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Hiking the Alps From End to End

Europe's new Via Alpina is a 3,100-mile (4,989-kilometer), high-altitude answer to the Appalachian Trail.

Text by Alex Crevar Photograph by Carly Calhoun Map by Lindsey Balbierz



SLOVENIA SPECTACLE: A group of hikers at the summit of Slovenia's highest peak, Mount Triglav. Click here to watch a slide show of Slovenia photos >>

Action Plans for the Adventures of Your Life: The Alps

France | Liechtenstein | Italy & Switzerland | Slovenia

Go Guided | Vitals: Trekking the Alps

For years, retired French chemical engineer Maurice Chazalet dreamed of an Alps thru-hike. But traversing the length of the range from the roof of the Balkan Peninsula, in Slovenia, through Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Italy, France, and down to the beaches of Monaco required a veritable library of guidebooks. The prospect of sloggish thousands of miles with 30 pounds (14 kilograms) of literature in a backpack is one that no hiker would relish.

But in the summer of 2005, Chazalet's three-month expedition finally became feasible. That's when the eight-member Alpine Convention officially unveiled the completed signage for the Via Alpina, Europe's first trans-Alps trail.

Suddenly, tiny Slavic villages and tucked-away French farms, rustic vineyards in Liechtenstein, and Italian patron-saint festivals (previously unknown to all but the most punctilious guidebook readers) became accessible to the average hut-to-hut trekker along the range's main trails.

"I now have a much more global view of the Alps," says Chazalet, 67, who navigated 1,500 miles (2,414 kilometers) from the Adriatic Sea to the Mediterranean entirely with maps downloaded from the Via Alpina Web site (www.via-alpina.org). "While hiking in Austria, I saw a father and his daughter reaping a field by hand on a very high slope. Nobody in France works land like that anymore."

Conceived in 2000 and established in 2002, the Via Alpina is the brainchild of France's Noël Lebel, then general secretary of the Alpine Convention. His goal was to preserve the cultures and character of a range facing the corrosive threats of global warming and automobile traffic. The 6.3-million-dollar plan, funded jointly by the European Union and the eight Alpine states, resulted in five new international trails covering more than 3,100 miles (4,989 kilometers). Its main artery, the Red Trail, which Chazalet hiked, crosses borders 44 times and traverses the Alps in 161 distinct stages.



Alpine trekking is a perennial classic, drawing millions of summer hikers who prowl old Roman roads and medieval footpaths among glaciated peaks, wildflower-carpeted meadows, plunging valleys, and quiet mountain villages. While roughing it is always an option, the Alps trekker is more likely to dine on local delicacies—Swiss fondue, French pâté, German pilsner—at comfortable village lodges and well-established hut systems along the way.

What the Via Alpina brings to this formula is cohesion, providing a center of gravity to an otherwise disparate number of itineraries. It stitches together some of the region's most famous routes: the Tour du Mont Blanc in France, the Triglav Lakes Valley Circuit in Slovenia, and the Col du Grand-Saint-Bernard between Switzerland and Italy, among them. But more than just marking out a navigable thruway, the Via Alpina organizers have also designed the most comprehensive Web site ever assembled for Alps trekking, a one-stop shop in five languages with detailed information on trail stages, hiking distances, GPS coordinates, challenge levels, and lodging options from huts (or refuges, in Alpine parlance) to chalets.

For trek-it-alone types, the trail system makes it easier to tailor an ideal two- or three-section expedition. If you prefer a trip where the way is guided and the heavy loads are portered ahead, the VA's database can help you personalize an itinerary so you can tell outfitters exactly where you want to go. Today, even a novice trekker can be as informed about the route underfoot—and the paths less traveled—as the wildest of Alpine veterans.

FRANCE • The Haute-Savoie

THE ROUTE: Vernayaz, Switzerland, to La Flégère, France (four days).

TRAILHEAD: Fly to Geneva, train to Vernayaz.

The Rhône-Alpes have been an extreme outdoor playground ever since mountaineers Michel Paccard and Jacques Balmat first summited 15,771-foot (4,807-meter) Mont Blanc, in 1786. Trek this section of the Via Alpina in the shadow of France's signature peak and you'll wander among soaring rock faces and churning rivers to the euphonious clanging of cowbells. After days of feasting on French trail mix (*tartiflette*—a blend of potatoes, cheese, and bacon—and tins of duck pâté) and bedding down in isolated pasture huts and trailside chalets, hop a bus in La Flégère for an adrenaline-charged break in Chamonix. Off season the slopes of the Haute-Savoie's world-class ski resorts are a haven for mountain bikers. Sign on with La Vache Qui Ride (\$40 a day; www.lavachequiride.com) and make use of more than 40 chairlifts to access downhill bombs at Chamonix, Le Gets, and Morzine.

BASE CAMP: The Clubhouse (\$705 for three days; www.clubhouse.fr), a seven-room art deco lodge in Chamonix, is esteemed by locals for its convivial barroom and by guests for its sweeping views of the Aiguille du Midi and Mont Blanc peaks.

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LIECHTENSTEIN • Eastern Alps

THE ROUTE: Feldkirch, Austria, to Schesaplana Hütte, Switzerland (four days)

TRAILHEAD: Fly to Zurich, train to Feldkirch.

At a mere 62 square miles (161 square kilometers), Liechtenstein is often overlooked. But hike this section—where some 1,600 species of flora green the meadowed flanks of the Rhine Valley—and you'll be reminded that size is a relative virtue. Bunk down at mountain inns and hunting lodges—cum—alpine huts at 8,500 feet (2,591 meters). To go higher, spend a day paragliding on the area's renowned thermals. **Flugschule Flumserberg-Heidiland** (\$329; www.fly.ch) can take you up for border-to-border views. Cap things off in the capital, Vaduz, at the royal Hofkellerei wine cellars, with Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays that were once Charlemagne's favorite quaffs.

BASE CAMP: The Park Hotel Sonnenhof (\$180; www.sonnenhof.li), in Vaduz, is a high-class refuge (think armchairs and glasses of cognac by the fire), but its terrace views of the Rhine Valley are the real luxury.

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ITALY & SWITZERLAND • Pennine Alps

THE ROUTE: Trient, Switzerland, to Valgrisenche, Italy (five days).

TRAILHEAD: Fly to Geneva, train to Chamonix, bus to Trient.

The 8,100-foot (2,469-meter) Col du Grand-Saint-Bernard between Switzerland and Italy—across which Napoleon led 40,000 troops in the summer of 1800—marks the start of the Via Alpina's southerly walk to the Mediterranean Sea. Mule paths through vertiginous pastures prep you for the big climbs of this section, which presents nearly 5,600 feet (1,707 meters) of elevation gain. Pause at the top of the col and bunk with the monks at the 11th-century Hospice du Grand-Saint-Bernard, where you can savor a hearty bowl of broth with fellow trekkers in the brothers' communal dining hall. Hike down to the glacier-cirqued village of Valgrisenche, saddle up, and ride into Italy's oldest national park, Gran Paradiso, established as an ibex sanctuary in 1922 on King Vittorio Emanuele II's private hunting grounds. Park guides lead overnight horse treks through pine and fir forests while golden eagles wheel overhead (\$370 for two days; www.pnqp.it).

BASE CAMP: Hotel Bellevue (\$205; www.hotelbellevue.it), in Cogne, at the heart of Gran Paradiso National Park, has gourmet cuisine, a spa, and sweeping glacial scenery.

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SLOVENIA • The Julian Alps

THE ROUTE: Trieste, Italy, to Thörl-Maglern, Austria (11 days).

TRAILHEAD: Fly to Venice, train to Trieste.

With dozens of huts, bivouacs, and refuges as well as superb rock climbing, mountain biking, and kayaking, Slovenia offers a complete Alpine experience. And though it's a diminutive land, the VA traverses it for nearly 200 miles (323 kilometers), passing by the former World War I fronts Ernest Hemingway describes in *A Farewell to Arms*. For a cooldown along the way, pull on some waders, grab a fly rod, and cast for elusive marble trout—some of the world's largest river trout. Local guide Rok Lustrik, based in the village of Medvode, shares his favorite streams with guests (\$170 a day, including gear; www.lustrik.com).

BASE CAMP: In Novo Mesto, the 800-year-old **Otoc'ec Castle Hotel** (\$105, including breakfast, sauna, and thermal baths at the nearby **S'marjes'ke Toplice Spas**; www.termo-krka.si/en/otocce) sits on an island in the Krka River, a favored spot of local fishermen.

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GO GUIDED

HONEYMOON ON HIGH: Ski-mad crowds glut northern Italy's Dolomites in winter. But off season the range has some of the Alps' most secluded trekking. On a six-day ultraluxury trip from Bolzano to Venice with **Butterfield & Robinson** (\$4,695; www.butterfield.com), you can indulge in wine-tastings, spa treatments, and cooking lessons in intimate mountaintop hotels. A support team plans your trek and portages your gear ahead while you're busy admiring views of the Austrian Alps and the jagged Dolomites from atop the 7,175-foot (2,187-meter) Bec de Rocces.

THE FAMILY VON TRAPP TRIP: A private, weeklong "self-guided" tour of the Swiss Alps with **Mountain Travel Sobek** (\$2,290; www.mtsobek.com) lets your crew hike at its own pace among massive peaks, crystalline lakes, and sleepy villages in the heart of the Bernese Oberland. Tricky ascents are conquered by cable car, gondola, and cog train. On the first night, a guide maps out the route, briefs your group, then takes a hands-off approach so you can meander on your own all day and pass the nights on eiderdown pillows in the comfort of local chalets.

ALPINE ADRENALINE: Switzerland may be an Alps trekking classic, but it's also famed for its canyoning—snaking down rock chutes, rappelling from cliffs, and dropping off waterfalls into glacial lakes, wearing a wet suit, helmet, and life jacket. **Outdoor Interlaken** leads tailored day trips (\$90; www.outdoor-interlaken.ch) through the Saxeten and the more extreme Chli Schlieren canyons. Runs range from serene to maniacal.

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VITALS: Trekking the Via Alpina

WHEN TO GO: Trekking season in the Alps starts in June and peaks in September. Summer temperatures range from approximately 59°F to 75°F (15 degrees Celsius to 24 degrees Celsius). Be advised: In July and August the hills are alive with hordes of European vacationers.

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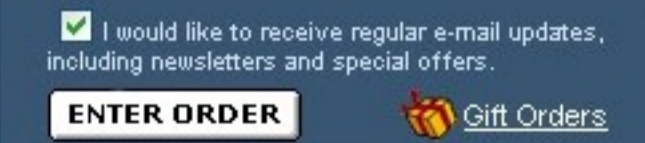
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