



Western Alps

HIGHLIGHTS

- o Enjoying the dearth of ski lifts in the wildlife-packed **Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso** (p93)
- o Sampling esoteric Walser culture in the **Val d'Ayas, Val di Gressoney** and **Valsesia** (p107)
- o Walking amid colourful carpets of wildflowers in alpine meadows on the **Lakes & Wildlife** walk (p98)
- o Feeling the dominating presence of the mighty mountain massifs of the **Matterhorn & Monte Rosa** (p106)

Signature food: Polenta with Fontina cheese

Celebrated native: Jean-Antoine Carrel (climber)

Famous for... Mont Blanc tunnel

Western Europe's highest peaks rise like stark white sentinels above the semi-autonomous Valle d'Aosta, the smallest and least populous of Italy's regions, which remained a virtual cul de sac until the opening of the Mont Blanc tunnel in 1965. At 4810m, Mont Blanc (Monte Bianco) is the tallest giant, but it is matched for Tolkeinesque beauty by the pyramidal Matterhorn (Monte Cervino), grandiose Monte Rosa and wilderness-flecked Gran Paradiso.

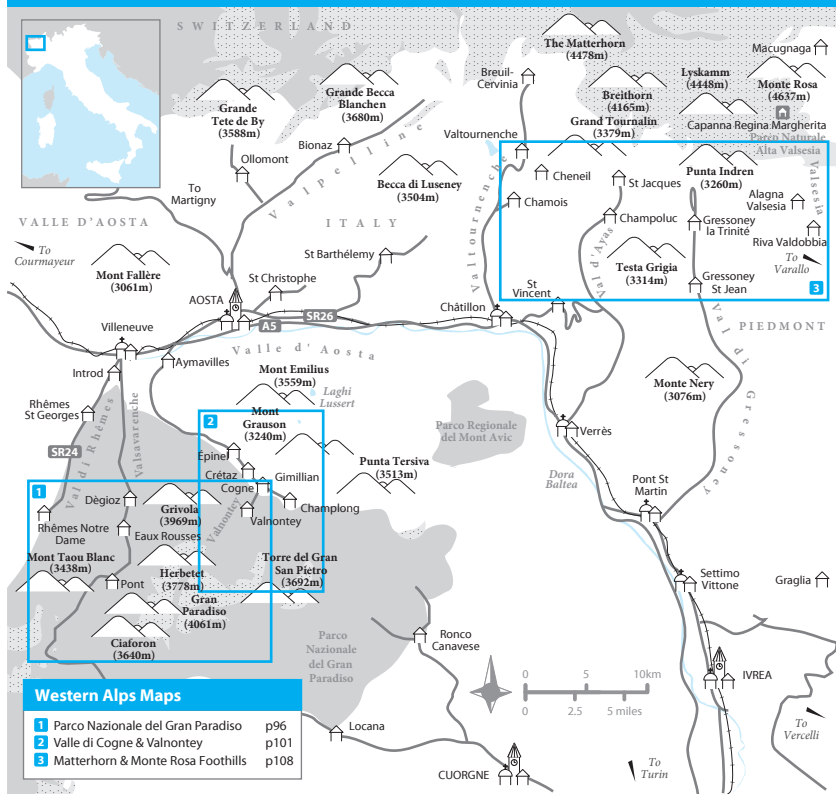
Comprising one large glacial valley running east-west which is bisected by several smaller valleys, the Valle d'Aosta's Western Alps offer some spectacular hiking with access to numerous long-distance walking paths such as the 165km Tour du Mont Blanc and Aosta's two blue riband high-altitude trails, the Alte Vie 1 & 2.

Despite an overabundance of modern and often incongruous ski resorts, Aosta has managed to protect a significant portion of its ancient ecosystem in the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso (PNGP), a 700-sq-km swathe of the Graian Alps that makes up Italy's oldest and most revered national park and provides a grand paradise for walkers.

Bordered by France and Switzerland on two sides, Aosta's cultural nuances are Valdostan – a historical mix of French-Provençal and northern Italian – and over 50% of the local population still speak an esoteric local language known as Valdôtain. Even more curious is the Swiss-influenced Walser heritage prevalent in a trio of the region's northern valleys.



WESTERN ALPS



HISTORY

Valle d'Aosta's roots are Roman – the eponymous regional capital boasts significant ruins – while annexation by the House of Savoy in the 11th century led to the building of numerous medieval castles. In the 12th- and 13th-centuries German-speaking Walser from Switzerland migrated into the Val de Gressoney and a few villages still preserve the language and architecture.

With the opening of the Mont Blanc tunnel in 1965, life in the Valle d'Aosta changed exponentially with tourists flocking in to ski the high Alps in the two popular resort towns of Courmayeur and Cervinia. Transformed from rural backwater to 21st-century success story, the Aostan economy now revolves around tourism and high quality cheese and wine production.

ENVIRONMENT

Within the vast chain of the Western Alps, stretching from the far southwest corner of mountainous northern Italy to Lago Maggiore, Valle d'Aosta separates the Graian Alps to the south from the Pennine Alps to the north. The Gran Paradiso massif – the heart of PNGP – is the most significant range in the Graian Alps, with 15 glaciers and 10 major summits, topped by Gran Paradiso (4061m). The park consists essentially of deep lateral valleys and their separating ridges extending south from Valle d'Aosta. These valleys were cut by glaciers pushing north towards Valle d'Aosta where they dumped huge masses of moraine. The Pennine Alps are dominated by the chain of peaks between the Matterhorn (Monte Cervino; 4478m) and Monte