

ROUTE 24

*Monêtier-les-Bains (1495m) –
Col de l'Eychauda (2425m) – Ailefroide (1507m)*

Grade	3
Distance	19km
Height gain	930m
Height loss	918m
Time	7½hrs
Location	South of Monêtier, across the mountains to the Vallée de la Vallouise

Much of this long and demanding route follows GR54 (the Tour de l'Oisans), and is included here as a means of drawing walkers who may not have transport of their own towards the heart of the region where the mountains are big and bold and the scenery truly dramatic. It's a walk of great variety and extremes, but the approach to Col de l'Eychauda reveals an ugly, scarred terrain sacrificed to the downhill ski industry – a grim site that makes a savage contrast to the otherwise wild nature of the district.

Directly below Monêtier-les-Bains two bridges cross the Guisane. Between them a road snakes southwest



*Charvet, on the way to
Col de l'Eychauda*

through meadows towards the wooded slopes of the Tabuc valley. Shortly after reaching woodland bear left along a track, and 2mins later branch right on a footpath climbing among trees. When it forks take the left branch, and about 15mins from Monêtier reach Charvet (1608m), a solitary house and a small chapel with a fine view to mountains on the north side of the valley.

After rising a little further the path then contours to the right and forks again on a corner. Take the upper branch which continues to rise through larchwoods. Keep ahead when another path breaks left, but at the next fork, 7mins later, take the left-hand path, rising again. The gradient eases as you cross a glade and a stream at about 2000m. The path climbs on, and 8mins later recrosses the stream to its left-hand side. Now with the Torrent de la Selle for company, wander up into a hanging valley marred only by a chairlift.

About 2hrs from Monêtier you will reach a ski area with broad pistes and chairlifts. Turn left up a track to reach a saddle with the Restaurant la Bachas nearby. Now take the track on the right, and follow it all the way to Col de l'Eychauda – much of the way tracing the line of a chairlift.

Col de l'Eychauda (2425m) is reached about 3hrs after leaving Monétier. It's a broad saddle, and although the view ahead is much more enticing than that behind, this is no place to linger, so cross the col on a continuing track, but leave it when it forks at a hairpin bend. Take the footpath ahead which contours across the left flank of the Neyzets glen, then descends in numerous well-made zigzags to the Vallon de Chambran. Turn left, and wander down the track to the tiny hamlet of **Chambran** (1719m) where there's a *buvette* offering welcome refreshment.

The way is metalled from here, and about 1km south of Chambran you leave the tarmac for a track descending below the road, signed to Pelvoux. About 10mins later leave the track just before it ends in favour of a footpath going ahead. This contouring path, flanked by low-growing trees and shrubs, eventually descends to the road at a hairpin bend. A short distance along this road take a track which cuts back to the right, signed to Ailefroide, and very soon cross the valley's stream.

When the track forks continue ahead. Later, ignore a path heading left to Pelvoux (marked by a cairn), and remain on the track which soon provides a hint of big mountains and glaciers ahead. On coming to a large pipe where it enters the hillside as part of a hydro-electric scheme, go ahead on a footpath, ignoring an alternative which zigzags up a rock slope.

The trail rises across a bluff of grass and boulders, then twists a little higher with views into the narrow wooded valley below. Having reached a high point at a rocky corner, the way slants downhill, gently at first, then more steeply in zigzags to pass below a prominent black crag. Beyond this you come to an *abri* (a small stone shelter) beside a path junction where you take the left branch ahead, still sloping downhill to reach a crossing path.

Turn right on what develops as a delightful contour. The path becomes a track by a chalet, and when it forks with a small meadow ahead, take the right branch (Ailefroide par Pra Chapel). The track narrows again to a

footpath, and gently rising leads to a stream tumbling down the mountainside. There is no bridge, so pick your way across on rocks and continue between trees, the trail fringed with wild raspberries, and eventually arrive in **Ailefroide** (1507m, 7½hrs: accommodation, refreshments) on the north side of the bridge spanning the Torrent de St-Pierre. Turn left into the village.

Ailefroide has a huge campsite covering several locations. There are a few hotels, a *gîte*, shops and restaurants, PTT, tourist information and a Bureau des Guides. An infrequent bus service links Ailefroide with Vallouise. See the Vallée de la Vallouise section for further details and a range of walks in the neighbourhood.