

Alpinehikers

pre-trip information guide



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How to Use this Guide

Hello Alpinehikers' traveler ~ Congratulations! You're about to set off on a journey through the Alps. We've designed this guide book to provide helpful reference information to all of our travelers. As you read, please note the details specific to the type of tour you are taking:

Self-Guided or Guided
Hiking or Leisure
Village-based or Inn-to-Inn
Switzerland, Italy, France - or a combination

Your Itinerary Packet is separate from this booklet and includes information specific to your tour.

how to

A Short History of Tourism in the Alps





While the history of human settlement in the Alps goes back thousands of years, for most of that time, life was simple. People were farmers, they lived where they were born, and by traditional means. In the mountains, they had a way of life that was virtually the same across the alpine regions. In summer, moving cows and animals between alp meadows, cutting hay, making cheese, growing food, preparing for winter. The whole family pitched in. In winter, hunkering down, tending animals, schooling the kids, handcrafts like woodcarving or needlework. A mountain culture was established, that saw very little disruption until tourists started to arrive.

The first stirrings of tourism began in the late 1700's and 1800's. Scientists came to study glaciers, geology, and botany. A few wealthy tourists came and raved about the beauty of the dramatic landscape. The Alps, particularly Grindelwald, Switzerland and Chamonix, France, became an integral part of "The Grand Tour" of Europe. By the 1860's, the Alps were attracting large numbers of young men, attempting first ascents of all the peaks. Many more

History

people came (most of them British) to walk and admire them from a distance. Trains were making travel easier, and a leisure class rose that had time and money to enjoy travel.

These first tourists found no hotels and had to find places to stay among the locals, in a farmer's spare room or with the local priest. As more and more tourists arrived, a few locals started adding extra rooms to their homes and opening small guesthouses. Two English aristocrats, William Windham and Richard Pocock, discovered "Chamouni" in 1741, and the first inn opened in 1770. Zermatt's first inn premiered in 1839... with 3 beds. The Hotel Faulhorn, on a scenic peak above Grindelwald, was opened in 1830, making it one of Switzerland's very first mountain hotels. The Schlernhaus, an historic inn atop the Schlern near Bolzano, Italy was opened in the late 1800's, making it one of the very first high mountain inns in the Dolomites. Many of these mountain inns exist still today, serving as quaint and beautiful B&B's.

Switzerland

The Confederation Helvetica (Switzerland) is now over 700 years old. In 1291 Representatives from 3 cantons (or states) met on a meadow near Lucerne to pledge their independence and a mutual defense against the Habsburg empire. The Habsburgs sent huge, mounted armies to test the impudence of these simple mountain folk, and time and again the Swiss prevailed. More cantons willingly joined, and the confederation grew. The association between the cantons was loose, but it held. Soon, the Swiss (taken from the name of one of the original cantons, Schwyz) became downright aggressive, and



other cantons were conquered and added to the confederation. Their soldiers became famous for their fierceness and bravery; so famous that the Pope insisted on (and to this day still has) a Swiss Guard. After defeats to France in the 1500's, the Swiss started to retreat from their aggression, and turned more to internal matters.

Italy

The Dolomites extend across north-eastern Italy, east of Como, north of Venice. Much of the region was part of Austria-Hungary before WWI. During the war, many battle lines were drawn through the Dolomites, and a tortuous trench warfare was waged. A number of tunnels were blasted into the mountains, both for housing soldiers and as attempts to attack the other side, and a system of *vie ferrate*, cabled paths, was maintained to help soldiers get around the rugged landscape. Some of these tunnels exist still today, and the via ferrata path system has expanded into a widespread and popular network of cabled trails that fall somewhere between hiking and climbing.

After WWI, much of the region was ceded to Italy, even though the locals were Tyrolean - native German speakers more closely associated with Austria than Italy. Italianization of the region began, and every town, mountain, and many families received an Italian name. During the early years of WWII, non-Italian speaking inhabitants of this region were given "the Option" to emigrate to Nazi Germany, thus leaving their homeland, or be assimilated into mainstream Italian culture, losing their cultural heritage. Over 80% left, although many returned after the war.

In some valleys, a 3rd language survives, the ancient Ladin. Born when Roman soldiers moved into remote regions in the mountains, it is a romance language similar to Romansh of eastern Switzerland, but it is not simply an Italian dialect. Today, the region enjoys a high degree of local autonomy, and this mixture of Ladin, Tyrolean and Italian cultures adds to the fascinating fabric of this beautiful area. Many towns have 2-3 names, and the people are multi-lingual.

History

The name Dolomites refers to the type of rock, similar to limestone, that makes up the region. It comes from the French scientist Déodat de Dolomieu, who discovered the essential difference in the late 1700's.

Mont Blanc

Named for the peak of the same name, the Mont Blanc region straddles 3 countries - Switzerland, Italy and France - each with a similar but unique history. Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in the Alps, and the entire region is a thriving hub for hikers, bikers, trail runners, climbers, skiers, and everyone in between. Two villages, Chamonix in France, and Courmayeur in Italy, anchor the region.

Close to Geneva, and easy to visit from there, Chamonix was one the very first mountain villages to attract the attention of tourists. On the French side, Chamonix first appears in written history in 1091, and was a valley of sheep farmers. In 1786, in response to a reward offered by the Geneva scientist Horace Benedict de Saussure, two locals from Chamonix made the first successful climb of Mont Blanc and kicked off the sport of mountaineering. These men, Dr. Paccard and Jacques Balmat, led de Saussure to the top the next year.

This region has been alternately swapped between the two countries (and local princes) for hundreds of years. Most recently, in 1860, the locals in Chamonix were given the right to vote on whether they should go back to France. They voted 130,533 yes, 235 no, and Chamonix became part of France for good.

At the same time, Courmayeur became noted for its spa baths and healing mineral waters. The Italian village of Courmayeur was defeated by the Romans in the 1st century BC, and gets its name from the Roman *curia major*, or large parish. The nearby Col de la Seigne was used even in ancient times as a trade route to the north. It was in the 1860's that Courmayeur began to

show up in travel literature, hailed for it's beautiful views, and it's cobblestoned roads and medieval flair make it an atmospheric and comfortable stop today.

The mountain people of the Alps have always been fiercely independent, and place great importance on responsibility and self-sufficiency. It was this toughness that enabled their ancestors to move into the mountains, to open up new grazing land and to eke out an existence. In centuries past, the mountains were not seen as beautiful vacation spots, but as fearsome obstacles to travel and agriculture. Winters were long and harsh, and in order to survive, the locals relied on a system of moving their animals to progressively higher meadows to graze in the summer - the word "alp" actually means summer pasture or meadow in German - while lower fields were cut and stored for winter hay.



These traditions define the region, and this style of life continues today. These regions are more prosperous now, and tourism is a major industry, but many people in the mountain communities continue to keep cows and sheep, driving them to the alps in summer (an event accompanied by a colorful procession of bell-ringing and flowers), and making cheese by hand to keep for the winter. In Switzerland, the price of milk and cheese is subsidized by the government to help make sure these traditions don't die out, and holding onto this way of life, and the history and self-sufficiency it embodies, is one of the reasons Switzerland has so far declined to join the European Community. Throughout the Alps, the pace of life has changed little over the years, something for which we can all be thankful.


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Getting There and Around

OK. You have your ticket, you have your tour packet, you have your passport... you're on your way! What are you going to do when you land? Transportation is straight-forward and highly functional throughout our Alpine tour regions. Trains, shuttle vans, and busses will fetch you from airports and take you between cities and villages. Specialty trains offer access to remote destinations like the Jungfraujoch, Switzerland's highest railway station. The occasional funicular or gondola can supplement your time on the trail; choose to take a ride to the top and hike down, save your knees by hiking up and cruising back, or ride both ways and enjoy the view! Practical and fun, the railways are often a surprisingly enjoyable part of an alpine adventure.

Switzerland

If you're flying in to Zürich or Geneva, you'll find these airports are small and efficient, and you can get around in English very easily. Best of all, they both have train stations at the airport, so once you get your bags and clear customs, you should be on your way very quickly! Just follow the signs to the train station, and stop at the ticket counter for a printout of the next departure to your destination. The clerks can print a train schedule for your journey with connection times and track numbers. The trains will leave on time, to the minute.

The yellow train departure schedules are posted at every track of every train station (white schedules are for arrivals). This can be very useful when you need to find your next train option or track quickly. Maybe you've just arrived in Visp at 11:02 and you need to go to Geneva, but don't know the next departure or track. When is it? Find a yellow departure schedule, scan to the correct hour, find your destination and time. The Swiss words for track are *gleis* (German), *voie* (French), and *binario* (Italian).

There & Around

Listen also for the announcements ("You're next connection...") that are often in English in popular tourist areas.

For most trains in Switzerland you will have a ticket or pass that is valid for the whole day rather than a specific departure. Most do not take or require seat reservations at all (exceptions are the scenic trains, like Glacier Express and Bernina Express, and longer, international journeys). Trains are labeled 1st or 2nd class with a big 1 or 2 on the outside of each car. Find the correct track, get on either a first or second class car (depending on your pass or ticket), and find any free seat. Somebody will find you soon to check your pass or ticket. There are spaces for your luggage either at the end of each car, or behind or above your seat. Connections are sometimes as short as 4-5 minutes. Amazingly, it works, but it doesn't leave time for dallying or confusion. Just be ready when your train gets to the stop and walk to your next track. If you do miss a connection, there will usually be another leaving in 30 minutes to an hour.





You don't need a rail pass to travel by train in Switzerland, but it's usually a good idea. One popular rail pass, a Swiss Transfer Ticket, gives you 2 free days of travel in a 30 day period. There are a variety of Swiss Travel Flex Passes with 3, 4 or more free travel days in a 30 day period, or consecutive



passes that can be useful for short trips with lots of train travel. Half-fare cards are also available, giving you 50% discounts on any tickets you buy. Please note that a "free" travel day is valid only for trips between cities or villages, as well as on city buses and lake boats. Anything going to viewpoints above the villages is usually privately-run, and will only offer discounts to passholders. You're not getting to Jungfraujoch for free with a Swiss Pass!

Most of our tours include either a Transfer Ticket or Travel Flex Pass with enough free days to cover your major journeys. If you have a short travel day - to a neighboring village or maybe Zürich airport to downtown - you probably won't want to use a free day on your pass, but can buy an affordable ticket for that journey instead.

Haute Route and Mont Blanc

For both of these tours, which start in Chamonix, you'll most likely choose to fly in and out of Geneva. To get to Chamonix from Geneva, an airport shuttle is a much quicker and easier than trains, and our tours typically include this shuttle trip. These are small vans that have welcome desks just outside customs at the airport, pick you up there, and drop you at your hotel. If you're taking a shared shuttle, you'll probably need to wait a bit as other people arrive, but once you're on the road, the trip takes just over an hour, and will drop you at your hotel. If we haven't booked your shuttle yet, let us know your arrival information, and we will arrange this for you. They strongly prefer that you have a cell phone so they can contact you if there are any problems meeting up, but these shuttles can be arranged without a cell phone contact. Please let us know the cell number you'll be using while traveling.

The Tour of Mont Blanc finishes back in Chamonix, and again we'll arrange a shuttle to pick you up at your hotel and take you to the airport. This takes just over an hour, so flying out that morning is quite possible without an overnight in Geneva. The Haute Route finishes in Zermatt, and at the end of that tour, you'll return from Zermatt by train. Our Haute Route Tour normally includes a ticket from Zermatt back to Geneva or Zurich, unless you've arranged otherwise with us, or a rail pass that will cover that trip for you. This trip takes over 3 hours, and often an overnight stay in Geneva or Zurich is needed for a flight the next day.

Dolomites

There are a lot of potential entry points for the Dolomites. Whether you fly into Venice, Verona, Milan, Munich or someplace else, you'll either take the train, rent a car, or book a taxi. Taxi is easiest, but expensive. Trains are also convenient and are how most of our clients travel.

All of these airports are connected to public transportation. In Milan, Venice or Verona, you take a bus to the train station, in Munich there is a train station at the airport. To get to the western Dolomites, you'll take a train to Bolzano/Bozen (Bolzano is the Italian name, and Bozen the Germanic name for the same city). For the Alta Via 1, you will take the train to Brunico/Bruneck. You will probably want to buy tickets in advance. You can also simply buy tickets at the train station once you arrive, though you run the risk specific departures could be sold out.

Most of our tours to the Dolomites include taxi transfer from Bolzano or Brunico to your hotel in the mountains. We will arrange this individually with you. Private taxis can also be arranged for pick up and drop off at the airport, and while it's more expensive, usually costing about as much as 4 people taking 1st class trains, this can be a convenient solution. Please ask us about the available options for your particular plans.







What to Expect

In many ways, what you get out of your vacation depends on what you put into it. You'll have an excellent opportunity to see a new country, meet new people, and to experience their culture. You may be surprised to find that their ideas about how things should be are sometimes different than our own. Rooms in alpine hotels are smaller than what you may be used to. Elevators are the exception rather than the rule (pack light). Tap water isn't normally served with dinner (you're often expected to buy a drink), ice for your drinks is a rare treat, and so on. Stores often close between 12 and 2 for lunch, and stay closed on Sundays. There are many other differences large and small, which is part of what makes foreign travel so much fun.

In mountain villages in the Alps, it's quite common for both breakfast and dinner to be included in the price of a room. Breakfast is almost always a buffet, with plenty of choices. Dinner is typically a multi-course feast with perhaps 3 to 5 courses, often with choices, always catered to individual dietary restrictions and allergies. Most hotels take a lot of pride in their dinners and put a lot of effort into creating delicious, filling meals. A reservation with dinner included is called half-board or half-pension, and that is how we refer to dinner on our bookings (full-board would include lunch as well, but is fairly rare).

As a guest in a foreign country, try to approach their customs with an open mind and wide-eyed wonder. Enjoy the differences, and remember we are all ambassadors for our home countries. You'll probably find that you enjoy many things that you can't find at home. Don't be afraid to open up to people or to ask questions. Most locals are very friendly and are quite happy to talk to a stranger from a different land. Most of them speak English, sometimes fluently, almost always willingly. At the end of your trip, the people you meet and the interactions you've had will be among your favorite memories.

Travel is a great time to try new things and expand our boundaries. It's a wonderful escape from the normal routine of work, and perhaps the best way to gain new perspectives not only on how other people live but also on how we want to live. In fact our tours have inspired more than a few to re-think their current direction. It's not just about seeing mountains and museums. So go ahead... try the chocolate and drink the wine, paraglide off a mountain (when will you do that again?), ignore your emails, book a massage, and strike up a conversation with your fellow travelers. Approach your trip as an open book, and you may be surprised at what you find!



Language

Knowledge of English is common in all parts of the Alps, and it is very easy to get by. Don't be afraid to talk to people. Ask if they speak English, speak slowly and clearly, and try to avoid using too much slang. If you know any German, French or Italian, make an attempt to use it in the appropriate region. The German-speakers don't really care, but the French and Italian-speakers often do, and even if you fail miserably, the effort is always appreciated.

Switzerland

Switzerland is home to 4 national languages - German, French, Italian, and Romansh - each residing in its own region. German is the largest of these groups, spoken in about 67% of the country, with French occupying about 24% in the west and southwest, and Italian about 8%, mainly in the canton of Ticino around Lugano. The Romansh community is very small, with about 50,000 speakers concentrated in the eastern part of



Switzerland. The Bernese Oberland and Matterhorn regions are entirely German-speaking, while the Engadine is also primarily German-speaking with pockets of Romansh. While the Haute Route stretches from the French-speaking Mont Blanc region to German-speaking Zermatt, with the linguistic divide between Zinal and Gruben.

Throughout Switzerland, this German/French division is playfully known as the Rösti divide (because they eat hash-brown Rösti potatoes in the German part but not so much elsewhere), and refers as much to the many cultural differences between these two main regions of Switzerland as it does to the language.

Mont Blanc

Around Mont Blanc, you'll hike through France, Italy, and Switzerland. The Aosta region of Italy near Courmayeur is officially bilingual, and French is nearly as common as Italian. The Swiss portion of Mont Blanc is French-speaking.

Dolomites

While most of the eastern Dolomites (like Cortina d'Ampezzo) is primarily Italian-speaking, much of the Dolomites is multilingual. In the Bolzano province of the western Dolomites, about 70% of the population is native German speaking, 25% Italian, and 5% Ladin.

In the Val Gardena and Alta Badia regions, where many of our Dolomites tours are centered, a majority of the local population are native Ladin-speakers, an ancient language that traces its origins to the Roman soldiers stationed here thousands of years ago. Similar to Romansh community in Switzerland, it is very small, but you'll often see signs in Italian, German and Ladin.




ALPINEHIKERS

Before You Go

Insuring Your Trip

So... what happens if you need to cancel your trip? Many of our clients have to cancel each year for various and unpredictable reasons. Cancelling a trip is no fun, and it's also very expensive - from train passes to flights, independent hotel stays and other various trip costs. To protect yourself in the event that you have to cancel, trip cancellation and travel insurance is highly recommended. We always try to be fair to our clients who can't come, but we make substantial commitments that can't always be reversed last minute. You'll have flights and pre-trip and post-trip plans to account for also. So although we don't require it, I highly encourage you to look at travel insurance for your tour.

For US and Canadian residents, we suggest you look at Travel Guard and choose among their coverage plans. Travel Guard has worked well for our tour members for years, and is not that expensive - generally between 3-9% of your tour cost, depending on your age, the cost of your trip, and what kind of plan you get. It's best to buy insurance within 15 days of your initial deposit, which gives you more comprehensive coverage, and the option to buy "cancel for any reason" coverage, but you can still buy insurance any time before you travel.

If you are forced to cancel a trip, you can talk to us about rescheduling, or carrying over a portion of your tour cost to a future tour. We'll always do what we can to help. But every year we have clients who regret that they didn't get insurance, while nobody ever regrets that they did.

Passport

When does your passport expire? You thought it expired on the expiration date, but it's not quite that easy. For Americans

traveling in Switzerland and most of Europe, your passport must be valid for at least six months *after* your return date, or you will be refused entry on the airplane before you even fly to Europe. This is not a detail that will be overlooked! Contact the embassy of your destination country for more information if your passport expires less than six months after your planned return home.

Getting in Shape

The Alps are steep! Elevations vary from 2000' in the cities, to around 4000' to 5000' in the mountain villages. Hikes regularly reach 7000' to 9000', with some of the highest passes closer to 10,000'. You'll never sleep much higher than 10,000' in even the highest hut, and most of your hotels will be closer to 5000' to 6000'.

For hikers, flat trails are few and far between, and in general the trails are quite a bit steeper than what you would encounter elsewhere. We always try to give you harder and easier options so you can adjust your pace to the level and desire of yourself or the group. Many times there are cable cars or trains that can shorten a long day, and sometimes there are alternate trails that can shorten a hike. But still, especially on inn-to-inn trips, come prepared for some strenuous days. Our guides like to say, "in the Alps, the only time it's flat is when you're sleeping".

Even non-hikers should be prepared for lots of city walking through sometimes hilly cities, up and down hotel stairways, to various viewing platforms at cable car stations, and through steep mountain villages. Even though you might not be hiking, you will probably do a fair amount of walking.

You should definitely do some conditioning exercises prior to arriving in the Alps. Whether it's going to the gym a few times per week or getting out on dayhikes on the weekends, any exercise you get is going to help you when you arrive. Some of the best viewpoints involve long climbs to remote locations.

Even walks through towns often have a lot of up and down to them, and higher altitudes adds to the difficulty. You will have a safer and overall more enjoyable trip, and will be able to get to places you wouldn't reach otherwise, if you arrive in shape.

Special Note for the Haute Route:

The Haute Route is our most strenuous tour. It has very few good options for shorter days. There are only a couple of cable cars and trains to shorten certain stages, and alternate trails to shorten hikes are rare. This is a strenuous trip. Come prepared for 3000 to 4000' ascents and descents on steep, rugged terrain each day. All of the passes involve long climbs and long descents, and higher altitudes add to the difficulty. Stairmasters or squats will help prepare your legs for those kinds of days. If you have time, consider arriving a few days early to take some warm-up hikes.



Packing Tips

Generally speaking, the Alps give you an opportunity to wear every layering option from t-shirt to a down jacket - sometimes all in the same day! When people ask what the weather is like, it's tempting to say, "promising". Promising what... who knows? It could snow in July, it could rain for a few hours each day, or be sunny with bright blue skies and you might get downright hot. A day might start out beautiful, bring a drenching downpour mid-day, then open up for a gorgeous sunset at dinner. Flexibility is a good policy when you're packing for the Alps. Take less than

you think you need. Your packing check list is included in your tour packet and lists recommended and optional items for your specific tour.

Keeping in Touch

A cell phone is the easiest way to keep in touch. If you bring your cell phone with you, coverage in the Alps is great even in the mountains. Calling and using the internet is still going to be expensive from your own cell phone, if you're not connected to, say, your hotel's wi-fi signal, but the technology and plans are changing constantly, and prices are coming down. Some providers' international plans offer unlimited data, others have pretty stingy data caps. Each provider has its own options for international phone use, so call your provider to see what programs they have available, and to sign up for any international rate plan before you go. The major companies all have information on short-term international plans, if your phone can be used in Europe, or if you'll need a "loaner" phone sent to you.

If you haven't used Skype yet (or Google voice, Facetime, WhatsApp, etc), now might be the time to try it. Many hotels have free internet, or at least affordable internet for your stay, and this can be a great way to call home, especially if you will be calling a lot. If your family is on Skype, you can call their computer for free from yours, but you can also pay to make Skype calls to regular phones. Buy a Skype credit from their website (or sign up for a calling plan). Calls to the US are about 2 cents/minute. It's a lot cheaper and easier than it used to be, folks. You don't need to be out of touch on your vacation... unless you want to!

Public phones are disappearing, but are still available in some places. In Switzerland and France they usually require a credit card or phone card. For local and international calls, you can buy cards of different denominations at train stations, post offices, and many hotels and magazine shops. Just insert it into

the phone (or dial a toll-free number and code), and make your call.

To call Europe (or if someone is calling you at your hotel), you'll need the country code. Switzerland's country code is 41, in France it's 33, and Italy is 39. If your hotel's phone number in Switzerland is 033 855 1212, you would call that number from anywhere in Switzerland, but from the US, you would dial 011 41 33 855 1212. From another European country it would be 00 41 33 855 1212. When you're making calls on a cell phone, use the plus sign (+), so it would be +41 33 855 1212.

For calling the US or Canada from Europe, the country code is 1. To call the US from a cell phone while in Europe, you dial +1 and then the number, and from a hotel or pay phone you dial 001 then the number.










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Frequently Asked Questions

Weather

The weather in the Alps varies. A lot. It's usually not too hot. The valleys might reach the low 80's on a hot day, but a typical high might be in the 60's, and you can expect it to be about 5°F cooler for every 1000 feet you gain. Showers and afternoon thunderstorms are common, and snow in the summer is not unheard of, but there is typically a lot of fine weather for hiking. This is weather in the mountains, and you should be prepared for a wide variety of conditions.

With that in mind, most days are actually quite nice. International weather sites, besides focusing on any slight amount of rain during a day, tend to be terribly wrong, often pulling mountaintop info and presenting it as accurate for the valleys. Or they are, at best, extremely incomplete, showing a rain cloud, when in reality the day was beautiful with just a few showers at 5 pm. Did it rain? Yes. Did you need to worry that your day in the mountains would be ruined? Absolutely not.

Our best advice is don't look. Those generic weather sites are wrong more than they are right, and anything that pretends to tell you the weather more than a few days in advance is guessing. Your best bet is to get weather forecasts locally, for that day or the next, and don't try to look ahead.

Here are some of our favorite sites for weather forecasts in English:

SWITZERLAND: www.meteocentrale.ch

CHAMONIX weather: www.chamonix.com/weather,11,en.html

ITALY's Val Gardena and the surrounding region: www.valgardena.it/en/holidays/weather

FAQ's

Luggage Transport

Luggage transport is often included for many stages of our tours. Refer to your itinerary packet for specific details.

If you're traveling by train to your next destination, you should take your luggage with you on the train. Although luggage can be sent separately in Switzerland, it always travels slower than you do, and you'd need to return to the train station later in the day to retrieve it anyway. On the trains, there is room behind your seat, above the seat, or at the end of the car for luggage.

Currency

Although currency rates can fluctuate quite a bit, the Alps have been consistently expensive for years. Train travel is relatively expensive, as are hotels and restaurants. Switzerland is more expensive than Italy or France, especially in the 4 and 5-star hotels, but cable cars, meals and drinks can add up quickly at any of these stops. Expect a mountain top cable car to cost $100 or more, a cup of coffee or a coke $5, or lunch in a restaurant $20. How much spending money you need to bring depends on your habits, and whether you are on a guided or self-guided tour.

On self-guided tours, breakfasts and most dinners are normally included in the price, as are the accommodations and much of your train travel. You'll need some cash for lunches, drinks,



souvenirs, and other miscellaneous items, but whether you drink tap water with dinner (sometimes there's a charge for that) or $80 wine is up to you. If you forget to bring something, don't worry - everything you might need for the trip can be found in Europe, but it adds to your costs. You'll also need to pay for cable cars, busses or trains that take you above the villages to viewpoints and trailheads, most of which can be put on credit card.

Guided tours have fewer costs during the tour. Lunches and any transfers to and from trailheads are already included, so you'll just need some cash for drinks with dinner, any travel or activities done outside the tour, personal items and a tip for your guide, if you choose.

Either way, we recommend bringing a couple hundred dollars in cash, which can easily be exchanged at the airport train station when you arrive. Most countries in Europe use only euros, while in Switzerland you will need Swiss francs. Credit cards are great too. Visa, MasterCard (called Eurocard), and American Express are all equally accepted. You will not be able to use your credit card everywhere - at a bakery, to make small purchases at a souvenir shop, or to pay for drinks at many hotels and small mountain inns. You will be able to buy train tickets (train stations accept all 3 cards), or pay for a meal or a larger purchase in any town.

Most importantly, you can use bank machines to get cash advances in the local currency when you need cash. The machines are fairly well distributed, and exchange rates are quite good. If your PIN code is a word, make sure you know the number sequence before you leave, as the ATM's in Europe usually don't have letters on them. Bring two different cards, in case one gets lost, demagnetized, or just plain doesn't work in the machines you find.

Before you go, remember to call your bank and credit cards and let them know your travel plans. Otherwise you run the risk of having your card charges declined by their fraud services.

Tipping

Rounding up a few francs or euros (about 5%) in restaurants is customary, but not necessary. This is given to the waiter as you pay. For instance, if a drink costs 3.40, you might give the waiter 4 francs/euros and tell him to keep the change. For a dinner that costs 75 francs/euros, you might pay 80, with the extra 5 as a tip. Nobody will chase after you if you don't tip, but nobody expects or needs a 15-20% tip.

On a guided trip, tipping is voluntary but common. If your guide was attentive and helpful, and tried their best to help create a memorable trip, they're always going to appreciate a tip. $100 per person per week (in dollars or local currency) is a good general rule of thumb, and can be a starting point when considering how much to tip.

Business Hours

Business hours and train schedules are posted in 24-hour format, so be careful when you glance at a time. For example, 17:00 is 5:00 pm. Many shops will close at midday for lunch, for example, they may be open from 8:00 - 12:00 and 14:00 - 18:30. These are extended in larger towns or during the high season, but in small villages, hours might be even more restricted. A post office or bank might only be open a few hours a week in a very small village. Many shops close early on Saturdays (14:00 or 16:00) and may not open at all on Sundays. Most grocery stores are closed on Sundays, although some bakeries remain open and sell a variety of food supplies. Souvenir shops are usually open on Sundays. Pay attention to opening hours, and keep these particularly in mind if you are arriving late or on a weekend and need to get something.

City train stations often have shops or malls attached to them that stay open later, if you need something late at night or on a weekend, or in small towns, bakeries, dairy shops, or train station kiosks are sometimes open on Sundays and often carry a few

essentials (you know... that bottle of wine or bar of chocolate that you need to complete the day).

Laundry

Occasionally a village will have a self-service laundromat that you can use, and we try to mention these in your village notes. Many hotels will also do laundry for you, albeit at a rather steep fee, and sometimes the turnaround time is not quick enough. For longer trips with short stops, a good course is to take a little soap with you, and do laundry in your sink at night. Make a nightly habit of it, and you can travel very light. Returning from the day's activities, shower and change into clean clothes. At the same time, wash your dirty clothes and hang them up to dry. Bring an extra set as backup in case your clothes don't dry during the night, or if you want a break from washing clothes one evening. It's not much fun to do laundry while you're on vacation, but if you stay on top of it, it only takes a few minutes each evening, and it lightens your load, which you'll appreciate every time you travel someplace new.

This is much less of an issue on a shorter trip, since you don't need as much. We do find though, that lighter luggage almost always pays off in ease and convenience while traveling.

Special Notes for Inn-to-Inn:

Self-service laundromats are not very common on the TMB, Haute Route, or Dolomites Traverse, and you are often arriving late and leaving early in the morning anyway. We suggest taking 3-4 hiking shirts and 3-4 pair of socks and underwear, and plan to do laundry as you go. It lightens your load by allowing you to take fewer clothes, making longer trips more accessible and enjoyable.





On the Trail

For hikers, there are a number of things you should be aware of while on the trail in the Alps.

Trails and Signposts

One thing you'll notice once you start hiking in the Alps is that there seem to be trails everywhere. The European mountain folk have a walking culture, and have built a superb network of trails. Many of the trails you will be walking are centuries old, having been used by farmers and hunters since the Alps where settled. Some even date back to Roman times, and were used as ancient trade routes. Some are newer and were added with tourism in mind. In Switzerland and France, they are meticulously maintained and very well-marked. In Italy, they sometimes aren't maintained quite as often or marked as well, but you should still have no problem finding your way around.



Many signposts give a local place name and altitude (posted on a white plate), and may point to a variety of destinations. The locals have made a habit of giving a place name to every rise and hollow, and posted destinations may be a pass, a lake, a village, a restaurant, a meadow - almost anything. Often the names are followed by estimated walking times given in hours and minutes. Trails in the Alps don't dwell on miles or kilometers... it's the elevation that matters most, and distances are measured by estimated time instead. You may be faster or

slower that these estimates, but once you find your pace, you'll find this a useful estimate of how long a hike will take.

Printed route descriptions are helpful, and we take care to keep our hikes fresh and updated, but they also take one's attention out of the open wilderness and into the printed page. For this reason, we give you just brief descriptions of your intended hiking routes covering the beginning and/or trickier sections of the route. You will need to keep your eyes open for trail markers and signposts where paths split. Often there will be more than one possibility. If one route is particularly better than another, we will indicate that in your directions. Otherwise, follow the signs, use your map to find intermediate destinations, and have a great hike! (It's really quite easy.)

Safety

The Alps are heavily populated, and you are never very far from a town, a hut, or a farm. Walking in the Alps is not inherently dangerous, but a certain amount of caution is always in order. Watch your step, pay attention to the weather, don't leave your luggage unattended at a train station, and keep money and important documents in a safe place.



Weather is always something to consider when hiking in mountains. Storms can sweep in incredibly quickly, and a sunny nice day can turn to a cold, windy lightening storm within an hour. Be alert to changes in the weather. Afternoon thunderstorms are very common in the Alps, and it is likely on a long trip that you will see some. For this reason, it's a great idea to start and arrive early rather than start late and

EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION

If you need help, and can get access to a phone, the general numbers to call for emergencies are as follows. In the mountains they will probably send a helicopter, and you will be expected to pay. This service is expensive, and should only be used in an emergency.

SWITZERLAND: Call 144. Helicopter rescue is 1414, and police 117.

ITALY & FRANCE: Call 112. For a medical emergency, you can call 118.

risk afternoon rain. You'll often be making many stops along the way, and you don't want to get caught out in a storm or at nightfall, when the trail is difficult, even impossible, to see!

Heavy fog is another safety concern. It doesn't happen as often, but it can be dangerous, particularly if you are high in the mountains. Use common sense, and don't hesitate to call off a hike if it doesn't feel safe. Always try to think ahead.

If you don't currently carry insurance that covers emergency rescue and evacuation, we strongly urge you to consider buying a policy for your stay in Europe. You can get information on affordable air rescue insurance in Switzerland from Air Zermatt www.air-zermatt.ch, or sign up for more comprehensive travel insurance through a company like Travelguard.

Unforeseen circumstances can create some question marks and safety concerns for hikers in the Alps. Your hosts at remote inns will be expecting you and if you fail to arrive by nightfall, it is generally their duty to try to find you, make sure you're ok, and initiate a search party if necessary.

The best way to stay safe is to keep everyone informed of your plans ahead of time by confirming your intentions with your innkeepers before setting out on your hike. Refunds are normally not given for last-minute changes and cancellations, but please let us or your inns know if you are going to be skipping parts of your tour or if you know you will be arriving later than 7 pm or so.

Water

Fresh, clean water is plentiful in the Alps. Tap water is almost always drinkable (if not, there will be a sign - usually a picture of a cup with a slash through it). In addition, you will find many springs in the fields as you walk. These are often in the form of a hollowed out log with a constant stream of water running into it. You can safely drink the water from these springs, one of the joys of the Alps. One to two liters of water per person should be enough to carry. You can refill the bottles as you walk.

We have drunk water directly from streams in the Alps for years... provided it's not running through a herd of cows! While we make no guarantees, we've never had problems, nor heard stories of people getting sick from the water there. Often at the high huts, water comes from nearby glaciers and is high in minerals, and does not pass tests for drinkable water. Huts sell expensive bottled water, and often sell much cheaper boiled water that you can buy to refill. Water purification tablets are not essential but good to carry, just in case you need to refill from a questionable source. Remember to drink plenty of fluids when you hike, especially on hot days. Dehydration can cause serious problems!

Hut Etiquette

If you're staying in a hut, please be aware of a few basic rules. First, take off your boots when you arrive and put on a pair of hut slippers (that are always provided) or your spare evening shoes. Find the warden to check in, and make your bed early, so you don't wake people when going to sleep. Common sleeping rooms with multiple mattresses and blankets are the norm. Also, make your bed in the morning by neatly folding your blankets before leaving. Sheets are usually not provided - they are not required at some huts, but you may want to bring a light sleep sheet, especially if you're visiting a number of huts.

I also like to use a clean t-shirt as a pillowcase. Bring soap



and a small towel for washing up. Along the TMB, all stops have showers, but at many older huts throughout the Alps, a cold-water sink is all you'll have. Earplugs and a flashlight or headlamp (for finding your way at night) are almost essential! Dinners are served at a set time, and are all-you-can-eat, family-style affairs, but breakfasts are often very simple. Payment is usually cash only, and typically paid the night before, after dinner. Please be respectful of your fellow sleepers and hard-working hut wardens, and enjoy!

Via Ferrata

A via ferrata route is a cabled climb, very popular and common in the Dolomites, shown on the Italian maps as a +++ along the trail. A few of them are merely strenuous hikes, often with big dropoffs, and somebody with a good head for heights could conceivably hike along while holding on to the cable with their hand. Most, however, are fairly serious climbs, and you absolutely need gear, stamina, and instruction before attempting any. If you're interested in experiencing a via ferrata route, visit the mountain guide center at one of your stops, or ask us to

help arrange something beforehand. They are not something that should be attempted on a whim or without any idea of what you are getting into. On the same note, be very careful about map reading, and striking out on your own to explore new trails. Easier trails are indicated by a dashed line, harder scrambles by a dotted line, and via ferrata by a series of + signs. They're easy to miss while looking at the map, and even one + along the trail may indicate a sheer climb of a couple hundred feet up a steep gully, or some other such impassable blockade. Don't let yourself be caught out late in the day, forced to turn around on a long trip back, and definitely don't ever push through on a route that doesn't appear or feel safe. Our described hikes will never include any via ferrata, and although I like to encourage people to explore on their own, in the Dolomites, any exploration needs to be well-planned beforehand. Be safe.

Many villages in Switzerland and France also offer via ferrata routes, that you definitely need gear (and maybe a guide) to take. But unlike the Dolomites, you are very unlikely to just happen across a via ferrata by accident around Mont Blanc or in the Swiss Alps. These are specific climbs that are available to you as a sport, but the line between hiking trail and via ferrata very rarely gets blurred outside the Dolomites. You'd have to go looking for them, and we make note of a few of them in your village notes.




Black Diamond



After Your Trip

All good things come to an end, and eventually we all have to come home again. When you're home safe and settled back in, we would love to hear about your trip! What did you love? What could have been better? What do you want to do when you go back? Where would you like to go next? We love trip reports - the more detail the better - and pictures are always a treat.

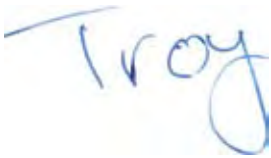
We'll be in touch by email to ask you these questions and more, but you don't need to wait for us. If you have a thought or discovery that you think we'd like to know, please pass it along.

Your critical feedback is truly valuable to us. We do our very best to help you enjoy a great adventure, but we'll never know how it went unless you tell us. Like us on Facebook, post some pictures or a review, or just give us a call or send an email. We want to know.

info@alpinehikers.com
1-928-778-0345

And then of course, it's never too soon to start planning the next trip...!

Thanks for coming,





Alpinehikers Pre-Trip Information Guide

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