

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

### Tour-Only Itinerary

On this true hiker's tour of the Western Alps, Country Walkers brings you Mont Blanc at its very best. Our certified mountain leaders live and work in the region—using their deep local expertise to reveal hidden highlights of the awe-inspiring alpine massifs. Here, you'll hike from inn to inn, crossing the borders of France, Italy, and Switzerland as your luggage is magically transported to your next hotel. Along the way, you'll pause in meadows blossoming with edelweiss and gentian to enjoy traditional trailside picnics beneath Mont Blanc's imposing *aiguilles*. You'll also enjoy hearty alpine culture and cuisine at *refugios* and trailside mountain huts where hikers from all over the world swap tales from the trail. You're sure to come away with a few lively stories of your own!



### 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, visit local shops, or sip a cool drink at a café beneath towering Mont Blanc.
- Accompanied by your expert mountain leader, experience the thrill of hiking through the borders between France, Switzerland, and Italy.
- Treat yourself to a relaxing massage or visit your hotel's spa after a rewarding day on the Mont Blanc circuit.

## On all Fully-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.



Air Packages 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 leaders 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. **Mer de Glace**

*6.5 miles (about 3.5 hours of walking), moderate to challenging, 2,745-ft. elevation gain*

Your leaders will meet you at 8:00 a.m. in the lobby of your meeting hotel in Chamonix. They'll be wearing Country Walkers shirts.

Chamonix is the mountaineering capital of the Alps, so it is apt that you begin your exploration of the legendary Mont Blanc Circuit here. Following a morning meeting, you travel ten minutes along a scenic road to the hamlet of Les Tines to start your first hike.

As you ascend among these storied peaks – a mighty range of jagged pinnacles and graceful slopes – you have an excellent introduction to the unique flora of this alpine wonderland. Flowers of the martagon lily, masterwort, and gentian blanket the mountainsides, all protected species for the role they play in this fragile ecosystem. At higher elevations, strata seems painted onto rock faces, revealing the glacial forces that shaped these magnificent vistas.

In the Valley of the Glaciers, arrive at the Refuge des Mottets, once a cattle farm for local ranchers. Today, this retreat at the foot of the spectacular Glacier Needle welcomes hikers overnight. But you're here to enjoy lunch in its welcoming, rustic café adorned with mountaineering equipment.

After, continue your hike among spectacular mountain panoramas that evoke the spirit of alpine exploration. Your destination is the Montanvers train station, a charming stone structure on a terrace that overlooks the Mer de Glace – the Sea of Ice – the longest and largest glacier in France and the second longest in the Alps. After time to admire its enormous breadth winding through the valley, you board a train back to Chamonix. This evening, toast the adventures to come during a welcome dinner at your hotel.

**Included Meals:** Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 2

### Chalets de Chailloux

*7 miles (about 5 hours of walking), challenging, 2,460-ft. elevation gain/loss*

After breakfast, travel 20 minutes to Les Houches, a charming commune straddling the River Arve. You'll see plenty of long-haul hikers in this ski resort town, as it is the official start and end point of the Tour de Mont Blanc. Continue by shuttle up the hillside to the district of Le Bettey, from where you begin a stunning walk.

Traverse alpine woodlands, magnificent alpine meadows, high alpine pastures and beautifully crafted chalets. After a couple of hours, arrive at the rustic Chalet de Chailloux, which seems to have been built with a view in mind. Admire the Mont Blanc massif from its vast, sloping "front lawn" of emerald-green vegetation.

You have several options to explore a bit, taking in the stunning vistas of Mont Blanc and the Bossons Glacier from various perspectives. Following a hearty picnic lunch, descend back to Le Bettey and travel 45 minutes to lovely Les Contamines-Montjoie. This village of restored old farm buildings was once home to chamois hunters and, today, is a popular mountaineering and ski resort.

Settle into a cozy, family-run hotel nestled in the Montjoie Valley. There'll be time to relax before gathering for an exceptional dinner of local specialties in your hotel's dining room.

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

## DAY 3

### Col du Bonhomme

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

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 return minibus journey 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 4

### Col de La Seigne

*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 5

### Independent exploration of Courmayeur

Today is a rest day, and you have the opportunity to explore the charming Italian resort town of Courmayeur. You may choose to peruse the local shops for souvenirs, sit on a sidewalk terrace to taste a delicious gelato, or simply relax in the hotel's sauna or Jacuzzi. If you prefer to walk, your leaders 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 leaders can assist with logistics.

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

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Dinner

## DAY 6

### 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*

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 7

### Col de Balme

*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 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, your leaders will provide you with recommendations to several nearby restaurants for dinner on your own.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch

## DAY 8

### Chéserys Lakes

*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 a restaurant in town, 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

### Air Package

Exceptional boutique accommodations	✓	✓
20 on-tour meals: 8 breakfasts, 7 lunches and 5 dinners	✓	✓
Local leaders 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	✓	✓
Roundtrip airfare		✓
Two extra nights in Chamonix		✓
Airport car service for arrival and departure		✓
Pre- and post-tour breakfasts		✓
Business-class upgrades available		✓