

The Reptiles & Amphibians of the Italian Alps

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Outbound flights; arrive Turin

Days 2 – 5 Piemonte

Days 6 – 7 Lombardy

Days 8 – 10 Veneto

Days 11 – 13 Friuli-Venezia Giulia

Day 14 Inbound flights from Venice

Departs

August/September

Focus

Reptiles, amphibians, and local cuisine

Grading

B. This tour is suitable for participants with a good level of fitness.

Dates & Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code ITA23)

Highlights

- Learn about the herpetofauna of the Italian Alps
- Explore the region at the prime time for alpine viper and salamander activity.
- Traverse all the Italian Alps, exploring five different locations.
- Stay in agriturismos and enjoy the regional cuisines.
- Led by an expert local herpetologist.



Nose-horned Viper, Common Frog, melanistic Barred Grass Snake © Simone Giachello



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Introduction

The Alps are the highest mountain massif in Europe, forming a natural border between Italy and the rest of the continent, but more importantly, acting as a strong physical barrier separating the Mediterranean region from the temperate zone. Situated on the southern slopes of the Alps, facing the Mediterranean, the Italian Alps host an exceptionally rich variety of environments shaped by the combined influence of both climatic regions.

Searching for reptiles and amphibians will be the perfect pretext to spend two weeks immersed in beautiful alpine and pre-alpine landscapes, traversing the entire Italian Alpine arc, from Piedmont in the west to Friuli Venezia Giulia in the east. From crystalline alpine lakes high above the treeline to open pastures and coniferous forests at lower elevations, we will explore a wide range of habitats in search of local herpetofauna, tasting the regional cuisine, and admiring traditional alpine landscapes shaped by millennia of coexistence between humans and nature.

Our daily schedule will remain flexible and weather-dependent: sunny days will be dedicated primarily to searching for snakes and other reptiles, while rainy days will be perfect for amphibians such as Alpine and Fire Salamanders. Night walks will offer further opportunities to find amphibians, especially if rain is scarce.



Italian Asp Viper © Simone Giachello

Itinerary

NB. 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 Turin

Our holiday begins with a flight to Turin, where our local expert guide will greet us. Upon arrival, we will all disinfect our shoes with an antimicrobial solution to prevent the spread of harmful pathogens affecting amphibians and reptiles. This is very important since many Italian species are potentially very sensitive to those pathogens, and we will repeat the process each time we will change location.

We will then transfer to our first accommodation an agriturismo at around 1,700m elevation, near the source of the Po, Italy's longest river. After settling in, we can take a short walk to get our first taste of the Italian Alps before enjoying our welcome dinner. We will spend the next two nights here, focusing on finding the endemic Lanza's Alpine Salamander (*Salamandra lanzai*), a pitch-black, viviparous species found only in a few valleys of the western Alps.

Day 2

Piemonte (Cuneo)

On our first full day in the Italian Alps, we will walk to a nearby alpine lake, carrying panini for a picnic lunch at the foot of the towering pyramid of Monviso (3,841m), the highest peak in the area. Picnicking in the mountains will become our routine for most lunches during the trip. We will spend the day gently exploring pristine alpine habitats above the tree line, wandering among alpine grasslands and crystal-clear streams in search of Lanza's Alpine Salamander and Asp Viper (*Vipera aspis aspis*). In the afternoon, we will return to our accommodation to relax before dinner.

To aid digestion before heading to bed there will be an optional night walk to try again for our main target salamander. Night walks are usually very productive to find this wonderful endemic species.



Lanzas Alpine Salamander (*Salamandra lanzai*) © Simone Giachello

Day 3

Piemonte (Cuneo) – Piemonte (Biella)

After our final breakfast at 1,700m, we will depart for our next destination. A 4-hour drive will take us across much of the Piemonte region, from the province of Cuneo to Biella, with lunch en route.

Our accommodation for the next two nights will be in a small rural alpine valley at 1,400m elevation. This area offers excellent opportunities to find Asp Viper (*Vipera aspis aspis*), Smooth Snake (*Coronella austriaca*), and a micro-endemic subspecies of European Adder (*Vipera berus walsei*).

Once settled, we will take a short walk around the village to familiarise ourselves with the new environment and perhaps spot some of our target species.



Asp Viper © Simone Giachello

Day 4

Piemonte (Biella)

Today will be our best chance to find the local endemic vipers and will be another full, delicious picnic, day. After having breakfast at our hotel, we will walk deeper into the valley to search for snakes. Here the habitat will be a mix of pasture grassland and Alpine Rose shrubs offering numerous refugia for reptiles making this environment one of the best to find the alpine herpetofauna.

After a day-hike in the valley, we will be back to our accommodation and enjoy our last dinner at this location.

Day 5

Piemonte (Biella) – Lombardy

After four days spent in Piemonte, it is time to move on to a new region of northern Italy, Lombardy. Another 4-hour transfer will take us to our next accommodation which is situated in the Bergamasque Prealps at around 500m of elevation giving us access to a range of low-altitude environments hosting a different set of species. Here our main targets will be Italian Asp Viper (*Vipera aspis francisciredi*), Crested Newt (*Triturus carnifex*) and Yellow-bellied Toad (*Bombina variegata*). Depending on the weather, we may also be able to find Fire Salamander (*Salamandra salamandra*).

As usual, we will have lunch on the way before settling into our new accommodation. In the afternoon we will take a short walk to explore the surrounding area before the dinner.

Day 6

Lombardy

For our only full day in Lombardy we will spend the morning walking in a wild but easily accessible valley searching for such thermophilous species as Italian Asp Viper, Western Green Lizard (*Lacerta bilineata*) and Green Whip Snake (*Hierophis viridiflavus*).

In the afternoon we will drive less than an hour to reach a site hosting one of the last remaining populations of Yellow-bellied Toad of the area.

Day 7

Lombardy – Veneto

Today we leave our accommodation after breakfast and head to the nearby Iseo Lake, one of the four great pre-alpine lakes in northern Italy. There, we will spend a couple of hours enjoying a lakeside walk with views of the surrounding Prealps. Of course, we will also keep an eye out for snakes since the rocky



Golden Alpine Salamander (*Salamandra atra aurorae*) © Simone Giachello

banks of the lake are a prime habitat for Dice Snake (*Natrix tessellata*). We will conclude our morning with a lunch in a local bar with a view over the lake.

The afternoon will be spent driving east to reach our next location in Veneto in the Altopiano di Asiago, a plateau hosting a marvellous micro-endemic subspecies of alpine salamander which will be our main target for the next two days, Golden Alpine Salamander (*Salamandra atra aurorae*).

Days 8 – 9

Veneto

During our two days on the Altopiano di Asiago we will explore the last patches of the ancient mixed forest where the Golden Alpine Salamander still survive. We will hike gently through forests composed of Beech trees and firs looking for salamanders, but we will also take the opportunity to walk through the expansive alpine pasture of the plateau that harbour a healthy population of the Italian subspecies of European Adder (*Vipera berus marasso*).

Lunches will be picnics while dinners will be served at our hotel. Night walks will be an additional opportunity to try to spot the elusive micro-endemic salamander.

Day 10

Veneto

During the tenth day of our trip, we will move to our final location in the easternmost region of the Italian Alps, Friuli Venezia Giulia. As usual we will have lunch on the way to our next accommodation and arrive in the afternoon at the hotel. Today we will have a well-deserved free afternoon and relax until dinner to recharge the energy for our final three days in Italy.

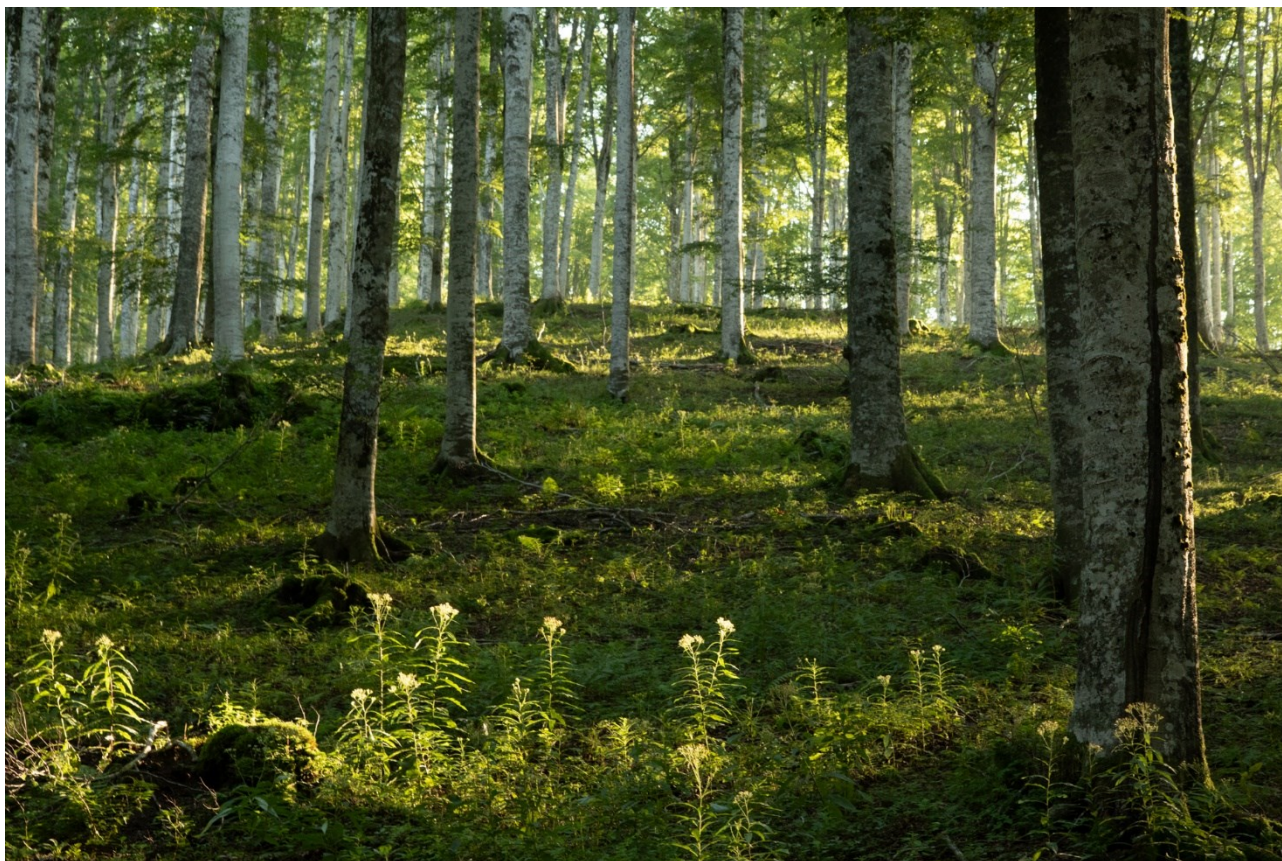
This part of the Alps hosts a very special viper, Nose-horned Viper (*Vipera ammodytes ammodytes*), the largest and most venomous Italian viper, which of course will be our main target for the three full days we will spend in Friuli. Friuli Venezia Giulia is by far the wildest region of northern Italy, and we will take our time to explore different areas of this wonderful sector of the Alps.

Days 11 – 13

Veneto

Although Nose-horned Viper will be our main target here, we will spend each day exploring different habitats with good chance to come across many other snake species such as European Adder, Italian Asp Viper, Green Whip Snake, Aesculapian Snake, Grass Snake and Dice Snake.

We will also dedicate a day to visit one of the most spectacular Beech forests of northern Italy which is home to the fully black subspecies of Alpine Salamander (*Salamandra atra atra*). As always, we will hike at a relaxed pace, taking time to observe the nature around us. Lunches will be picnics and dinner will be served at the hotel.



Habitat of alpine salamanders © Simone Giachello

Day 14

Inbound flights

After a wonderful tour, sadly it will be time to leave the Italian Apennines and make our way to Venice for our inbound flights.

Tour Grading

On a typical day on our herpetology tours, we'll begin searching in the field after breakfast, when the sun has warmed the substrates and landscapes, often getting into the vehicles at 9am and, after stopping for approximately one hour for lunch (which is often a continental-style picnic eaten in situ), we'll continue into early evening, when we will stop for a rest and dinner. Most evenings, it will be possible to go on excursions in search of nocturnal species, which will on average last for three hours after dinner. With an equal percentage of the target reptile and amphibian species likely to be nocturnal, these night searches are an important part of the tour but are optional, with some participants preferring to rest on some of the days.

We'll focus our time in the field on building an enviable list of reptile and amphibian species seen. Whilst searching, there is no doubt we'll come across a huge variety of amazing fauna and flora, which we'll also take time to enjoy, but reptiles and amphibians will strongly remain our focus. Sensitively checking under stones, logs and other refugia is an effective way of finding many species. Some of the target reptile or amphibian species may require longer field hours to locate, and therefore this tour is suitable, and most enjoyable, for experienced herpetologists or naturalists who, aside from wishing to see the region's rarely-seen reptiles and amphibians, relish being in the field searching for and identifying the vast array of birds, butterflies, invertebrates, orchids and other wildlife which can be found sharing the wonderful habitats that we'll explore on the tour.

In summary, Naturetrek herpetology holidays offer tremendous value and are suitable for those whose main holiday focus is seeing some of the world's superb reptiles and amphibians, whilst spending the majority of their time in wildlife habitats.

On this holiday, some occasional ascents are required and on average, 3-7 miles are walked per day.

Weather

Whilst we should hope for warm, sunny conditions, it can be overcast at times with occasional rains. The time in the mountains could be cool, particularly at night. It would be sensible to come prepared for such possibilities.

Food & accommodation

All meals starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 14.

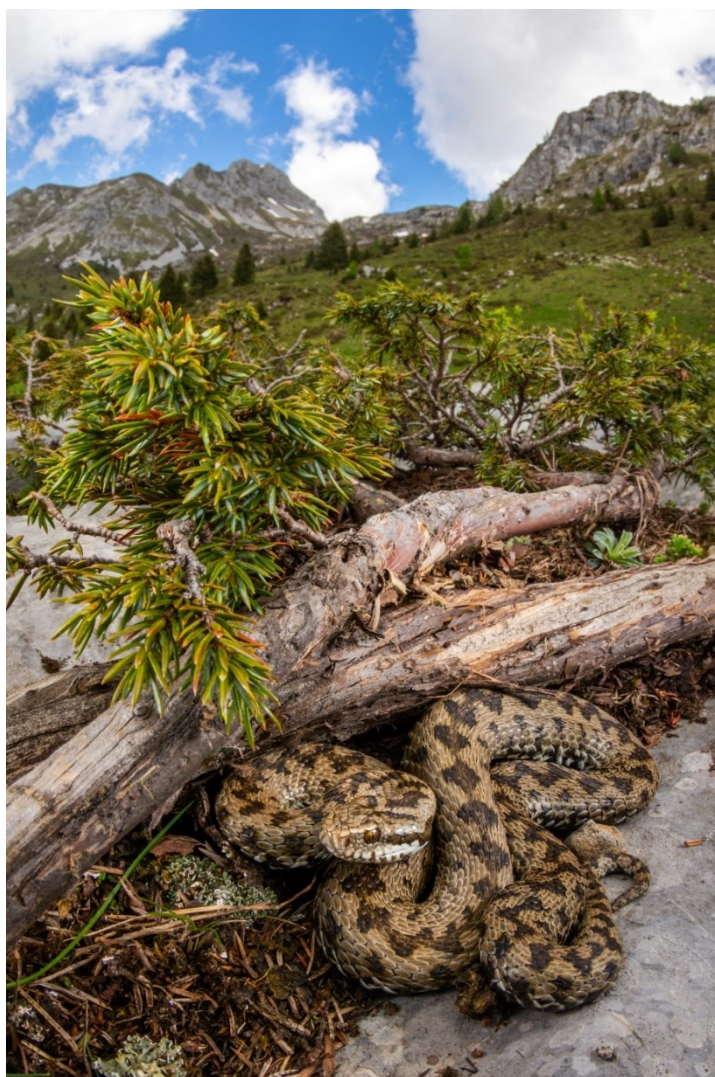
The hotel's bedrooms are quite simply appointed but are clean and comfortable, with en suite bathrooms, and the restaurant serves excellent cuisine.

Booking your place on the tour

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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European Adder (*Vipera berus*) © Simone Giachello