

Enjoying CAI - the Club Alpino Italiano

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We chanced upon the notice board while wandering round central Ravenna on a chilly Sunday in December. The city, country and language were all new to us but here was a point of common interest - the programme of CAI, the Club Alpino Italiano. We noted down those words we couldn't understand for translation at home, and in due course negotiated the maze of corridors in a community centre where CAI open their office for two short evenings each week. We were met with polite curiosity and some surprise but managed to book for the next outing, and established our hill walking credentials through a German-speaking Italian climber.

So off we went to the hills in mid-January with a full busload. The club President spoke at length by loudspeaker, including an effusive welcome to the two foreigners - us. Folders of photocopied information were distributed and the designated leader of the day's outing encouraged us to study them before the walk. We poured out of the bus into a village café for the morning espresso - a necessary kick-start to the day for most Italians. The recently opened Monterenzo museum was our first stop so that we could, according to my translation "immerse ourselves in an atmosphere suggestive of Etruscan (9th to 4th century BC) and Celtic (4th to 1st century BC) cultures." The archeological finds related to our walk in the nearby hills later - the necropolis on Monte Tamborino on a narrow ridge and the remains of an Etruscan village on Monte Savino with its water cistern, perched high above the valley for safety. Later we traversed the 617m summit of Monte Bibele and gingerly circled its Celtic sacrificial area, then descended through groves of sweet chestnut trees. Thus well exercised both bodily and mentally, we located the bus in an upland village. Trays of savoury and sweet nibbles emerged with massive dispensers of wine and fruit juice for a New Year *al fresco* party.

We became regulars on the fortnightly outings encouraged by detailed information sheets describing the next event circulated on the bus. These include degree of difficulty, amount of ascent, duration of each section of the route, and several committee phone numbers for booking. Curiously, map numbers and grid references are not used, so we often have to use the internet to find the location. Each outing has a designated leader with responsibility for researching the route and providing relevant information, either printed or as a discourse on the way. If 30 or more members book at least three days beforehand, a bus is provided. If not, cars are used and drivers recompensed. Pricing is decided on the day, depending on the number attending, and includes a fixed amount for accident insurance. Food and drink are only provided when



The Appennines near Ravenna

the bus is full, making immediate use of the day's profit margin. On hot evenings demands for an ice cream stop are usually satisfied on the return journey.

Most Sunday outings from autumn through to spring are to the Appennines within the province of Emilia-Romagna and north-east Tuscany. There is no long walk in to the hills, as tracks lead steeply uphill from the roadside through the trees. It is strange, coming from Scotland, to find deciduous woodland reaching to the skyline at Munro height. These woods have a history of unified management dating back to the Middle Ages, led by monks and trade guilds. Massive beech trees dominate the upper valleys and those on the ridge bordering Tuscany are so magnificent that their trunks resemble cathedral columns. In November we swish our way through knee-deep leaves and have a soft landing if we trip over unseen obstacles. Below 900m there are groves of sweet chestnuts, the most gnarled said to be several centuries old. Local knowledge indicates that they reach peak productivity after

80 years and most have been in family ownership for generations. The chestnuts were ground into flour by water mills in the lower valleys, producing a reliable staple food. Now most are sold whole, dried, candied and even made into a most delicious and very localised ice cream. Lime, hornbeam, cobnut and oak cloak the lower slopes and there are sharp lines of delineation from one dominant species to another, according to steepness and aspect.

The flowers are a joy here, and spring comes early with the intense blue of *Anemone hepatica* peeking out from leaf mould. Acid green swathes of stinking hellebore brighten the woodland and striped crocuses appear in clearings. Banks of primroses and violets clothe damp areas near water for several weeks from March, while the azure *Anemone appennina* flutters in short grass higher up. By April the first of the orchids appear and this is when I have problems keeping up with the others. I won't bore you with further rhapsodising; just accept that the Appennines are my idea of botanical heaven.

The mountains are also home to the wild boar and their two-legged hunters, whose dogs are kept in kennels well away from villages to reduce the nuisance of their frustrated barking. Crested porcupines range the woods too, but so far we have only seen some discarded quills. Red, roe and fallow deer are plentiful, preyed upon by at least two packs of wolves based in the Campigna National Park. Signs of depopulation are all too frequent - ruined farmsteads, overgrown tracks and untended fruit trees. Small museums show pictures of smiling family groups and cheering Partisans, most massacred during 1943/4 by the German SS in this remote region of defiance. Farming at these altitudes must have been marginal even then, but we occasionally come across herds of white Romagnola cattle grazing in the more open areas of woodland, and tiny, steep fields scythed for fodder.

There are so many tracks, some cobbled and with wheel tracks from Roman times, but most used by mules for centuries. Some routes are marked using CAI, local or national signage, but these need to be maintained regularly or they become lost in the rampant foliage. Route finding by compass alone is not usually practical since tracks swoop alongside streams then climb to surprisingly sharp ridges, where there may be a glimpse of yet more ridges fanning out in all directions. Separating into groups is not an option. We need to keep within sight of each other as the potential for becoming lost is always present. Extended views are rare until reaching the higher ridges, and here we look down upon the pall of grey-beige smog, which smothers the great plain of the river Po for most of the year.

Every time we visited the club-rooms we met folk we had never encountered before. All became clear when it dawned on us that CAI contained several specialist groups. The Alpinism, Ski-touring and Climbing group is open to those with at least basic knowledge of techniques and safety as well as mountain experience. Most of their meets are full weekends, as the Dolomites

and Alps are several hours' drive away. The Young Climbers group provides instruction for 8-18 year olds, and aims to engender appreciation of all aspects of the mountains. They have their own programme that includes camping weekends and an overnighiter in June. The Cross-country Skiing group is for those with enough experience to cope without assistance. They meet fortnightly in winter and arrange two separate weeks away in the spring. The Excursionists, to which we belong, have fortnightly Sunday outings from autumn to spring, then weekends to the higher mountains from June to September when it is too hot to walk nearby. The Caving group owes its existence to a chalk vein in the Appennines less than an hour's drive away. They run a course for beginners each spring and have regular meets until the rains come in autumn.

Each group produces an annual programme and has at least one shared event. Thus Kees spent a happy day wriggling along subterranean passages, then marvelling at deep caverns lit by carbide headlamps. Nearby clubs combine outings on occasions, which can mean a large number following the same track but is highly sociable. Ninety of us sailed through the salt marshes of Commachio to the north, had a fly-past from the local flamingoes, and then walked for hours along a narrow peninsula to the safety of solid ground. There are also local courses in climbing, downhill and cross-country skiing. All groups are autonomous and self-funding, but must liaise with the local CAI committee and adhere to national standards. Excursion leaders should have successfully completed a recognised hill-leadership course.

We gradually learned more as our grasp of the language improved. CAI was formed in 1863 in Turin, which remains the centre of the association with its archives, National Museum of the Mountains, and National Library. Its constitution, with eight pages of statutes, is based on its purpose (Article 1) "A national association for all aspects of mountaineering, particularly in Italy, and the defence of their surroundings." The national association consists of an assembly of delegates, a general president, a central council, which elects a secretary-general and vice-secretary every five years, and a president's committee. Two councils, one for accounts, and one for trade including legal responsibilities, are elected by the assembly of delegates at its annual meeting. There are six geographical assemblies with 478 sections, each of which can have up to 20 sub-sections. National membership currently stands at around 308,000. The Ravenna section, formed in 1981, is part of the Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna assembly. It has its own 58-article constitution (centrally approved of course), president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and committee of 11, plus an accounts council of three who deal with social events. Membership fees are decided nationally, currently €35 for full membership, €17 for an additional adult family member (me), €11 for youths aged 8-18 and €20 for those aged 18 to 21.

We receive three different publications. *Edelweiss* is a quarterly four-page publication for the Ravenna section, with content similar to the *Cairngorm Club Newsletter*. *Lo Scarpone (The Climbing Boot)* arrives monthly, a 40-page journal of national and local reports and articles, as well as related events and book reviews. *CAI Rivista* (magazine) appears every two months, its 100 or so glossy pages awash with advertising, and its articles dominated by alpine and international climbing. This circulation of information enables members to learn of events throughout the country, and to join them. There is a national website (www.cai.it) as well as our own (www.racine.ra.it/cairavenna), and presumably one for each section.

CAI produce their own excursion maps on a scale of 1:50,000 and some of 1:25,000. These have numbered tracks marked in red, with supporting text and estimated time required. Each is classified as suitable for tourists, excursionists or experts. They liaise with National Park and other authorities to produce local maps, and are involved in a Working Group that aims to standardise mapping throughout the country. CAI also promotes the publication of guide-books and articles, often in collaboration with tourism groups. They finance and maintain CISDAE, the Italian Centre for the Study and Documentation of Alpinism Outside Europe. There are two national sections - alpine guides and an academic group which liaises with relevant university departments.

CAI also takes responsibility for leading the construction and maintenance of paths throughout the country, 6,844 of them at the last count covering 60,000km, all numbered on the maps mentioned above. A recent publication celebrated its 436 refuges, 223 bivouac sites, 66 social club huts and 14 emergency stations, which together provide 23,500 beds. Three hundred of the refuges have custodians, while access to the others is co-ordinated by the local section. Each refuge is categorised according to its facilities, with overnight charges ranging from €8 to €13. Bed and board prices are standardised nationally and are doubled for non-members. The recently constructed Bruno Crepez Mountain Centre at the Pordoi Pass in the Dolomites combines accommodation with training facilities for all sorts of mountain skills. Trenitalia, the national railway company, liaises with several sections to organise and lead day-excursions using regular train services. These are well advertised, seem to be very popular with non-members as well, and can be accessed through the website: trenotrekking@libero.it.

The Ravenna section evening meets are usually illustrated talks given by members from outwith the area. These are 'bring your own wine bottle' affairs with accompanying nibbles, so socialising can be long and late. They may coincide with the weekly opening of the club library, when the librarian asks what you want to know then produces a selection from which to choose - after prolonged discussion with others in the true Italian manner. It has a huge stock

of videos, some produced to celebrate the International Year of Mountains in 2002. Committee members also run open evenings of talks and films related to all aspects of hills and mountains, in a bid to educate the public. We have so far managed to avoid joining in the club's twice-weekly exercise sessions in a city-centre gym, and are reminded of it whenever we show any signs of breathlessness.

Our intention was just to join a local walking club, so were amazed as we learned so much about this national organisation. Here we are, thoroughly enjoying the Appennines through membership of CAI, as well as becoming more aware of local and national history, geology, customs, botany, agriculture and language. But the greatest joy is meeting folk whose interests are similar to our own - isn't hill walking great!