

Trek
in
France & Switzerland

I. The Tour du Ruan

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Mount Ruan, 3057m, is a mountain in the Haut Giffre Massif in the Chablais Alps between Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc. It is not the highest mountain in the Massif with 2 adjacent mountains, Tour Salliere and Mont Buet, slightly higher. The Haut Giffre Massif and this trek straddles France and Switzerland. The Haut Giffre Massif is largely heavily folded limestone strata which has been geologically thrust up as the Morcles Nappe.

The Tour du Ruan is a reasonably new trek created by Willy Fellay, President of the Valais Hiking Club in 1998, so it has not yet become a classic.

The trek does not pass through a tourist area nor does it pass under any famous mountains and in this respect it is rather modest. However it passes close to many small high glaciers and is frequently above 2000m in quite demanding terrain. In addition there are many peaks around the 3000m mark which can be climbed from some of the cols which would make the tour even more challenging. I have not mentioned these side trips here as the 4 days are quite long as they are. The more notable side trips would be Mount Buet and Haute Cime.

The Haut Giffre is untarnished by ski development. However, on the Swiss side 3 valleys have been dammed creating 3 lakes where there were once pastures. These lakes are used for hydroelectricity. The smaller Vieux-Emosson reservoir can be used

for pump storage by reversing the turbines. The lakes are part of the landscape and if the dams can be ignored, enhance the area.

Most of the trek on the French half is in the Sixt-Passy Natural Reserve noted for its limestone topography and the enormous Cirque du Fer à Cheval, the largest amphitheatre in the alps. This Reserve allows wildlife to thrive and ibex, chamois, marmots and eagle are frequently seen. Because of the the predominantly limestone soils and the karst type structures the area is rich in flora, especially the gentian varieties. Even in the depths of the karst fissures there are ferns growing.

Due to its proximity to Mont Blanc and Chamonix, the Haut Giffre massif is remarkably quiet. Indeed it is about as lonely as one cant get in the Alps. The paths are small and the markings are not as bold as elsewhere in the alps so the trek feels remote.

The best place to start is probably Emosson which is in Switzerland. From the dam you can go either clockwise or anticlockwise. Getting to Emosson from Chamonix or Martigny take the train or bus to Finhaut or Châtelard. From the former you can take a bus or the latter a very steep funicular railway. At the dam by the lake there is restuarant, which also has some accommodation if needed. It is also possible to drive to the dam and park here for the 4 days of trekking.



Day 3. Ibex, *Capra ibex*, thrive in the Sixt-Passy Reserve. They are plentiful around the Mount Buet and Col de Ottans areas. Here is a female and kid on the screes above Refuge Vogealle.



Day 4. The Blacknose sheep (Nez noir) are a unique breed of sheep from the Swiss canton of Valais. They are large sheep of 70 -120 kg but are very sure footed grazing the high pastures.

The Tour du Ruan



Purple gentian, *gentiana purpurea* flowers in the late summer and grows to ½ metre.



Alpine plants. **Yellow:** Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* & Yellow Saxifrage *Saxifraga aizoides*. **Purple:** Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*. **Red:** Hairy Stonecrop *Sedum villosum*.



Great yellow gentian, *Gentiana lutea*, is a metre tall. It has huge roots, used to make bitters drinks.

This circuit of Mount Ruan is quite a demanding 4-day trek. It goes over a number of high cols most of which will have patches of snow well into the summer and certainly in June. It also involves a few sections of quite easy via ferrata with one more exposed section on an 80 metre ladder. The trek also goes through alpine meadows grazed by sheep and cows and high pastures grazed by ibex, chamois and marmot. There are however just a few sections of transhumant culture left now.

On days 1, 3 & 4 the small path goes over a couple of cols which afford great views. There is very little forest on these days as you are largely above the treeline. It is only on day 2 you encounter forests as you descent into the Sixt valley beneath the jaw-dropping Cirque Fer a Cheval.

There are refuges at every night and there are also accomodation opportunities in the middle of most days but these are erratic. The refuges are generally quite quiet and there is probably no need to book

in June, early July, Late August and September. But you must be prepared to sleep in a dormitory if you dont book to reserve a smaller room. Half pension at these refuges are quite reasonably priced and they will make up packed lunches.

Perhaps the best time to go is the second half of August or the first half of September. During late July and early August the temperatures will be excessive and the refuges busy. The flowers seem to last well into August in this limestone terrain.

A map covers the entire route except for a small section between the Refuges of Susanfe and Salanfe. The route is not marked on this map and the route of the trek has to be extrapolated from it. The map is a 1:25,000 Carte Nationale de la Suisse. It is number 1324 and called "Barberine". There was no guide book for this trek in English however there is a chapter on Trekking in the Alps by Kev Reynolds. ISBN 9781852846008. There is also a good website: www.tourduruan.com



Map of the Tour du Ruan which lies just to the north of Mt Blanc and to the south of Lake Geneva. The best place to start is Emosson, where there is bus transport and a parking place and then go either clockwise or anti-clockwise crossing into France before returning to Switzerland again.



Day 2. The Cirque du Bout du Monde is a huge limestone cirque just to the north of the larger Cirque du Fer à Cheval. Both these vast adjacent cirques have many wispy waterfalls drifting down from the melting glaciers above. This view of the Cirque du Bout du Monde is from the Chalet Buvette du Boret.



Day 3. Looking down to the Refuge de la Vogelle from the flower filled pastures above it en route to the Col du Sagerou. The relatively small mountain beyond, Les Avoudrues, 2666m, is typical of the steep striated limestone peaks of the area which have been eroded by glaciation into sharp peaks.



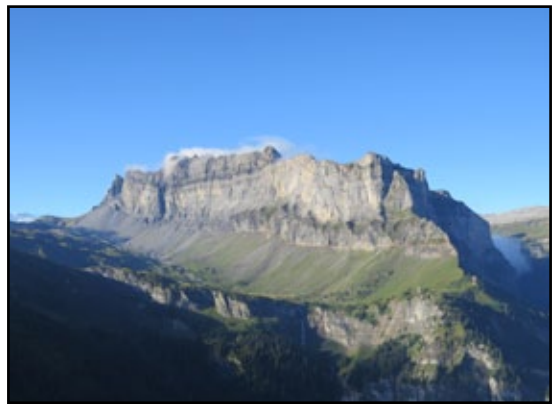
Day 1. Near the Gorge de la Veudale is a recently uncovered limestone slab. In the Jurassic period this slab was a beach visited by dinosaurs. In the 230 million years since the prints were fossilized, and plate tectonics heaved the slab up here.



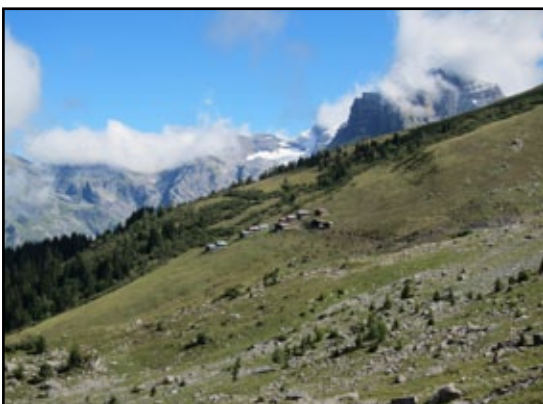
Day 1. The path from the dinosaur prints goes round the head of the valley crossing a vast scree. The path makes for above the snow patch and then climbs steeply up the Cheval Blanc mountain, 2831m, in the centre of the photo.



Day 1. The final metres up Cheval Blanc, 2831m, are quite steep and reasonably exposed. However there are chains secured to the rock to hold onto for extra security.



Day 1. From Refuge Grenairon there is a great view south to the Rochers des Fiz., a steep sided mountain which rises up from the flatter alpine pastures which surround it on all sides.



Day 2. At Les Praz de Commune there are still some summer dairy farms. The cows graze on the rich pastures here and are milked daily by farmers come up the rough track from the Sixt valley.



Day 2. After the Refuge de la Vogealle the path heads up into the hanging Vogealle valley where there is a small lake. The lake is fed by snows from Dent Blanc, 2727m, and shrinks as they melt away.



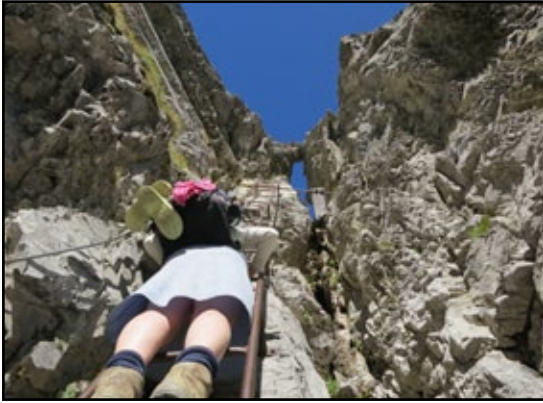
Day 3. Looking SW down the Sixt Fer à Cheval valley from Col des Ottans, 2496m. The two vast cirques, Fer à Cheval and Bout du Monde, are both just out of the picture to the left.



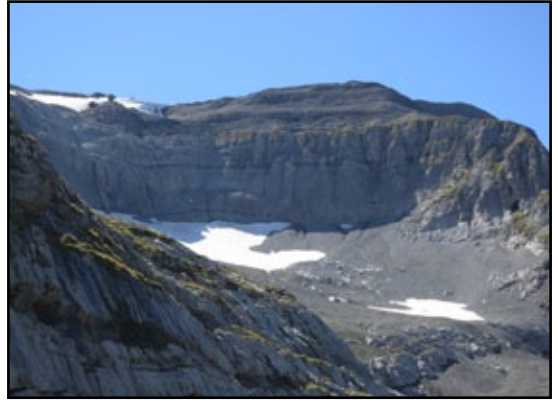
Day 3. Ibex are commonly seen above Refuge de la Vogealle near Col du Sagerou and Col des Ottans. Because there has been no hunting for decades the ibex are relaxed around humans.



Day 4. The artificial Lac de Salanfe is a hydroelectric lake but is now part of the landscape. There are large alpine meadows around the lake and these are grazed all summer by herds of cow. This view is looking NW across the lake to the Col du Susanfe, 2494m, on the right, which was crossed the previous day. The large mountain in the centre left is Tour Salliere, 3220m, which is the highest in the Mount Ruan massif



Day 3. Between Col des Ottans and Cabane de Susanfe is an exposed 80m section. Initially one has to go through a small hole and then shuffle sideways to reach the top of the 40m ladders. The lower 40 metres are steep rock with chains.



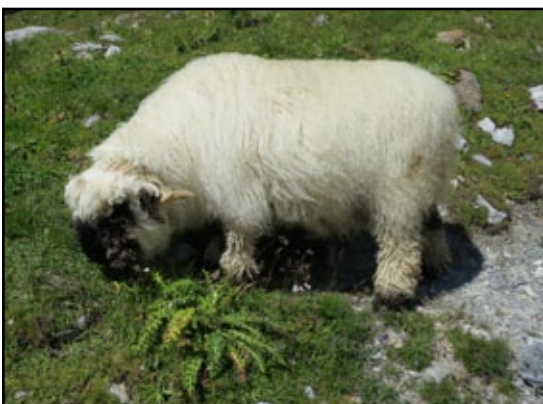
Day 3. Looking from near the Cabane de Susanfe towards the Col des Ottans on the left skyline. The steep section with ladders comes down this near vertical escarpment just to the right of centre of the photo.



Day 4. Looking north from Col d'Emaney, 2462m, to Lac du Salanfe and the Dents du Midi beyond. They are the highest mountains in the Chablais Alps and slightly higher than the Ruan Massif.



Day 4. Looking south from Col d'Emaney down into the upper reaches of the Emaney valley and beyond that Col de Barberine, 2481m, on the other side of the valley to the left of centre.



Day 4. There is usually a flock of the Valais Black nose sheep on the south side of the Col de Barberine. These large sheep are unique to the area and the breed is about 400 years old



Day 4. From the pastures on the south side of Col de Barberine there are great views over the Lac d'Emosson to Mont Blanc, which is only some 20 kilometres away.



Day 4. The view from Col de Barberine, 2481m, to the NE half of the Mont Blanc Massif. On the right is Aiguille Verte, 4122m, centre right is the north face of Les Droites, 4000m. Centre left is Aiguille du Chardonnet, 3824m, and in the distance on the left is the Aiguille d'Argentière, 3901m.



Day 4. A meadow of poisonous Monkshood, *Aconitum napellus*, on the south side of the Col de Barberine. They are intuitively avoided by the Valais Black Nose sheep who graze in the lower reaches of this pasture. As the bottom of these meadows is the Lac d'Emosson with the dam off to the left. The mountain in the middle is the Cheval Blanc, 2831m which was climbed up the left flank on Day 1.

Tour du Ruan

Day	Start	Finish	Km	Up	Down	Time	General
1	Emosson	Grenairon	16	1100	1100	8	From the parking place and busstop at Emosson, 1966m, cross the dam to the west side and continue another half km beside the road before you veer SW up the Gorge de la Veudale. Continue up for a 2 hours on a good path to reach the ridge at the head of the gorge. Now with great views descend soon to the fossilized dinosaur footprints. The path now climbs again round the bowl to the south of Vieux Emosson lake before making a steep ascent with a few chains to the top of Le Cheval Blanc, 2831m, the days highpoint. Now descend SW down the ridge and then across a bowl to the south to reach pylons on the edge of glaciers. Follow the path down beside these for half hour to the Lac du Plan Buet. If you plan to climb Mont Buet, 3096m, for great views it takes a good 2 hours from here return. Now walk across a high rocky valley on a faint path to gain a ridge. Follow this ridge for 2 hours as it weaves its lonely way along the crenellated limestone spine on a narrow rocky path with some chain sections before the final lbex rich descent to Granairon refuge, 1974m.
2	Grenairon	Vogealle	19	1360	1420	9	From Grenairon head down a steep damp path for 500 metres well into the forest. Here cross a couple of near ravines, which would be treacherous in heavy rain, at the bottom of huge slabs. After the ravines follow a lovely pastoral forest road as it contours along the hillside past alpine huts. After a good 4 km the terrace track climbs gently to the alpine dairy of Les Praz de Commune, 1672m. The path now descends in 2 stages through mixed forest with tremendous views down to the Giffre valley, 950m, just downstream from Plan du Lacs and beneath the vast Cirque du Fer à Cheval. Walk north past the lakes for 2 km on a track then cross the Giffre River and walk another km to the base of a steep section. If dry climb this short steep rocky slope with cables for a short hour to the quaint Chalet de Boret, 1390m. If it is wet take the longer route to this same charming cafe, with tremendous views to the huge Cirque du Bout du Monde. Now climb up the pasture above the cafe to gain the cliffs. Bear NE under these cliffs and continue climbing on rocky terrain to reach the comfortable Refuge de la Vogealle. 1902m.
3	Vogealle	Salanfe	17	1300	1260	9	Head up stream from Vogealle Refuge, 1902m, for a km and then leave the main trail and climb the sustained slope to the NE rising through meadows to a shale covered spur. Now with tremendous views to Mt Ruan ahead and Mt Blanc south, climb the easy path to Col du Sagerou where you now follow the ridge east over Tete des Ottans, 2549m, to Col de Ottans. Now begin the exciting descent to the top of the 80m ladder section, which is quite exposed and exhilarating. From the bottom of the ladders is a long descent below glaciers to the Susanfe valley, 1900m. Now climb gently up to the Susanfe Refuge for a rest. From here it is a good hours climb east up the valley to Col de Susanfe, 2494m, where the days goal Salanfe refuge is seen beside the lake. The 550m descent is long with a steeper 150m rock section which is tame compared to the ladders earlier. From the base of this rock band descend slowly down to the meadows ringing with cow bells. It is just a 2 km walk along a level track now to the very comfortable Salanfe Refuge, 1925m.
4	Salanfe	Emosson	17	1170	1150	8	Leave the comfortable refuge and head under the dam to the southside of the lake. Follow it for a km before heading south up the hill. Initially the path is grassy then it becomes rocky as you near the Col d'Ermany, 2462m. There is a great view here south to Mont Blanc and even round to the Matterhorn. The next challenge, Col de Barberine, 2481m, is also visible across the deep pastoral Emaney valley some 500m below. The descent to the Emaney meadows is pleasant and from the lowest point it is 20 minutes to the Alpage where food s served. Otherwise bypass the cafe and start the 500m climb to Barberine col on a steep rocky path with little respite. The view from the top bursts forth with Mt Blanc dominating beyond the lesser peaks including Cheval Blanc of Day 1, all beyond the azure Emosson lake. The descent to the lake is straightforward through flower filled pastures grazed by the unique Valais "Nez Noir" sheep. At the lake a road follows the shore and some tunnels to reach the carpark at Emosson dam to complete the hard 69 km circuit
			69	4930	4930	34	