

## France, Italy & Switzerland: The Mont Blanc Circuit

### Tour-Only Itinerary

With one foot in France and the other crossing into Italy, it's time to savor the reward for your morning's climb. Dominating the horizon is 15,781-foot Mont Blanc, its rocky *aiguilles* (needles) soaring above Lex Blanche Glacier and Val Vény's braided river channels. Since leaving Chamonix, Europe's highest peak has become your constant companion. Next up: a nearby *rifugio*'s sunny mountain-facing deck, where a well-deserved lunch of hearty mountain fare awaits: risotto, venison ravioli, and fondue with gnocchi. Five more spellbinding days await on your Mont Blanc hiking tour as you close the loop, crossing from Italy into Switzerland and back to France, enjoying an insider perspective brought to life by your exceptional mountaineer guides. By trail's end in Chamonix, you'll feel the satisfaction of conquering one of the world's classic walking routes.



### Highlights

- Ride the La Flégère cable car into the Chamonix Valley and witness its breathtaking panoramic views of impossibly green hillsides, fragrant forest, and the curving Arve River.
- Delight in the best of Savoyard cuisine after an invigorating day on the trail, from creamy fondues and raclettes to savory stews and delicious tarts.
- Enjoy the mountaineering culture of the Alps in Courmayeur, visiting local shops or sipping a cool drink at a café beneath towering Mont Blanc.
- Accompanied by your expert mountain guide, experience the thrill of hiking through the borders between France, Switzerland and Italy.

- Treat yourself with a relaxing massage or visit to your hotel's spa after a rewarding day on the Mont Blanc circuit.

## On all Guided Adventures you can count on ...



Expert local guides to introduce you to the best of your destination.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Off-the-beaten-path places you'd never find on your own.



Experts to handle all the details.



A maximum of 18 fun-loving fellow travelers to share the journey.



Flight + Tour Combos include plane tickets, airport car service, and pre- and post-tour accommodations.



Delicious, authentic multi-course meals—virtually all are included.

## Activity Level

This tour is one of our Guided Walking Adventures, rated challenging, with an average of 6 to 7 hours of hiking per day, very limited options, and only short drives due to the inn-to-inn nature of this itinerary.

There are significant ascents and descents averaging 2,600 and 2,400 feet, respectively, per day,

typically sustained over 2 to 3 hours on switchback trails. The highest walking altitude on tour is 8,370 feet. The footing is uneven, with hikes on single-track trails with loose rocks, gravel, and roots that can be slippery when wet. Your guides set a steady yet comfortable pace to maximize your appreciation for this Alpine environment. Hiking boots (not shoes) are required and hiking poles are highly recommended. This itinerary offers limited time for non-walking activities, except for a rest day in Courmayeur, and is perfect for guests interested in day-long hikes.

## DAY 1

### **Join your France, Italy & Switzerland: The Mont Blanc Circuit tour. La Vilette to Les Contamines-Montjoie**

miles (about 5 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 2,600-ft. elevation gain, 1,950-ft. elevation loss

Your guides will meet you at 8:00 a.m. in the lobby of Hôtel Le Morgane. They'll be wearing Country Walkers shirts.

Your exploration of the legendary Mont Blanc Circuit begins in Chamonix, the mountaineering capital of the Alps. Following a morning meeting, you travel one hour to the hamlet of La Vilette to start your first hike.

Today's hike offers exceptional views of the Aiguille ("needle") de Bionnassay, with its dramatic glacier and soaring rock spires. The route also provides an excellent introduction to the unique flora of this region. Martagon lily, masterwort, and gentian are among the flowers that adorn the mountainsides—they are also protected species, as they are an integral part of this incredible area. Taking a wide trail along gorges, you ascend toward the Refuge de Miage, a mountain hut nestled in a large pastoral bowl crowned by the summit of Dômes de Miage.

Following a hearty lunch at the refuge, you continue up a narrower trail to the pastureland of the Truc plateau, where a local farm produces and sells its own cheese. Your destination is the attractive village of Les Contamines-Montjoie, once home to chamois hunters and, today, a popular mountaineering and ski resort.

You are welcomed at a cozy family-run hotel nestled in the Montjoie Valley. There is time to relax before gathering for a welcome drink and an excellent dinner of local specialties served in your hotel's dining room.

**Important reminder:** Because of luggage-weight restrictions imposed on our luggage carrier in the Mont Blanc region we must adhere to a maximum on-tour luggage weight of 15 kilograms per person (33 pounds). Each guest is limited to one medium soft-side luggage and one soft-sided carry on (no hard sided luggage). If you have additional luggage that do not meet these requirements, you are welcome to store it at our meeting point and final tour hotel, Hôtel Le Morgane in Chamonix. We suggest you prepare these bags the night before the tour meeting

**Included Meals:** Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 2

### Les Contamines-Montjoie to Les Chapieux

11 miles (about 7 hours of walking), challenging, 4,395-ft. elevation gain, 3,260-ft. elevation loss

*If for any reason, you wish to opt out of this walk, as it is not possible to join the luggage transportation, your guides can arrange private transportation at your own expense (cost of approximately 250 euros for the 2.5-hour transportation).*

After an early breakfast, you travel by minibus to the end of the valley and start the most challenging hike of the tour. The trail begins at the Baroque chapel of Notre Dame de la Gorge, a pilgrimage site at the foot of the Gorge du Bon Nant. From the church, you walk along an old Roman road that climbs steadily through a beautiful coniferous forest. Leaving the woods, you cross broad, level Alpine pasture, passing rustic chalets as you make your way to La Balme. Continue ascending, occasionally pausing for a snack of tasty Alpine chocolate and views of the dramatic valley below.

By midday you reach the Col de la Croix du Bonhomme (8,180 feet), where you stop to take in the breathtaking panorama. With the most difficult part of the day complete, you break for a trailside picnic before meandering down to the valley.

The day's final walking destination is Les Chapieux, a summer village at the southern limit of the Mont

Blanc massif. A 45-minute drive takes you to your hotel in a Savoyard village. Here, you stroll out for dinner at a local restaurant after, perhaps, unwinding in the sauna or swimming pool.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 3

### Les Chapieux to La Visaille and Courmayeur

10 miles (about 6.5 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 2,645-ft. elevation gain, 3,050-ft. elevation loss

Today you say *au revoir* to France and *buongiorno* to the Aosta region of Italy, tracing the footsteps of countless Roman legionnaires. A short drive takes you to the beginning of your hike at La Ville des Glaciers. After 2.5 hours, you reach the Col de la Seigne (8,300 feet). This “hill,” with a broad, flat landscape, represents a watershed between the ancient glaciers that extended along the Aosta and Savoy slopes. Following a descent along an easy, winding trail, you reach a spectacular setting beneath the Aiguille of Combal to stop for lunch. Although you’re in Italy, this valley enjoys a certain regional autonomy, and its friendly population speaks French.

You continue on foot to La Visaille, at the base of the spectacular Glacier of Miage, whose snowcapped domes you saw for the first time two days ago. After another short drive, you are in the resort town of Courmayeur, Italy’s elegant counterpart to Chamonix and your home for the next two nights. After settling into your comfortable in-town hotel, you are free to dine on your own at one of the town’s lively pizzerias or *trattorias*.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch

## DAY 4

### Independent exploration of Courmayeur

Today is a rest day, and you have the opportunity to explore the charming Italian resort of Courmayeur. You may choose to peruse the local shops for souvenirs, sit at a sidewalk terrace to taste a delicious gelato, or simply relax in the hotel’s sauna or Jacuzzi. If you prefer to walk, your guides offer a hike in the surrounding area (the mileage and level of difficulty will vary depending upon the group’s interests) with a stop for an independent lunch. Another option in Courmayeur is to ride the Skyway cable car, a new aerial

lift reaching the closest point to the summit of Mont Blanc. Your guides can assist with logistics (cost not included in your tour price).

This evening, you reunite for a dinner of Italian mountain specialties at a nearby local restaurant.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Dinner

## DAY 5

### Courmayeur (Arnouva) to Ferret (Champex)

8.5 miles (about 5.5 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 2,600-ft. elevation gain, 2,830-ft. elevation loss, highest elevation: 8,370 ft

Following a hearty buffet breakfast, a 20-minute drive takes you to Arnouva and the start of today's hike. Exploration of the Val Ferret continues along a winding footpath with a view of the Pré de Bar, the imposing granite peaks of Mont Dolent (12,545 feet), and the Grandes Jorasses. Along the way, you may stop for a rest at the Rifugio Elena for a steaming cup of rich hot chocolate. The climb continues through meadows that are home to Alpine wildlife—from talkative marmots to agile chamois may be frolicking on the glacier after you cross the Grand Col Ferret (8,321 feet). This pass, in use for several centuries, serves as the Italian-Swiss border between Val D'Aosta and the canton of Valais. The descent brings you along a trail with a profusion of wildflowers and the sound of Swiss cowbells echoing across the hillside. This area is truly *Heidi* country; its tidy chalets with geraniums spilling from the window boxes greet you as you enter the sleepy village of Ferret.

A final minivan shuttle delivers you to Champex, a tranquil Swiss summer resort on a lake with the same name. Upon arrival at your comfortable family-run hotel, there is time to relax, swim, or take advantage of the Jacuzzi before dinner on your own tonight.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch

## DAY 6

### Champex to Col de la Forclaz

9 miles (about 6 hours of walking), challenging, 2,310-ft. elevation gain, 2,060-ft. elevation loss



Today's hike begins right from the doorstep of your hotel in the picturesque town of Champex. A coniferous trail winds north across Alpine pastures, with sweeping views of the town of Martigny, the Rhône Valley, and vineyards. You also catch your first glimpse of the highest summits in the Swiss region of Bernese Oberland. After a picnic lunch in this unparalleled setting, you walk to a nearby farm for a cup of coffee or refreshment on their rustic terrace.

Reenergized, you start your afternoon hike to the Col de la Forclaz, pronounced *forc/* by the locals and meaning "fork" in Old French, as it is one of the three entrances to the Chamonix Valley—and the only one on the Swiss side. The trail ascends above the tree line, and, on a clear day, you see the famous Swiss ski resort of Verbier in the distance. Farther along the trail, you might stop for a moment to watch black Hérens cows fight for the title of "Queen." This fight involves two strong, bull-looking females pushing each other until the weakest steps backward.

You arrive on foot at the day's final destination, a simple, family-run inn located at the top of the pass. Toast the day's accomplishment with a glass of Fendant, the fine local wine for which the area is famous, before a simple and comforting dinner.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 7

### Trient to Argentière

8.5 miles (about 4 hours of walking with cable car descent or 6 hours of walking without cable car descent), moderate, 2,860-ft. elevation gain, 915-ft. elevation loss with cable car descent or 3,080-ft. elevation loss without cable car descent

Today starts with a short drive as you leave Switzerland. The trail rises gradually from the secluded valley of Trient, where the imposing village church stands out like a beacon in this green, lush environment. You pass through a tranquil spruce forest with many switchbacks before arriving at the Col de Balme in France. This pass offers tremendous views over the whole of the Chamonix valley, flanked by the Aiguille Verte and Aiguilles Rouges (the "green" and "red" needles, or peaks) surrounding Mont Blanc. The red rock peaks are named after the distinctive color of the granite in the morning sun. Upon descending to the village of Tour, you have the option of using a cable car or continuing to walk on the slopes of the Balme ski area.

Your home tonight is in the charming resort town of Chamonix. After settling into your elegant four-star hotel located in the town's center, your guides will provide you with recommendations to several nearby restaurants for dinner on your own.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch

## DAY 8

### Col des Montets to the Cheserys Lakes to Chamonix

7 miles (about 6 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 2,770-ft. elevation gain, 1,560-ft. elevation loss, including a cable car descent

Following a few miles' taxi ride, you set off on the final stage of the circuit. It's one of the most beautiful parts of the trail, and the stunning Chéserys Lakes are the highlight. Most people seek the famed reflection of the mountains in the still waters of these mountain lakes. Often frozen until the end of June, by August, these lakes are free from ice and snow, and the views of the Mont Blanc massif from this vantage point are breathtaking.

Over lunch, you work together to identify the various peaks that have been part of your journey this past week. Afterward, you descend along a rocky trail for two hours to La Flégère cable car, giving you panoramic views as you ride into the valley. Then, it is a leisurely walk along the glacier-fed Arve River to Chamonix, where an inviting, heated swimming pool awaits your arrival back at the hotel. Reuniting for a farewell feast at your hotel's excellent restaurant, you can indulge to your heart's content after completing 60+ miles of walking.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 9

### Your France, Italy & Switzerland: The Mont Blanc Circuit tour concludes

*Au revoir!* After a plentiful buffet breakfast, you are free to continue your exploration of Chamonix or depart for your next destination.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast



## What's Included

### Tour Only

Exceptional boutique accommodations	✓
20 on-tour meals: 8 breakfasts, 7 lunches and 5 dinners	✓
Local guides with you throughout tour	✓
Local wine and/or beer with dinner	✓
Entrance fees and special events as noted in itinerary	✓
Telescopic walking sticks provided on tour	✓