



FORT CENTRAL ON THE COL DE TENDE



EXPLORING THE GRAVEL MILITARY ROADS OF THE MARITIME ALPS



MONT BLANC LOOMS OVER THE LITTLE ST BERNARD PASS



VIEWS NEAR THE SUMMIT OF THE COLLE DEL SOMMEILLER

being the Cenis Pass (Col du Mont Cenis) at 2,083m. Historically, the route was an important trading path, and by 1810 Napoleon had built a road over the pass.

The Cenis Pass is also our recommended route for avoiding the expensive Fréjus Road Tunnel, which connects Modane in France to Bardonecchia in Italy – see the next page on the Colle del Sommeiller for more information on Bardonecchia.

South of Bardonecchia, right down to within sight of the Mediterranean, both the road touring and off-road adventure riding is superb and it's almost inevitable that you'll find yourself crossing into France riding one of the major or minor passes or when checking out the old military roads.

These military roads were constructed to serve fort and gun positions along the high Alpine ridges of the French/Italian border. Most are unpaved and quite a few are off limits to motorised vehicles and in disrepair, but there are

still plenty of them that are open to, and accessible by, motorcycle.

Our favourite spot for riding military roads is just to the south of Cuneo on the old road cresting the Col de Tende. Whilst these trails make for spectacular riding, be warned that you're a long way from help, and even a telephone signal, should you have problems on these off-road trails.

If you ever tire of the fantastic mountain roads in the north-west, then a visit to Turin is rewarded with numerous art galleries, palaces, opera houses, parks, gardens and classic architecture.

Alternatively, a ride down the old Mediterranean coastal road from the border with Monaco to the Cinque Terre peninsula near La Spezia is worth a blast. Whilst it's a busy route in summer, it makes for a great 186-mile tour of the Italian Riviera and the spectacular coastal villages of the Cinque Terre are not to be missed.

▶▶ HIGH PASSES IN NORTH WEST ITALY YOU MUST RIDE

Col du Nivolet (2,641m) - Near Ceresole Reale and the scene of the bus crash in the Italian Job.

Colle Fauniera (2481m) - Near Marmora, the pass is also known as 'The Pass of the Dead' due to the fierce fighting that was seen here between the Franco-Spanish and Piedmontese troops in the 17th century.

Col de la Lombarde (2350m) - Near Vinadio in the Maritime Alps



▶▶ HIGHLIGHT: COLLE DEL SOMMEILLER

The Italian Alpine town of Bardonecchia is famous in motorcycle circles for two reasons; it's the venue of the famous Stella Alpina (Stella Alpina Motociclistica Internazionale) adventure rally, and the 17-mile long trail to the 2,993m-high Colle del Sommeiller. There are higher trails in the Alps, but most are now closed off to motorised vehicles or a lot more difficult to ride.

The rally and the colle are intrinsically linked. Socialising aside, the objective and main focal point of the rally is to ride as high as is safely possible up the Colle del Sommeiller, a gravel mountain pass that tops out at 2,993m above sea level.

Due to the altitude, it is not uncommon for late lying snow to hamper the efforts of those who attempt it, at which point the ride is considered to be 'done' at a lower altitude before things get too dangerous.

Speaking of which, I've attempted the ride up the Colle del Sommeiller on three occasions and it was only the last

time, in the making of this guide and accompanying video, that the conditions allowed a successful summit.

On both previous occasions the snow level was below the colle and far too extensive in cover and soft in composition to reach the fabled summit. At a guess, I reckon we got to within 100 vertical metres of the summit on both prior occasions and thoroughly enjoyed the ride.

From Bardonecchia, the route up the Colle del Sommeiller follows a narrow, twisty tarmac road to the small village of Rochemolles. There, the tarmac ends and the gravel trail begins with a series of zig zags before levelling out alongside the Lago di Rochemolles lake and dam.

The trail carries on to the head of the valley and the Rifugio Scarfiotti which is open during the summer months and offers good food and welcome refreshments. From the refuge, the fun begins with a series of steep zig zags carved into the mountainside which leads onto a higher plateau.

Whilst the ride to the refuge is considered non-technical and easy enough for the vast majority of riders,

even those on road bikes, the series of hairpins above can be a little daunting for the less experienced. Many rally goers are more than content to call it a day at the refuge and watch the spectacle unfold up above.

There is little in the way of technical difficulty above the hut, but the zig zags are very tight, steep and covered in gravel and loose stone, and you'll need to be comfortable riding along a narrow, single track trail with steep drop-offs alongside.

The rewards for gaining the high plateau above the zig zags are the spectacular views and just the sheer enjoyment of being able to ride a motorcycle in such a jaw dropping environment.

From the plateaux to the colle there's a further sequence of gravel and rock-strewn zig zags (the rocks here are larger and looser than those that you rode a few miles down hill), which can hold snow well into the summer months.

The Stella Alpina takes place in Bardonecchia on the second Sunday of July each year and is attended by hundreds if not thousands of riders, so you'll not be short of company.