



The stunning cliffs of the Rochers des Fiz. All photos: Lindsay Cannon.

The Tour des Fiz, Haute Savoie

Short of time? Then try this weekend out for size – a mountain circuit of the stunning cliffs of the Rochers des Fiz, passing through two nature reserves offering stunning views of Mont Blanc.

The towering cliffs of the Fiz dominate the skyline as you drive from Geneva to Chamonix; for many years I'd crane my neck whilst driving along the auto-route to stare at these stunning rock faces. Being nosy, it all got too much and I finally had to just go and explore. Much to my delight I soon realised that a perfect miniature 'tour' could be done in two to three days, taking in views of the big alpine peaks and offering rare wildlife, hidden valleys and incredible geology.

The tour can be started from Plaine Joux, high on the mountainside above the Sallanches valley, and the first day can include an ascent of the Pointe Noire de Pormenaz – which sits at 2,323m. This is a very satisfying beginning: a decent summit offering some of the very best views of Mont Blanc. This tour is not overly frequented, which makes it all the more

appealing, and it offers accommodation with bags of character. The first night's stop is at the Refuge de Moede-Anterne, where the 'myrtille' tart comes highly recommended!

After a steep climb over the Col d'Anterne the next morning, the views change to the beautiful high meadow – where vast herds of sheep graze in the summer months. Here you might manage to spot 'Le Pastou'. These giant white dogs have been bred for centuries in the Pyrenees, and they are usually referred to by their local name of 'Le Pastou' (taken from 'pastre', the old French word for a shepherd). Born in the 'bergerie', or sheepfold, the puppies quickly establish a strong bond with their future charges. Consequently their natural instinct is to protect the sheep from intruders. They spend much of their time on their own guarding the flock – they are fascinating to watch, but it's best to give them a wide berth!

Shortly after, you can stop for coffee (or the night) at the historic Alfred



Another view of the Rochers de Fiz.



Nearing the top of the Col de la Portette.



The charming Refuge de Moede-Anterne.

Oscar Wilde. His ascent of the Wetterhorn, in 1854, is credited with marking the beginning of the Golden Age of Alpinism.

A hike up through the impressive Gorge de Sales is next, leading into the Grand Pré, (or large meadow) where herds of cattle and sheep were taken for summer grazing for centuries. Here you can often spot marmots, ibex, and the rare 'gypaète barbu' (bearded vulture) which has just been successfully re-introduced to the area. In the 19th century, the bearded vulture had a rather unfortunate press: it was accused of devouring lambs, and even small children. Alpine authorities eventually declared open season on the bird, and the last one was shot in 1913. But the vulture (known as the 'bone crusher' since it drops bones from a great height in an attempt to break them open for the marrow) is now back.

As you wander on up the Grand Pré, the limestone geology becomes very apparent and if flowers do it for you then you're in for a treat: the limestone soils give some very rare types. Now it's over the Col de la

Portette and onwards down to the Refuge de Plate. The Désert de Platé is a high altitude karst (limestone pavement). On the Désert de Platé, water does not trickle over the surface – it's sucked into the interior of the mountain itself, to resurge finally from beneath the limestone. The Refuge de Plate is definitely worth an overnight stay as it's got so much character. The situation is great, offering more views of the Mont Blanc Massif, and it's got real history: used by the 'maquis' – the rural guerrilla bands of the French Resistance – during the Second World War. Today you can just relax with a refreshing drink, surrounded by hens scratching in the grass and the Refuges' two donkeys, Nanette and Fifine. The final descent is an exciting path through steep and seemingly impenetrable rock bands, as it descends down to the valley before

traversing the mountainside back to Plaine Joux. So, if your holiday has been credit-crunched, and you only have a weekend to spare, then check this out. Alpine landscape, stunning views and off the beaten track – what more could you want? ■

Lindsay Cannon is an International Mountain Leader (IML) and presents on The Adventure Show for the BBC. Join her in the Alps at: www.tracks-and-trails.com.

Essential facts: Tour des Fiz

Getting to France

Fly to Geneva: a range of airlines fly to the city including Easyjet (www.easyjet.com), British Airways (www.britishairways.com) and Flyglobespan (www.flyglobespan.com). Or get the train (www.seat61.com).

Getting to the start

Begin from Plaine Joux, near Plateau d'Assy, which sits high on the mountainside. From Geneva you can take a train to St-Gervais-Le-Fayet, then a taxi to Plaine Joux. Alternatively, spend a night in Chamonix first, and then take a taxi to the start. It's around 1.5 hours from Geneva airport by car.

Accommodation

On the Tour, accommodation is in mountain huts. There is a choice of four on the route – all with great character and in beautiful settings – and which ones you choose will depend on how long you want each day to be.

Maps and guides

1:25,000, Institut Géographique National 3530 ET Samoëns.

When to go

Mid-June to mid-October. Check beforehand that the refuges are open. Snow can also lie late in the couloirs, which could make crossings interesting.



One of the Refuge de Plate's permanent residents.



Another of the Refuge de Plate's friendly locals.