



ADVENTURE
BASE

MOUNTAIN REFUGES: THE HEART OF THE JOURNEY

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YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO A UNIQUE ALPINE EXPERIENCE

If you've signed up for a trekking or mountaineering adventure – whether it's the Tour du Mont Blanc, Dolomites Alta Via 1, or summiting Gran Paradiso – you're likely going to spend a few nights in a mountain refuge. These refuges are nothing like hotels or even auberges. They're a unique part of the mountain experience, offering shelter and a warm meal, but they come with some quirks that may surprise you if you're not prepared.

The goal of this journal is to set the right expectations about refuge life and help you understand the hard work and logistics that make these remote shelters possible. By the end of it, you'll hopefully not only be ready for your stay but might also develop a newfound appreciation for the efforts of the people who run them.

WHAT IS A MOUNTAIN REFUGE?

A mountain refuge is exactly what it sounds like: a refuge from the elements. Located in remote, hard-to-reach areas, refuges provide tired hikers and climbers with the essentials – a bed, a meal, and shelter. They're a lifeline for adventurers on long, multi-day trips. But don't expect luxury or private rooms. Refuges are communal, basic, and practical. In most cases, there are no roads leading up to them, and supplies are flown in by helicopter or transported by mule or foot.

This means everything – from your warm dinner to the mattress you sleep on – has travelled a long and difficult route to get there. So, while you may not be getting a five-star meal, that bowl of hot pasta after a day of trekking through rugged terrain will be one of the most satisfying meals you've ever had.

Oh, and did we mention you're lucky enough to get a three-course meal in the middle of the mountains? That's right. Despite the logistical challenges, some refuges serve a starter, main, and dessert – something you might not expect so far from civilisation. And believe us, after a long day of trekking, it feels like a feast!

THE REALITY OF REFUGE LIFE: WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT

Here's a breakdown of what you'll likely experience:

DORMITORY-STYLE SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

Refuges often don't have any or only very limited private rooms. Instead, expect to be sharing a dormitory with other trekkers or climbers, often sleeping in bunk beds. This means earplugs might be your best friend (someone always snores), and privacy is limited. But it's all part of the adventure, and there's a certain camaraderie that comes from sharing space with fellow adventurers.

Don't forget to bring a sleeping bag liner. Refuges provide blankets or duvets, but you'll need a liner for hygiene and extra warmth. It's a small item that makes a big difference. (Only in Toubkal do you require a sleeping bag.)

LIMITED FACILITIES

Hot showers? Maybe. Wi-Fi? Unlikely. You're far from the modern world in a refuge, and that's the beauty of it. Some refuges have showers, but the hot water might run out quickly, especially if you're trekking during peak season. In some refuges, you might be able to pay for hot water in the showers, so it's a good idea to carry some small change with you. If you get lucky and snag a hot shower after a long day on the trail, it'll feel like the best thing ever!

Now, let's talk bathrooms – because this is where a lot of people are caught off guard. In many refuges, especially those in more remote areas, you may find yourself face to face with an eco-toilet (think composting toilet) or, yes, even a hole in the ground. But don't worry – while it might seem primitive at first, it's actually quite hygienic. After all, there's no seat to touch! Plus, squatting is great for your leg muscles, giving you an extra workout to round off your day of trekking.

Also, don't be surprised if there's no soap or toilet paper provided – so be sure to pack your own. A little preparation goes a long way when you're miles from civilisation. Just think of it as part of the adventure. When you're in these wild places, embracing the quirks is all part of the fun!

Electricity is often limited, and charging your phone may require sharing a single outlet with 30 other people. Embrace this chance to unplug. Enjoy the fact that you're out in the wild, and let go of the need to check your messages or emails. Trust me, the views are better than anything you'll find on your phone.

MEALS ARE SIMPLE, BUT HARD-EARNED

Refuges offer simple but hearty meals, often made with local ingredients and recipes. Think pasta, polenta, and stews—the kind of food that fuels a day of trekking or climbing. And remember, the logistics behind getting these meals to you are far from straightforward. With no road access, many refuges have their supplies flown in by helicopter.

This adds to the cost, of course, but also makes you realise how much effort goes into every bite. When you're sitting around the communal table, tucking into your meal, remember that a helicopter probably brought those tomatoes!

BREAKFASTS IN REFUGES: DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH

While dinner can feel like a well-earned feast, breakfast in mountain refuges is often quite limited – particularly in France. You're likely to be served a very basic breakfast. Rarely will you find any protein options, so it might be a good idea to carry a small stash of nuts or protein bars to supplement your breakfast if you need something more filling for the day ahead.

DON'T KNOW HOW LUCKY YOU ARE TO BE THERE

Refuges are fully booked most of the summer. There aren't many options along the trails, so if you've been secured a place, consider yourself lucky! We work hard to ensure there's a spot for you, so just getting a bed and a meal in one of these refuges is something to appreciate. Spaces are limited, and they fill up fast, making each night's stay a well-earned part of your mountain adventure.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE REFUGES: UNSUNG HEROES OF THE MOUNTAINS

Now, let's talk about the people who keep these refuges running. Refuge staff often spend the entire summer living at the refuge, working long days (we're talking 12 hours or more), starting early to prepare breakfast and staying late to clean up after dinner. They are the true unsung heroes of your adventure, ensuring that you have food, shelter, and a bed to sleep in after a long day on the trail.

Working in a remote location, often with minimal breaks and limited access to the outside world, is no easy task. Imagine having to cook for up to 100 people every day, manage food supplies flown in by helicopter, clean dormitories, and deal with the unpredictable weather conditions that come with being high in the mountains. These are the people who ensure you're safe, fed, and rested. So, a smile and a "thank you" can go a long way in showing your appreciation.

EMBRACING THE REFUGE EXPERIENCE

Refuge life is about embracing the simplicity and beauty of mountain living. It's a chance to step outside your comfort zone and discover that some of the best experiences come from letting go of modern comforts. You might miss your private room and hot shower, but what you gain in return is far more valuable. It's about waking up to the crisp mountain air, enjoying the quiet solitude of nature, and sharing moments with fellow adventurers that you simply wouldn't find anywhere else.

In a refuge, time slows down. Without the distractions of technology or the comforts of home, you're left with the essentials: a warm meal, a place to sleep, and the company of like-minded people. There's a certain magic in the simplicity of it all – the shared stories over dinner, the satisfaction of a long day's trek, and the feeling of being completely immersed in the wild. Every moment feels more meaningful, whether it's watching the sun set behind the peaks or simply sipping a hot drink after a challenging day on the trail.

By the end of your stay, you'll leave the refuge with more than just memories of breathtaking landscapes. You'll have stories of shared meals with fellow trekkers, of communal efforts to make the best out of limited resources, and of staff who work tirelessly to make your stay possible. The sense of camaraderie that comes from staying in a refuge is unique and unforgettable. It's not just a place to rest – it's a part of the adventure itself.

So, if you're ready to disconnect from the rush of daily life and immerse yourself in the mountains, refuge life is your chance to do just that. It's about connecting with nature, with others, and perhaps most importantly, with yourself.

And if, after the trek, you're ready for a bit of pampering (and a hot shower), feel free to get in touch with us. We'd be happy to help you book a nice hotel where you can relax, unwind, and reflect on your mountain adventure.

Curious about how to navigate **dietary requirements** during your stay? Read our tips on managing your meals in refuges with **Dietary Requirements in Refuges** or see **how refuges differ from hotels** in **A True Mountain Experience vs. Hotel Comforts**.