



Valle d'Aosta Flag



Valle d'Aosta

Valle d'Aosta (**Aosta Valley**) is the smallest, most mountainous, least populated and one of the wealthiest regions in Italy. The name Valle d'Aosta literally means "Valley of Augustus". It is situated in the northwest corner of Italy bordered by France to the west, Switzerland to the north and the region of Piedmont to the south and east.

Valle d'Aosta is enclosed on the north, west, and south by the Alps. Included in this region is the Italian area of the famous Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn mountains. The territory is very mountainous and known for its breathtaking landscapes that include snowy mountain peaks, crystal clear lakes, incredible wildlife and some of the best ski resorts in Europe. Valle d'Aosta is home to the highest peaks in the Alps such as Cervino, Monte Rosa, Gran Paradiso and, the king of them all, Mont Blanc which at 15,781 feet is the highest mountain in Europe.

The Aosta Valley is also home to Italy's oldest national park, the Gran Paradiso. The Gran Paradiso National Park is 173,000 acres of snowcapped mountains and is home to chamois, marmots, foxes, golden eagles and the famous ibex. In summer, this region offers a wide range of climbing and hiking options. In winter, it is at the heart of the Italian skiing experience with such famous areas as Courmayeur located here.

The region has many picturesque mountain villages, small rural churches, castles, and Baroque art. The region's mixed heritage makes it culturally fascinating and politically interesting. It is the only region in Italy which has not been divided into separate provinces and is one of the country's five legislatively and administratively autonomous regions.

History

Valle d'Aosta's first inhabitants were from the nearby region of Rodano (France) by way of the Gran San Bernardo pass. The Salassi (Celticized Italic or Ligurian tribe) later came here by the same route. The Salassi were a warlike people and fought the Romans over gold in nearby mines. Rome easily defeated the Salassi, and in 25 B.C. founded the colony of Augusta Praetoria Salassorum. The Romans organized the land, built roads, and connected the Little and Gran San Bernardo passes. Aosta's location had considerable military strategic importance. After the Romans, Valle d'Aosta was loosely held in turns by the Goths and Burgundians in the 5th century followed by the Franks. Under Charlemagne, Aosta acquired importance as an outpost on the Via Romea Francigena (the road to Rome from France). This was the route for those wishing to visit the Vatican and the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul. In 888 A.D., Aosta was annexed as part of the renewed Kingdom of Italy. In the 10th century, Aosta became part of the Kingdom of Burgundy.

During the Middle Ages, the region remained strongly feudal. Many grandiose castles were built that still stand today. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the region was part of Savoy lands. Then between 1800 and 1814, Aosta was ruled by the First

French Empire. Aosta later became part of the Kingdom of Sardinia and joined the new Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The province of Aosta was disbanded at the end of World War II and the autonomous region of Valle d'Aosta was created in 1945 in recognition of the special French linguistic and cultural orientation of the area.

Culture

Valle d'Aosta boasts a wealth of cultural sites displaying art and history dating back to Roman through medieval times. The Roman Amphitheatre and Augustus' Arch in the town of Aosta are some of the more noteworthy archaeological excavations. The Bard Fortress and Fénis Castle are well known for their strategic position and lavish historical interiors. The Gamba Castle in Châtillon houses the new Valle d'Aosta Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.

One of the most original carnivals in this region is certainly that of the Gran San Bernardo Valley called Coumba Frèide due to its reputation as a freezing area. The carnival features people dressed in traditional costumes or uniforms worn by Napoleon's forces and was established in commemoration of the march through the Gran San Bernardo Pass by Napoleon and his 40,000 soldiers in May 1800.

A more imaginative account of the carnival's origin begins when two elderly simpletons got married in the town. The townspeople decided to participate in the celebration as was the custom at the time. They felt a little embarrassed at the idea of going to church in their Sunday best and decided to wear unusual clothes instead.



The Landzette is a regional term for a typical carnival costume. Participants' costumes consist of expensive handmade clothes and hats decorated with beads and sequins, up to 30,000 per costume. Their waists are adorned with belts and bells as well as small mirrors which

reflect the light and symbolically ward off evil spirits. They also wear masks and carry and shake a horse or mule tail to represent the banishing of Coumba Frèide, the cold winter breezes. There are people also dressed in bear costumes to represent the coming out of hibernation and arrival of Spring. The bright red color of the costumes symbolizes vigor and strength and is believed to have the power to dispel dark spirits, ill omens and misfortune. During the parade, the carnival characters enter the homes of local families, dance along the streets and in the squares and eat and drink what they are given.

By JIM SANO

REGIONS OF ITALY



Climate

Aosta Valley is a complex region. There is no one type of consistent climate. Instead there are varied microclimates dependent on the different terrains. The classifications range from oceanic climate, warm humid continental climate, subarctic climate, and tundra climate. The climate overall is considered continental with a significant amount of rainfall and prone to rapid temperature changes.

Language

Valle d'Aosta is defined as the least Italian region of Italy and is bilingual with both Italian and French taught in school and both languages commonly used at home. The Aosta government was the first to adopt Modern French as its official language in 1536, three years before France. The spread of the Italian language began and reached its peak during the 20 years of Fascism which banned the use and teaching of French and saw the systematic translation of places into Italian. In addition, some municipalities in the Lys valley speak the German-based dialects, Titsch and Toitschu.

Food and Wines

The food in this region can best be described as the best of traditional Italian food with a healthy dose of mountain flavors and ingredients influenced by neighboring France and Switzerland. The people in Valle d'Aosta are skilled hunters and farmers thus the abundance of game meats in their food products.



Traditional methods of production are strictly adhered to regarding wines, pork products (renowned local salamis, made from beef, deer or alpine ibex) and cheese such as the famous Fontina which originated here. Some other local products are honey, apples, chestnuts, medicinal herbs and g n p y (used to make G n p y Alpine Liqueur).

Local popular dishes include Polenta Alla Rascard (cornmeal mush chilled and sliced, layered with a thick beef and sausage ragout with fontina cheese), Vapele-mentse Soup (cabbage soup topped with Fontina cheese and rye bread), Carbonada (beef stew made with onions and red wine and served with polenta), Valdostana Ribs (veal ribs stuffed with ham and fontina cheese) and Civet di Camosci (venison stewed with vegetables in an herb-flavored cream and grappa sauce).

The two most popular wines from this area are Nus Rouge and Petite Arvine. Nus Rouge is a dry, velvety wine with a slight hint of herbs and an intense red color. It

has an alcohol content of 11 % and goes well with pasta and minestrone soups. Petite Arvine has an extremely fruity taste and a greenish yellow color. It has an alcohol content as high as 13% and is ideal as an aperitif with fish.

Desserts and Coffee

Valle d'Aosta has two very distinctive desserts, the Renette Apple dessert and Valdostan Sweet Tegole. Renette Apple dessert consists of triangles of buttered bread baked in the sweet apple sauce from the Renette apple and served with powdered sugar. Valdostan Sweet Tegole are small cakes made with very finely chopped almonds and hazelnuts that give these biscuits a soft and delicate taste.

Every Italian meal must finish with a good coffee. The Valle d'Aosta has perhaps the most delicious and peculiar tradition known as the Coppa dell'amicizia, the Friendship Cup. The Friendship Cup is an after-dinner tradition in the Italian Alps. It comes from the Soldiers of the Snow who acted as guides to travelers in this rough terrain. They needed extra energy to survive in the cold. A Coppa dell'amicizia is a traditional Lombardic round container made of turned wood that is often finely carved. It has a cover and spouts, varying in number according to the capacity of the cup, from which people drink. The drink consists of Valdostana coffee, usually the herbal liqueur G n p y or fruit grappa, cognac, Cointreau, red wine or rum, sugar and spices. Sometimes people add butter and orange peels.

After dinner, you gather your friends having at least one more person than the number of spouts on the cup. Why? You end up sharing and drinking from a different spout as the cup gets passed around the table. People don't worry about the germs for two reasons. First, it's your friends. Second, what they put in the cup is strong enough that it could probably be classified as some sort of disinfectant. The cup is passed around counterclockwise. People drink from the different spouts of the cup and don't set it down until it's empty. The atmosphere warms up and friendship is reinforced after the cup makes a few turns around the table.

Conclusion

The Aosta Valley has always been viewed as a point of contact between Italy and France since ancient times due to its strategic military location at the crossroads of the Western Alps. The great modern tunnels of Gran San Bernardo connect Italy with Switzerland and the Mont Blanc tunnel connects Italy with France. These extraordinary engineering masterpieces highlight even more clearly the fact that this area was and still is the gateway between Italy and the rest of Europe.