



Valais

POP 312,700 / AREA 5224.5 SQ KM / LANGUAGES FRENCH, GERMAN

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Why Go?

Valais is a salacious natural beauty. Her tale is of rags to riches, of changing seasons and celebrities, of an outdoors so great it never goes out of fashion. Wedged in a remote corner of southern Switzerland, this is where farmers were so poor they didn't have two francs to rub together a century ago, where today luminaries sip Sfr10,000 champagne cocktails at Coco Club in Verbier.

Landscapes here leave you dumbstruck: from the unfathomable Matterhorn (4478m) that defies trigonometry, photography and many a karabiner to the Rhône valley's tapestry of vineyards and shimmering 23km Aletsch Glacier. With such backdrops how can any hike, bike or ski tour be anything but great?

As earthy as a vintner's boots in September and as clean as the aesthetic in Zermatt's lounge bars, this canton can be fickle. The west speaks French, the east German, united in matters of cantonal pride by fine wine and glorious cheese.

Best Places to Eat

- » Chez Vrony (p178)
- » Walliserkanne (p165)
- » Le Cube (p156)
- » Château de Villa (p161)
- » Le Namasté (p155)

Best Places to Stay

- » Hôtel Beau Site (p151)
- » La Grande Maison (p157)
- » Vernissage Berghaus Plattjen (p181)
- » Hotel Bahnhof (p168)
- » Hotel Arkanum (p161)

When to Go

There are two obvious seasons: December to early April when the region bustles with excited ski and snowboard enthusiasts out to enjoy the area's world-class winter sports. Then there are the China-blue sky days of July and August when hikers, bikers and adventure-sport lovers hit the Alps for a summer dose of adrenalin. Late September and October is the secret season to go: leaves turn gold on vines, grapes and chestnuts are harvested, and the autumnal feast of La Brisolée (p346) is laid out on the Valaisian table for all to celebrate.

History

As in neighbouring Vaud, Julius Caesar was an early 'tourist' in these parts. The Roman leader brought an army to conquer the Celtic community living in the valley, penetrating as far as Sierre. Once under Roman domination, the four Celtic tribes of Valais were peaceably integrated into the Roman system. Archaeological remains attest to the passage of the rambling general and his boys from Rome.

Sion became a key centre in the valley when the Bishop of Valais settled there from AD 580. By 1000, the bishop's power stretched from Martigny to the Furka Pass. That authority did not go uncontested. A succession of Dukes of Savoy encroached on the bishop's territory and a Savoyard army besieged Sion in 1475. With the help of the Swiss Confederation, the city was freed at the battle of Planta. Internal opposition was equally weighty and Valais' independently minded communes stripped the bishops of their secular power in the 1630s, shifting control to the Diet, a regional parliament.

The Valais was not invaded again until Napoleon Bonaparte stopped by in 1798, determined to dominate the routes into Italy. Valais joined the Swiss Confederation in 1815.

Getting Around

Travelling around the Valais is a grandiose experience thanks to the astonishing road links – high mountain passes, snowbound in winter, and masterfully engineered tunnels – it shares with neighbouring Italy (via the Great St Bernard Pass and Tunnel to Martigny, and the Simplon Pass and Tunnel to Brig) and France (from Chamonix over the Col de la Forclaz, also to Martigny). The N19 enters the far eastern end of the canton via the vertiginous Furka Pass (closed in winter, when cars chug through the mountain on a train instead) and passes through Brig, a key stop on the Glacier Express rail route and train line between Italy (Milan via Domosossola) and Geneva.

LOWER VALAIS

Stone-walled vineyards, tumbledown castle ruins and brooding mountains create an arresting backdrop to the meandering Rhône valley in western Valais. Running west to east, the A9 motorway links towns such as Roman-rooted Martigny and vine-strewn Sion and Sierre, where the French influence shows not only in the lingo but

also in the locals' passion for art, wine and pavement cafes.

Glitzy resorts like Verbier and Crans-Montana have carved out reputations for sunny cruising, big panoramas and celebrity style, but there's more. Narrow lanes wriggle up to forgotten valleys such as Val d'Anniviers and Val d'Arolla, packed with rural charm and crowd-free skiing in the shadow of ice-capped mountains.


Martigny

POP 15,900 / ELEV 476M

Once the stomping ground of Romans in search of wine and sunshine en route to Italy, small-town Martigny is Valais' oldest town. Look beyond its concrete high-rises to enjoy a world-class art gallery, Roman amphitheatre and a posse of droopy St Bernard dogs to romp up the surrounding mountains with.

Sights & Activities

The tourist office has details of vineyard walks and cycling trails.

 **Fondation Pierre Gianadda** GALLERY
(www.gianadda.ch; Rue du Forum; adult/10-25yr Sfr20/12; ☎9am-7pm) Set in a spacey concrete edifice, this renowned gallery harbours a star-studded art collection. A copy of Rodin's *The Kiss* sculpture by the entrance promises great things and the gallery delivers with works by Picasso, Cézanne and van Gogh, occasionally shifted to make space for blockbuster exhibitions. A highlight is the garden where Henry Moore's organic sculptures and Niki de Saint Phalle's buxom *Bathers* peek above the foliage.

Admission also covers the permanent exhibition of Roman milestones, vessels and so on in the upstairs **Musée Archéologique Gallo-Romain** and the classic cars from vintage Fords to Swiss Martinis (the kind you drive, not drink) parked in the downstairs **Musée de l'Auto**.

Musée et Chiens du Saint-Bernard

MUSEUM

(☎027 720 49 20; www.museesaintbernard.ch; Route du Levant 34; museum adult/child Sfr12/7, dog walking & museum adult/child Sfr45/9, audio-guide Sfr3; ☎10am-6pm) A tribute to the lovably dopey St Bernard, this museum across from the Roman amphitheatre includes real-life fluff bundles in the kennels.