

Travel is not about getting from Point A to Point B. Real travel is about soaking up the local flavor, getting a sense of other peoples lives, and their history.

Thank you for booking your hiking tour with Alpinehikers. I hope you're getting excited for an unforgettable trip. To put it simply, the Alps are fantastically beautiful! The countries encompassing the Alps have been endowed with more than their fair share of soaring, white-capped peaks, breathtaking waterfalls, and flower-filled meadows. The Swiss take good care to utilize their land without harming its scenic beauty, and they have built probably the world's best network of mountain transportation (trains, busses, cablecars) and hiking trails, making this beauty accessible to everyone. The French and Italian areas of the Mont Blanc region are similar, and beautiful, accessible, well-maintained hiking trails abound. The combination of easy access, rustic mountain culture, and sheer physical beauty make the Alps a hiker's dream.

I first traveled to the Alps as a student in 1989, and fell immediately in love. Back then, I didn't know where any of the trails were, where I should go, or what I should see - I just knew I loved what I saw. These mountains have a way of lifting you up - the tension melts away, and everything is so beautiful, you feel as if you're in a dream.

I have to admit there are times when the romance of living in the Alps makes one want to consider dropping everything... Devin, 1999 tour member

I started walking... and I kept coming back, finding places I liked even more, asking locals where one should go to get off the tourist track, and slowly discovering more and more of the country. I was hooked. Finally I gave in and moved there, working in a hotel in Mürren, I was able to forget the outside world and lose myself in the majesty of my surroundings. I found beautiful places that made me feel as if I'd been transported into a fairy tale. Places I'd never heard of - Rosenloui, Gasterntal, Balzenberg, Trift. I found fantastic small inns tucked away in the mountains - the Suppenalp, Obersteinberg, Steinbock - places where the rhythm of traditional alpine life lives on.

It's these places that we want to share with you. This isn't just a string of easy tourist sites. We've hiked extensively everywhere we lead tours, and have put immense amounts of planning and care into each tour. We'll take care of all the details and hassles. What's left for you is to enjoy the walks and views, sample the cuisine, and learn a bit about the Alps and the people who live there.

A Short History-

The Confederation Helvetica (Switzerland) is now over 700 years old, dating back to 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. The Dolomites of Italy has also long enjoyed a high degree of local autonomy. Many of the inhabitants there are Tyrolean, native German speakers more closely associated with Austria than Italy. In some valleys, the ancient romance language of Ladin, born when Roman soldiers moved in to the largely Celtic speaking mountains, has survived in isolated pockets. This mixture of Ladin, Tyrolean and Italian cultures adds to the fascinating fabric of this beautiful area.

The Mont Blanc region of France and Italy has been alternately swapped between the two countries (and local princes) for hundreds of years. Most recently, in 1860, the locals in the Chamonix valley 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.

The first stirrings of tourism began in the late 1700's and 1800's. Scientists came to study glaciers and botany. A few wealthy tourists came and raved about the beauty of the dramatic landscape. The Alps,

particularly Grindelwald and Chamonix, 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 people came (most of them British) to walk and admire them from a distance.

The first tourists to arrive 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 people came, a few locals started adding extra rooms to their homes and opening small guesthouses. Zermatt's first inn was opened in 1839 with 3 beds. The Faulhorn hotel above Grindelwald was opened in 1830 - making it one of Switzerland's very first mountain hotels.

The mountain people of the Alps have always been fiercely independent, and place great importance on responsibility and self-sufficiency. It was this toughness and self-sufficiency 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 - while lower fields were cut and stored for winter hay.

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 now subsidized by the government to help make sure these traditions don't die out, and holding onto these subsidies is one of the main reasons Switzerland has so far declined to join the European Community.

What to Expect-

In many ways, what you get out of your vacation depends on what you put into it. We'll have an excellent opportunity to see a new country, to 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 definitely a lot smaller than a standard hotel room in America, and don't automatically come with cable TV. Elevators are the exception rather than the rule (pack light). Tap water isn't normally served with dinner (you're expected to buy a drink), coffee doesn't come with free refills, and they wouldn't dream of having fried eggs for breakfast (although maybe for dinner...). Stores often close between 12 and 2 for lunch, and stay closed on Sundays. There are many other differences you'll notice, both large and small, which is part of what makes foreign travel so much fun.

As a guest in Switzerland, France, and Italy, try to approach their country with an open mind and wide-eyed wonder. Enjoy the differences. 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 quite friendly and are quite happy to talk to a stranger from a different land. At the end of your trip, the people you meet and the interactions you've had will be among your favorite memories.

Transportation-

Luckily for all of us, the Alps have one of the best-organized, most extensive public transportation networks in the world. Trains are clean and run on time, connections are quick, and every village in Switzerland is accessible by train, bus, or cablecar (often in combination). Connections to Chamonix and Bolzano are also quite good. You will not need a car.

If you fly into Zürich or Geneva, you will find the train station immediately downstairs in the airport. Just grab your bags, and take the escalator downstairs. You can buy a train ticket there. The clerks at the ticket windows invariably speak English (it is always polite to ask anyway) and can help you out. The trains are rarely full, and most depart every hour. Local trains usually do not offer the option of booking seats anyway. Almost everybody rides 2nd class, which is hardly distinguishable from 1st class, and I think you'll find it to be fine. Ask the clerk to print out a schedule of train changes you may need to make. Cars are labeled 1st or 2nd class, smoking or non-smoking. Once you find the right track, and your train arrives, just find a seat

in the appropriate section and sit down. Connection times are routinely as short as 5 or 6 minutes, and incredibly, it works!

The tour price on our guided tours does not include travel to and from our meeting and departure points. However, we do offer a Swiss Card 2nd-class rail pass at subsidized prices. For \$90 (a \$30 savings), you get a free trip to and from any Swiss airport or border, plus 50% discounts on any other travel in Switzerland for a month. This is a great idea if you're coming on the Jungfrau, Matterhorn, Mürren, or Engadine tours, or if you're planning any extra travel in Switzerland outside of the tour. It will probably not be useful for members of the Chamonix, Dolomites, or Mont Blanc tours. Please ask if you have questions about your particular situation.

Money-

The Alpine regions of France, Italy, and Switzerland are quite expensive. Train travel is relatively expensive, and the minimum wage translates to about \$12/hour. You can expect a one-way 2nd class train trip from Geneva to Chamonix to cost about \$40 (without any passes), a cup of coffee or a coke \$2, lunch in a restaurant \$10-15, and postage for a postcard home \$1.20.

How much spending money you need to bring depends on your habits. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are included in the price of the tour, as are the accommodations and travel between inns. You'll need some cash for drinks, souvenirs, extra film, postage, and other miscellaneous items. If you forget to bring something, don't worry - everything you might need for the trip can be found in Europe.

We recommend bringing a couple hundred dollars in cash, either exchanged before you leave or at the airport when you arrive. France and Italy now use only Euros, while in Switzerland you will need Swiss francs. Traveler's checks are a hassle, because nobody likes to accept them, and banks always seem to be closed by the time we walk into town. If you're worried about security, use a credit or debit card instead. Visa, MasterCard (called Eurocard), and American Express are all about equally accepted. Discover Card is not a good option. You probably *won't* be able to use your credit card at the grocery store, to make small purchases at a souvenir shop, or to pay for drinks at many hotels and most of the mountain inns (including some that we stay at). You *will* be able to buy train tickets (train stations accept all 3 cards), or pay for a meal or a night's stay at a restaurant or hotel in Geneva, Chamonix, or other larger villages. 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 we've found the exchange rates to be 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.

Language-

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%, and Italian about 8%. The Romansh community is very small, with about 50,000 speakers concentrated in the eastern part of Switzerland. The German Swiss actually speak a variety of local dialects, known collectively as Schwyzerdütsh. These dialects vary widely from standard German in pronunciation, vocabulary, intonation, and even grammar. Everybody learns standard German in school, but it is definitely a second language. Many German Swiss prefer to speak English over standard German - they think it sounds much too stilted and formal coming from a Swiss person.

On the Tour of Mont Blanc, we hike through France, Italy, and French-speaking Switzerland. The Aosta region of Italy is officially bilingual, with French being nearly as common as Italian. The other areas of the Mont Blanc region are French-speaking. In the Dolomites, the people speak either Italian, German, or Ladin (and ancient Latin-based language). Knowledge of English is common in all parts of the Alps, especially in the German-speaking areas, 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.

Business Hours-

Business hours and train schedules are posted in 24-hour format. For example, 17:00 is 5:00pm. Most shops are open from 8:00 - 12:00, and 14:00 - 18:30 (or some variation thereof). These might be slightly extended in larger towns. Many shops close early (14:00 or 16:00) on Saturdays 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.

What to Bring-

First rule of packing: Pack light!

Most people bring far too much for a couple weeks in the Alps. My advice is to pack up everything you think you'll need, and then carry it around the block. If this is too much to fathom, then you need to cut out a few items. On our tours you are allowed 1 piece of luggage to be transported between inns. Extra pieces can be transported for an additional fee, but that probably won't be necessary. If you're carrying extra for the second leg of your trip, that can easily be sent ahead to your final destination, for a surprisingly small fee, and picked up when you arrive.

With that in mind, you'll still need to be prepared for all sorts of weather. Warm summer days can reach into the 80's, and at altitude the sun feels extra strong. On the other hand, cold rainy weather, or even snow, is not unusual in the summer, and warm, dry clothing will be essential.

Here are the essentials you'll need for your trip:

- Boots - Don't neglect your feet. Of number one importance is comfort and fit. Blisters can absolutely ruin any hiking trip. Make sure your boots are well broken-in before coming to Europe, and bring a pair of light tennis shoes or Teva's for similar footwear for walking around at night. Seasoned European hikers wear their boots on the plane - if your luggage is lost or delayed, at least you'll have a good, broken-in pair of boots to start with.
- Socks - Thick, woolen socks will help protect your feet from blisters and will also keep them warm when wet. There are some made specifically for hiking. Smartwool is one brand that I like. I bring 3 pair for a week.
- Raingear - A hi-quality raincoat with a hood is a must. Rainpants aren't quite as essential, but you will definitely be grateful for them if we need to hike through extended periods of rain. I bring both.
- Warm layer - A wool or synthetic sweater, fleece, or long underwear is a must. People get wet, weather changes suddenly, and we all need to be prepared for cold temperatures. Cotton does not keep you warm if you get wet. Polypro long underwear is extremely warm and lightweight (although not convenient to take on and off). I like to carry it in my daypack while hiking. A sweater or fleece is ideal for cool nights.
- Sun protection - It's good to have a sunhat, sunglasses, and sunscreen (and protective lipbalm). The sun can be very strong at high altitudes, especially when reflected off snow or water - don't underestimate it.
- T-shirts - Bring a few. I bring 3-4 for a week, and hand-wash as I go.
- Shorts - 1 pair for warm days.
- Pants - Pants should be light and breathable. Jeans are restrictive and dry much too slowly when wet.
- Dinnerwear - None of our restaurants require us to dress up. 1 or 2 casual outfits for dinner is fine.
- Soap and Towels - A small amount of soap, shampoo, and a small bath towel are needed for a few of the nights we spend in mountain huts and simple inns on the inn-to-inn tours. They won't be needed on our village-based tours.
- Daypack - For hiking during the day. It should be large enough to carry your sweater, camera, water, lunch, and raingear, no matter what the weather when we start out!

Here's some other gear that you may find useful but not necessary:

- Walking poles - They look like collapsible ski poles and are becoming very common in the Alps. I find them to be a great help on steep slopes, up or down. They help distribute your weight from your knees and can make a vast improvement in comfort, especially for people who have had knee problems in the past. I use them, and I recommend them to others also.
- Small flashlight - For finding the bathroom at night on our inn-to-inn tours. We'll have one you can borrow, if necessary, but having your own is useful.
- Swiss army knife - Always useful.
- Binoculars - Fun for spotting wildlife, climbers on peaks, and distant avalanches. I also have a pair we can all use.
- Compass - Really only useful for self-guided tours (and only if you know how to use it).
- Moleskin for blisters - We carry some, but if you're prone to blisters, you may want to carry some of your own as well. Blisterblock works well.
- Swimsuit - There are pools at many of our hotels
- Nalgene water bottle - If you have one already, bring it. If not, you can buy bottled water when you arrive, and re-use the bottle for the rest of the week.
- Earplugs - They take up little space, and can turn out to be very useful.

What you won't need:

- Sleeping bag or sleep sheets - Even in the huts on the inn-to-inn tours, blankets are always provided. Sheets aren't provided at huts, and some people use their own sleep sheets, but it is not necessary.
- Water filter - Clean, safe drinking water is in no short supply in the Alps. You won't need a filter. A small amount of iodine tablets are good to have for emergencies.

A Word About Conditioning -

These mountains are steep! Flat trails are few and far between, and in general the trails are quite a bit steeper than what you would encounter in America. We always try adjust our pace to the level and desire of the group. Often this means we'll break up into 2 groups so that some of us can spend a more relaxing day walking while the rest of us tackle an ambitious hike. But still, come prepared for some fairly strenuous days.

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 just going to help you when you arrive. Some of the best viewpoints involve long climbs to remote locations. Even short rambles near town have a lot of up and down to them. If you have time, consider arriving a few days early, and take some warm up hikes on your own. You will have a safer and overall more enjoyable trip, and you won't hold back the rest of the group, if you arrive in shape.