

Maurice-en-Valais. Saint Maurice was one of the most well known of the "soldier saints" celebrated in the middle Ages. In 961 his remains and those of the men who perished with him were disinterred and reburied with honors at the Cathedral of Magdeburg where his relics remain to this day.

Martigny

Lying at an elevation of 475 metres, Martigny sits on the crossroads between Italy, France and Switzerland and is the start of the one road over the Great St. Bernard Pass to Aosta in Italy. Martigny's history stretches back two thousand years - Celtic tribes, the Romans and Napoleon's troops have all left their traces. Later, Martigny became the first bishop's seat in Switzerland and is admired for the historical districts of La Bâtiaz and Vieux-Bourg featuring



several churches and secular buildings worth seeing. Martigny is surrounded by vineyards and orchards, because the climate is ideal for growing strawberries, apricots, grapes and asparagus. It is also well known for its famous visitors: Rousseau, Goethe, Stendhal and Liszt. Less seriously and culturally, cow fights are held in the Roman amphitheatre during early autumn - a bizarre spectacle not to be missed if you happen to be there at the right time. King of the beasts these poor milkers may not be, but the most belligerent bovines do win the prized title: "Queen of the

Alps." Unlike bullfighting, which exploits the male animal's aggressive instincts by antagonizing him, cows don't kill or seriously hurt anybody, not even one another. Veterinarians file the cows' horns before a fight if they are too sharp, but it is hard to provoke a cow into a fight it doesn't want to. Perhaps the only living beings to get really excited about all of this are the farmers, because the calf of a bell-winner can sell for nearly 10 times the going price of an ordinary calf. So fierce is the competition that a bovine queen, named Samba, was attacked and beaten while grazing in the mountains. Many here suspect rival cow owners.



Martigny Ampitheatre

Orsières L Ursiores

At an altitude of 900 metres, Orsières is home to a number of architectural treasures, the undisputable jewel in the crown being the church and its bell-tower. Dedicated to Saint Nicolas, it was built in 1895 on the site of two known former churches: the first built between 1177 and 1296, the second devoted in 1497. Orsières is also known for the medicinal and aromatic plants grown on its surrounding slopes and used to make herbal and iced teas, or in the manufacture of beauty and healthcare products.

Bourg-st-Pierre XLIX Petrecastel

During the wars of the 1790s, entire armies crossed the pass and, in May 1800, Napoleon led 40,000 troops over the pass into Italy, consuming on the way 21,724 bottles of wine, a tonne and a half of cheese, 800kg of meat and more. The bill came to a staggering Fr.40,000 but though Napoleon sent an IOU promising, "I will reimburse everything", he ultimately dodged payment. When President François Mitterrand visited Switzerland in 1984, the citizens of Bourg-st-Pierre politely reminded him of the outstanding debt, but did not ask for a specific sum. In response, a personal representative of Mitterrand's returned, bearing a commemorative plaque and a handwritten letter from the President, thanking the village for the hospitality shown to Napoleon. Shortly after, Fr.18,500 was offered as a token gesture of account settling with regard to the village's debts and those relating to Napoleon's stay in the hostel on the summit, along with the construction of a swimming pool in Bourg-st-Pierre. French officials said the matter had been resolved "in a warm and friendly way". Mayor Fernand Dorsaz accepted the plaque and letter as symbols of the debt's amicable settlement and declared the matter "closed and settled".



Napoleon Crossing the Alps

"It was high morning and everyone was full of fear and trembling. Through holy prayer we were preparing to face menacing death..." written by a Belgian abbot in 1129, just before beginning his ascent on the Great St Bernard Pass.

The Great Saint Bernard Pass

The Great St Bernard Pass is the most ancient route through the Western Alps, crossing at 2,473 metres and one of the highest of the Alpine frontier passes. Named after Saint Bernard of Menthon, who founded a hospice at its summit in the 11th century, The Grand-St-Bernard Pass has been in use since the Bronze Age - tribes and armies tramping their way to and fro for millennia since. In 390 BC, a Gaulish army crossed to defeat Rome and from the earliest times ordinary people used the pass to trade goods between northern Europe and Italy. Hannibal's famous crossing of the Alps in 217 BC is indelibly associated with the Grand-St-Bernard and (though there's little actual evidence of it actually having taken place) in the 1930s the fabulously eccentric American travel writer, Richard Halliburton, rode his elephant

over the pass to re-enact the journey. Sadly, the poor beast suffered from altitude sickness and stalled on the summit.

In 57 BC, Julius Caesar crossed the Summa Poenina (as it was known then) to conquer the pagan peoples of Martigny, who worshipped the Celtic god Poenn (the chain of great peaks on the Swiss–Italian frontier is still called the Pennine Alps). Shortly after, Emperor Augustus built a road across the pass and left a temple to Jupiter on the summit, which subsequently lent



Roman steps

its name to the area (Mons Iovis, or Mont Joux). Unfortunately the temple was sacked with the fall of Rome, but since the great and the good continued to tramp the road, it is assumed that a refuge may well have remained on the pass. Pope Stephen II crossed in November 753 to meet with Pepin the Short (vertically challenged), King of France, while in 800 Charlemagne crossed back following his coronation in Milan. In the early 900s, Huns and Saracens swept through the region, raping, pillaging and destroying churches. In an attempt to keep them quiet, Hugh of Provence, King of Italy, granted them guardianship of the Mont Joux pass, whereupon they just changed their focus to terrorize travellers and demand payment - a prototype for today's muggers. Deeply concerned by the disruption caused to merchants and pilgrims Europe-wide, King Canute of

Denmark took King Rudolf III of Burgundy to one side to have a quiet word. As a result the heathens were ejected and the archdeacon of Aosta, one Bernard of Menthon (who had spent years tending to travellers coming down off the pass stripped of all their belongings), was given permission to oversee the construction of the hospice. Bernard himself travelled around the area, spreading the word of God and was beatified shortly after his death in 1080. Pope Pius XI confirmed him as patron saint of the Alps in 1923. The hospice immediately became a

welcome point of safety on an extremely dangerous route, attracting favours and gifts from royal and noble households. Throughout the Middle Ages, the hospice provided free shelter and food to pilgrims, clerics and travellers, many crossing to and from Rome. By 1817 some 20,000 people were using the road annually. The hospice on the pass is still used by Augustinian monks who, with their St. Bernard dogs, provide services to travellers. When you finally reach



the summit of the Great St Bernard Pass, the first building you will see is the Combe de Morte a 'charnel house' where the corpses of those who never made it over the pass were mummified by the cold, but don't worry it is no longer in use. Next, look out for the sign informing travellers that they are 2473 metres up - an obligatory photo stop. Then, head for the hostel or hotel and a much needed shower. After that, if you still have sufficient energy, visit the St. Bernard Dog

Museum, which is also an important part of the Great St Bernard Pass history. Probably descended from mastiff-like dogs, the St Bernard dogs were brought to the hospice in the late 17th century and remained loyal companions to the monks living there. The name St. Bernard was dedicated to Bernard, the 11th century monk. The most famous dog was Barry, who reportedly saved somewhere between 40 and 100 lives. There is a monument to Barry in the Cimetière des Chiens and his body is preserved in the Natural History Museum in Berne.



Saint Bernard of Menthon (923 - 1008)



Descended from a rich, noble family and recipient of a thorough education, Bernard refused an honorable marriage proposed by his father and decided to devote himself to the service of the Church. Sneaking away from the chateau the day before the wedding, he fled to Italy and joined the Benedictine order, placing himself under the direction of Peter, Archdeacon of Aosta, under



whose guidance he progressed rapidly. Bernard was ordained as a priest and then became the Archdeacon of Aosta (966). Seeing the old pagan ways still prevailing among the people of the Alps, he resolved to devote himself to their conversion. In popular legend it is said that during his flight from Château de Menthon, Bernard cast himself from his window only to be captured by angels and lowered gently to the ground forty feet below.

Richard Halliburton

Writer, Lecturer and World Traveler, Richard Halliburton published numerous books, including *The Royal Road to Romance* (1925), *Glorious Adventure* (1927), *New Worlds To Conquer* (1929) and *The Book of Marvels* (1937). During his world travels, he visited the Taj Mahal in India, climbed the Matterhorn, flew across the Sahara desert in a bi-winged plane and swam the entire length of the Panama Canal. In his book, *Seven League Boots*, he describes his journey in the tracks of Hannibal as he rides his elephant over the Alps, through Great St. Bernard Pass, because he thought it would be amusing. The journey caused a sensation throughout Europe, but unfortunately Halliburton's enjoyment of fame was short-lived. He died in March 1939 as he and his crew attempted to sail a Chinese junk, the *Sea Dragon*, from Hong Kong to San Francisco. The vessel was unseaworthy and went down in a storm. His body was never recovered.

