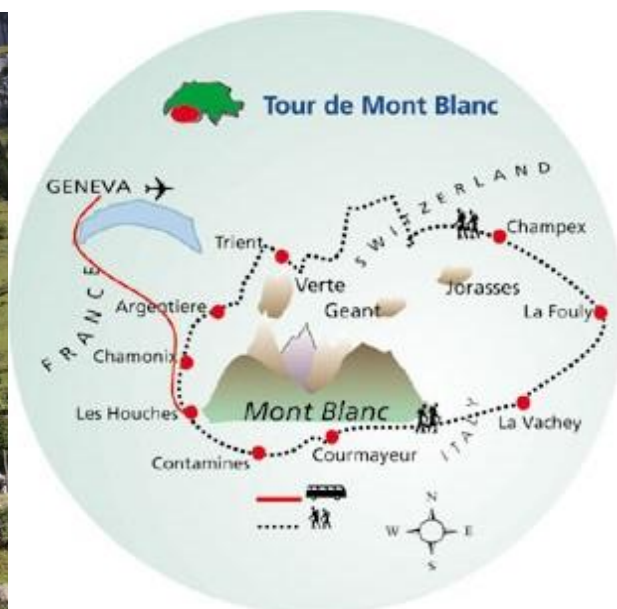


FRANCE SWITZERLAND ITALY – AROUND MONT BLANC *Early booking essential* 14-day / 13-night **SELF-GUIDED** walking holiday – the circuit route around Europe’s highest mountain



One of our most popular and classic alpine walking routes, the famous **Tour du Mont Blanc** circumnavigates Western Europe’s highest mountain over passes and through valleys, following ancient pack animal routes, with each ascent to the next pass rewarded by a new and exciting vista of the great peaks of the Alps. Travelling through the three contrasting countries of France, Italy and Switzerland, you can savour the food and wine and enjoy some of the finest alpine scenery in the world – picturesque meadows, rustic huts, wide valleys, tumbling streams, and sharp, snow-clad summits. The satisfaction of completing one of the world’s great walks provides the finishing touch to a wonderful holiday. This is a long walk in the valleys, foothills and high passes of the Mont Blanc massif. You walk beneath spectacular glaciers and at times through breathtaking alpine villages and summer meadows. The trail is mostly graded as moderate but with a few challenging ascents.

This self-guided walk operates on set dates (unlike most of our self-guided walks) to accommodate the logistics of baggage transfers. There will be up to fifteen other walkers on any date, usually staying in the same accommodation, but you are under no obligation to walk together. Single travellers can sometimes be paired up with others, if they are prepared to share, saving on single supplement charges – ask for details.

We also offer a **guided** version of the Tour du Mont Blanc, providing support and an escorted group walking experience, with a slightly different itinerary. Ask for details.

Departs: 27th June; 12th, 18th July; 1st, 15th, 16th, 22nd, 23rd, 29th August, 2020

Cost from: \$3590 per person twin share. Single supplement on request (limited availability)

Includes: 13 nights’ accommodation in hotels with ensuite rooms on 11 nights and in simple mountain auberge or guesthouse with shared facilities and communal bunk rooms on 2 nights; 13 breakfasts, 4 dinners; luggage transfers as described; information pack including route notes and maps (one set per room); emergency hotline.

Not included: Meals not mentioned, drinks, entrance fees, cable car/gondola tickets, personal expenses, travel to/from the start/end of the tour.

Starts/ends: Les Houches, France. The nearest international airport is Geneva; from Geneva Airport a public bus and private shuttle service operate direct services to Les Houches. If taking the train, Les Houches train station is some distance from the village and there is no taxi rank or phone there, so you may prefer to travel to La Fayette and catch a taxi from there to Les Houches.

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Level of Difficulty:

Grade: We grade this tour as moderate to strenuous; anyone used to hill walking / mountain hiking with a daily height gain / loss of 1000 metres per day should find the tour within their capability. There are no vertigo-inducing localities on the TMB, provided you stick to the basic TMB as described in the route notes and defined on the maps, and avoid the variations. We make it clear in the notes which variations in our opinion do require a 'head for heights'. Of course you always need to take care where you put your feet. Early in the season you may encounter snow on the passes, and at any time you should be prepared for variable and sometimes extreme weather conditions, including snow, ice, and strong winds.

Day Stages: Average duration of walking per day is 6 to 7 hours. Some of the walks can be shortened if desired by the use of cable cars or (in Italy) a local bus service.

Waymarking and route finding: This is a well-trodden trail and the waymarking and signposting is mostly good, although slightly different in each of the three countries (explained in the route notes). Carry and know how to use a small pocket compass as the cloud may occasionally be down on the high passes. On self-guided tours you will receive detailed route descriptions and excellent 1:25,000 scale maps, which show the whole TMB route through all three countries.

Suggested itinerary:

Day 1: Arrive at Les Houches. Plan to arrive at Les Houches by mid-afternoon. Stay at a 2-star chalet-style hotel facing the Mont Blanc range. The hotel has a shaded garden, a solarium-terrace and a games room. Dinner is included tonight.

Day 2: Les Houches to Les Contamines

walking @ 19km / 7 hours

A demanding first day starts with a steady climb from Les Houches (950m) via Col de Voza (1653m) - below the tip of the Bionnassay glacier - to the Col de Tricot (2120m). There is a very steep descent from the col to the Chalets de Miage (1550m) followed by a short climb over Truc before descending through forest to Les Contamines (1170m). Many walkers start by taking the cable car up from Les Houches to Bellevue; this avoids the long slog and makes for a more enjoyable start to the tour. Your hotel in Les Contamines is a comfortable 4-star hotel with a swimming pool. Les Contamines is a popular ski resort in winter, with several restaurants and bars and a well-stocked supermarket.

Day 3: Les Contamines to Les Chapieux

walking @ 20km / 8-9 hours

This morning pack what you need for tonight and tomorrow (overnight essentials and change of clothing) as your bags are transferred to La Palud; you will not see them this evening in Les Chapieux. You ascend to the Col du Bonhomme (2329m) and then traverse to the slightly higher Col de la Croix de Bonhomme (2479m) before descending to Les Chapieux. At this tiny and remote settlement, 15km from the nearest village of Bourg St Maurice, you stay at a small, welcoming auberge, basic but comfortable with shared facilities (towels are provided). Accommodation in twin / double rooms; evening meal is included. The price and menu are fixed (please advise any dietary restrictions) and local specialties may include fondue, raclette, potée savoyarde, gratin, crozets de tarentaise etc.

Day 4: Les Chapieux to La Palud

walking @ 30km / 9 hours

Today's walk can be shortened to around 20km by using local buses along the Val Veni (Italy) - the bus service does not normally operate before 1st July each year. After a steady ascent past Ville des Glaciers, you cross the Col de la Seigne (2516m) into Italy. The Elisabetta refuge is a popular lunch stop. In summer (again not before 1st July) there is a local bus service along the Val Veni from Cantine de la Visaille to La Saxe and Courmayeur, but purists can follow the strict TMB route high up on the south side of Val Veni, or follow delightful low-level paths along the Val Veni itself. From La Saxe or Courmayeur you can walk or catch the bus to La Palud. For your 2 nights in Italy you stay at a modern 3-star hotel at La Palud, close to the station for the cable car to Mont Blanc (Heilbronner peak). All rooms have private bathroom facilities. It is a short bus ride to the historic town and modern shopping centre of Courmayeur, or walk to Courmayeur via La Saxe.

Day 5: Rest day in La Palud.

On a clear day you may enjoy taking the cable car from La Palud to Pointe Heilbronner (3462m) on the crest of the Mont Blanc massif with views across the Glacier du Geant. Alternatively you can try one of the TMB variations such as from Courmayeur over Mont de la Saxe or Col Sapin, returning by bus from La Vachey or Pra Sec along Val Ferret to La Palud (note again this bus may not run before 1st July).

Note: an additional map will be needed if you intend to do any of these TMB variations on the south side of the Italian Val Ferret. The 1:50,000 map 'Pays du Mont Blanc' published by Didier Richard covers this part of the route and shows the TMB. This map is not provided as part of the information package we provide, but can be obtained through a specialist map shop or via the internet.

Day 6: La Palud to La Fouly**walking @ 28km / 7 hours**

You may shorten the walk by taking the bus to La Vachey or Arnuva. You pass close by Mont Dolent, and cross the Grand Col Ferret (2537m) to re-enter Switzerland. From Grand Col Ferret descend through alpine meadows past the summer pastures and barns of La Peula (refreshments available) and the tiny village of Ferret to your hotel in La Fouly (1595m). Here you stay at a small, comfortable 3-star hotel. Rooms have private facilities.

Day 7: La Fouly to Champex**walking @ 13.5km / 4.5 hours**

Follow the beautiful Swiss Val Ferret and pass through some pretty villages before leaving the valley to climb through woods to Champex in its picturesque lakeside setting. An easy day – in warm weather there is time to cool off in the open-air swimming pool. In the little resort town of Champex-Lac at the north-eastern end of the Mont Blanc range we use a 3-star hotel (all rooms en suite). You stay 2 nights here. Dinner is included tonight.

Day 8: Rest day in Champex

Relax, stroll around the lake or visit the botanical gardens (these are open daily with a small entry fee). There is an abundance of day walks from Champex, of which one of the most challenging is from La Breya (upper cable car station at 2198m) to the mountain hut at Cabane d'Orny (2811m). Another good walk from Champex-Lac is to follow the Val d'Arpette up towards the Fenetre d'Arpette.

Or, for those who would like some cultural stimulation it is possible to use the 'rest' day at Champex for an excursion by bus and narrow gauge train to the neighbouring town of Martigny, where the renowned Pierre Gianadda gallery usually offers summer exhibitions (Picasso, Renoir, Matisse have been featured in past years). Dinner at own arrangements on your second night in Champex.

Day 9: Champex to Trient**walking @ 15km / 5.5 hours**

Ascend through woods to reach the barns of Bovine (1987m; food and drinks usually available) and then descend to the Col de la Forclaz (1526m; refreshments available – in season try the local blueberry pie, *tarte aux myrtilles*). There is then the option of a walk to the Chalet du Glacier and a bit beyond for fine views of the Trient Glacier before descending to the village of Trient. There is a strenuous and challenging variation to today's route, over the Fenetre d'Arpette (2665m), although we consider that the 'Bovine' route is so scenic that it should not be missed. For your last night in Switzerland you stay at a simple 'relais' or auberge / refuge at the tiny village of Trient in the Val Trient. Accommodation is basic but comfortable, in two-bedded rooms with shared facilities. Dinner is included: tomato fondue, the specialty of the region, is a popular main dish with potatoes rather than bread as the accompaniment.

Day 10: Trient to Argentière**walking @ 20km / 6 hours**

You cross into France via the Col de Balme (2191m) revealing the Chamonix Valley below and the Mont Blanc massif above. On the way up to the col there is a longer but very scenic and satisfying alternative via Les Grands (head for heights an advantage). The best route from Col de Balme is via the spectacular but easy Posettes ridge, from the end of which there is a steep descent on good paths through forest to Tre le Champ and your hotel at Argentière. For those who want a more leisurely day, a shorter (yet still scenic) descent from Col de Balme to Argentière is possible via Le Tour. Back in France, stay in a comfortable and welcoming 3-star hotel in Argentière.

Day 11: Argentière to Chamonix**walking @ 12km / 5 hours**

Climb via Tre le Champ (1417m) and Les Cheserys, and make a detour to the scenic Lac Blanc (2352m) before rejoining the Grand Balcon route, which looks across the Chamonix valley towards Mont Blanc. From La Flegere (1877m) you can either descend to the valley at Les Praz de Chamonix on foot or by gondola and cable car.

From Les Praz, make your way to the hotel either by bus or by walking through the pleasant environs; or continue along the Grand Balcon for another two hours to Plan Praz, from where there is another cable car (or rather gondola) and another footpath down to Chamonix. It is necessary to check the timetables and keep an eye on the time so as not to miss the last gondola down. Spend two nights at the famous mountain resort of Chamonix in a 3-star hotel. All rooms are en suite and a sauna is available.

Day 12: Rest day in Chamonix.

There are so many options in Chamonix. Perhaps take a cable car up to the Aiguille du Midi (3842m), the highest ride up the Mont Blanc Massif (cost is @ €65 per person return); or a train ride to Montenvers and the Mer de Glace glacier and ice cave; or explore Chamonix and its surroundings.

Chamonix boasts an Olympic standard pool and aquatic fun centre. If you're after an adrenaline rush there are opportunities to try luge at the summer luge centre, take that first paragliding flight, or go sky-diving, rock-climbing or mountain biking; or there are the more sedate activities of golf, tennis, spa treatments or yoga. There is also the very interesting Alpine Museum, an art gallery and lots of shopping.

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Day 13: Chamonix to Les Houches

walking @ 14km / 6 hours

You rejoin the trail either at La Flegere, using the cable car from Les Praz de Chamonix, and continue along the Grand Balcon to Plan Praz, or at Plan Praz via the Brevent cable car from Chamonix. From Plan Praz ascend to Col de Brevent and up to the peak of Le Brevent (2525m), one of the highest points of the tour. This day offers some of the finest views of the route. From Brevent you descend to Les Houches (1010m) and make your way to the hotel where you spend the last night.

In case of bad weather or low cloud there are some good alternative low/medium level walks, well-marked, leading to Les Houches along the flanks of the Chamonix valley such as the *Petit Balcon* and the *Rive d'Arve*.

Day 14: Tour ends.

Depart Les Houches after breakfast.



Accommodation and Meals: The accommodation described above is our usual choice; if these are not available then we arrange alternatives and on occasion a supplement may apply; if this is the case you will be notified when booking.

On 11 nights you will stay in comfortable 2- to 4-star hotels with ensuite rooms; on 2 nights stay in simple guesthouse/auberges more like *mountain refuges*, where you may stay in communal bunk rooms and there are shared bathroom facilities. Breakfast is included daily and 4 dinners are included. Where dinner is not included there is a choice of places to eat nearby. There are places to shop for picnic lunches in local towns and villages, or to eat en route in refuges and cafés (although please note that some may not be open for early-season treks). Some hotels may provide a picnic lunch for an additional charge (usually €10-15 / 12-20CHF per person).

If twin rooms are available, single travellers can be paired to save single supplement charges. NB: there are no single rooms available in Les Chapieux, and if not paired up, single travellers will have to stay in a small dormitory at Refuge Les Mottets, which is 7km further up on the route.

Extra nights: These can be added at the beginning and end or the walk, please ask for details and pricing. We cannot add extra nights during the tour.

Walking holidays, guided in small groups or self-guided with inn-to-inn luggage transfers and meals, are available in many parts of Europe through **Outdoor Travel** including in Switzerland the **Bernese Oberland** and the **Val d'Anniviers**. We offer walking routes or trails in the footsteps of famous painters or writers such as van Gogh in **Provence** or Robert Louis Stevenson in the **Cevennes** in France. Long distance routes include the **Way of St James**, the **Camino de Santiago**, from Le Puy in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain; the **Via Francigena**, the pilgrims' *Road to Rome*; or Wainwright's challenging **Coast to Coast** walk in England.

Contact Outdoor Travel for more itinerary details and reservations:

- Call toll free on 1800 331 582 or (03) 57551743 or Fax (03) 57501020
- Email: info@outdoortravel.com.au
- Web: <http://www.outdoortravel.com.au>
- Mail: Outdoor Travel Pty Ltd, PO Box 286, Bright, VIC 3741, Australia