

## EPIC DRIVES: GREAT ST BERNARD, COL DU MONT CENIS (AND BACK)

**Martigny**

**Approx. 8 hours**

**310 miles/500 km**

This is the impossibly scenic backdrop for car commercials. Alpine peaks, hairpin bends, juicy green meadows, and grand vistas. But your vehicle does not have to have a *Vorsprung durch Technik* to master these climbs. Just make sure that your brakes are in good (or rather excellent) working order and stay well clear of some rather sudden and steep drops on the side of the road. And on a sunny summer's day, you might not be alone, as other sightseers and motorists might escape from the heat down in the valleys. But what a drive ....



From Martigny in the upper Rhone valley of the French-speaking part of Switzerland, you gradually climb the mountain pass of the Great St Bernard (2469m), crossing the border into Italy before descending along tight bends down into the Aosta valley and onto the Piedmont metropolis of Turin. Then it is back up again through the Valle di Susa and up the Col du Mont Cenis (2083m) before entering France and descending along the western Alpine slopes past Albertville and Chamonix, before once more entering Switzerland.



The entire circular road trip comes in at just under 8 hours, covering around 300 miles (500 km). While possible to do in one day (good luck!), it might be best for your nervous system and your vehicle's radiator to break up the tour into two, or even more stages. Apart from the awesome mountain landscapes, you will pass pretty villages and pristine alpine pastures that will make you want to park your vehicle and do some exploration on foot. Extending the trip into a one-week, or even two-week journey is therefore a distinct possibility.



As it is a circular journey, your start can be at any point along this loop. From the northernmost tip in Martigny, it is around 160 miles (250km) over the Great St Bernard and to the Col du Mont Cenis, which can be done in just under 4 hours of non-stop driving. Getting back to Martigny takes another four hours (150 miles or 240km). If you type Martigny and Col du Mont Cenis into the Michelin route planner ([www.viamichelin.co.uk](http://www.viamichelin.co.uk)), you will get a handy and accurate set of directions, so these do not need to be repeated here. For ease of access you could enter the loop at or near Turin in Italy, or on the route's most western points in France (such as Albertville which can be easily reached from Grenoble, or from Lyon). In Switzerland, Geneva is the obvious reference point.

To keep costs down, make sure that you do not enter the Swiss motorway system (signs are in green). Hence, in case you are renting a car in Geneva, make your way across to Chamonix in France, where you can enter the loop. Once on the loop, avoiding toll roads should be straightforward, as the

road to and from Martigny goes along minor roads; otherwise it is 40 Swiss Francs for the vignette (or 50€ if you do not have that currency at hand). In Italy, you can save a little over 25€ by setting your Satnav to avoid the tolls on the Italian Autostrade system, although this will add a good 2 ½ hours to your journey. In France, you can save around 10€ but the additional journey time will be around 1 hour.



As potential overnight stops, I would recommend Aosta (in the valley of the same name) or Susa (once again in the not imaginatively named Valle di Susa). The former is at the foot of the Great San Bernard, the latter at the foot of the Col du Mont Cenis. If you prefer big city lights, Turin, which was nicely smartened up in the run-up to the 2006 Winter Olympics, is your obvious choice. Should you prefer to stay in France, you might want to consider Lanslebourg on the northern slope of Mont du Cenis: a mid-size ski resort in a pretty valley with plenty of summer accommodation. Or you could divert from the route slightly by driving an extra hour from Albertville into Annecy for a romantic seaside setting. If you prefer to rest in Switzerland, please check with your bank manager first. Your appetite might also be compromised when forking out 25€ for a mediocre pizza. The mountain passes are obviously only open in summer (as a rough guideline from June to September) so make sure to check before you take off.

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