



➤ Stopover on the Col d'Izoard.
 → The highest pass in the Alps, the Col de l'Iseran (2,764 m), Savoie.

inspired a grand twentieth-century French project: a north-south, forest-to-sea Alps crossing. Begun in 1909 and interrupted then hastened by world wars, it connected Chamonix and Nice via Europe's highest paved road, Col de l'Iseran, by 1937. An unexplored backwater—shepherds and artisans had spent millennia wandering the Alps for days at a time to get anywhere—was suddenly open to locals, freight, and countless après-ski seekers.

Most infrastructure is set up for skiing—430 resorts lie between Geneva and the sea, including giants like Espace Killy, with hundreds of kilometers of slopes. In summer, these spots revert to pleasing waypoints for riders' priorities: beer in a sunny valley bar, rest in wooden alpine chalets or *chambre d'hôtes*, and rich French food in clifftop restaurants usually only accessible by ski gondola. France's comfort food offerings don't get richer than gratin, raclette, tartiflette, and fondue savoyarde: the potato, cheese, and cream-based dishes born in this chilly place.

Alpine weather can make visits tricky. The Route opens from June to October, with shoulder season anyone's guess. In winter, many roads become ski runs; midsummer is best and busiest, but still brings both snow days and glorious 30 °C (86 °F) ones that have you thanking whichever god pushed the African and Eurasian plates together 300 million years ago. Which configuration of paved and off-road routes to take will depend on how dusty you want to get, but the asphalted set course has five official stages and is about a 20-hour ride over three to four days, allowing for stops, and climbing 18 km (11 mi) in total. Learn a little French, make sure the Tour isn't on, audit the infrequent gas stations, and avoid the area during the July–August holidays (or ride in the very early morning hours)—you won't regret it.

Leaving Thonon-les-Bains bound for Arêches-Beaufort (Stage 1) via Col des Gets (1,170 m [3,839 ft]), Col des Aravis (1,486 m [4,875 ft]), and Col des Saisies (1,650 m [5,413 ft]) the road rises gently toward the first

challenge at Col de la Colombière (1,613 m [5,292 ft]). Stage 1 is facility-rich, sweeping past ski resorts like Morzine, Les Gets, and La Clusaz; quaint villages Flumet and Notre Dame de Bellecombe; and forested watchmaking center Cluses. It no longer skirts Chamonix at the base of Mont Blanc, but the glitzy resort still makes for a delightful detour.

The popular Stage 2 route from Arêches-Beaufort to Valloire via Cormet de Roselend (1,968 m [6,457 ft]), Col de l'Iseran (2,764 m [9,068 ft]), and Col du Télégraphe (1,570 m [5,151 ft]) through Val d'Isère has exceptional views of the Graian Alps, but consider turning at Bourg-Saint-Maurice for the overlooked Col de la Madeleine (1,993 m [6,539 ft]), Col de la Croix de Fer (2,068 m [6,785 ft]), and Moûtiers's eleventh-century cathedral of Saint Pierre. At Lanslebourg-Mont-Cenis, another shortcut to the historical World Heritage Site commune Briançon via Col du Mont-Cenis (2,080 m [6,824 ft]) and Col de Montgenèvre (1,850 m [6,070 ft]) passes the stunning Écrins National Park. >

