

Via Alpina: An Alpine Buffet of Epic Proportions

Hikers heading to the Alps can now experience a new trails system stretching across eight countries. The Via Alpina offers tranquil lakes as well as majestic mountains.



Have you always wanted to do more than just view the Alps? Ready to experience them? Now there's a new way to discover this legendary region. Five hiking trails christened the Via Alpina stretch more than 5000 kilometers across eight countries from Trieste, Italy to Monte Carlo. Envision some of the world's most famous trails and celebrated mountains combining with Alpine beauty, culture, nature, and cuisine for one delicious Alpine buffet of epic proportions.

What calls to you? The majestic Mt. Blanc circuit? The no-nonsense Eiger? The tranquil lakes of the Julian Alps? Panoramic Austrian vistas? A little of them all? That's the beauty of this design. Set off in whatever country you like—Italy, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, France or Monaco—and hike as long as you choose.



I should know. Recently, my wife and I were among the first to thru-hike its 1900-kilometer length from the Adriatic to the Mediterranean Sea. Each night over 111 days I chronicled our adventure while muscles still ached and hearts still throbbed. Initially, as seasoned long-distance hikers, we imagined it as a European Appalachian Trail—only with better food and wine. But oh, it has its own challenges.

From the start, spotting trail markers became a contest as we navigated ice across narrow Slovenian scree slopes. Then there's the notorious Alpine weather. At 6–9,000 feet (1800–2700 meters), it can be sunny, foggy, showery and snowing—all the same day.

Of course, the terrain is both physically and mentally demanding. Hiking at least 20 kilometers a day, a virtual marathon, we scaled and slid down 700,000 feet (211,000 meters) of Alpine goodness. But who's counting when each day brings its unique reward? We hiked in the shadow of Mt. Blanc amid an ocean

of wildflowers. Meeting a statuesque steinbok, chamois or marmot was always a memorable rendezvous. But on many days, we were happy just to arrive at a mountaintop hut to enjoy a jaw-dropping sunset. As the peak was draped in darkness, we enjoyed hearing legends, such as the tale of the shepherd whose frozen tears formed Mt. Blanc glacier.



We bunked in these cozy huts run by mountaineering clubs or in pensions with local families. Although our daily budget averaged about \$40 each, you could easily spend more.

One of our fondest memories is a feast by cabin's firelight. First, the shepherd fixed socca, reminiscent of the Riviera's traditional fried chickpea meal crepe. Then came a wild nettle and potato soup, roast lamb with herbed onions, and four kinds of handmade cheese. As always, there was schnapps and great local wines, especially welcome at the end of another thirsty day.

Although hiking the Via Alpina is a tasty feast, you don't have to devour the entire 1200 miles in one bite. Envision it as a peaceful holiday along paths less taken. Even with the culinary delights, there's no better weight-loss plan. For Via Alpina info: Via-Alpina.org.

By Brandon Wilson Brandon Wilson is the Lowell Thomas Award-winning author of "Over the Top & Back Again: Hiking X the Alps", the first Via Alpina travel narrative published in English, with 53 photos, maps and illustrations by Ken Plumb. Short-listed for 2010 Book of the Year Award, ForeWord Reviews.

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