



Living on the edge

The perched villages of the Roya Valley near the border with Italy provide a rich cultural mix for **Clare Hargreaves** during an enlightening walk ▶

After the heat of Nice and the Mediterranean coast, the air in the Provençal perched village of Tende, tucked under the white rump of Mont Bégo near the Italian border, was cool and quiet. My travelling companions and I had just stepped from the train which had heaved its way up the valley of the River Roya like a great blue millipede. It was a spectacular journey along what is a feat of Franco-Italian engineering genius – the line between Nice and Tende has more than 45 bridges, viaducts and tunnels (one more than six kilometres long). In some ways it was disappointing to ride on a modern, air-conditioned train, rather than a creaking, steam-powered one, as the first passengers did when the line opened in 1928.

Wandering Tende's grey cobble streets, so narrow you could touch the slate-roofed houses on both sides at once, we had to pinch ourselves to remember that we were in France, not Italy. Street names such as Place du Ponte, and the bowl of home-made gnocchi in the Miramonti restaurant all felt firmly Italian. It is not surprising, given that Tende was part of Italy until 1947 when the border was changed after World War II. Schoolchildren who spoke Italian were suddenly forbidden from doing so – although most villagers now speak *Tendesque*, a dialect mixing French and Italian.

"If only the stones below our feet could speak," said our guide Yves. Perhaps it was as well they couldn't: this was a turbulent place during the war. We spied the entrance to the giant bunker inside the mountain across the valley where Tende's inhabitants crouched for many dark hours as the Allies bombarded the strategically important village. Their targets included the magnificent 16th-century Église collégiale de Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption, but happily they missed, leaving its later Baroque interior and artworks intact.

Brandishing lightning

Today Tende attracts tourists as the jumping-off point to see around 40,000 incredible Neolithic and Bronze Age engravings on the glacier-polished rocks just above it, part of the Parc National du Mercantour. They make a touching account of early pastoral life 5,000 years ago with images ranging from a pair of yoked cows being goaded by a peasant, to horned figures and the most famous engraving, nicknamed *Le Sorcier*. The latter is thought to depict the god Bégo brandishing lightning. To me, though, his moustachioed smile seemed benevolent, his raised hands appearing to say 'Game's up, you win.' If you don't have time to make the trek up to the Vallée des Merveilles to see them, Tende's museum has reproductions of the engravings.

It's to these high mountains that the villagers take their flocks of sheep in summer in search of lush pastures, called transhumance. With their hooked Roman noses, the sheep known as Brigasque (after the village of La Brigue, a few kilometres down the





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valley) are unusual-looking beasts. Their milk makes an excellent *tomme*-style cheese. Keeping an eye on sheep and their shepherds is Saint Roch; his statue stands in the church and is taken on an annual parade in the middle of August. That is followed a few weeks later with further celebrations to mark the flocks' descent from the mountains for the winter, when the streets heave with sheep.

Our aim was to walk from Tende down the Roya Valley to Sospel. By road, it is around 40 kilometres, but the journey is a lot longer by footpath, depending on your route. The first two-hour hike, through pine forests and across scree-clad mountain paths lined with hyssop and thyme, took us to La Brigue, whose grey jumble of houses jostled for space in their valley between the mountains.

Warming sip

We arrived at our riverside hotel, the Mirval, just in time for dinner. Jean-Jacques, the owner, offered me a taste of his home-made liqueur *génépi*, made from Alpine plants that he had picked on the high plateaux above Tende where he also works as a guide. Defying warnings from Brenda, my colleague, that *génépi* was related to absinthe and would be the end of me, I took a warming sip, watched by an amused Jean-Jacques. "I nip over to Italy to buy the alcohol to make it with," he confided. "You can't buy pure alcohol here, but in Italy you find two-litre bottles."

Jean-Jacques told me that he went to school inside the grandiose railway station at Saint-Dalmas-de-Tende, just down the valley, built in 1928 by the Italian dictator Mussolini. Ever since the area's villages rejoined France in 1947, the imposing Palladian-style structure has been an embarrassing white elephant; it had certainly appeared abandoned when we passed by in the train the day before. But for a young Jean-Jacques its extensive platforms had proved the perfect playground. "We loved it," he laughed.

La Brigue is a jewel and, in contrast to many villages in the area, still has a permanent population of French residents – around 500 in winter. Compared to the 1860s, though, it is deserted. Then it had around 4,000 inhabitants, most making a living by cultivating wheat and vines on the terraces carved into the steep mountainsides cradling the village. Now nature has reclaimed their well-worked soil.

One of the highlights was the superb, sculpted lintels above many of the buildings' doorways, which happily escaped the vandalism of the Revolution. Hewn from black schist rock in the 15th and 16th centuries, their aim was to ward off evil – or sometimes to make political statements. Each was a sort of CV of the bourgeois inhabitants, displaying their coat of arms or livelihood (plenty of hammers, chisels and Brigasque sheep). Many bear the letters IHS, for *Iesu Hominum Salvator* – Jesus Saviour of Man. We also spied Rue du Ghetto, a street that once

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Église collégiale de Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in Tende; A sculpted lintel above a doorway in Tende; Walking down to La Brigue; Sheep fill the streets of Tende during the transhumance celebrations
OPENING PAGES: The village fortifié of Saorge





housed the town's Jewish inhabitants and which was locked up at both ends every night.

The Église collégiale de Saint-Martin was another feast for the eyes, with its Baroque gold and blue altarpieces, and stunning organ – one of seven in the Roya Valley, built by travelling craftsmen from Lombardy and Tuscany. Many of the religious paintings on the walls are Italian too, painted on wood in the 16th century by members of the Bréa family, based in Liguria. They include a gruesome but beautiful martyrdom of Saint Erasmus, showing the saint bound to a table while his stomach is lanced.

There's more gore, and extremely fine frescoes, half an hour's walk up the valley behind the village at the isolated Chapelle Notre-Dame-des-Fontaines, dubbed the 'Sistine Chapel of the southern Alps' by the tourist brochures. The walls of the nave were painted between 1489 and 1492 by Giovanni Baleison and Giovanni Canavesio from nearby Piedmont. They include depictions of the Passion of Christ in 25 magnificent scenes, plus an additional Last Judgment. Perhaps the most striking image shows in gruesome detail the treacherous disciple Judas hanging from a tree. Not a painting to see too soon after breakfast.

If medieval La Brigue was a gem, Saorge, a *village fortifié* 12 kilometres down the valley, took our breath away. The village clings to steep walls of grey limestone, a staggering feat of medieval town planning and defiant isolation. It's built on three

levels, each with its own street, drinking fountain and square, but the beauty of it all is that its streets are far too narrow to cope with cars, so the only sounds are those of human activity and the occasional scooter. We picked up lunch from the *épicerie* – a baguette sandwich and a *tourte de blette* (chard pie) which was fast becoming a gastronomic favourite on the trip. We stomped past the village *lavoir* and then went up to the Monastère de Saorge, once an Italian-style Franciscan convent and now a writer's retreat with views that could not fail to inspire.

Gnarled olive trees

The afternoon walk plunged us into the Roya Valley and the bustling Breil-sur-Roya, stretched alongside a vast trout-rich *Lac aux Cygnes* (Swan Lake). The village was once famous for its olive trees – olive oil from its mills was served at the Russian court – and a few gnarled old trees still soldier on at the far end near the tiny Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Mont. The main tourist attractions are the railway museum and the huge Église Sancta-Maria-in-Albis with another fine organ.

We headed to the *boulangerie* Le Petit Gourmand in the main street for a taste of its famous Madeira-style cake, *Crescente de Breil*, flavoured with orange flower water and aniseed derived from the wild fennel growing on the hillsides. Another town, another dialect: here, it's *Breillois*, a mix of no fewer than 17 languages, according to the guide. In Breil

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too, World War II has left its mark: Rue de Turin recalls the enforced departure of many inhabitants to the Italian city.

We spent that night at an altitude of 879 metres in a stylish auberge perched on the Col de Brouis run by a Dane called Christina, with advice from her five-year-old son Olivier. Huddled by the fire in the homely bar-restaurant, we devoured her wonderful home-made focaccia and courgette tart before setting off early next morning to the village of Piène-Haute, whose dramatic silhouette on a rocky spur we deciphered long before arriving.

Wealthy residents jazzed up their façades with playful trompe l'oeil images of windows and balustrades

Like Tende and La Brigue, tiny Piène-Haute returned to France only after the war – hence the Place du Rattachement 1947 at its heart. But it felt a disappointing place, perhaps because its square had no bar or because of the unsympathetic restoration.

Continuing our journey we left the River Roya to join the Bévéra, which runs into it nearer the coast. Walking the balcony path high above the river – one of the most spectacular stretches of the walk – the

vegetation became noticeably more Mediterranean, with pines yielding to olives, holm oaks, carobs and field maples. My favourites, though, were the sumacs, vivid red like mountain flames. Many bore plumes of feathery grey flowers – not for nothing is the tree variously nicknamed *arbre aux perruques* (wig tree) or smoke tree. Its fruits are ground into a purple powder to produce the citrusy spice used in Middle Eastern cooking. Their leaves and root, Yves told us, yield a substance that was used for tanning gloves. A multi-talented tree, indeed.

Descending to the river's flat-bottomed basin on the outskirts of Sospel, we passed fields that incongruously had been transformed into a golf course in the late 19th century by a Briton. A luxury hotel was built in 1913 by the Danish architect Hans-Georg Tersling to accommodate the golfers – mostly English aristocrats who came here to enjoy the Riviera's mild winters. But World War I and the Depression dealt a double blow to the project and sheep replaced caddies once again. When we passed, the hotel's grandiose walls were crumbling fast.

With its ochre and russet houses clutching the banks of the River Bévéra, Sospel is a colourful place. In the 19th century, the wealthy residents' idea of one-upmanship was to jazz up their façades with playful trompe l'oeil images of fake windows or balustrades. If they look Italian, it's because they are – the painters came from Piedmont.

In medieval times, though, Sospel's claim to fame ►

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The village of Saorge clings to the hillside; Breil-sur-Roya; Red sumac bushes on the trail between Piène-Haute and Sospel; Decorated houses in Sospel; Crescente de Breil on sale at Le Petit Gourmand



ABOVE: The Pont Vieux across the River Bévère in Sospel

was as a staging post on the Route du Sel, the salt route. Mule-drivers taking their precious cargo from the coast up to Tende and into Piedmont had to cross the river by the 13th-century fortified bridge and pay up at the tollhouse halfway across. On the other side, the caravan trail stocked up on provisions – and sheltered from the elements – under the arcades bordering the Carriera Longa (now Rue de la République) before heading up to the

mountains. With all the passing traffic, Sospel's inhabitants must have been rubbing their hands with glee at this white gold rush.

Happy to have reached journey's end, we headed for the Baroque peaches-and-cream cathedral in Place Michel and sat on its steps watching Sospel's residents walking their poodles across the black and white cobbles. It was, I thought, a very fine little corner of Italy – in France. [📍](#)

FRANCOFILE

Explore the Roya Valley's perched villages

GETTING THERE

Clare flew to Nice and then took the train to Tende which runs daily June-Sept and at weekends May and Oct. See holiday planner on page 91 for more details.

GETTING AROUND

Footprint Holidays runs unaccompanied 'Perched Villages of the Roya' walking trips which include six nights' hotel accommodation sharing a twin/double room and baggage transfer between hotels. Prices start at £545pp half-board. Tel: 01932 837 633 www.footprint-holidays.com

WHERE TO STAY

Le Mirval

3 Rue Vincent Ferrier
06430 La Brigue
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 63 71
www.lemirval.com
Newly refurbished family-run *Logis de France* hotel overlooking the river, with restaurant. Doubles from €46, half-board from €49pp, menus from €19.50.

Auberge du Col de Brouis
Route du Col de Brouis
06540 Breil-sur-Roya
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 55 30 88
www.coldebrouis.com
Family-run auberge on a mountain pass. Doubles with breakfast from €75, dinner around €22.

Hôtel des Étrangers
7 Boulevard de Verdun
06380 Sospel
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 00 09

www.sospel.net
No-frills hotel with comfortable en-suite rooms in heart of the village. Doubles from €70, breakfast €8, half-board €75pp, menus from €25.

WHERE TO EAT

Hôtel Restaurant Miramonti
5 Rue Antoine Vassalo
06430 Tende
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 61 82
www.lemiramonti-restaurant.fr
Simple village restaurant specialising in wood-fire-cooked pizza. Menus from €16.

WHERE TO VISIT

Musée des Merveilles
Avenue du
16 Septembre 1947
06430 Tende

Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 32 50
www.museedesmerveilles.com
Closed Tuesdays except July and Aug.

Notre-Dame des Fontaines
Passe de Collardente
La Brigue
06430 Tende
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 79 09 34

Monastère de Saorge
06540 Saorge
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 55 55
www.saorge.monuments-nationaux.fr
Closed Nov-Jan.

Éco-musée du Haut Pays et des Transports
Plateau de la Gare
06540 Breil-sur-Roya
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 42 75
www.ecomusee-breil.com



TOURIST INFORMATION
Côte d'Azur tourism
www.frenchriviera-tourism.com

Roya-Bévère tourist board
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 92 05
www.royabevera.com

Tende tourist office
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 73 71
www.tende-merveilles.com

Breil-sur-Roya tourist office
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 99 76
www.breil-sur-roya.fr

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