

The Bisses of the Valais



In the Valais the climate is dry and the mountain slopes are steep. In the 14th century farmers increasingly bred livestock and thus needed water for pastures and hayfields. To irrigate their fields, they turned their minds to exploiting the waters in the glaciers and the mountain streams above them. The result was the construction of irrigation channels with parallel maintenance paths along the mountain slopes and rock faces that today are called “Bisses”.

The bisses harnessed and deviated water from the glaciers and brought it to farmland in a controlled and continuous manner. It was one of the first forms of intensive farming with irrigated pastures producing grass both for grazing during the warmer months and, once harvested, animal feed in winter. Most of the bisses are between five and ten kilometers long and descend gently to ensure that the water does not flow too quickly.



To build these often spectacular structures – and many cling to dizzying rockfaces – was frequently a dangerous undertaking. The only tools available were as basic as a pick and shovel, and there was nothing but timber and ropes to secure the irrigation channels that were suspended along the rock faces several hundred meters above the fields! And all of that with nothing more than muscle power and human ingenuity. This required a real pioneering spirit and unfortunately many accidents happened with frequent loss of life.

The bisses were also a source of conflict, occasionally descending into bloodshed. Given that land rights at the time were not well codified, it was inevitable that nearby communities would come to blows. Bishops and local lords were often called upon to ease tensions between conflicting villages. Once a bisse was operational, use of the water was highly regulated. Each farmer had the right to use only a certain quantity of water which corresponded to the time spent on building or maintaining the bisse which in turn depended on the size of his land.

There are bisses at every altitude and in every region of the Valais. Until the beginning of the 20th century there were more than 200 in use – around 1,800km. Each bisse was supervised by a guard whose job was to make sure that the flow of water was maintained and that the beneficiary rights were properly distributed. Many of the bisses have disappeared, victims of modernisation and economic transformation. However those that remain are generating renewed interest among the local population and are being repaired and preserved by non-profit associations. Their maintenance paths are also being restored and today they make wonderful hiking trails that are not too steep but spectacular for those who are not afraid of heights.

Last year we walked 9 kms of the Bisse d’Ayent which was built in 1442 and has a total length of 18 kms which took us about 3.5 hours. It’s altitude is between 1800 and 1300 meters and most of the walk is easy and goes gently downhill. It starts at the Barrage de Rawill also known as the Lac the Tseuzier.



This is a spectacular walk but not for those suffering from dizziness or fear of heights. It follows, at the outset, a pretty trail meandering through forest and later precariously clinging to a rock wall. It goes through a tunnel with a viewing platform from where you can observe the wooden canals hanging from the vertical facade. Furthermore, apart from fabulous views, there are also panels with examples of building methods on the way. The best period to walk this bisse is from June to September when the water flows.

The way to get to the start of the walk is from Sion railway station. From where you take bus 351 in the direction of Anzère and then at St Romain take bus 352 in the direction of Rawill Barrage. This sounds complicated but there are plenty of other walkers and the bus drivers are helpful. However the busses only run on a daily basis from 25 June until 17 August. This link tells more about the lake and also has a link to the bus timetable: <https://www.anzere.ch/tourism-ski-spa/tseuzier-lake-354.html>

When you get to the lake walk back about 50 meters until you see a restaurant and then you will see the signs for the Bisse d'Ayent. From there on the walk is well signposted. Do bring sandwiches and drinks as there are no shops or cafés along the way. At the end of the walk you will come to the main road from Anzère from where you can either walk up to the village and take the bus or walk down the main road to the bus stop for Sion. Attached is a link to an overview of the walk and maps: <https://www.valais.ch/en/activities/hiking/bisses/bisse-d-ayent>

Further reading on the history of the bisses can be found at: http://www.les-bisses-du-valais.ch/uploads/ckeditor/files/Histoire_des_bisses_Anglais.pdf