

Courmayeur and the Val d'Aosta

The Val d'Aosta (the Aosta Valley) may be Italy's smallest region but it is also one of the most spectacular: a wedge of towering mountains in the north-west corner of the country, sharing borders with Switzerland and France. The Val d'Aosta itself is a deep and beautiful valley dominated by Europe's highest peaks: Mt Blanc, the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa to the north and the massif of Gran Paradiso to the south.

The Val d'Aosta and its tributary valleys have linked Italy with the French and German speaking worlds since Roman times, as the imposing castles that guard the valleys bear witness. Tourists first discovered Val d'Aosta in the early 19th century when British mountaineers and alpinists came to conquer its mighty peaks but the region also offers some of Europe's finest autumn walking: a variety of well-marked trails that wind through the small valleys, connecting villages, high pastures and mountain passes, passing stone hamlets, waterfalls and glaciers along the way.

This wonderful tour celebrates the rich cultural heritage of Europe's most spectacular mountain range. It starts with two days in elegant Turin and then four days exploring a small valley in the shadow of Mt Rosa. The next four days are spent exploring the Gran Paradiso National Park, Italy's oldest national park. The last two days are in Courmayeur, a glamorous resort at the foot of Mt Blanc. Going in early September means we avoid the summer crowds and we get to enjoy the autumn weather, colours and cuisine.

The walks:

These are walks, not hike, and they follow well-marked and well-maintained paths. However, they are more challenging than most of the walks on our usual guided tours. We have classified them as Grade 3 (ie between 12 to 15 kms with some steep climbs) and you will need to be reasonably fit and a strong walker to enjoy them. Your efforts, though, will be amply rewarded as the trails take you through green valleys filled with forests and alpine villages which are surrounded by glaciers and Europe's highest mountains. Most of the walks leave directly from our accommodation so there is no need for long transfers.

The accommodation:

Accommodation is in 4-star hotels. The first in Turin is a well-established hotel in the pedestrian centre of the city. The second is a lovely alpine hotel at the head of a small valley with views up to a glacier and the peak of Mt Rosa. The third hotel, an elegant mountain lodge, drips with history and has been in the same family since it opened in 1925. The last is a charming hotel set in the centre of Courmayeur with breathtaking views of Mt Blanc. All the hotels have wellness centres and spas and two have swimming pools.

The food and wine:

The cuisine of the Val d'Aosta is simple and substantial, as befits a mountain region. It shows the influence of nearby France and Switzerland: robust soups, polenta, risotto, wholesome rye breads, tasty sausages and smoked meats, fine handmade cheeses (fontina and toma are the best known) and game from the surrounding mountains and valleys. One of the few places to have escaped the ravages of the phylloxera plague in early 20th century, the Val d'Aosta has the oldest vineyards in Europe. They produce some very fine wines including Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle and the robust Nus Rouge as well as the famous ice wine and glacier bubbly, produced in Europe's highest vineyards.

The tour leaders:

Simon Tancred will lead the tour and we will be accompanied on the all walks by a fully qualified local mountain guide. The founder and director of Hidden Italy walking tours, Simon has over thirty years' experience hiking and walking in Italy, including twenty-five years leading group tours for Hidden Italy. 'Great Walks' magazine recently said he had the best job in the world... (there are other much more worthy jobs around but I am lucky my passion has become my profession) - [click here](#) to read the interview.

Val d'Aosta itinerary

Day 1:

Arrival in Turin, my favourite Italian city: miles of arcades with bookshops, chocolate shops, excellent museums and historic cafes. We will spend the first two nights in an elegant 4-star hotel in the pedestrian centre of the city. We'll meet for an aperitivo and then have dinner in a neighbouring restaurant. (Dinner)

Day 2:

This morning you will be taken on a guided walk through Turin's centre visiting some of the city's Baroque splendour, the legacy of the Savoy kings who ruled from here for nearly six centuries. After lunch, the afternoon and evening are free. (Lunch)

Day 3:

Today we head north, following the course of the Dora River from Turin, into the mountains. The 'Serra di Ivrea' is a large moraine, a forested amphitheatre formed by glacial debris at the entrance to the Val d'Aosta. We'll stop here to visit a magnificent castle that for ten centuries the home of one of Italy's great families and is now a property of the Italian Environment Fund. After lunch at the castle, we drive into the Val d'Aosta itself.

Our base for the next four days is in a beautiful German-speaking village at the head of one of the small tributary valleys, dominated by a glacier and the looming form of Monte Rosa (the second highest peak in the Alps). This valley is the heartland of the Walser people, German-speaking people who settled in the valley in 13th century. A form of ancient form of German is still spoken and their traditions are alive and well. Our accommodation is in a charming, family-run, 4-star hotel, where we will have dinner. (Dinner)

Day 4:

The walk today starts from the front door of the hotel, where we pick up an historic trail that takes us to the head of the valley. From here we take a cable car up to a high pasture with spectacular views of the valley and the encircling mountains. After coffee, we contour around the valley under Mt Rosa passing a glacier and a number of lakes. Along the way, we will have lunch in a 'rifugio' (mountain lodge) before walking down through forest to the valley floor from where you can walk back to base or catch a bus back. (12 kms, 5 hrs, 500 mts gain). The evening is free. (Lunch)

Day 5:

This morning, we take a series of cable car climbs up to the foot of Monte Rosa. Weather permitting, we will take a forty-minute walk from the lift station across a glacier to a marvellously situated mountain hut (3495 mts asl) with a terrace that looks out over our valley and up to the peak of Monte Rosa, where we have lunch. We then return via the cable cars to our base, where the rest of the afternoon is free. We will have dinner at our hotel tonight. (Lunch and dinner)

Day 6:

Today we will immerse ourselves in the local Walser culture. This morning's walk again starts from front door of the hotel but this time we head south, following the historic 'Grand Walser Trail', passing through old stone hamlets and pastures that have remained unchanged for centuries, stopping at a rifugio for a coffee. We take a steep path down into the largest village in the valley. After a delicious lunch of local specialities, we will be taken on a guided visit of the town including the handsome castle that was once the summer residence of Queen Margherita in the late 19th century, now a museum. We'll get a lift back to base where the evening is free. (11 kms, 3.5 hrs, 400 mts gain). (Lunch).

Day 7:

Today we leave the valley and head west up the Val d'Aosta to our next base, in the foothills of the Gran Paradiso National Park. On the way, we'll stop to visit the most interesting, castle in the Val d'Aosta, dating from the 13th century. After a guided visit, we'll have a lunch in the courtyard of a lovely agriturismo.

The Gran Paradiso National Park, Italy's oldest, was founded in 1922 when the King Vittorio Emanuele donated his hunting reserve to the state. Our base is a lovely village-resort in one of most picturesque and unspoilt valleys

of the region. Our hotel is a beautiful 4-star hotel, a green-shuttered mountain hideaway that dates from the 1920's. After settling in, the evening is free. (Lunch)

Day 8:

This morning, we do a beautiful loop walk to a pretty lake at above the valley. After leaving our hotel, we walk up the river. There is a short steep climb before the well-marked path levels out and takes us through a variety of landscapes to the lake. There are plenty of breath-taking panoramic points along the way, with views over the mountains and valleys to Mt Blanc. After a picnic beside the lake, we head back the lake, detouring to a magnificent waterfall. (13 kms, 5.5 hrs, 760 mts gain). We will have dinner at our hotel. (Lunch/dinner)

Day 9:

Today we visit the regional capital, Aosta city, a pleasant small town surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Controlling one of the Roman empire's main roads, Aosta had great importance in antiquity. Although still surrounded by its Roman walls and containing many monuments from this era, the character of the city is more southern French than Italian. The architecture is essentially Burgundian (thanks to the town's allegiance to the house of Challant) and the people speak a French dialect. More than enough to keep us busy for the day. We'll have lunch in town. Once we've returned to our base, the rest of the day and evening is free. (Lunch)

Day 10:

Our next walk is a superb outing into a neighbouring valley (Glacier Money). After an initial steep climb, which is rewarded by the extraordinary views, an amphitheatre of glaciers descending from an impressive chain of peaks from Mt Herbertet to the Gran Paradiso. The walk continues along a good trail across alpine pastures to a small stream where we'll have a picnic lunch before returning back to base. (12 kms, 5 hrs, 660 mts gain). The rest of the afternoon is free. Dinner will be in an excellent local restaurant which specialises in mountain dishes and game. (Lunch/dinner)

Day 11:

This morning we head to Courmayeur, our last stop and the tour *grande finale*. Flush against the French border, Courmayeur, has combined upmarket ski facilities with an ancient Roman military base that controlled the perilous mountain roads that crossed the Alps. Its *piece de resistance* is the towering Mt Blanc (Monte Bianco in Italian), Europe's highest mountain, 4810 mts of solid rock and ice that rises like an impregnable wall above the Val d'Aosta.

On the way, we will visit Europe's highest vineyards, grown between 900 and 1200 mts, butting up against the snow line. They are home of the famous 'glacier bubbly' (a traditional method sparkling wine) and the rare, and very prized, 'vin de glace' (or ice wine). After a private visit to the vineyards and winery, we'll have a delicious lunch and wine degustation at the winery's very good restaurant. After checking into our 4-star, family-run hotel in the centre of Courmayeur, the rest of the afternoon and evening is free. (Lunch)

Day 12:

This morning we take the first section of the famous Monte Bianco Skyway, a spectacular cable car that was inaugurated in 2015. After a cappuccino in a cosy mountain hut, we set off for an extraordinary three-hour, loop walk across a glacier to the base of Mt Bianco. Once back at the rifugio, we'll have a light lunch (and a glass of 'glacier bubbly' to celebrate) before taking the cable car back down to Courmayeur, where the afternoon is free. In the evening, we will have dinner in one of the classic restaurants, an elegant restaurant in the centre of town. (Lunch/dinner)

Day 13:

This morning, we get an early start, drive 1.5 hours back to Turin, which has excellent national and international rail and air connections.