

# LA THUILE ANTHRACITE MINES' PATHS

## (BUIC WOODS)

### HOW TO READ THE PATHS

In order to make your hikes through La Thuile paths easier we have put all along our itineraries some stakes with plates, which will help you to understand your position according to the number of the stake, the path you are going along thanks to its colour, run-times and the altitude both of the place you have come up to and of the path. Stakes will also help you to understand how to reach the other paths which are linked with your itinerary.

The colours which identify the different paths are:

- Yellow: Le Buse
- Blue: Scalini
- Orange: Paris
- Rose: Granier
- Light blue: Barbeblanche
- Red: Villaret
- Green: Hoist (starting from Les Granges)
- Violet: Hoist (starting from Buic)

### 1) LE BUSE – easy path

The term “buse” or “buso” and all its derivatives mean “mine” and they can be found in many mines all around the Italian side of the Alps, from Piedmont to Friuli Venezia Giulia. During the past centuries this term was also used in the mine legislation and very often it was also used as a placename in some resorts (for example Passo Buso, in Navastolt Mount in Friuli, la Busate, in the southern area of Creta di Pricot in Veneto, etc).

This path starts in the hamlet of Preylion (1.588 mamsl) and reaches the entrance of a mine called “Ribasso Le Buse” at 1.592 mamsl (N. 4). Here, the 15 January 1943 a huge landslide swept away a cabin of the COGNE society and everything was completely destroyed. In that awkward situation two foremen were buried under the snow and one died.

The word “ribasso” normally indicates the lowest point of exploration of new underground veins. The mine (which was closed many years ago) is now used as a water pick-up point. The “Le Buse” path was also used by La Balme and Elevaz miners who worked in the areas above the hamlet of Buic. To reach the territory of La Thuile, miners used the path which is partly still practicable today. This itinerary reached first the hamlet of Les Granges (in the area between the Mont du Parc and the slopes under the Trinceramenti del Principe Tommaso) and then the hamlet of Preylion.

## 2) SALINI – difficult path

The path “Salini” starts a bit upper than the hamlet of Preylien (1.588 mamsl) and reaches the building called “Baraccon” (1.875 mamsl). After having walked along a big stone wall, which protected the hamlet of Buic from the overburden dump that overlooked the small village, the path becomes a muletrack. At 1.686 mamsl you will see some ruins and an old mine entrance, in front of which you can see an open space realized thanks to filling materials. This “mouth” was called Entrance “Paris” (N. 10). Going a bit further, at 1.730 mamsl, after having reached and gone beyond a high wall and a “drilling” (that is to say an excavation in rock, whose length is approximately 10 metres, which was realized to verify the possibility to exploit a mine vein – N. 11) you will reach a ruin, which was perhaps used as a dormitory by miners. After having come at a large open space – which was again realized with filling materials – you will walk along the first entrance, called “Col Croce” (N. 3, at 1.738 mamsl, which is now used as a water pick-up point for the municipal aqueduct). This entrance was used as extractive mine, but it was also employed to accelerate the building operations of the tunnel which, during 1039s, allowed the anthracite transport from the mine area of Preylet (1.491 mamsl) to Arpy (1.738 mamsl). The particular position of “Col Croce” entrance, situated approximately in the middle of the future tunnel, allowed miners to realized the excavation both towards Arpy and Preylet by halving the time of execution.

After some metres, close to the wall, there is a small entrance, which is now closed for precautionary measures, which was probably used as a “ventilation opening” (N. 2). Once you have reached a fork at 1.730 mamsl you can either turn right and keep on climbing or simply go straight ahead along the plateau.

If you go straight ahead you will reach a huge rectangular ruin, close to which there probably was the departure of the cableway which reached La Balme (close to the ruin there are some big blocks of ferroconcrete with some irons; they might be the base of the departure). After that, you will walk along the second entrance, called “Salini” (N. 1), at 1.730 mamsl, another water pick-up point for the municipal aqueduct. This entrance has never been used to extract material, but it only served to accelerate the building operations of the tunnel “Preylet-Arpy” (as for “Col Croce” entrance). The plateau finishes with a big open space realized with filling materials. Until 1965 here there was a railway system with Decauville lines. Locomotives and wagons full of anthracite went along the plateau following there south-north direction.

If you decide to turn right at the fork, the path climbs up through a canyon, which is completely bare because of the avalanches. Once you have gone beyond a long stone wall on your left, you will find an old mine entrance which is now collapsed (N. 33) and a ventilation opening. By keep on walking, both on your right and on your left, you will see some small accesses and ventilation openings which skirt the path (N. 5 and N.7). When the mines were closed, they were blocked with heap of stones and earth for precautionary measures. If you keep on walking towards “Baraccon” you can see, even if partly collapsed, an entrance (N. 6), which is close to the fork for the “Paris” path, at 1.808 mamsl, right after stake n. 14.

After a ten-minutes’ walk, right before the small bridge over the Petchou river, where there is a big fallen tree and some small walls, you will find some steep slopes and, at the top, two mine “mouths” (or ventilation openings? N. 16 – N. 17). Unluckily, today the path that led to the two “mouths” is no more practicable and so, to reached the two entrances, you will have to walk on steep and dangerous tracts (the inclination of the path is approximately 40 metres), because of the land subject to landslides, many fallen trees and some thorn bushes that obstruct the way.

During 1930s Salini, like Damiano Avancini (see point n. 5), was a technician for mine management and control for the Ansaldo Cogne society. The area or the mine where the technician worked assumed its surname (as it happened with Mr. Damiano Avancini for the “Ribasso Avancini”).

### **3) PARIS – difficult path**

Geom. Vittorino Paris was born in La Thuile in 1887; he was the son of Anselmo and Maria Granier. He maintained the necessity of strengthening mining industry without sacrifice too much cattle-breeding and agriculture, since they have always been the only way of support of the population. In 1909 he started working with his brother Camillo in Biolley and Promise mines, where he became administrative employee. In 1920 he realized the cableway which started in the “Salini” area and that led to La Balme by flying over the hamlet of Les Granges. In this way, the transport of the materials towards Aosta was realized in a really shorter period of time. This cableway replaced the one, which has always been realized by Paris, that linked the entrances of “Granier” mines with the hamlet of Preylion,. Some other searches have been done by Paris concerning silver at the Alpe di Crottes in the area of Breuil and at Teppe de Chamois, at 2.600 mamsl. “Paris” paths start from 1.630 mamsl and reach 1.808 mamsl. At 1.765 mamsl there are the two mine entrances called “Granier”. Unluckily, for the first entrance you can only see some wooden body bolsters: they are the remains of the original vault. The entrance was barred when the mines were closed. In front of the entrance you will see a canyon, which probably was the point where filling materials were collected. The second entrance “Granier” (N. 9) is still practicable: it is covered in cement and 10 metres long; at the end of the tunnel there is a big room where you can see an engine hoist and some pieces of machinery in very good condition. The hoist was part of the “DISCENDERIA” (sloping tunnel which linked galleries at different levels, generally by following the inclined trend of a vein) and it was used to lift up or let down wagons full of anthracite coming from the extractive area of Chaz Dura (the entrance of the tunnel is in Preylet at 1.491 mamsl) and which had to reach Arpy at approximately 1.738 mamsl. Once they have come up to Arpy, they were brought to Morgex through a cableway and then they finally reached Aosta and the COGNE factory through the “Pré-Saint-Didier – Aosta” railway. Along the cemented tract of the entrance there still is a part of the lighting system and some hooks that supported the ventilation system.

Close to the two “mouths” there is an open space where you can still see some Decauville line tracts. Wagons traction was directly realized by miners or by animals (horses or mules).

Outside the second entrance there is a platform made of cement 3mx2m (70 cm high). On the base there probably was the departure of the ancient cableway which reached the hamlet of Preylion and part of the ventilation system of the mine. In the surrounding area, by covering a flat path, you can see the “mouth” of another mine (N. 31); it is easily recognizable since there are some small dry-stone walls. Close to the entrances there still are the bases of a second cableway made of stone and cement (N. 32).

A bit lower, at approximately 1.700 mamsl, along the way you will find an entrance or ventilation opening (N. 13), which has been closed for precautionary measures. By keeping on walking, before reaching the drilling N. 11, outside the path, at the top of a steep slope (approximately 20 metres of inclination that has to be done on an unstable soil – there is no trail) there still is, even if partly collapsed and covered by earth and heap of stones, an old mine entrance (N. 12).

### **4) GRANIER – medium path**

Pietro Granier started the extraction of the anthracite mine in the area of Cretaz at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by establishing a company together with Mr. Lorenzo Jacquemod and Mr. Luigi Jacquemod. To

carry extracted materials to La Thuile they first used sleighs, then wagons. During the years a new cableway was finally realized: it linked Cretaz (1.735 mamsl) with the centre of the town, where today you can see the primary school.

In the arrival station of the cableway the extracted material was directly sold. In the plain of Arly and in Cretaz (close to the baitas) there still are some bases made of cement and stone that supported the trellises of the cableway.

The “Granier” path links “Paris” paths (1.760 mamsl) with “Baraccon” (1.875 mamsl). 100 metres after the beginning of the path, where the way zigzags, it is partly visible (even if covered by slided earth) a small mine entrance (N. 15). In the surrounding area there are some ruins of an old cableway (N. 14). Right under “Baraccon”, at 1.824 mamsl you will easily see the old entrance of a small mine-drilling (N. 29), probably the highest one. Once you reach the muletrack you will see the entrance of another mine (1.778 mamsl – N. 28).

## **5) BARBEBLANCHE – difficult path**

In 1849, with the publication of some more restrictive mine laws by the Kingdom of Sardinia, the seasonal exploitation of La Thuile anthracite ore deposit began. “Barbeblanche” was the first mine to be exploited; the name comes from a “sobriquet” (nickname) of the owner of the permission, Mr. Giovanni Martinet. Giovanni Martinet obtained some concessions for mine exploitation: the first one concerned the Grande Golette area, where Mr. Martinet owned also a foundry, which was used to fuse blende and galena. Another concession was in the area called “Barbeblanche”, which probably was close to the hamlet of Buic. The agriculture in the “Les Réches” of Barbeblanche area was abandoned for two years because of a huge avalanche, which struck the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1904: two workers died and three were seriously wounded. The forest of that area was completely knocked down by the avalanche.

Barbeblanche paths lead to an ancient ruin which was probably used as dormitory (1.665 mamsl). On its left you can easily see the departure point of the cableway (platform made of cement with 4 irons for the anchorage) and a mine entrance (N. 22). A bit upper than the ruin you can see the remains of some other buildings, some big walls and a couple of mine entrances, which are no more accessible (N. 23 – N. 24). At 1.715 mamsl, a bit upper than stake n. 20 you will see a small room which was probably used as a deposit for working tools (N. 30). By climbing a bit more, you will see some other small mine entrances (N. 25, N. 26 and N. 27), which probably constituted the group called “Les Réches”.

On the left side of the dormitory, after having gone beyond the bridge of the Pechou river, you will reach another mine entrance (N. 21), at 1.660 mamsl (by the stake n. 38, which indicates the end of the itinerary). The access, in front of which some small stone walls, is now closed because of small landslides. Here, in the heart of the mountain at 1.666 mamsl (it is not visible from outside) there is the “Ribasso Avancini”. A bit upper than the entrance N. 21 there are entrances N. 18, N. 19 and N. 20, which probably constituted the group called “Chaux Platta”. You can see both the dormitory and a part of the path in some photos of the book “La Thuile 1860-1960” (pages 12 and 29), which were shot during the 1930s, two decades after the huge avalanche which completely destroyed the forest.

## **6) VILLARET – medium path**

This path links the “Barbeblanche” area with the sports area in the hamlet of Villaret, which was used as a overburden dump during the mine exploitation period. Along the way there are two entries, called “Villaret entries”, placed respectively at 1.624 mamsl (N. 39) and 1.579 mamsl (N. 40).

## **7) HOIST (STARTING FROM LES GRANGES) – easy path**

The path starts from the hamlet of Les Granges; through it the entrance N. 9 “Granier” can be reached. Here there is a huge hoist and some pieces of machinery that were used to feed of the “winze” of the mine.

## **8) HOIST (STARTING FROM BUIC) – difficult path**

The path starts from the hamlet of Buic; through it the entrance N. 9 “Granier” can be reached. Here there is a huge hoist and some pieces of machinery that were used to feed of the “winze” of the mine.