



Country Walkers

Explore the world one step at a time. ®

www.countrywalkers.com / 800.234.6900

France, Italy & Switzerland: The Mont Blanc Circuit

Travel Style - Guided Walking Tour

This small-group Guided Walking Adventure offers an authentic travel experience, one that takes you away from the crowds and deep into the fabric of local life. On it, you'll enjoy 24/7 expert guides, premium accommodations, delicious meals, effortless transportation, and local wine or beer with dinner. Rest assured that every trip detail has been anticipated so you're free to enjoy an adventure that exceeds your expectations.



For two centuries, adventurers have walked the celebrated Tour du Mont Blanc, reveling in its snowy rock spires, rustic *rifugios*, and colorful meadows of martagon lily, purple saxifrage, and vivid blue gentian. In this spectacular setting—where Alpine travel was born—you follow narrow paths through coniferous forests, Roman roads ascending glacial saddles, and a suspension bridge across a plunging valley. Enjoy the best of three distinct cultures, stopping by French pilgrimage sites, Italian mountain villages, and Swiss farms full of bell-wearing cows. Exhilarating walks lead to stunning views: the imposing granite peaks of Mont Dolent, the green and red hues of Aiguille Verte and Aiguilles Rouges, the swooping arc of Col de Tricot, and, of course, the colossal serrated edge of the Mont Blanc massif, ever present throughout the region. Along the way, you cool your feet in glacial streams, spot ibex in remote mountain passes, and sip hot chocolate in rustic lodges. It's the ideal way to experience the birthplace of mountaineering, in the company of expert guides.

Tour Only Itinerary - 2019

Day 1

Join Your Country Walkers *France, Italy & Switzerland: The Mont Blanc Circuit* tour **La Villette to Les Contamines-Montjoie**

6 miles (about 5 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 2,600-ft. elevation gain, 1950-ft. elevation loss.

Your exploration of the legendary Mont Blanc Circuit begins in Chamonix, the mountaineering capital of the Alps. Following an early-morning meeting, you transfer one hour to the hamlet of La Villette to start your first hike.

Today's hike offers exceptional views of the Aiguille ("needle") de Bionnassay, with its dramatic



Country Walkers

Explore the world one step at a time. ®

www.countrywalkers.com / 800.234.6900

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 and are protected as an integral part of this incredible area. Following a large 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 on a narrower trail to the pasture land 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 again for a welcome drink and excellent dinner of local specialties served in your hotel's dining room.

Accommodation: Hôtel La Chemenaz, Les Contamines-Montjoie, France

This traditional Alpine inn boasts comfortable, spacious rooms with balconies, stunning views of the Mont Blanc Massif, a landscaped outdoor terrace as well as a swimming pool, sauna, and a Jacuzzi.

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 transfer, your guides can arrange a private transfer at your own expense (cost of approximately 250 euros for a 2½-hour transfer)

After an early breakfast, you transfer by minibus to the end of the valley and the start of what is 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 conifer forest. Leaving the woods, you cross broad, level Alpine pasture, passing rustic chalets as you make your way to La Balme. Continue the ascent, pausing occasionally 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.



Country Walkers

Explore the world one step at a time. ®

www.countrywalkers.com / 800.234.6900

Accommodation: Hotel l'Autantic, Bourg Saint Maurice, France

This comfortable and spacious 3-star hotel constructed of local stone and wood stands at the southern limit of the Massif du Mont Blanc. In a quiet landscaped setting, the décor includes Savoyard and antique furnishings, as well as a sauna and swimming pool.

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* as you enter the Aosta region of Italy, tracing the footsteps of countless Roman legionnaires. The hike begins at La Ville des Glaciers after a short transfer, and climbs eastward. After 2½ 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 the Elisabetta Refuge for lunch, a spectacularly situated stone chalet beneath the Aiguille of Combal. The valley enjoys a certain regional autonomy, and French is spoken by its friendly population.

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. A short transfer brings you to 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 many lively pizzerias or trattorias.

Accommodation: Hôtel Berthod, Courmayeur, Italy

This 3-star, family-run, country-house hotel is set in an ideal location in the center of a charming Italian Alpine town. The inn offers 25 unique rooms with splendid views. Jacuzzi, sauna, and massages are available.

Day 4

Free day in Courmayeur with optional walk

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, but the cost is not included in your tour price.

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



Country Walkers

Explore the world one step at a time. ®

www.countrywalkers.com / 800.234.6900

Accommodation: Hôtel Berthod, Courmayeur, Italy

This 3-star, family-run, country-house hotel is set in an ideal location in the center of a charming Italian Alpine town. The inn offers 25 unique rooms with splendid views. Jacuzzi, sauna, and massages are available.

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 (12,543 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—ranging from the talkative marmot to the agile chamois, which may be seen 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 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 transfer 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 site.

Accommodation: Hôtel du Glacier, Champex-Lac, Switzerland

This 3-star, family-run, classic Swiss mountain hotel is ideally situated on Lake Champex. Enjoy its Jacuzzi, sauna, fireside lounge, and reading room.

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, providing great views of the town of Martigny and the Rhône Valley and its 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 charming old farm nearby for a cup of coffee or refreshment on their rustic terrace.

Re-energized, you start your afternoon hike to the Col de la Forclaz, pronounced *forcl* by the locals and meaning "fork" in Old French, as it is one of the three entrances to the Chamonix Valley—and the



Country Walkers

Explore the world one step at a time. ®

www.countrywalkers.com / 800.234.6900

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 consists of two of these strong, bull-looking females pushing each other until the weakest steps backwards.

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.

Accommodation: Hôtel du Col de la Forclaz, Trient, Switzerland

This simple Alpine hotel prides itself on serving the typical cuisine of the Valais region of Switzerland. In the same family for six generations, the hotel is located at the Swiss entrance to the Mont Blanc region. Please note: not all rooms have private baths and wifi is unavailable.

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 transfer as you leave Switzerland. The trail rises gradually from the secluded valley of Trient in Switzerland, where the imposing village church seems to be the only beacon in this entirely green, lush environment. You pass through a tranquil spruce forest with many switchbacks before arriving to 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 latter is named after the distinctive reddish 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 village of Argentière—literally “silver” in French, as it was once the site of a silver mine. After settling into your traditional hotel, located in the town’s center, you walk to a dinner of Savoyard specialties at a charming restaurant.

Accommodation: Hôtel de la Couronne, Argentière, France

A traditional mountain hotel nestled in the heart of the authentic mountain village of Argentière, the Hôtel de la Couronne has warm wooden décor and chalet-style furnishings, with a welcoming bar.

Day 8

Mer de Glace to the Plan de l'Aiguille to Chamonix



Country Walkers

Explore the world one step at a time. ®

www.countrywalkers.com / 800.234.6900

4 miles (about 4 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 1,650-ft. elevation gain, 600-ft. elevation loss, including a cable car descent

Following a few miles' taxi ride, you set off on the final stage of the circuit, and it's one of the most beautiful. Your day starts with the Montenvers "little red train ride" to the largest glacier in France, La Mer de Glace or "The Sea of Ice". From the upper station, your hike takes you further above to the side of the mountain overlooking the glacier. You reach the higher point at Le Signal where you enjoy an incredible panorama of the most impressive peaks in the Alps. This trail, overlooking the entire Chamonix valley, continues undulating at the foot of the Chamonix Needles towards Mont Blanc and the Bossons glacier.

The historical Plan de l'Aiguille hut hosts you for lunch. The hut keeper is not only famous for his warm welcome but also for his superb pies! A 10 minute ascent after lunch takes you to the cable car for a ride down to Chamonix, where an inviting, heated swimming pool awaits your arrival at an elegant 4-star 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.

Accommodation: Hôtel Le Morgane, Chamonix, France

This elegant and environmentally friendly 4-star hotel offers mountain views and a fine-dining restaurant just steps from Chamonix's pedestrian main street. Contemporary guest rooms are tranquil and plush with wood accents and neutral tones. A spa complete with swimming pool, steam room, sauna, and treatment facilities is on site.

Day 9

Your Country Walkers *France, Italy & Switzerland: The Mont Blanc Circuit* tour concludes

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