



THE NORTH WEST

LIGURIA, VALLE D'AOSTA AND PIEDMONT

From Sanremo and Genoa on the Mediterranean Coast to the high peaks of the Aosta Valley, the Italian North West has it all. There's great off-road adventure riding to be found on the Alpine military roads and some of the best road touring passes and scenery in Europe.

WHERE IS IT?

Butting up to France and Switzerland, the Italian North West consist of three regions; the coastal strip of Liguria, the Alpine region of Valle d'Aosta on the northern border and the larger region of Piedmont sitting in-between and offering a variety of mountains, lakes, plains and big cities.

For the UK rider, there's a good chance you're going to start your tour of Italy in the north-west of the country. All three of the north-west regions (Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont and Liguria) have main road links with either Switzerland and France, with the tunnel under Mont Blanc, or Monte Bianco as it is known in Italy, being the nearest border crossing to the UK.

Our favourite entry point in this northern region is the Col du Petit Saint Bernard (The Little St Bernard Pass), which starts out as the D1090 from Bourg-Saint-Maurice in France and ends as the SS26 in the Aosta Valley just south of Courmayeur.

The Little St Bernard Pass is a thrilling road and offers the rider unparalleled views of Mont Blanc, Western Europe's highest mountain which tops out at a glaciated 4,810m. From the Chamonix Valley in France, Mont Blanc is one of the less dramatic peaks in the massif appearing as a benign, rounded white dome.

However, it's all change on the Italian side where it becomes one of the most dramatic and savage mountain vistas in the Alps, and there's no finer view of the wild and precipitous ridges and glaciers than that offered from the SS26.

And whilst not conclusively proven, the pass is thought by many historians to be the route followed by the Carthaginian general Hannibal when he led his army into Italy in 218BC. Something for you to mull over as you hit the switchbacks.

Heading down the Aosta Valley towards Turin and Piedmont, you're flanked on the left (north side) by some of the high peaks in the Alps, including the Grand Combin (4,314m) and the only mountain in the world that's had a chocolate bar cast in its image - the spectacular and unmistakable Matterhorn (4,478m).

The Aosta Valley offers outstanding natural beauty and fantastic Alpine passes, but it is also a region packed with interesting and historic architecture such as Savoia Castle, Fénis Castle and many Roman monuments and museums. Plus, there are colourful festivals and carnivals throughout the year and if you're lucky to be riding through when the Pont-Saint-Martin carnival is taking place, you'll be able to check out the chariot races.

Continuing further east into Piedmont, there are plenty of attractions to keep you in Italy, not least the spectacular roads and scenery surrounding Lake Maggiore, but it's inevitable that you're going to nip over into Switzerland at least once to check out one or more of the famous Alpine passes such as the Simplon or Gotthard.

Heading back to Mont Blanc and riding south from Valle d'Aosta, you'll find that the Alps form a continuous and formidable barrier right down to the Mediterranean coast with the next major crossing