

The Trails to Freedom: 7-day hike through the Italian Alps:

28 August to 5 September 2018

This extraordinary nine-day hike combines breath-taking scenery, enchanting towns, challenging walks and delicious food with the fascinating story of four young men who crossed the Italian Alps to freedom in the Second World War.

On the 4th of October, 1943, four young Australian soldiers crossed the Italian border at the Monte Moro Pass and into Switzerland, ending a three-week odyssey that had started in a Fascist prison camp on the Po Plain near Biella in Piedmont (north of Turin). It had taken the soldiers across the Italian Alps, walking nearly one hundred kilometres of trails, crossing five mountain passes, climbing over five thousand metres and skirting around Mt Rosa (the second highest mountain in the Alps). The route they took followed a network of medieval paths that had been re-opened by partisans, which the locals called the 'sentieri della liberta' or the trails to freedom.

Based on several years' research, this magnificent hike follows the same route, starting in Biella and finishing on Mt Moro. It passes through some of the most spectacular scenery in the European Alps, staying in a mixture of hotels (at the beginning and end); pilgrim monasteries and mountain huts along the way (see below for details). It will also include two side trips, via cable car, up to the mountain peaks (including to the base of Mt Rosa at 3600 mts) to enjoy the breathtaking views and hearty mountain lunches before returning to the valleys.

Although we will walk through uncontaminated mountain landscapes, this is an ancient land: traders, pilgrims and graziers have been passing through here for millennia, in fact since before the Bronze Age. While the trails are well-marked and no technical skills are required, this is a challenging hike (definitely not a 'walk') which requires very a good level of health and fitness (medical certification will be required before joining the tour). The group will be a maximum of 12 guests and will be lead by Simon Tancred and Marco N, a certified local alpine guide with a passion for conservation and a Phd in alpine biodiversity.

The walks

The trails are well-marked, starting with a pilgrim route that takes us up into the hills above Biella in northern Piedmont before picking up sections of two long distance trails: the Grande Traversata degli Alpi (GTA) and the final section of the Tour de Mt Rosa (TMR) which will take us to the Swiss border.

A large part of the route follows ancient pack routes, variously narrow, wide, cobbled and paved. You will cross some long stretches of scree and boulders, so you'll need to be sure-footed and fit. Technically the route is simple, however, you will be required to climb more than a thousand metres on several days and you will be crossing high altitude country where weather conditions can change dramatically so you will require a high level of fitness. You must also be prepared to walk in all conditions rain, hail or shine! This is a Grade 5 walk ([click here for details](#)).

The accommodation

The accommodation is one of the highlights of the tour. We will start with the first night in a 4-star hotel in Biella in Piedmont. The next two nights we will stay in very comfortable pilgrim accommodation in two magnificent monasteries that date from the Middle Ages; two nights are in 'rifugi' or mountain huts, where we will sleep overnight in shared accommodation (including shared bathrooms) either in 4 to 6 person rooms or larger dormitories (depending on availability); a night in a 'casa alpina', an historic alpine hotel which once hosted the Queen of Italy; while the last two nights we spend in a lovely, family-run 3-star hotel in a village below the Mt Moro Pass.

The food

The walk passes through the region of Piemonte (Piedmont), home of the Slow Food movement and one of Italy's premier food and wine regions, so, although sometimes simple, the food on the tour will always be local, hearty and delicious. Dinner each night will consist of three courses: a first course which may consist of risotto, ravioli or polenta; mains such as veal or rabbit stew; and desserts such as bonet (a thick chocolate pudding) or a slice of excellent mature local cheese, chased down

with coffee and/or a shot of grappa. Wine with the meals is included. Our accommodation will also prepare a cut lunch for us for the next day's walk.

The tour leaders

Simon Tancred will lead the tour. The founder and director of Hidden Italy walking tours, he has over 30 years' experience hiking and walking in Italy, including 20 years leading groups for Hidden Italy. Simon will be supported by Matteo, a local Alpine guide certified by the region of Piedmont. Matteo is 33. He grew up in a village in the mountains north of Biella, is a passionate hiker and conservationist and graduated from university in Turin with a Phd in alpine biodiversity. He is a teacher and operates his company promoting hiking and appreciation of mountain culture and traditions to young people.

The equipment

Because several of the legs do not have car access, you will need to carry your own gear for the week. We will provide you with a comprehensive (and proscriptive) list of what is required (nothing more and nothing less!). The first requirement is a good quality 40 litre backpack. The total loaded weight should be no more than 12 kilos. (The rest of our luggage will be stored in Biella during the walk and then will be waiting for us in Macugnaga at the end of the walk.)

As mentioned, the trail is well maintained, well-marked and there will be other people walking the route, however, the trail does pass through long stretches of uninhabited land at high altitude where the weather can change quickly so safety is a priority. The main safety requirements are a high level of fitness and common sense. We will be accompanied by a certified mountain guide and there is a very experienced mountain rescue service that can send in qualified mountaineers and helicopters, if needed.

Tour Cost:	\$ 3200 AUD per person (two people sharing a double room; single supplement \$550 AUD)
Tour inclusions:	7 nights' accommodation (see itinerary for details) All breakfasts and dinners Transfer to Domodossola at the end of the tour; luggage storage in Biella. All taxes and service charges at the hotels 24 hour telephone back up.

Trail to freedom hike itinerary

Day 1: (Biella)

Your first night is spent in Biella, a pleasant town with a rail link, north of Turin. Situated where the Po River plain butts up against the foothills of the Italian Alps, Biella has had a long history as a trade and commercial centre. The Oropa River valley has provided access over the Alps to Switzerland and France since Roman times. Biella's centuries-old textile tradition continues today producing high quality woollen clothes and it is the home of international fashion houses such as Ermenegildo Zegna. (Dinner)

Day 2:

The path we take today leaves Biella following a route that was first mentioned in 1207 and which was a trade route leading all the way to Lyon in central France. The path climbs up through forests and hamlets with spectacular views back over the plains and finishes at one of the most unexpected and striking sites on the walk: an enormous baroque monastery that has been a popular place of pilgrimage for centuries and which is where we'll be staying the night (16 kms, 5 hours, 925 mts ascent, 318 descent, Grade 4). (Lunch and dinner)

Day 3:

Today, we take a small trail that contours around the mountain with vast views over the Po Plain and then cuts back into the forest and heads north to a second monastery, where we'll have lunch. After visiting a partisan cemetery, we continue on the trail which takes us down a winding path into the next valley to a rather strange little town that was home to the benefactor who would build a road and tunnel that connects the two monasteries in the later 1800s. The trail then takes us north up beside the river to a second village at head of the valley. (18 kms, 5 hrs, 557 mts ascent, 708 mts descent, Grade 3). (Lunch and dinner)

Day 4:

Girding our loins for the long climb that awaits, possibly the hardest stretch of the tour, up to a welcoming mountain hut that sits spectacularly on a platform under mountain peaks. It is a hard 4 hour ascent but the rewards are great - glorious views south across the Alps and a convivial place to relax and sleep. (6 kms, 4 hrs, ascent 1205 mts, descent 65 mts, Grade 5) (Lunch and dinner)

Day 5:

Today's walk takes us through the heart of the Alps with our first glimpse of Monte Rosa. We pass a number of enchanting frozen lakes and small glaciers and cross high mountain pastures that are still used by flocks walked up for the summer. There is no road access, only a network of trails that run north and south, east and west. The second half of the walk is a long descent, boulder hopping down a narrow glacial valley which eventually opens up into forest and then pastures where we'll start passing the gorgeous wooden 'Walser' farm houses that characterise the area. Our accommodation tonight is in a very comfortable historic alpine hotel (in a restored Walser hamlet) that hosted Margherita, the queen of Italy, in 1889. (17 kms, 460 ascent, 1261 mts descent, Grade 5). (Lunch and dinner)

Day 6:

Today is a short and very pleasant walk, which will give us the chance to rest from the previous two days' efforts. The trail takes us into a larger valley with the majestic Monte Rosa at the head. We finish at a pretty skiing town, a sunny place that has a number of pleasant cafes and small restaurants. From here a series of cable car climbs up to the foot of Monte Rosa, with breathtaking views and a rifugio where we can have lunch. Weather permitting, we will have also the option of a 40-minute walk from the lift station across a glacier to a second mountain hut

After returning to the valley, it's a short walk to another 'rifugio' (there is also the option of a shuttle ride from town) a beautifully restored, stone shepherds' hamlet surrounded by pastures, with an excellent restaurant and a terrace with views up to the mountains. (11 kms, 3 hrs, 628 mts ascent, 394 mts descent Grade 2) (Dinner)

Day 7:

Today is another long, hard walk but is one of the highlights of the tour: leaving the valley with Monte Rosa looming above us, we climb up an old military mule trail (built in the 1920s following a route that dates from Roman times) to the last pass (2900 mts) offering the first views of Switzerland. Once over the pass, we head down into another beautiful valley with a pretty lake in the distance to the village of Macugnaga. Our accommodation for the last two nights is a lovely family-run 3-star hotel near the main square where your luggage will be waiting for you (transported from Biella) – luxury! (22 kms, 9 hrs, ascent 1257 mts, descent 1510 mts, Grade 5) (Lunch and dinner)

Day 8:

Today is an easy day. We'll spend the morning exploring this fascinating little town before taking the cable car that runs between Magugnaga up to the pass that separates Italy from Switzerland. It is a short climb from the cable car station to the Swiss border, where the granite ridge is topped with a golden Madonna. The Saastal valley drops away from here down to an artificial lake, that wouldn't have been there when the soldiers crossed. We'll have lunch at the pass before taking the cable car back down. (Lunch and dinner).

Day 9: Domodossola:

This morning after breakfast you'll be picked up by private car and driven 40 minutes along the valley to Domodossola (arriving at 09.00), which has direct rail connections to Geneva and Milan.