

Valais – Highlights of the Swiss Alps

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Geneva and transfer by train and cable car to Bettmeralp
-
- Day 2/7** Natural history excursions from Bettmeralp
-
- Day 8** Transfer to Geneva and fly London
-

Departs

June/July

Focus

Alpine flowers, birds, butterflies, stunning mountain scenery and other natural history

Grading

Grade B – walks generally over undulating ground, or downhill. See grading section for further information.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code CHE04) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Highlights:

- Spectacular mountain scenery of Valais and the Swiss Alps, with all travel by train or mountain lift!
- Stay in a family run hotel with beautiful mountain views
- Enjoy carpets of flowering bellflowers, primroses, gentians & other alpine
- Follow the famous Glacier Express line to Zermatt and the Gornergrat
- Birds including Alpine Chough, Alpine Accentor, Snow Finch, Nutcracker and Red-backed Shrike all likely



From top: Aletsch Glacier (Kerrie Porteous), Alpine Toadflax *Linaria alpina* (Kerrie Porteous), Alpine Accentor (Martin Palanek)



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Introduction

The Swiss canton of Valais lies in the heart of the Alps and is home to some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in Europe. The charming, car-free village of Bettmeralp will be our base for this new single-centre holiday, where — from our family-run hotel — we will explore the beautiful forests, valleys and high peaks in search of the region's varied wildlife. Using the efficient network of cable cars and chairlifts, each day we will enjoy the profusions of alpine flowers, birds, butterflies, and perhaps a few mammals too! Above Bettmeralp lies the stunning Aletsch Glacier, and we will ascend high above the village to enjoy the spectacular views on a number of our daily excursions. The glacier's 27 billion tons of ice slowly flows down into Valais from the dramatic slopes of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau and lies within the 825-square-kilometre UNESCO 'Jungfrau-Aletsch Protected Area', the first World Heritage Site to be designated in the Alps.



Aletsch Glacier (K.Porteous)

Please note that this tour can be combined with our 'Wengen – Alpine Flowers of the Swiss Alps' and 'Switzerland - Alpine Flowers of the Upper Engadine' holidays. Please call the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 for more information.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Geneva, transfer Bettmeralp

We begin our holiday with a short flight to Geneva, before we continue our journey by efficient Swiss rail, following the mighty Rhône along the length of the Rhône Valley to the town of Brig. From here we take another train for the short (20 minute) journey to Betten Talstation, before completing our journey by cable car, as this is the only way to reach Bettmeralp and our base for the week! We aim to arrive in Bettmeralp in the late afternoon, and will transfer to our comfortable, family-run hotel on the edge of the town. After settling into our rooms, the rest of the evening will be free to explore the town or adjacent meadows.



View across Valais from Bettmeralp (K.Porteous)

Days 2 – 7

Excursions from Bettmeralp

We will keep our plans for the week flexible to best take advantage of the season and the weather each day. Whilst Valais receives plenty of sunshine (as demonstrated by the copious number of vineyards along the length of the valley!), mountain weather can be unpredictable and so we will plan our higher altitude excursions for the clearest, sunniest days. Bettmeralp itself rests at 1950m, though a visit to the highest view point over the Aletsch Glacier may take us up to 2869m above sea level. As Bettmeralp and the adjacent villages of Riederalp and Fiescheralp are all car-free villages, we will spend the majority of each day exploring the region on foot. Needless to say, we will make full use of the extensive network of mountain cable cars and chair lifts to thoroughly explore the area and avoid trekking uphill wherever possible! The majority of walking will therefore be over undulating ground, or downhill. For those that wish to occasionally save their legs at the start or end of the day, there is also a small electric shuttle bus that runs between the villages every half an hour (tickets for this must be purchased directly from the driver and as such are not included in the tour cost).



Alpine Marmot (K.Porteous)

We are likely to begin our week of excursions by taking the chairlift that operates from just outside our hotel to explore the alpine meadows above us. This area is particularly known for its colonies of comical Alpine Marmots, which should be easy to spot from the trails, and at this time of year the meadows will be filled with a stunning array of alpine flowers. Alpenrose (*Rhododendron ferrugineum*), Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Globeflower (*Trollius europaeus*), Broad-leaved Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza majalis*), Small White Orchid (*Pseudorchis albida*), and Mountain Houseleek (*Sempervivum montanum*) are common, along with an abundance of *Primula*, *Saxifraga*, *Viola* and *Campanula*, numerous orchids and gentians. During the week we will also be looking for some of the rarer alpine specialities, such as Black Vanilla Orchid and *Androsace chamaejasme*, and the sun should bring out a wide variety of butterflies including Berger's Clouded Yellow, Scarce



Androsace chamaejasme (S. Warburton)



Dark Green Fritillary (J. Stokes)

Copper, Adonis, Mazarine, Small and Alpine Blues, Heath, False Heath, Dark Green and Marsh Fritillaries, Almond-eyed Ringlet and Marbled White. On our dedicated butterfly holiday to the Swiss Alps we have recorded over 100 species in the space of a week... and whilst we wouldn't expect such numbers on this particular trip, enjoying over 60 species during our stay in Valais would not be unusual!



Alpine Choughs (Arto Hakola)

On one day we will be sure to take the cable car up to the Bettmerhorn, high above Bettmeralp itself, to take in the stunning views across the Aletsch Glacier, the longest glacier in the Alps. We will also take the opportunity to enjoy a little high alpine botany, looking for the likes of Glacier Crowfoot (*Ranunculus glacialis*), *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and *Saxifraga paniculata*, Alpine Toadflax (*Linaria alpina*) and Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), whilst watching out for high altitude birds such as Snow Finch, Alpine Accentor, Water Pipit, Ring Ouzel, Citril Finch and, of course, the characterful Alpine Choughs.

Another day we may choose to descend to the floor of the Rhône Valley. Here, we can expect the birdlife to be quite different, with the sounds of Nightingale, Blackcaps, Golden Oriole, Whinchat, Serin, Citril Finch and Garden Warblers around us, whilst overhead, Common and Honey Buzzards, Peregrines and Hobby are all possible. As we descend, we will look for the likes of Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*), Greater Masterwort (*Astrantia major*) and Martagon Lily (*Lilium martagon*).



Alpenrose and the Aletsch Glacier

Spring Gentians, *Gentiana verna* (K. Porteous)

Along the river we will look for Dippers, and the lush meadows are full of various buttercups, Bistort, Alpine Lovage and Bladder Campion. There should be a good array of butterflies to look for, and special residents of the Rhône Valley include Camberwell Beauty, Large Tortoiseshell, South White Admiral, Bath White, Mallow Skipper and Iolas Blue, so we will make a particular effort to find some of these butterflies during our time lower down in the valley.

Taking the cable car up to Moosfluh on another day, we will again enjoy the views along the length of the Aletsch glacier, before walking along the ridge towards the neighbouring village of Reideralp. This ridge borders the Aletsch Forest – perhaps worthy of a day's exploration in its own right – where Black

Redstart, Fieldfare, Red-backed Shrike and Nutcracker are common, and we can also look for Firecrest and perhaps the elusive Black Woodpecker.

Finally, having enjoyed the views of the mighty Matterhorn across the valley, on one day we will descend to Betten and join the final section of the famous 'Glacier Express' line, taking us to Zermatt and then to the Matterhorn itself. Continuing on the mountain cog railway to the Gornergrat at around 3000m, we will enjoy the spectacular views and carpets of alpine flowers, including the beautiful Pink Rock-Jasmine (*Androsace carnea*), Spring Gentian (*Gentiana verna*) and Trumpet Gentian (*Gentiana acaulis*). We will once again be on the lookout for Snow Finch, Alpine Accentors and the ever-present Alpine Choughs, whilst descending a little in altitude, we may find Ortolan Bunting and Northern Wheatear.

Day 8

Transfer Geneva, Fly London

This morning we must sadly return by cable car and train to Geneva. Our return flight to London departs Geneva in the mid-afternoon.

Tour grading

Grade B – We enjoy walks ranging in difficulty from 'easy' to 'moderately strenuous' each day. Each day's walk varies in distance up to around 6 miles, though regardless of the distance covered, we will be on foot, on mountain trails, for the best part of each day, some of which are steep and rocky in places. As we use cable cars and chairlifts to ascend the mountain most days, the majority of the walking is along flat or undulating terrain, or downhill. If you wish to do less than the main party on any particular, this can often be accommodated.

We usually have breakfast at around 8 am and aim to leave our hotel by 9 am for a full day in the field. We break the day to relax and enjoy a picnic lunch, and typically aim to return to our hotel at around 5 to 6pm, depending on the weather and our success in the field.



Alpine Blue (Jon Stokes)

Focus

Valais contains a rich diversity of natural history, and on this holiday we plan to enjoy all aspects of this, including alpine flowers, birds, butterflies, mammals, and, of course, the stunning scenery.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All meals and accommodation are included in the cost of this holiday (except for any meals or snacks you require during travel to and from Switzerland). We will be staying in the comfortable, family-run Hotel Bettmerhof in the delightful Swiss village of Bettmeralp, and from the hotel's sun terrace we enjoy unrestricted views across Valais and towards the Matterhorn. All rooms have private facilities and balconies. A limited number of single rooms are available without a supplement, and a limited number of superior rooms with south-facing balconies and fantastic views towards the Matterhorn are available at a supplement of £140 per person. One 'Junior Suite' is available at the supplement of £350 per person.



Left: sun terrace at the front of the Bettmerhof. Right: Hotel Bettmerhof.



Weather

Mountain weather is always variable, with cloud and rain (and even snow!) always a possibility, especially in the afternoons. At this time of year, however, the weather should be becoming settled, with daytime temperatures ranging from 15 to 25°C, and plenty of clear sunny weather. Very hot weather is also possible, and carrying plenty of water in those instances is essential. At high altitudes, overcast conditions can rapidly reduce temperatures, and waterproofs and a warm jacket should be carried at all times.

Regional flights

Flights to Geneva are available from numerous regional airports across the UK. These are often operated by easyJet and other low-cost carriers, and schedules do change frequently, so please contact the Naturetrek office for the latest information and prices. If your preferred regional flights do not fit in with the group flight timings, we would be happy to help arrange an additional night in Switzerland for you at either end of the trip.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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