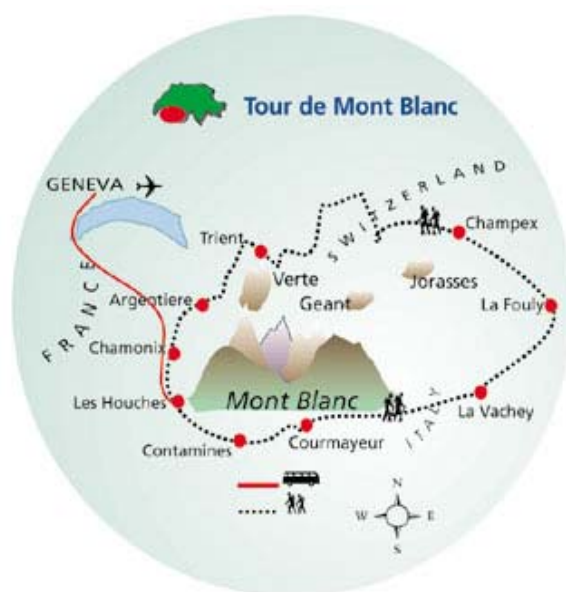


## FRANCE SWITZERLAND ITALY - TOUR DE MONT BLANC

14-day / 13-night self-guided or escorted walking holiday – the TMB circuit route



One of our most popular and classic alpine walking routes, the famous 'Tour du Mont Blanc', circumnavigates Western Europe's highest mountain over passes, through valleys of three contrasting countries. Walkers will enjoy the food and wine of France, Italy or Switzerland and enjoy some of the finest alpine scenery in the world.

The trail follows 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

This is a long walk of 14-days in the valleys, foothills and high passes of the Mont Blanc massif. The traverse of the high passes takes you beneath spectacular glaciers and at times you pass through breathtaking alpine villages and summer meadows. The Tour de Mont Blanc (TMB) is however well within the scope of most walkers who are reasonably fit and with regular walking experience. Trails are well defined and easy to follow. The trail itself is mostly graded as moderate, but with a few challenging ascents and the satisfaction of completing one of the world's great walks provides the finishing touch to a wonderful holiday.

Unlike most of our inn-to-inn or hotel treks, this **self-guided walk** operates on set dates to accommodate the logistics of baggage transfers. There will be up to fifteen other walkers doing the walk on any date - staying usually in the same accommodation - but you do not have to walk together if you are on the self-guided tour.

We also offer an **escorted tour** on selected dates each season: These are essentially the same as the self-guided tours, the main difference is that you will be met in the evening at your hotel on the first night by the leader for a trek briefing. The leader will lead you around the route every day and normally eat with you in the evenings too. He will look after your safety, group organisation, makes sure you get into the right hotels, and take care of navigation.

Single travellers on both the self-guided or escorted trips can sometimes be paired up with others, if they are prepared to share, saving on single supplement charges. There are usually two staff in the area to manage the baggage transfers. They will also act as a local contact in case of any problems that may arise.

**Self-guided departures:** 23, 24 June; 7, 21, 22 July; 4, 18, 19, 25, 26 August 2012

**Cost:** \$2190 per person twin share. Single supplement \$405

**Escorted departures:** Saturday 8 July 2012 (Ref: EJMB)

**Cost:** \$2475 per person twin share. Single supplement \$405

**Contact Outdoor Travel for more itinerary details and reservations**

## Travel Information:

**Season:** Mid June to mid September. This hotel trek tends to fill up so book early!

**Joining point:** First hotel of the tour, in Les Houches.

**Nearest airport:** Geneva.

**End of Tour:** The tour ends on day 14 at Les Houches.

**On Self-guided Tours** we provide you with route notes and maps.

## General information

**Transport between Geneva and Les Houches:** A private company operates a shuttle bus 6 times a day between Geneva airport and villages of the Chamonix valley (including Les Houches). We can book these transfers for you at a fee of @ AU\$60 per person, per transfer – ask for details when you make your reservation.

**Public transport between Geneva and Les Houches:** those who prefer to make their own way to the first hotel can also take a public bus from Geneva airport direct to Les Houches (three time daily). The same bus also stops at Geneva bus station in the city centre. There are also train services on two different routes from Geneva to Chamonix and Les Houches: (a) on Swiss railways from Geneva Airport via Geneva Cornavin (central station), changing trains at Martigny and Le Chatelard, from Le Chatelard onwards on French railways; (b) on French Railways (SNCF) from Geneva Eaux Vives, changing trains at Le Fayet. Although trains stop at Les Houches the station is some distance from the village and there is no phone or taxi rank at the station, so if you are arriving by train with baggage it is better to travel to Le Fayet and take a taxi from there to your hotel in Les Houches. Train timetables will be available on the Internet, but note that there is a changeover to new summer timetables at the end of May.

**Baths:** it is not normal for your room to have a bath, some hotels/guesthouses may have a separate room in the house where a bath is available to guests, but in the main there are showers in the ensuite bathrooms.

**Meals:** in France, Italy and Switzerland breakfast is usually coffee or tea and toast/croissant and light buffet (cheeses, ham yogurt etc.). If you want more for breakfast then we would suggest you purchase some food the night before. Please don't offend your hosts by making up a picnic lunch from the breakfast buffet unless it has been specifically organized for you.

It is important for you to tell us if you have any dietary requirements when you book your holiday so that we can inform everyone that you are staying with.

**Single Supplements:** are payable on most of our tours. The single supplement guarantees the privacy of your own room, except at one hotel. However, single rooms can at times be small and in some places they may not enjoy the same facilities as double/twin rooms.

**Language:** You will not necessarily find people speaking English. Remember to bring a phrase book and try to learn a bit of French, Italian and even German, as all are official languages in Switzerland.

**Luggage:** When staying in hotels your luggage will be awaiting your arrival at reception. Please ask someone if you need assistance. When staying at Les Chapieux there is no luggage transfer (you will see your bags next in Italy), so you need to take your wash bag & a change of clothes for two days.

## 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. Some potential customers have asked us about whether there are any vertigo-inducing localities on the TMB, or if a head for heights is needed. The answer in short is 'No' - provided you stick to the basic TMB as described in our route notes and defined on the maps; and avoid the 'variations'. Of course you always need to take care where you put your feet.

Some of the variations and alternatives pose no problem - we make it clear in the notes, which in our opinion do require a 'head for heights'.

**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, particularly where the route coincides with the GR5 French long distance trail. There are however differences

between the styles and thoroughness of waymarking in the 3-countries. These differences are explained in the route notes. It is advisable to have with you and be familiar with the use of a small pocket compass as the cloud may occasionally be down on the high passes.

On the self-guided tours (but not escorted) we provide you with detailed route descriptions and excellent 1:25,000 scale maps, which show the whole of our TMB route (ie including the Italian and Swiss sectors).

## Outline Itinerary

**Day 1: Arrive Les Houches** (see above).

**Day 2: Les Houches to Les Contamines** 19 kms / 7 hours.

A demanding first day starts with a steady climb from Les Houches (950m) via Col de Voza (1653 m) - below the tip of the Bionassay 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.

**Day 3: Les Contamines to Les Chapieux** 17.5 kms / 7 hours.

We 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. Your bags are not carried to this point -you will next see them in Italy. You have to carry your wash bag and a change of clothing for two days (one night).

**Day 4: Les Chapieux to La Palud** 30 kms / 9 hours.

The walk can be shortened to around 20km by using local buses along the Val Veni (Italy) - the bus service does not normally operate before 1<sup>st</sup> July each year. After a steady ascent past Ville de Glaciers, we cross the Col de la Seigne (2516m) into Italy. The Elisabetta refuge is a popular lunch stop. In summer (again not before 1<sup>st</sup> 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 up to La Palud.

**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 1<sup>st</sup> 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** 28 kms / 7 hours.

Taking the bus to La Vachey or Arnava can shorten the walk. We pass close by Mont Dolent, and cross the Grand Col Ferret (2537m) to re-enter Switzerland. From Grand Col Ferret we descend through alpine meadows past the summer pastures and barns of La Peula (refreshments available) and the tiny village of Ferret to our hotel in La Fouly (1595m).

**Day 7: La Fouly to Champex** 17 kms/ 4.5 hours.

We 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.

**Day 8: Rest day in Champex**

A chance today to relax or to 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). Good weather and a head for heights are needed for this walk; we do not provide route notes but route finding is simple in good weather. Another good walk from Champex-Lac is to follow the Val d'Arpette up towards the Fenetre d'Arpette.

For those who are starting to feel the lack of 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 ([www.gianadda.ch](http://www.gianadda.ch)) usually offers summer exhibitions (in the past 50 original Van Gogh paintings were on show every day for 5 months, another year it was the turn of Picasso).

**Day 9: Champex to Trient** 20 km / 5 hours.

We 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 including - in season -local tarte aux myrtilles (blueberry pie) - recommended!). 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. Basic accommodation provided in rooms in a simple auberge (inn) tonight.

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.

**Day 10: Trient to Argentiere** 20 kms / 6 hours.

Cross into France via the Col de Balme (2191m) revealing the Chamonix Valley below and the Mont Blanc massif. 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 at one point). The best way on 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 our hotel at Argentiere.

For those who want a more leisurely day, a shorter (yet still scenic) descent from Col de Balme to Argentiere is possible via Le Tour.

**Day 11: Argentiere to Chamonix** 12 kms / 5 hours.

We 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 (1877) you can either descend to the valley at Les Praz de Chamonix on foot or by gondola & cable car.

From Les Praz, you would make your way to the hotel either by bus or by walking through the pleasant environs; or continue along the Grand Balcon for another 2-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.

**Day 12: In Chamonix.**

A chance to take the cable car up to the Aiguilles du Midi (3842m (the highest ride up the Mont Blanc Massif. The cost is @ Euros 35.00 per person return but it's really worth it); or a train ride to Montenvers and the Mer de Glace glacier; or explore Chamonix and its surroundings. If you are looking for something totally different from walking Chamonix boasts an Olympic standard pool and aquatic fun centre, a summer luge course, opportunities for that first paragliding flight, golf etc. There is also the very interesting Alpine Museum and an art gallery and lots of shopping.

**Day 13: Chamonix to Les Houches** 14 kms / 6 hours.

We 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 we ascend to Col de Brevent and on 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 we descend to Les Houches (1010m) and make our way to the hotel where we spend the last night.

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

**Day 14;** Tour ends after breakfast at Les Houches.

**Accommodation & Meals:** Of the total of 13-nights, 7-nights are spent in hotels of 3-star or similar standard, 3 nights in 2-star or Swiss 1-star hotels. The other 2-nights are in simple auberges more like *mountain refuges*. Of these 13-nights, 5 are 'half-board' (ie dinner, bed and breakfast), the remainder are bed and breakfast only. 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 cafes (although please note that some may not be open for treks early in the season). These are described in the detailed route notes.

**Night 1:** The tour starts in the village of Les Houches at a 3-star chalet-style hotel facing the Mont Blanc range. There are 21 rooms with bath/shower, WC and telephone. The hotel has a shaded garden, a solarium-terrace and a games room. Dinner included.

**Night 2:** The hotel in Les Contamines is a comfortable 3-star hotel with a swimming pool. Les Contamines is a ski resort in winter, and has several restaurants and bars, also a well-stocked supermarket...B&B only.

**Night 3:** At the tiny and remote settlement of Les Chapieux, 15km from the nearest village of Bourg St Maurice, we stay at a small but very welcoming auberge with 12-rooms with basic comforts. No ensuite bathroom, but towels are provided. Accommodation in twin / double rooms; evening meal is included. The price and menu are fixed; vegetarians should ensure that we know of your requirements. Local specialties may include fondue, raclette, potée savoyarde, gratin, crozets de tarentaise etc.

Packed lunches are available (at extra cost) and there is also a little shop in the hamlet where such items as the local Beaufort cheese can be obtained.

**Nights 4 & 5:** For your 2-nights in Italy you stay at a modern 2-star hotel at La Palud (1370m), which is situated close to the station for the cable car to Mont Blanc (Helbronner peak). All rooms have private bathroom facilities. There is a large terrace, a bar, and a TV lounge. It is a short bus ride to the historic town and modern shopping centre of Courmayeur. It is also possible to walk to Courmayeur via La Saxe. Bed & Breakfast only.

**Night 6:** For our first night in Switzerland in the unspoilt Val Ferret we stay at a small, unclassified but very comfortable hotel (we would describe it as 2/3-star standard) in the well-situated village of La Fouly. Each room has a bath or shower. Bed & Breakfast only.

**Nights 7 & 8:** In the little resort town of Champex-Lac at the northeastern end of the Mont Blanc range we will be using a 3-star hotel (all rooms en suite). Nearby there is a good choice of restaurants with specialties such as raclette, first hotels to be built in the valley. All the rooms have en-suite bathrooms. There is a small shop in the town for picnic materials etc. The first night here is half-board and the second one is Bed & Breakfast.

**Night 9:** For our last night in Switzerland we stay at a simple 'relais' or 'auberge' (inn) at the tiny village of Trient in the Val Trient. Accommodation is fairly basic tonight, in two-bedded rooms but without private facilities. Evening meal is included. Tomato fondue, the specialty of the region is a popular main dish with potatoes rather than bread as the accompaniment. Packed lunches are not available here but there is a good small grocery shop under the same roof as the inn where picnic materials can be obtained.

**Night 10:** Back in France to spend one night in a comfortable and welcoming hotel in Argentiere. Bed & Breakfast only.

**Nights 11 & 12:** We spend 2-nights at the famous mountain resort of Chamonix. The hotel where you will be staying has a mixture of new and early 1900s décor and all the rooms are fully en suite, and include satellite TV. A sauna is also available. Bed & Breakfast only.

**Night 13:** Back at Les Houches at the same hotel as on night 1 with half-board.

**Extra nights:** As this tour operates to fixed schedules it is not practicable to add in extra nights. Except at the beginning and end of the walk.

**Other walking holidays** – guided in small groups or self-guided with inn-to-inn luggage transfers & meals are available in many parts of Europe through **Outdoor Travel** including in Switzerland the **Wildstrubel Circuit**, the **Alpine Pass Route**, the **Haute Route**, **Bernese Oberland** & centre-based walks at Meiringen. For long distance routes we offer the the **Way of St James** from Le Puy to Santiago, the route of Pilgrims along the River Yonne to Vezevalay in Burgundy and **St Cuthbert's Way** from Scotland into England or the English **Coast to Coast** classic. We also offer literary walking routes or trails in the footsteps of famous painters such as van Gogh in **Provence** or Robert Louie Stevenson in the **Cevennes** in France.

**Contact Outdoor Travel for more itinerary details and reservations:**

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