



Ballons des Vosges Park Trails

THE COMPLETE GUIDE



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Overview

Ballons des Vosges Park Trails: Flexible Vosges Hiking Guide

Ballons des Vosges Park Trails is not one fixed route: it is a dense Club Vosgien-waymarked hiking network in the Parc naturel régional des Ballons des Vosges, north-eastern **France**. There is no single distance or set number of days; choose half-day walks, 8–20 km day hikes, 2–7 day ridge sections, or the roughly 430 km GR53/GR5 Vosges traverse. Difficulty is moderate overall, with easy forest walks and hard exposed paths such as the Sentier des Roches. It suits hikers who want flexible mountain walking rather than a prescribed itinerary.

Route Overview

There is no official start or finish: this is a network of local loops, day walks and GR routes across the Massif des Vosges. For a full north–south thru-hike, follow the GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges from Wissembourg to Belfort, using the Club Vosgien red rectangle waymarks. Shorter trips often use bases such as Munster, Gérardmer, Guebwiller or Col de la Schlucht, with the Route des Crêtes giving easy access to high points including the Hohneck and Grand Ballon. Plan with IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 maps. Compare with the **Alsace Vineyard Trail**, **Burgundy Canal Towpath** or **Chartreuse Trail (GR9 Segment)** if you are choosing between French hiking styles.

Pastures, War Roads and the Park's Creation

The Vosges high pastures, or chaumes, were shaped by marcaires: dairy herders who moved cows uphill each summer for Munster cheese. From the 19th century they began feeding walkers, leading to today's fermes-auberges and the traditional repas marcaire. The ridge also carries WWI history: the Route des Crêtes was built by the French army from June 1915, and Hartmannswillerkopf / Vieil Armand is now a national memorial with preserved trenches. The regional natural park was created in 1989.

Notable highlights

Grand Ballon (1,424 m): The highest summit of the Vosges and the Grand Est region, with a radar dome and the Diables Bleus war monument. It is one of the clearest targets for a summit day walk from the Route des Crêtes.

Hohneck (1,363 m): The third-highest Vosges summit sits on the Alsace-Lorraine border above glacial cirques. It is a key high point for ridge walks from Col de la Schlucht.

Sentier des Roches: This exposed cliff path links Col de la Schlucht with the Frankenthal cirque. Expect stairways, footbridges and fixed cables; it is hard and closed from 1 November to 30 April.

Glacial lakes — Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux: These cirque lakes sit below the high ridge, ringed by steep forested slopes. They make popular shorter walk objectives and picnic stops.

Hartmannswillerkopf / Vieil Armand: A WWI battlefield where around 25,000 soldiers died, now preserved as a national memorial with trenches and a crypt. Marked paths make it a sobering historical walk.

Fermes-auberges and chaumes: Farm-inns on the high pastures serve the traditional repas marcaire. They are part of the pastoral landscape that defines Vosges ridge walking.

Challenges to expect

Navigation is usually well waymarked, but the network is dense: carry IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 mapping and know the colour-symbol system. Ridge weather can change quickly, so take layers and water even on short walks. The Sentier des Roches and similar exposed paths require sure footing and are seasonal. Winter snow closes or complicates many high routes. Accommodation and food are easy to plan near towns and fermes-auberges, but check opening dates.

Key Data

Country	France
Difficulty	Moderate
Trail type	Network
Elevation gain/loss	800 m
Highest point	1424 m
Terrain & landscape	Mountainous, Forest
Trail surface	Dirt, Rocky, Gravel
Accommodation	Hotels, Lodges, Huts, Campsites, Wild Camping Spots
Average daytime temp.	17°C
Chance of rainfall	Medium
Estimated cost	\$
Optimal season	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Accessibility	Family Friendly, Pet Friendly
Facilities	Restrooms, Water Sources, Campsites, Shelters, Picnic Areas
Permits & fees	No permits or fees

Introduction

The Ballons des Vosges are made for hikers who like choice: a dense Club Vosgien-waymarked network of forest paths, lake circuits, high pasture traverses and long-distance GR routes in the southern High Vosges of north-eastern France. The flagship line is the GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), running about 430 km from Wissembourg to Belfort.

This is rounded mountain country rather than alpine drama: broad ballons, dark pine forests, glacial cirques, open chaumes (high summer pastures) and fermes-auberges (farm-inns) serving the traditional repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal). Grand Ballon, at 1,424 m, gives the network its clearest high-point objective, while Hohneck and Ballon d'Alsace anchor classic ridge days.

The park suits a wide range of walkers, from families planning easy lake or forest walks to fit hikers linking 2–7 days along the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) and GR5. Experienced, sure-footed hikers can add harder objectives such as the Sentier des Roches, an exposed cabled path that is closed from 1 November to 30 April.

What the Vosges ask for is good route choice, not technical mountaineering. Weather changes quickly on the high ridge, the path network is dense, and seasonal transport, huts and fermes-auberges need checking before travel.

This guide covers route choices, stages, days, accommodation, food, transport, terrain and the common planning mistakes to avoid.

Stage-by-Stage Guide

The stages below describe a demanding southern High Vosges section of the GR5 through the Parc naturel régional des Ballons des Vosges. It is an illustrative high-level itinerary through the main ridge, not the whole 430 km GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif).

Follow the Club Vosgien red rectangle for the GR5, but carry IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping as the path network is dense and waymarked routes often overlap. Food, beds and transport on the ridge are seasonal, so check fermes-auberges (farm-inns), huts and Navette des Crêtes services before relying on them.

Stage 1: Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie to Col de la Schlucht via Col du Bonhomme — approx. 30 km

This is a long opening ridge-and-pass stage, linking Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie with Col de la Schlucht via Col du Bonhomme. It is a substantial day by distance alone, so it suits walkers already comfortable with full mountain days rather than those easing into the route.

The walking is typical High Vosges terrain: forest paths, gravel or dirt tracks, pasture sections and higher ridge walking where the route approaches the crest. Underfoot it is generally non-technical, but the day can still feel hard because of its length, repeated rises and the need to manage food, water and weather exposure between road passes.

Col du Bonhomme is the main named landmark on the stage and a useful mental breakpoint. The wider landscape is the transition into the higher southern Vosges: forested slopes, open chaumes (high summer pastures) and the long north-south ridge that is shadowed in places by the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road).

Food and water should not be improvised on this stage. Fermes-auberges and high huts may provide meals or simple supplies in season, but opening dates vary and should be checked before travelling. Carry enough water and food for the full day, especially outside peak summer.

Accommodation at the end is usually planned either at or near Col de la Schlucht, if open options are available, or by descending to a valley base such as Munster or Gérardmer. Book ahead for ridge accommodation, as high places have seasonal opening patterns and limited capacity.

Public transport is easier in the valleys than on the crest. The seasonal Navette des Crêtes can be useful for reaching or leaving high points along the Route des Crêtes, with links from valley towns and stations such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann, but current timetables must be checked before travelling.

Navigation is mostly a matter of staying disciplined at junctions. The Club Vosgien system uses many shapes and colours, and a wrong turn onto another well-marked path can take you into the wrong valley. Use the red rectangle of the GR5 together with map and compass or GPS, rather than following signs casually.

The main warning is the length of the stage. Start early, avoid committing to it in poor visibility if not confident with ridge navigation, and do not assume every road pass has open food or shelter.

Stage 2: Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein over the Hohneck — approx. 24 km

This is one of the classic High Vosges ridge days, crossing the Hohneck at 1,363 m before continuing towards Le Markstein. It is shorter than Stage 1, but more exposed to mountain weather and more clearly a high-level day.

The terrain mixes open crest walking, pasture paths, rocky mountain tracks and sections above glacial cirques. The route stays within rounded Vosges mountain country rather than technical alpine terrain, but mist, wind and sudden temperature changes can make the ridge feel serious.

The Hohneck is the key landmark. It is the third-highest summit in the Vosges and sits on the Alsace-Lorraine border, with broad views in clear weather over the cirques and surrounding high pastures.

Food and drink may be available at Col de la Schlucht, at fermes-auberges on or near the chaumes, and around Le Markstein, depending on season and opening days. Do not rely on finding water on the ridge; carry what is needed for the day and check any intended meal stop in advance.

Accommodation around Le Markstein is based on high-level options such as huts, simple lodgings and fermes-auberges where open. If those do not fit the itinerary, nearby valley bases such as Munster, Gérardmer or La Bresse may be used with a pre-planned road transfer or shuttle connection.

Col de la Schlucht and Le Markstein both lie in the high ridge zone served seasonally by road access and the Navette des Crêtes network. The shuttle is particularly useful for one-way ridge walks, but it runs to a seasonal pattern, mainly weekends in the shoulder season and daily in July-August. This should be checked before travelling.

Navigation is usually straightforward in good visibility, but the open ridge can be confusing in cloud where paths, pasture tracks and ski-area tracks may converge. Stay with the GR5 red rectangle and check every major junction against the map.

The Sentier des Roches is associated with the Col de la Schlucht area but is not a casual shortcut. It is a hard, exposed cliff path with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables, suitable only for sure-footed walkers, closed from 1 November to 30 April, and dogs are banned. Only include it as a deliberate variant if conditions, season and ability are appropriate.

Stage 3: Le Markstein to Thann over the Grand Ballon — approx. 26 km

This stage crosses the highest point of the entire Vosges massif: Grand Ballon, also called Ballon de Guebwiller, at 1,424 m. It then leaves the main high ground and descends towards Thann, making it a rewarding but physically sustained day.

The first part is high ridge walking through open chaumes and rounded summit country. The Grand Ballon is unmistakable in clear weather, with its white air-traffic-control radar dome and the Monument des Diables Bleus (Blue Devils memorial to the Chasseurs Alpains) on the summit area.

After the summit, the stage becomes more of a descent day as it drops from the high Vosges into the Thann area. Expect a change from open crest and pasture to forested slopes and valley approaches, with cumulative descent adding strain even if the technical difficulty remains moderate.

Food and water options are generally better where the Route des Crêtes gives access to high farms and roadheads, and around the Grand Ballon area in season. However, fermes-auberges and high huts have

variable opening dates, so carry enough for the full traverse to Thann unless stops are booked or checked.

Thann is one of the more practical overnight stops on this section, with valley-town accommodation such as hotels, guesthouses, gîtes and campsites in and around the town. It is also a good point for laundry, resupply and resetting before the southern stages.

Transport logistics are much easier at Thann than on the ridge. Thann is one of the valley access points associated with the Navette des Crêtes network, and regional TER connections are available in the wider valley system. Current train and shuttle timetables should be checked before booking accommodation or planning a section break here.

Navigation needs attention where the route leaves the open ridge and enters more wooded, lower terrain. The Club Vosgien network is very dense, and junctions may be signed for local loops as well as long-distance routes. Keep following the GR5 red rectangle rather than any plausible downhill path.

The main hazards are weather on Grand Ballon and fatigue on the long descent. The summit is rounded rather than technical, but it is still a 1,424 m mountain and can be cold, windy or misty when the valleys are benign.

Stage 4: Thann to Ballon d'Alsace — approx. 26 km

This stage climbs back from the Thann valley area into the southern Vosges, finishing at Ballon d'Alsace. It is a demanding day because it starts low, returns to mountain terrain and ends away from the larger valley towns.

The walking is likely to feel more enclosed than the Grand Ballon stage at first, with forested slopes and quieter upland paths before reaching the rounded summit country of the southern massif. Ballon d'Alsace, at 1,247 m, is a classic Vosges objective and a natural high point before the final approach to Belfort.

There are fewer supplied named landmarks on this stage than on the Hohneck or Grand Ballon days, so navigation and pacing matter. Treat it as a full mountain stage rather than a simple link between two better-known points.

Stock up in Thann before leaving. Seasonal fermes-auberges or high huts may provide food on or near the uplands, but this should be checked before travelling. Carry enough food and water to complete the day without depending on an unverified stop.

Accommodation at or near Ballon d'Alsace should be arranged in advance. High-level accommodation and farm-inn options in the Vosges are seasonal, and if there is no suitable bed available on the pass or summit area, a pre-arranged descent or road transfer will be needed.

Thann is the reliable public-transport anchor at the start of the stage. Ballon d'Alsace has road access, but the ridge itself has no railway and onward public transport is more limited than in the valleys. This should be checked before travelling.

Navigation is mainly about staying on the GR5 through forest junctions and not being pulled onto local Club Vosgien routes. In poor visibility near the higher ground, use the map frequently and allow more time than the distance alone suggests.

The key warning is commitment. Once away from Thann, escape options are less convenient unless a road pickup has been planned, and weather can deteriorate on the higher southern summits.

Stage 5: Ballon d'Alsace to Belfort — approx. 27 km

The final stage leaves the mountains and descends towards Belfort, the southern end of the GR5 traverse through the Vosges. It is a long finishing day and should not be underestimated simply because the direction of travel is generally down and out of the massif.

Ballon d'Alsace is the main high-level landmark at the start: a rounded 1,247 m summit at the southern end of the Vosges, associated with the meeting point of Alsace, Lorraine and Franche-Comté. From there the route gradually changes character, moving from mountain and forest terrain towards lower ground and the approaches to the city.

The key highlight is the sense of leaving the High Vosges behind. Belfort provides the urban finish, known for its citadel and famous lion, and has the practical services expected at the end of a long-distance section.

Food and water planning should still be conservative. Start with enough supplies from Ballon d'Alsace or the previous evening's accommodation, then rely on Belfort for full resupply and meals at the end. Any intermediate stops should be checked before travelling.

Accommodation is simplest in Belfort, where city hotels and other standard options make the finish much easier to plan than a high pass. Booking ahead is still sensible in busy periods, particularly if arriving late after a full walking day.

Belfort is the strongest transport endpoint on this five-stage section, with rail access and a TGV station nearby. This makes it a practical place to finish, continue onward, or connect back to other parts of France. Current train times should be checked before booking onward travel.

Navigation remains important until the end. Keep following the GR5 red rectangle through lower paths and city approaches, where waymarking can compete with local signage and everyday street navigation.

The main practical warning is fatigue. Long descents and lower-level approaches can be hard on knees and feet, especially after several ridge days, so do not plan a tight same-day rail connection unless there is ample margin.

Recommended Itinerary

This is a route network rather than a single prescribed trail, so the itinerary below uses the southern GR5 / Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif) section as a practical high-level plan. It suits fit walkers who are comfortable with consecutive 24–30 km mountain days, changing High Vosges weather and accommodation that may be seasonal on or near the ridge.

Distances are approximate. Use IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping to check exact routing, ascent and overnight locations before booking.

Standard itinerary: 5 days from Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie to Belfort

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie	Col de la Schlucht, via Col du Bonhomme	30 km	A long opening stage that moves decisively onto the High Vosges line and sets up the classic ridge section over Hohneck the next day. Best for walkers already conditioned for a full mountain day rather than anyone easing in.	Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and Le Bonhomme / Col du Bonhomme are the key named points before Col de la Schlucht. Accommodation and food at cols and high locations can be seasonal; check opening dates before committing to the stage.
2	Col de la Schlucht	Le Markstein, over Hohneck (1,363 m)	24 km	This is one of the strongest ridge days, crossing the Hohneck area and keeping high ground for much of the day. It is shorter than Day 1 but still exposed to fast-changing weather.	Col de la Schlucht is a major high pass and Le Markstein is a key ridge area. Fermes-auberges (farm-inns) and high huts may be useful, but opening dates vary, especially outside high summer.
3	Le Markstein	Thann, over Grand Ballon (1,424 m)	26 km	This stage takes in Grand Ballon, the highest summit of the Vosges and the Grand Est region, then descends to a proper valley town. It gives a logical break after two high-ridge days.	Thann is a practical overnight base with town services and transport links. Food and beds on the high chaumes (high summer pastures) should be booked ahead if using fermes-auberges en route.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
4	Thann	Ballon d'Alsace	26 km	A demanding continuation from the valley back into the southern Vosges, ending at one of the massifs classic rounded summits. Expect this to feel tougher than the distance alone suggests because of the re-ascent from Thann.	Thann is the best place to resupply before leaving the valley. Accommodation at or near Ballon d'Alsace should be checked carefully before travelling, as high-level options may be seasonal or limited.
5	Ballon d'Alsace	Belfort	27 km	A final long stage off the southern end of the massif to Belfort, giving a clean point-to-point finish with urban services. It is still a full walking day, so do not treat it as a short exit.	Belfort is the most straightforward finish, with accommodation and onward transport, including rail connections. Book the final night if arriving late in the day.

Slower variant: 6–7 days

Choose this if the standard itinerary looks too compressed, if carrying a heavier pack, or if wanting time for weather delays on the ridge. The most sensible way to slow it down is to split the longest or most committing stages rather than shorten the whole route evenly.

Practical split points include Le Bonhomme / Col du Bonhomme between Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie and Col de la Schlucht, and seasonal ridge accommodation around the Hohneck–Route des Crêtes area between Col de la Schlucht and Le Markstein. Exact day distances depend on the overnight chosen; check official mapping before booking.

A slower plan also gives more flexibility around Grand Ballon. If the weather is poor, it is better to wait for a safer ridge window than to force the highest day of the itinerary in cloud, strong wind or thunderstorms.

Faster variant: 4 days

The cleanest faster version is to start at Col de la Schlucht and walk the final four stages to Belfort: Col de la Schlucht → Le Markstein → Thann → Ballon d'Alsace → Belfort. This keeps the main High Vosges objectives of Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace while cutting out the long approach from Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie.

This suits strong walkers with limited time who are comfortable starting directly on the ridge. Access to high start points depends on current public transport and the seasonal Navette des Crêtes (Ridge Shuttle), so this should be checked before travelling.

Full-traverse option

For walkers wanting the complete flagship route rather than this southern section, the GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges runs from Wissembourg to Belfort and is usually planned at about 19 stages over roughly 20 days. It is waymarked by the Club Vosgien with a red rectangle and forms part of European long-distance path E2.

The full traverse needs a separate accommodation plan, because the first half uses different towns and ridge sections before reaching the High Vosges. Treat the five-day itinerary above as a compact southern highlight section, not as a substitute for planning the whole 430 km route.

Planning the Route

Choose the type of trip first

Planning starts with deciding whether this is a day walk, a short High Vosges ridge section, or the full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif). This is a dense Club Vosgien network rather than one fixed trail, so distance, ascent and overnight stops only become meaningful once a specific line has been chosen.

For most visitors, the most practical options are:

Trip style	Typical planning approach
Half-day or day walk	Base yourself in a valley town such as Munster, Gérardmer, Guebwiller, La Bresse or Thann, then use marked loops or out-and-back walks to lakes, summits or fermes-auberges (farm-inns).
2–7 day ridge section	Link high points such as Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace, using huts, fermes-auberges, valley accommodation and the Navette des Crêtes where it fits.
Full traverse	Follow the red-rectangle GR53/GR5 from Wissembourg to Belfort, normally planned at about 19 stages over roughly 20 days.

The route does not need to be walked quickly. A slower plan is usually more robust because ridge weather can change fast, high accommodation may be seasonal, and transport from the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) depends on current shuttle timetables.

How many days to allow

For day hiking, allow 3–7 hours for a typical outing, then choose the walk to suit the forecast and the weakest walker in the group. Easy forest and lake walks are a very different proposition from exposed routes such as the Sentier des Roches.

For a short mountain section, 2–7 days is the normal planning window. The southern High Vosges ridge can be made into a demanding multi-day walk between Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie and Belfort, linking Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon, Thann and Ballon d'Alsace, but some stages are around 24–30 km and should be treated as long mountain days.

For the full GR53/GR5 traverse, plan around 20 days unless deliberately walking at a faster or slower pace. Add contingency if relying on seasonal accommodation, if walking outside high summer, or if planning detours to lakes, memorials and summits.

Staging and overnight stops

Daily stages are shaped mainly by accommodation and transport rather than by a single official schedule. Valley towns such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller and Thann give the most flexibility, while the high ridge relies more on mountain refuges, huts and fermes-auberges on the chaumes (high summer pastures).

Book high accommodation ahead where possible, especially fermes-auberges and huts. Opening dates are seasonal, and meals or beds should not be assumed without checking directly before setting out.

A practical itinerary usually alternates between high ridge walking and access to valley services. This gives better food resupply options, more accommodation choice and easier exit points if the weather closes in.

Shortening, extending and section hiking

This network is well suited to shortening or extending a plan. Club Vosgien paths overlap and intersect across the massif, so many walks can be turned into loops, linked to neighbouring valleys, or extended to a summit, lake or ferme-auberge.

Section hiking is also practical. Main valley bases are reachable by TER train, including access around Colmar, Mulhouse, Gérardmer, Remiremont, Épinal, Saint-Dié-des-Vosges and Belfort, while the Colmar–Munster–Metzeral branch line reaches deep into the Munster valley.

The high ridge itself has no railway. In season, the Navette des Crêtes on the Fluo Grand Est network links valley stations and towns such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points along the Route des Crêtes, which is particularly useful for one-way ridge walks. Current train and shuttle timetables should be checked before travelling, as the ridge shuttle runs mainly weekends in shoulder season and daily in July–August.

Navigation planning

Carry proper mapping, even on popular walks. The Club Vosgien waymarking is excellent, but the network is dense and several marked routes can share the same path or cross at close intervals.

Use IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 maps for the relevant part of the massif and understand the Club Vosgien colour-symbol waymark system before relying on it in poor visibility. For the flagship through-route, follow the red rectangle of the GR53/GR5.

Do not plan from place names alone. Many useful route decisions happen at cols, junctions, farm tracks and forest paths, so the map and waymarks matter more than a simple list of towns.

Food and water

Food planning is generally straightforward in the valley towns, but less predictable on the ridge. Fermes-auberges are one of the pleasures of the High Vosges and often serve a traditional repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal), but their opening dates and hours are seasonal and should be checked ahead.

Carry enough food for the day when crossing high sections between services. Do not depend on a ferme-auberge, hut or café being open unless it has been checked before setting out.

Water should be carried even on short walks. The open chaumes and ridge sections can leave long gaps between reliable services, and hot summer days can feel exposed despite the modest altitude.

Weather, season and route choice

The best planning window is roughly June to October. High summer gives the best chance of open fermes-auberges, operating ridge shuttles and clear ridge access; autumn is good for forest walking but requires more attention to shorter days and changing conditions.

Winter snow closes or complicates many high routes. The Sentier des Roches is officially closed from 1 November to 30 April, and it should be treated as a serious exposed path even when open, with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables.

Fast-changing weather is a central planning issue in the High Vosges. Pack layers, waterproofs and enough water even for a short summit or lake walk, and keep a lower forest or valley option available if the ridge forecast is poor.

Special restrictions and cautions

The Sentier des Roches is for sure-footed walkers only and is not a casual bad-weather alternative. Dogs are banned on this path and fines apply.

For ordinary walking, the main planning burden is accommodation, transport, navigation and seasonal access rather than permits or entry fees. Any local rules affecting huts, protected areas, parking or organised facilities should be checked before travelling.

Towns, Villages and Overnight Stops

Accommodation planning in the Ballons des Vosges depends on whether you are walking the full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), a shorter ridge section, or day walks from a valley base. Valley towns are generally the safest places for hotels, guesthouses, gîtes, campsites, shops and transport; high passes and summit areas rely more on seasonal refuges, huts and fermes-auberges (farm-inns).

Book ahead for ridge nights, especially in high summer and at weekends. Fermes-auberges and high huts can have limited opening periods, and this should be checked before travelling.

Wissembourg

Wissembourg is the northern start of the GR53/GR5 traverse, on the northern Alsace plain near the German border. It is the logical place to spend the night before starting the full southbound route to Belfort.

As a town rather than a high-ridge stop, it is a more practical place for pre-walk accommodation, food shopping and last-minute kit checks than the smaller mountain stops later on. Specific accommodation and transport options should be checked before travelling.

Saverne

Saverne is one of the main named stops on the northern part of the GR53/GR5 line before the route reaches the higher southern Vosges. It works best as a conventional town stop: overnight accommodation, proper meals and resupply are more likely here than at isolated cols or forest sections.

For walkers section-hiking the northern traverse, Saverne is a sensible place to break the route or start/end a section. Current public transport and accommodation details should be checked before travelling.

Le Donon

Le Donon sits on the through-line between the northern Vosges and the higher southern massif. It is more a mountain-route landmark than a large service town, so do not assume full resupply or plentiful beds without checking.

It can be useful as an overnight or stage break if accommodation is available nearby, but it needs firmer pre-booking than valley towns. Carry enough food and water to avoid depending on a single high or isolated service point.

Schirmeck

Schirmeck is a practical valley-side stop on the GR53/GR5 corridor and a useful place to divide the long traverse into shorter sections. It is also a logical access point for hikers joining or leaving the route before the High Vosges ridge.

Accommodation and food options are more realistic here than on the ridge, but individual services should still be checked before travelling. If using public transport to start a section, verify current

timetables before booking onward accommodation.

Le Hohwald

Le Hohwald is a village stop on the route south of Schirmeck and before the approach towards Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines. It can suit walkers who prefer shorter stages rather than pushing between larger towns.

Expect a smaller-scale stop rather than a major resupply centre. Accommodation, evening meals and any shop opening hours should be checked in advance, particularly outside the main walking season.

Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie

Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and Col de Sainte-Marie mark an important gateway into the higher Vosges ridge country. The illustrative southern high-section itinerary starts here before heading towards Col du Bonhomme and Col de la Schlucht.

Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines is the better bet for a proper overnight stop, while the col is a route point where services may be limited or seasonal. This is a good place to make sure ridge accommodation, weather, maps and any onward transport are fully sorted before committing to the higher stages.

Le Bonhomme / Col du Bonhomme

Le Bonhomme and Col du Bonhomme sit on the route between Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and Col de la Schlucht. For many walkers this is a through-point on a long stage rather than a guaranteed full-service stop.

If planning to overnight here or rely on food, check availability before travelling. On the high route, it is safer to carry enough food and water for the full day rather than assuming a pass will have open services.

Col de la Schlucht

Col de la Schlucht is one of the most important high access points in the High Vosges. It sits on the GR5 ridge corridor, gives access towards Hohneck, and is also associated with the Sentier des Roches, the exposed cabled path that is closed from 1 November to 30 April.

It is a useful overnight or staging point for strong walkers tackling the ridge between Col du Bonhomme, Hohneck and Le Markstein, but high-pass accommodation and food services should be checked before booking the stage around them. In season, the Navette des Crêtes (ridge shuttle) can help with one-way walks from valley bases, but current timetables must be verified.

Hohneck

Hohneck, at 1,363 m, is a summit objective on the GR5 ridge rather than a normal village overnight stop. It is best treated as a high point on the day's walk, with accommodation planned at a pass, valley base, hut or ferme-auberge elsewhere.

Weather can change quickly on this exposed ridge, so do not plan the day as if it were a lowland walk. Carry layers, water and a proper map, and avoid committing to exposed paths nearby unless conditions and ability are suitable.

Le Markstein

Le Markstein is a key high-ridge stop between Hohneck and Grand Ballon on the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) corridor. It works well as a stage end on a short High Vosges traverse, especially for walkers linking Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Thann.

Accommodation and meals in this high area are more seasonal than in the valleys. Fermes-auberges and huts may offer simple beds and food, but opening dates and booking requirements should be checked before travelling.

Grand Ballon

Grand Ballon, also called Ballon de Guebwiller, is the highest point of the Vosges and the Grand Est region at 1,424 m. It is a major objective on the GR5 and Route des Crêtes, with the white radar dome and the Monument des Diables Bleus (Blue Devils) on the summit.

Treat Grand Ballon as a summit and route highlight, not as a place to improvise an overnight. Plan beds either at an established high-route stop, a ferme-auberge, hut, or down in a valley town such as Thann or Guebwiller, and check all seasonal openings before relying on them.

Thann

Thann is one of the most useful valley stops on the southern High Vosges section, reached after the ridge stage over Grand Ballon in the sample itinerary. It is a strong overnight choice because valley towns are generally better for accommodation, meals, shops and transport than the high passes.

Thann is also listed as one of the places linked by the seasonal Navette des Crêtes network, making it useful for one-way ridge walks when the shuttle is running. Current shuttle and train timetables should be checked before travelling.

Ballon d'Alsace

Ballon d'Alsace, at 1,247 m, is a classic southern Vosges summit and a major stop before the final descent towards Belfort on the GR5. It sits high on the route, so accommodation and food planning should be treated in the same way as other ridge stops: useful if open, risky if assumed.

It can make a good final high overnight before walking to Belfort, but services are likely to be more limited and seasonal than in town. Book ahead and carry enough supplies to cover the stage if cafés, huts or farm-inns are closed.

Belfort

Belfort is the southern end of the GR5 traverse, near the city's citadel and famous lion. It is the most practical place to finish the full route, celebrate, recover, and connect with onward transport.

As a city, Belfort offers the best end-of-walk logistics on this section: accommodation, food, shops and onward travel are all easier to organise here than on the ridge. Belfort has a nearby TGV station, but current connections should be checked before booking fixed onward tickets.

Munster

Munster is one of the best valley bases for shorter walks into the High Vosges and is the seat of the Parc naturel régional des Ballons des Vosges. It is particularly useful for walkers who want ridge access without committing to a continuous multi-day traverse.

The Colmar–Munster–Metzeral branch line reaches deep into the valley, making Munster one of the stronger car-light bases. In season, the Navette des Crêtes can connect valley stations and towns to high points along the Route des Crêtes; verify current operating days before planning a one-way walk.

Gérardmer

Gérardmer is a practical Lorraine-side base for walkers focusing on lakes, forests and western approaches to the High Vosges. It is better suited to day walks and short linked itineraries than to acting as a fixed stop on the Wissembourg–Belfort line.

The brief identifies Gérardmer as a reachable valley base and as one of the places served by the seasonal Navette des Crêtes network. Use it when the aim is flexible day hiking, but check current transport, accommodation and shuttle timetables before committing to a car-light plan.

Guebwiller

Guebwiller is a useful Alsace-side base for Grand Ballon, also known as Ballon de Guebwiller. It suits walkers who want to target the highest summit of the Vosges without walking the whole GR5 ridge section.

Accommodation and food are more straightforward in the valley than at the summit area, where huts and fermes-auberges can be seasonal. If planning to start low and finish high, check transport back down before setting off.

La Bresse

La Bresse is another common valley base for the southern High Vosges. It is useful for walkers building a flexible itinerary around ridge walks, forest routes and lake objectives rather than following the full traverse.

Use La Bresse as a base when accommodation availability, weather and transport work better from the Lorraine side. Specific public transport links and local services should be checked before travelling.

Choosing where to sleep on ridge sections

For a 2–7 day High Vosges ridge itinerary, the most reliable pattern is to sleep in valley towns when possible and use high huts or fermes-auberges only where opening dates and beds are secure. The high chaumes (summer pastures) are a distinctive part of the route, and a ferme-auberge meal or overnight can be a highlight, but they should not be treated like always-open town hotels.

If a stage ends at a col or summit area, confirm accommodation, evening meal availability and breakfast before setting off. Carry enough food and water for the day, because high-route services can be seasonal and spaced irregularly.

Getting to the Start

There is no single start for the Ballons des Vosges Park Trails. First decide whether you are walking the full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), starting at Wissembourg, or using a valley base such as Munster, Gérardmer, Guebwiller, La Bresse, Thann or Col de la Schlucht for shorter walks and ridge sections.

By train

Train is the cleanest option for most walkers, especially for point-to-point itineraries. The high ridge itself has no railway, but the valleys and edge towns give good access to the network.

Hiking plan	Practical rail target	Notes
Full GR53/GR5 traverse southbound	Wissembourg	Northern start of the flagship traverse, in the northern Alsace plain near the German border. Current TER connections should be checked before travelling.
High Vosges walks from the Alsace side	Colmar, Mulhouse, Munster, Guebwiller, Thann	Colmar and Mulhouse are useful rail hubs on the plain; the Colmar–Munster–Metzeral branch line reaches deep into the Munster valley.
High Vosges walks from the Lorraine side	Gérardmer, Remiremont, Épinal, Saint-Dié-des-Vosges	Useful for accessing western-side bases and shorter itineraries. Onward local transport or taxi may be needed for some trailheads.
Southern finish or southern starts	Belfort	Southern end of the GR5 traverse, with a TGV station nearby. This is a sensible rail exit for walkers finishing the full route or a southern section.

For one-way ridge days, combine a valley train with the seasonal Navette des Crêtes shuttle where possible. Do not assume a train will get you directly to a high pass such as Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon or Ballon d'Alsace.

By bus

The key hiker bus service is the Navette des Crêtes, part of the Fluo Grand Est network. In season it links valley stations and towns such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points along the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road), making it useful for one-way walks on the GR5 ridge.

The ridge shuttle runs mainly at weekends in the shoulder season and daily in July and August. Timetables, operating dates and stops change by season, so this should be checked before travelling.

Away from the Navette des Crêtes, bus coverage is thinner and less convenient for flexible hiking starts. For minor trailheads, early starts or out-of-season ridge access, pre-booked taxis may be the practical fallback; availability and fares should be checked locally before relying on them.

By car

Driving is useful for day walks, family routes and short loops from valley bases, but it is less convenient for the full Wissembourg to Belfort traverse unless a separate vehicle retrieval plan is arranged. A car can also be limiting for one-way ridge walks unless paired with the Navette des Crêtes or a taxi.

The Route des Crêtes shadows much of the high ridge and gives road access to important walking areas, including Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein and Grand Ballon. In good summer conditions this makes short summit days straightforward, but winter snow can close or complicate high routes and access.

Parking rules, overnight parking and long-stay options vary by town, pass and season. Do not assume that a high-pass car park is suitable for multi-day parking; this should be checked before travelling.

From the nearest airport

The best airport depends on the chosen start, because this is a broad trail network rather than one trailhead. The practical approach is to fly into a city with onward rail connections into the TER network, then continue to a rail hub such as Colmar, Mulhouse, Belfort, Épinal, Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, Remiremont or Wissembourg as appropriate.

Specific airport-to-trail connections, transfer times and late-arrival options should be checked before travelling. If arriving late, it is usually safer to overnight in a rail hub or valley town rather than attempt an evening transfer to a high pass.

Where to stay before starting

For the full GR53/GR5 traverse, stay in or near Wissembourg before a southbound start. This avoids beginning the route after a long transfer day and gives time to sort food, maps and weather decisions before setting off.

For High Vosges ridge sections, practical pre-walk bases include Munster, Gérardmer, Guebwiller, La Bresse and Thann. These towns have a better mix of hotels, guesthouses, gîtes and campsites than the high ridge, and they work well with trains, local transport and the seasonal Navette des Crêtes.

If starting directly from a high pass or ferme-auberge (farm-inn), check opening dates carefully. Fermes-auberges and high huts are seasonal, and beds or meals should be booked ahead, especially in summer and at weekends.

Getting Home from the Finish

There is no single finish for the Ballons des Vosges walking network. Most walkers end at a chosen valley base and return from there; the practical advice below is mainly for the flagship GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), which finishes at Belfort.

For shorter ridge sections, the “finish” may be a col, ferme-auberge (farm-inn), summit roadhead or valley town. In those cases, check the last descent and onward transport before committing to the day, especially outside July and August.

By train

Belfort is the key rail exit for the full GR53/GR5 traverse. The city has rail services, and there is also a TGV station nearby for longer-distance onward travel.

For onward journeys back towards the Alsace or Lorraine sides of the massif, plan around the TER and TGV networks rather than assuming a simple direct link. Colmar, Mulhouse, Munster, Gérardmer, Remiremont, Épinal, Saint-Dié-des-Vosges and Thann are all useful transport bases around the wider Vosges area, but the exact connection from Belfort depends on the day and timetable.

Train times should be checked before travelling. This matters particularly if finishing late in the afternoon after the final approach from Ballon d'Alsace, or if needing a same-day connection to accommodation elsewhere.

By bus

Bus usefulness depends heavily on where the walk ends. Belfort itself is the straightforward finish for the full traverse, but many section hikes end on or near the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road), where public transport is much thinner than in the valleys.

In season, the Navette des Crêtes ridge shuttle on the Fluo Grand Est network links valley stations and towns such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points along the Route des Crêtes. It is useful for one-way ridge walks, but it mainly runs at weekends in the shoulder season and daily in July-August.

Do not rely on the ridge shuttle without checking the current timetable. If the last bus is missed, the practical options may be a long descent to a valley base, a pre-booked taxi, or staying near the finish.

By car/taxi

For a point-to-point itinerary such as Wissembourg to Belfort, leaving a car at the start is rarely convenient unless a separate retrieval plan is arranged. It is usually simpler to finish in Belfort and continue by rail.

For shorter walks that end away from a town or station, a taxi may be useful, especially from a high pass, ferme-auberge or Route des Crêtes roadhead. Availability, pick-up points and fares should be checked before travelling, and booking ahead is sensible for evening finishes or out-of-season walking.

If driving to a valley base and using the route for day walks, plan circular walks or use the Navette des Crêtes where it operates. The ridge has no railway, so car-free one-way walks need more careful timing than valley-to-valley days.

From the nearest airport

The finish logistics for this route are best planned around rail rather than flights. Belfort, with its nearby TGV station, is the practical onward hub for the full GR53/GR5 finish.

Airport choice depends on the onward rail itinerary and final destination. This should be checked before travelling, along with current train times from Belfort or the nearest station to the chosen finish point.

Where to stay at the finish

If finishing the full traverse in Belfort, staying overnight is the safest option if arrival time is uncertain. It avoids pressure to rush the final stage from Ballon d'Alsace and gives more flexibility if weather, fatigue or navigation slow the day.

For section hikes, choose accommodation according to the actual finish: valley towns such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller and Thann have the broadest practical options, while high huts and fermes-auberges are more seasonal. Opening dates should always be checked ahead, particularly outside the main summer period.

Finishing late on the high ridge is poor logistics unless accommodation or transport has already been arranged. In shoulder season, and especially outside the Navette des Crêtes operating days, it is often better to descend to a valley base and travel the following morning.

Which Direction Should You Walk?

For the Ballons des Vosges Park Trails as a whole, there is no required direction: this is a dense Club Vosgien-waymarked network, not one fixed trail. Direction only becomes a real planning decision if you are walking the flagship GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), or if you are designing a multi-day ridge section using the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road), cols, fermes-auberges (farm-inns) and shuttle links.

Standard direction: north to south

The GR53/GR5 traverse is normally framed from **Wissembourg to Belfort**, running south through the Vosges massif towards the southern High Vosges and the finish at Belfort. For most walkers, this is the cleanest direction because it matches the usual way the full traverse is described and makes stage planning easier to follow.

A north-to-south traverse also gives a strong psychological finish. Belfort is a proper end point, with city services and the famous citadel and lion near the finish, rather than simply stopping at a smaller northern trailhead.

Transport is workable at both ends. Wissembourg has rail access in the northern Alsace plain near the German border, while Belfort has rail services and a TGV station nearby, so neither direction has a decisive transport advantage for the full route. Current TER and long-distance train times should be checked before booking.

Reverse direction: south to north

Walking **Belfort to Wissembourg** is perfectly possible, especially for hikers whose travel plans make Belfort the easier starting point. It may also suit anyone linking the route with other walking in the southern Vosges before heading north.

The main drawback is practical rather than physical: guide descriptions, stage lists and the mental structure of the Grande Traversée are more commonly thought of from Wissembourg to Belfort. On a dense Club Vosgien network where several marked routes overlap, walking against the standard narrative makes careful map use even more important.

There is no clear evidence-based reason to choose the reverse for easier climbing. The Vosges are a repeated pattern of valleys, cols, forested slopes, open chaumes (high summer pastures) and rounded summits, so cumulative effort depends more on the exact stage choices than on overall direction.

Direction on the High Vosges ridge sections

For shorter 2–7 day ridge walks through the park's high points — for example between Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie, Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon, Thann, Ballon d'Alsace and Belfort — direction should usually be chosen around **transport and accommodation**, not scenery.

The seasonal Navette des Crêtes shuttle on the Fluo Grand Est network can make one-way ridge walks possible from valley towns and stations such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann. Timetables vary by season, with stronger service in July and August and more limited running in the shoulder

season, so the best walking direction may simply be the one that fits the first or last shuttle of the day. This should be checked before travelling.

Accommodation can also decide the direction. Fermes-auberges and high huts are seasonal and should be booked ahead; if only one sequence of beds is available, take that sequence and plan the walking direction around it.

Weather and wind

Prevailing wind is not a reliable reason to choose one direction over the other. The High Vosges ridge is exposed and weather can change quickly, so the important decision is whether the day's route is safe in the forecast conditions, not whether it is walked northbound or southbound.

On exposed or harder paths such as the Sentier des Roches, direction is secondary to conditions, sure-footedness and seasonal access. The Sentier des Roches is closed from 1 November to 30 April, and dogs are banned there.

Recommendation

For the full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges, walk **north to south, from Wissembourg to Belfort**. It follows the standard framing of the traverse, gives a satisfying city finish, and keeps planning aligned with the usual stage order.

For shorter Ballons des Vosges trips, choose direction pragmatically: start from the valley base, rail station, shuttle stop or booked ferme-auberge sequence that makes the logistics work. On this network, a well-planned itinerary matters far more than walking in a particular compass direction.

Accommodation Along the Route

Accommodation planning in the Ballons des Vosges is flexible, but it depends heavily on whether you are using a valley base, linking a short ridge section, or attempting the longer GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif).

The easiest strategy is to sleep in valley towns such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller and Thann, then use marked paths and, in season, the Navette des Crêtes ridge shuttle to reach higher trailheads. This gives the widest choice of hotels, guesthouses, gîtes and campsites, and avoids relying every night on small seasonal ridge accommodation.

The more atmospheric option is to build an inn-to-inn route along the high chaumes (high summer pastures), using mountain refuges and fermes-auberges (farm-inns). These can work very well, but beds are simple, capacity is limited, and opening dates vary by season. Always book ahead and check whether meals, bedding requirements and arrival times are specified.

Where to stay

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Munster	Good	Valley base for High Vosges walks and access towards Col de la Schlucht	One of the most practical bases, with valley accommodation and rail access via the Colmar–Munster–Metzeral branch line. Useful if combining day walks with the seasonal Navette des Crêtes.
Gérardmer	Good	Lake, forest and western-side Vosges walks	Stronger valley-base option than the ridge itself, with accommodation in and around town. Useful for walkers who want day walks rather than a continuous high-level traverse.
La Bresse	Good	Western-side access to the high massif	A practical base with hotels, guesthouses, gîtes and campsites in the wider valley area. Works well for flexible itineraries rather than a fixed end-to-end schedule.
Guebwiller	Good	Eastern access towards Grand Ballon and the southern High Vosges	Better for accommodation choice than sleeping high on the ridge. Useful before or after routes over the Grand Ballon area.
Thann	Good	GR5 section walking south of Grand Ballon	A useful valley overnight on the southern section, especially after the Le Markstein–Grand Ballon–Thann stage. Accommodation should still be booked ahead in busy periods.
Col de la Schlucht	Limited	High-ridge starts, Hohneck routes and access to the Sentier des Roches area	Treat as a high pass rather than a full-service town. Any overnight plan here should be arranged in advance, especially outside peak summer.

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Le Markstein	Limited	Ridge walking between Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Thann	A logical high-level staging point on the illustrative southern GR5 section, but options are much more limited than in the valleys. Book before committing to a point-to-point day.
Ballon d'Alsace	Limited	Southern GR5 stages before the descent towards Belfort	A classic high summit area, but do not assume the same choice as in a town. Check opening dates and availability before travelling.
Fermes-auberges on the chaumes	Limited / seasonal	Simple high-level overnights and meals on pasture sections	Distinctive to the High Vosges. Many serve the traditional repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal), and some offer simple beds, but opening is seasonal and capacity can be tight.
Mountain refuges and huts	Limited / seasonal	Multi-day ridge links where valley descent is inconvenient	Useful for inn-to-inn walkers, but not a turn-up-and-hope option in high season or outside the main walking period. Check dates, booking rules and meal availability.

Booking strategy

For weekend walking, summer ridge trips and any itinerary using fermes-auberges or high huts, book accommodation before finalising the walking stages. High summer brings the best chance of open services, but also more pressure on beds and meals.

Autumn can be excellent for the forested valleys and ridges, but seasonal accommodation and shuttle services may reduce. Spring conditions vary on the higher ground, and winter snow complicates many high routes, so do not plan a hut-to-hut itinerary without checking current opening and access.

For valley-based trips, accommodation is generally easier to arrange. Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller and Thann are the safer choices if you want a bed, food options and transport links without depending on small high-level establishments.

Inn-to-inn walking and awkward gaps

The Ballons des Vosges can work well for inn-to-inn walking, especially on carefully chosen 2–7 day ridge sections. The key is to plan around real overnight points rather than simply drawing a line along the GR5 and assuming there will be beds at every col or summit.

The illustrative southern high-route stages include long days between places such as Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie, Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein, Thann, Ballon d'Alsace and Belfort. On these sections, the valley towns provide the more reliable accommodation choices, while high passes and ridge areas need advance booking.

Do not assume a formal luggage-transfer system across the whole network. For a lighter pack, arrange taxi transfers or ask accommodation providers about local options; this should be checked before travelling. The seasonal Navette des Crêtes can also help with one-way ridge walks, but it is a transport tool, not a luggage service, and current timetables must be checked before booking accommodation around it.

Camping and Wild Camping

Camping is possible in the Ballons des Vosges, but it needs more planning than a hut- or ferme-auberge-based itinerary. This is a dense walking network rather than a single trail, so the practical camping picture depends entirely on the line chosen, the season and whether the day ends on a valley floor or high on the ridge.

Formal campsites

The most straightforward option is to use established campsites in and around the main valley bases, including Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller and Thann. These work well for day walks, short linked sections, or trips using TER trains and the seasonal Navette des Crêtes to reach the high ground.

For the GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), do not assume that every stage has a convenient campsite at walking distance from the red-rectangle route. The high ridge is better known for refuges, huts and fermes-auberges (farm-inns) than for formal camping, so camping itineraries often need detours down to villages or careful mixing of campsites with indoor accommodation.

Opening dates vary, especially outside high summer. Campsites, huts and fermes-auberges should be checked and booked ahead where possible.

Wild camping and bivouacking

Do not assume that wild camping is automatically allowed anywhere in the Parc naturel régional des Ballons des Vosges. Rules can vary by commune, protected area, land ownership and season, and this should be checked locally before relying on a bivouac plan.

The practical approach is to ask the relevant mairie, tourist office, refuge, campsite or landholder before pitching away from a formal site. This is especially important on the chaumes (high summer pastures), around farm buildings, near popular lake basins such as Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux, and on busy high points such as Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace.

If local bivouacking is permitted, keep it discreet and low-impact: arrive late, leave early, use a small tent or bivvy, camp out of sight of buildings and paths, and leave no trace. Never camp on memorial ground such as Hartmannswillerkopf / Vieil Armand, in grazing areas without permission, or anywhere signed as restricted.

Does this route suit camping?

Camping suits the Ballons des Vosges best when the itinerary is designed around known valley services. A good plan is to base yourself at a campsite near Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann, then use marked Club Vosgien paths and public transport to walk the ridge, lakes and summits as day routes.

A fully camping-based traverse is possible in principle, but it is less simple than the map may suggest. The GR53/GR5 often follows high ridges, cols and open pasture, where food, water and legal camping options cannot be assumed; indoor stops at refuges, huts or fermes-auberges may make some sections much easier.

Avoid carrying an oversized camping load on the hardest, exposed paths. The Sentier des Roches is a serious, partly cabled route with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables; it is for sure-footed walkers only and is officially closed from 1 November to 30 April.

Water and food planning

Water planning should be done from the specific map and stage plan, not from the existence of lakes or streams. Glacial lakes and forest water are not a substitute for reliable drinking-water points unless treated and suitable; carry enough water between towns, staffed accommodation and known service stops.

Fermes-auberges can be useful for meals on the high chaumes, including the traditional repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal), but they are seasonal. Do not rely on them for water, food or shelter without checking opening dates and times before setting out.

Fires, stoves and Leave No Trace

Open-fire rules and seasonal fire restrictions must be checked locally. In practice, walkers should plan as if open fires are not acceptable: use a stove only where permitted, avoid damaging turf or forest ground, and never light fires on the chaumes, in woodland, near farm buildings or in dry conditions.

Pack out all rubbish, including food scraps and used toilet paper. Keep well away from streams, lakes and paths for toileting, and avoid disturbing livestock on the high summer pastures.

The Vosges are accessible and well waymarked, but the High Vosges are still a mountain environment. Campers need proper wet-weather layers, warm clothing, a headtorch, IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping, and enough flexibility to drop to a valley or use indoor accommodation if weather, snow or closures make a high camp impractical.

Food, Water and Resupply

Food and water planning depends entirely on the walk chosen. The Ballons des Vosges is a dense Club Vosgien network, not a single continuous trail with fixed resupply points, so a short lake loop from a valley base is very different from a multi-day GR53/GR5 ridge section.

The easiest places to buy food are the valley towns and larger bases such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller, Thann, Wissembourg and Belfort. On the high ridge, food is more seasonal and should be treated as a bonus unless booked or checked in advance.

Food: valley services, fermes-auberges and ridge gaps

For day walks, buy picnic food before leaving the valley. Do not assume there will be a shop, café or open farm-inn on the route, especially outside high summer, on weekdays in shoulder season, or late in the day.

The distinctive food stop in the High Vosges is the ferme-auberge (farm-inn) on the chaumes (high summer pastures). These are part of the walking culture of the massif and often serve the traditional repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal), but opening is seasonal and variable. Beds and meals should be booked ahead where you plan to rely on them.

On the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) and GR5 high-level sections around Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace, there may be farm-inns or huts nearby, but this is not the same as a guaranteed resupply chain. Carry enough lunch and emergency snacks to finish the day without buying anything.

Rural French opening hours can be limiting. Expect reduced options on Sundays, public holidays, lunchtime closures in smaller places, and seasonal closures in mountain businesses. This should be checked before travelling.

Water: refill before the ridge

The most reliable water refills are at accommodation, cafés, restaurants, fermes-auberges and valley settlements. Start each day with bottles filled, particularly before climbing onto the open ridge or committing to a long forest section.

Natural water is present in the massif — the route network crosses forested slopes, pastures and glacial lake country — but it should not be treated as automatically drinkable. Where using streams or other natural sources, filter or treat water, especially near grazing areas, farm tracks, huts and popular lake sites.

For ordinary day walks, most hikers should carry at least 1.5–2 litres, with more in hot weather or on exposed ridge days. On longer 24–30 km GR5 stages, carry a full day's water unless a specific open refill point has been checked in advance.

Resupply by route type

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Valley-based day walks from Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann	Best supplied before departure; larger valley bases are the safest places to buy picnic food	Fill bottles before setting out; cafés/accommodation are the most reliable refill points	Good option for flexible walkers, but do not rely on small rural shops being open at the exact time needed
High ridge walks on the Route des Crêtes / GR5	Seasonal fermes-auberges and huts may provide meals, but availability varies	Refill only where a staffed business or accommodation is open; natural sources should be treated	Carry lunch, snacks and enough water to finish the stage without a stop
Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein via Hohneck	Possible mountain food stops only if open and on your chosen line	Start full from Col de la Schlucht or previous accommodation; do not assume ridge refills	A sustained high-level day where weather and seasonal opening matter more than map symbols
Le Markstein to Thann via Grand Ballon	Food may be available at seasonal high-pasture businesses, then more reliable once down in Thann	Fill before leaving; treat any natural water used en route	Long descent to a valley town, but the high section should be planned as self-sufficient
Thann to Ballon d'Alsace	Food options become less predictable away from Thann and the valleys	Carry sufficient water from the start; refill only at checked services	A long stage where relying on unplanned shops or cafés is poor planning
Ballon d'Alsace to Belfort	More reliable services as you approach Belfort, but the mountain start should still be self-contained	Start with full bottles; refill at staffed stops or in settlements	Final approach to a city does not remove the need to carry food and water for the day
Full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges	Resupply is built around towns, villages, accommodation and seasonal mountain stops	Refill daily at accommodation and settlements; treat natural sources	Plan each stage individually; opening dates and meal availability should be checked before booking

Navigation and Waymarking

The Ballons des Vosges is a dense Club Vosgien-waymarked path network, not a single corridor. Navigation is usually straightforward on popular day walks and the main GR line, but you must pay attention at junctions because local loops, GR routes and cross-ridge paths often overlap or cross.

The flagship Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif), using the GR53/GR5 from Wissembourg to Belfort, is waymarked by the Club Vosgien with a **red rectangle**. This is the key symbol to follow on the long-distance traverse through the High Vosges, including the ridge around Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace.

Club Vosgien waymarks

Club Vosgien signs use a colour-and-symbol system across the massif. Do not assume that all red, blue or yellow marks belong to the same route: the **shape matters as well as the colour**.

Route type / marker	What to know
GR53/GR5 red rectangle	Main long-distance through-route from Wissembourg to Belfort; the clearest line for the full traverse.
Other Club Vosgien symbols	Used for local paths, loops, links to lakes, cols, summits and valley towns. Check the exact symbol against your map before turning.
GR5 / GR531 / GR532 area links	Around glacial lakes such as Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux, several marked routes can be used for shorter walks, so junction discipline matters.

At path junctions, stop long enough to match the painted symbol with the route on your map. This is especially important when leaving a popular viewpoint, ferme-auberge (farm-inn), car park, col or shuttle stop, where several marked paths may start close together.

Maps and GPX

Carry **IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping** for the part of the massif being walked. This is the most practical paper-map scale for choosing between parallel paths, checking escape routes to valley towns, and identifying where the GR line leaves the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) corridor.

A GPX track is strongly recommended for the GR53/GR5 traverse and for self-built ridge itineraries. It is not a substitute for reading the waymarks, but it helps prevent wrong turns in the dense network and is useful if cloud, rain or early darkness reduces visibility.

Use an offline mapping app that can display detailed topographic mapping, ideally IGN-style mapping, and import a GPX file. Download the map tiles before setting out; mobile data should not be treated as guaranteed in forested valleys or on remote ridge sections.

Places where extra care is needed

The main navigation challenge is not wilderness route-finding, but choosing the correct marked path among many options. Take particular care around major access points such as **Col de la Schlucht, Le**

Markstein, Grand Ballon, Ballon d'Alsace and the lake areas, where roads, shuttle access, viewpoints and multiple waymarked paths can converge.

On the high ridge, the Route des Crêtes can make the terrain feel more accessible than it is. Bad weather can still make open chaumes (high summer pastures) and summit paths harder to follow, so carry layers, water, map and GPX even on short walks from a col.

The **Sentier des Roches** is a different proposition from the easier forest and pasture paths. It is exposed, partly cabled, closed from **1 November to 30 April**, and unsuitable for casual navigation errors or poor conditions; dogs are banned on this path and fines apply.

Is it suitable for beginners?

Easy forest, lake and pasture walks on the Club Vosgien network can suit hikers with limited navigation experience, provided they can follow waymarks and identify the correct symbol at junctions. For a first visit, choose a short signed circuit from a valley base or high pass rather than improvising a route across several symbols.

The full GR53/GR5 traverse and multi-day High Vosges ridge sections require more competence. You should be comfortable using a 1:25,000 map, checking a GPX track, planning bail-out points, and adjusting the day if weather, snow, seasonal closures or accommodation availability changes.

Terrain, Conditions and Difficulty in Practice

What the paths are like underfoot

The Ballons des Vosges trails are mostly walking paths rather than technical mountain routes. Expect a mix of forest tracks, dirt and gravel paths, pasture paths across the chaumes (high summer pastures), and rockier mountain tracks on the higher ridges and around glacial cirques.

The easiest walks use well-graded forest, lake and pasture paths and are suitable for less experienced walkers in good conditions. The harder routes become more committing because of cumulative ascent, steeper ground around cirques, exposed traverses and rougher rock underfoot, rather than because of altitude alone.

This is not a glacier or climbing environment, and standard hiking equipment is enough for normal marked routes in season. Good footwear still matters: wet roots, loose gravel, rock steps and muddy forest sections after rain can make otherwise moderate paths slow and slippery.

Ridge walking, cols and the Route des Crêtes

The defining terrain is the long north–south High Vosges ridge, with rounded summits such as Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace linked by cols, forested slopes and open pastures. The Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) shadows much of the high ground, so many walks start or finish at road-accessible passes such as Col de la Schlucht rather than requiring a long approach from the valley.

That road access can make the area feel easier than a more remote mountain range, but it should not be mistaken for lowland walking. Weather changes quickly on the open ridge, visibility can drop, and exposed pasture tops offer little shelter in poor conditions.

Most itineraries are not dominated by road walking. However, routes often cross or briefly meet roads at cols, parking areas and high access points, especially near the Route des Crêtes. Pay attention when leaving roadheads: the dense Club Vosgien network means several marked paths can depart from the same place.

Climbs and descents in practice

There is no meaningful single ascent figure for the park network. A short lake or forest loop may involve only a modest climb, while a ridge day linking cols, summits and cirques can build up a demanding amount of ascent and descent.

Walks starting from valley bases such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann can involve a long pull to the ridge before the main high-level walking begins. By contrast, routes starting from high passes reduce the initial climb but still require mountain fitness if they link summits such as Hohneck or Grand Ballon.

Descents can be as tiring as climbs, particularly where paths drop from the open ridge into steep forested cirques or towards lakes such as Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux. Poles are useful for long descents on gravel, rock steps and wet forest paths.

Exposed and harder terrain: Sentier des Roches

The Sentier des Roches is the main terrain exception to the generally moderate character of the network. It is a hard, exposed cliff path between Col de la Schlucht and the Frankenthal cirque, with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables.

This route is for sure-footed hikers only. It is not suitable for nervous walkers, poor weather, snow or ice, and it should not be treated as a normal family path simply because it is close to popular access points.

The Sentier des Roches is officially closed from 1 November to 30 April. Dogs are banned on this path and fines apply. Seasonal closures and current local restrictions should be checked before travelling.

Forest, pasture and livestock

Lower and mid-level routes spend a lot of time in forest, where shade is useful in summer but paths can stay damp after rain. Roots, stones and leaf litter can make descents slippery, especially in autumn.

On the high chaumes, paths cross open pastoral ground associated with fermes-auberges (farm-inns). Cattle may be present in summer grazing areas, so keep a sensible distance, do not walk between cows and calves, and follow any local signs or temporary diversions.

The network is not especially defined by stiles in the British sense. Expect a French mountain-path mix of open pasture access, forest tracks, path junctions and occasional fences or farm boundaries where local grazing requires them.

Weather and seasonal conditions

The best practical window is roughly June to October. High summer gives the most reliable ridge conditions and the best chance of open fermes-auberges, huts and ridge shuttle services, though heat, storms and sudden cloud still need to be planned for.

Spring and autumn can be excellent, especially for forest walking, but conditions are more variable. Higher paths may be colder, wetter and more wind-exposed than the valley forecast suggests, and daylight is shorter in autumn.

Winter snow closes or complicates many high routes. The hardest exposed paths, especially the Sentier des Roches, should be avoided outside their open season and in any snow, ice or poor visibility.

What makes it feel easier or harder

The route network feels easier when walks are chosen from high roadheads, kept to forest and pasture paths, and planned with clear Club Vosgien waymarks and IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping. The availability of valley towns, cols, fermes-auberges and the seasonal Navette des Crêtes can also reduce commitment.

It feels harder when a day combines valley-to-ridge climbing, exposed summit walking, rough cirque paths and long descents. Poor weather, mist on the ridge, wet forest ground and overlapping waymarked routes can all slow progress significantly.

For most hikers, the right approach is to choose the route to match the weakest member of the party, not the headline difficulty rating. Easy lake and forest walks, moderate ridge days and hard exposed

paths all exist within the same park network, and they should not be planned as if they were the same type of hike.

Weather and Best Time to Walk

The most reliable walking season for the Ballons des Vosges network is **roughly June to October**, with **high summer** giving the best chance of usable ridge conditions and the fullest spread of seasonal services. This matters most on the high Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road), the GR5 ridge sections over Hohneck and Grand Ballon, and any itinerary depending on fermes-auberges (farm-inns), high huts or the Navette des Crêtes shuttle.

The Vosges are not high by Alpine standards, but the High Vosges are still a mountain environment. Weather can change quickly on the open chaumes (high summer pastures), and the difference between a sheltered valley walk and an exposed ridge day can be significant. Carry waterproofs, warm layers, food and water even for short walks from road passes such as Col de la Schlucht.

Season-by-season planning

Season	What it means for hikers
Spring	Lower forest and lake walks may be attractive, but higher routes can still be awkward depending on snow and conditions. Seasonal services may not yet be running fully. Check hut, ferme-auberge and transport opening dates before building a point-to-point plan.
Summer	The best all-round period for ridge walking, multi-day GR5 sections and one-way walks using the Navette des Crêtes. High summer also gives the most reliable access to fermes-auberges and high accommodation, though popular places should still be booked ahead.
Autumn	A strong season for forest colour and quieter walking, especially before winter conditions arrive. Days shorten, weather windows matter more, and high services begin to reduce or close seasonally. Confirm current opening dates before relying on ridge accommodation or food stops.
Winter	Not the normal season for walking the high routes as summer hiking itineraries. Snow closes or complicates many high paths, and the hardest exposed routes are not suitable. Plan only with winter mountain competence and current local conditions. This should be checked before travelling.

Best months

For most independent hikers, **July and August** are the simplest months logistically: ridge weather is generally at its most reliable, the Navette des Crêtes runs daily in July-August, and more fermes-auberges and high huts are open. This is the easiest period for a car-light ridge itinerary linking places such as Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein and Grand Ballon.

June, September and October can be excellent, especially for walkers who prefer cooler, quieter conditions. However, the Navette des Crêtes runs mainly at weekends in the shoulder season, and seasonal accommodation or farm-inns may have more limited opening. Timetables and opening dates should be checked before travelling.

When to avoid exposed paths

The **Sentier des Roches** is the key seasonal restriction: it is **officially closed from 1 November to 30 April**. It is also a hard, exposed path with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables, so it should be

avoided in poor weather, ice, snow or any conditions where rock is wet and visibility is poor.

For ordinary ridge routes, the main issue is exposure rather than technical difficulty. Open summit sections around Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace can feel very different from sheltered forest tracks if wind, rain or cold arrives. Build escape options into longer days where the route crosses road passes or descends towards valley bases.

Trail surface by season

The network uses forest paths, pasture tracks, gravel, dirt and rocky mountain paths. After rain, forest sections can be muddy and rocky or stepped sections can become slippery. On the harder mountain paths, wet rock is a genuine planning factor, not just a comfort issue.

In winter and early spring, snow and ice can change the character of even moderate routes. A summer GR5 stage over the high ridge should not be treated as the same undertaking under winter conditions.

Accommodation and services by season

Seasonal opening is one of the main reasons to choose summer for a multi-day trip. Fermes-auberges and high huts are a major part of High Vosges walking, but their opening dates vary and are especially seasonal on the high chaumes. Book ahead and check current dates before relying on them for meals or beds.

For one-way ridge walks, the Navette des Crêtes is most useful in summer and more limited outside the peak period. Current Fluo Grand Est / Navette des Crêtes timetables should be checked before planning a linear walk from valley bases such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer or Thann.

Safety Notes

Emergency help and communication

Dial **112** for emergency assistance in France. When calling, give the nearest named place on the map — for example a col, summit, lake, ferme-auberge (farm-inn) or road access point such as the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road).

Do not rely on mobile reception as the only safety system. The Ballons des Vosges network crosses forested valleys, open ridges and cirques where signal may vary, so carry an offline map and, for anything beyond a short waymarked stroll, an IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 map.

Navigation on a dense path network

The main risk for many walkers is not technical ground but taking the wrong branch. The Club Vosgien network is dense, different colour-symbol waymarks overlap, and the GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif) is only one line through a much larger system.

Before setting off, know the exact waymark for the route being followed. The flagship GR53/GR5 traverse is waymarked with a **red rectangle**, but local loops and linking paths use other Club Vosgien symbols.

Weather and exposure

The High Vosges are rounded rather than alpine, but they are still a mountain environment. Weather can change quickly on the open chaumes (high summer pastures), the Hohneck, Grand Ballon and the long ridge sections above the valleys.

Carry a waterproof layer, warm layer and enough food and water even for short walks from places such as Col de la Schlucht or the Route des Crêtes. In warm weather, the exposed ridge can feel much hotter than the forest; in poor weather, wind and low cloud can make wayfinding and temperature management harder.

Winter snow closes or complicates many high routes. The best normal walking window is roughly June to October, with high summer giving the most reliable ridge access and services.

Exposed and harder paths

The **Sentier des Roches** is the key route-specific hazard. It is a hard, exposed cliff path with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables, suitable only for sure-footed walkers with a head for heights.

It is **officially closed from 1 November to 30 April**. Dogs are banned on the Sentier des Roches, and fines apply. Avoid this path in poor visibility, ice, snow or if anyone in the party is uncomfortable with exposure.

Roads, cols and one-way walks

The Route des Crêtes gives useful access to the high ridge, but it also means some walks involve road crossings, roadside starts and walking near traffic at cols and viewpoints. Take particular care in mist, at busy parking areas and where a path briefly joins or crosses the road.

For one-way ridge walks, plan the exit before starting. The Navette des Crêtes shuttle is seasonal, with more service in July and August and mainly weekend operation in shoulder season; current timetables should be checked before travelling.

Livestock and dogs

The high chaumes are working pastoral landscapes, with fermes-auberges and grazing animals. Give livestock space, do not cut between animals and young, and close any gates encountered on signed walking routes.

Dogs should be kept under close control around livestock and other walkers. On the Sentier des Roches they are not permitted at all.

Water, food and services

Do not assume every ridge day has reliable open services. Fermes-auberges, huts and high facilities are seasonal, so opening dates and meal availability should be checked ahead, especially outside high summer.

Carry enough water for the full stage or day walk. Lakes such as Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux are landscape features and walking objectives, not a substitute for planned drinking water.

Solo walking

Solo hiking is realistic on the easier marked routes and popular ridge sections, but the same planning standard applies. Leave a route plan with someone else, carry a charged phone, and avoid committing exposed paths such as the Sentier des Roches if conditions are deteriorating.

On long GR53/GR5 stages, remember that accommodation, transport and valley exits may be spaced by the route chosen rather than by a fixed official itinerary. A conservative plan is safer than relying on making up distance late in the day.

Daily pre-walk checks

Before each stage or day walk, check:

- the weather forecast for the ridge, not just the valley town;
- the exact Club Vosgien waymark and map line being followed;
- seasonal closures, especially the Sentier des Roches;
- accommodation, ferme-auberge or hut opening times if relying on them;
- TER train and Navette des Crêtes shuttle times for the return or escape plan;
- water carried versus the expected length, ascent and heat;
- whether the route includes exposed ground, road sections or high open pasture.

Gear Recommendations

Gear for the Ballons des Vosges should match the exact walk chosen. A short forest or lake circuit from a valley town needs less than a multi-day GR53/GR5 ridge section, but the High Vosges still deserve mountain kit: weather changes quickly, the ridge is exposed, and some paths include rocky, stepped or cabled ground.

Footwear

For most Club Vosgien paths, use lightweight hiking boots or robust trail shoes with good grip. Forest tracks, pasture paths and gravel trails are common, but rocky mountain tracks and wet roots can make soft-soled leisure footwear a poor choice.

For the Sentier des Roches and similar exposed paths, footwear should be grippy, stable and secure on rock-cut steps and fixed-cable sections. This is not terrain for worn trainers, sandals or heavy overnight packs that affect balance.

In autumn or after wet weather, expect mud in forest sections and slippery rock around cirque paths. Gaiters are optional, but can be useful on damp pasture and muddy woodland paths.

Waterproofs and Warm Layers

Carry a waterproof jacket on any ridge walk, even in summer. The Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) gives easy access to high ground, but the summits around Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace are still exposed mountain terrain.

A warm mid-layer is sensible for all high-level days. Wind on the chaumes (high summer pastures) can make conditions feel much colder than in Munster, Gérardmer, Guebwiller, Thann or other valley bases.

For multi-day sections, add a dry spare layer for evenings in huts, gîtes or fermes-auberges (farm-inns). Simple accommodation may not provide the comfort margin expected in hotels, and wet kit can be slow to dry in poor weather.

Navigation

Do not rely only on waymarks. The Club Vosgien network is dense, routes overlap, and many paths use different colour-symbol markers; the flagship GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif) is marked with a red rectangle, but local variants and crossing trails can be confusing.

Carry the relevant IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 maps for the chosen area, plus a phone or GPS with offline mapping. A small compass remains useful in mist on open ridge and pasture sections.

Before setting out, check whether the planned line includes seasonal closures or exposed paths. The Sentier des Roches is officially closed from 1 November to 30 April, and dogs are banned there.

Water and Food

Carry enough water for a full walking day between reliable resupply points. Fermes-auberges and high huts are a major advantage of the High Vosges, but their opening dates and hours are seasonal and should be checked before travelling.

Food carry can be light on well-planned summer inn-to-inn days, especially where a ferme-auberge meal is built into the route. Still carry emergency snacks, as a closed farm-inn on a ridge day can leave a long gap before the next village or road access.

For the southern GR5-style ridge stages between Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon, Thann and Ballon d'Alsace, treat high-level services as planned stops rather than guaranteed fallbacks. Book ahead where sleeping places are needed.

Trekking Poles

Trekking poles are useful on longer ridge and valley-to-summit days, where cumulative ascent and descent matter more than the modest summit heights suggest. They are particularly helpful on descents into forested valleys and on long GR5 stages.

On cabled or exposed paths such as the Sentier des Roches, poles may need to be stowed so both hands are free. A pack with secure pole attachments is better than carrying poles loose on this terrain.

Power, Phone and Lighting

Carry a charged phone with offline maps and a power bank for multi-day sections. Signal should not be treated as a navigation system, particularly in forested valleys and cirques.

A headtorch is sensible for all full-day walks and essential for hut-to-hut or inn-to-inn itineraries. Late arrivals are possible if a ridge day takes longer than expected in poor weather or if a route choice on the dense path network adds time.

Sun, Insects and Weather Exposure

On the open chaumes and summit domes, pack sun cream, sunglasses and a hat. Much of the route alternates between shaded forest and exposed high pasture, so conditions can change repeatedly during the same day.

Insect repellent is worth carrying for summer forest, lake and pasture walks. It is a small item, but useful on slower days around glacial cirque lakes such as Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux.

Camping Gear

Campers should plan around established campsites and legal overnight options rather than assuming a tent can be pitched anywhere in the park. Local rules and site availability should be checked before travelling.

A light three-season tent, warm sleeping system and reliable waterproof packing are appropriate for spring to autumn trips. Valley campsites can make flexible section-hiking easier, but they may add ascent or transport logistics if the day's route stays high on the ridge.

Inn-to-Inn Hikers

Inn-to-inn walkers can keep packs relatively compact, especially when using hotels, gîtes, huts and fermes-auberges. The priority is not ultralight minimalism but dependable mountain day kit: waterproofs, warm layer, map, offline navigation, water, snacks and a headtorch.

Carry a lightweight change of clothes and simple evening footwear if staying in shared accommodation. Booking confirmations, cash/card options and phone battery matter more than carrying excessive spare clothing.

Fast and Section Hikers

Fast walkers using TER stations and the seasonal Navette des Crêtes should still carry full bad-weather essentials. Easy transport access to Col de la Schlucht, the Route des Crêtes or ridge start points does not make the high route low-risk.

For one-way ridge walks, pack for waiting time at the end of the day if shuttle or train connections are missed. Current TER and Navette des Crêtes timetables should be checked before travelling, especially outside July and August.

Seasonal Extras

The best normal hiking season is roughly June to October, when ridge access, farm-inns and shuttle services are most useful. In spring and autumn, add warmer gloves, hat and a more protective waterproof layer for wind, rain and cold starts.

Winter snow closes or complicates many high routes, and the hardest paths may be unsuitable or closed. Do not treat the summer GR5 or Sentier des Roches kit list as adequate for winter conditions.

Budget and Costs

Costs on the Ballons des Vosges network vary widely because this is not a single fixed itinerary. A half-day walk from Munster, Gérardmer or Guebwiller may cost little more than transport and lunch, while a multi-day GR53/GR5 section depends heavily on whether you use campsites, gîtes, fermes-auberges (farm-inns), hotels or taxis.

All costs are in euros (€). Exact prices change by season and operator, so accommodation, meals, transport and any transfer costs should be checked before booking.

Main cost drivers

Cost item	What affects the budget
Trail access	The Club Vosgien path network is generally free to walk; there is no trail permit system to budget for.
Accommodation	Campsites and simple gîtes are the lower-cost option; hotels, guesthouses and private rooms in valley towns cost more. High huts and fermes-auberges are seasonal and should be booked ahead.
Food	Self-catering from valley towns is cheapest. Fermes-auberges are useful on the high chaumes (high summer pastures), especially for a repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal), but opening dates vary.
Transport	TER trains serve the main valley bases and end towns; the seasonal Navette des Crêtes can reduce taxi use for one-way ridge walks. Timetables should be checked before travelling.
Taxis and transfers	Useful for awkward trailheads, missed shuttles or weather-shortened days, but can quickly become one of the largest costs on a ridge itinerary. Availability is more limited away from towns.
Maps and guidebooks	Budget for IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping, especially if building a custom route through the dense waymarked network.

Budget approach

The lowest-cost approach is to base yourself in a valley town with TER access, use campsites or simple gîtes, buy food before heading onto the ridge, and plan walks that start and finish using public transport. Munster, Gérardmer, Guebwiller, Thann and Belfort are practical bases depending on the section chosen.

For multi-day walking, budget travellers should avoid relying on last-minute high-ridge accommodation. Fermes-auberges and huts can be excellent value compared with hotels, but many are seasonal and may not have space without booking.

The Navette des Crêtes is particularly useful for keeping costs down on one-way ridge walks along the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road). It runs seasonally, mainly weekends in the shoulder season and daily in July-August; current timetables should be checked before planning a route around it.

Mid-range approach

A mid-range itinerary usually mixes gîtes, fermes-auberges, simple hotels and guesthouses, with meals taken where accommodation is available. This is often the most practical style for a 2–7 day High Vosges ridge section, as it reduces food weight while keeping the route flexible.

For the southern GR5-style section through Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon, Thann, Ballon d'Alsace and Belfort, costs are mainly accommodation, evening meals and transport back to the start. Book ahead for ridge locations and check opening dates before committing to stage lengths.

Comfortable approach

A more comfortable trip uses hotels and guesthouses in valley towns such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller, Thann or Belfort, with taxis or private transfers used to reach trailheads and return at the end of the day. This works well for walkers who want high-level day walks without carrying overnight kit.

This approach is less suited to every remote ridge section unless transport is arranged in advance. The high ridge has no railway, and public transport is thinner away from the valleys, so taxi availability and prices should be checked before booking accommodation.

Food and drink budgeting

Food costs depend on how much is bought in valley towns versus taken in fermes-auberges or accommodation. Self-catering is the cheapest option, but the High Vosges ridge is not a place to assume that every lunch stop will be open.

Fermes-auberges are a distinctive part of walking here and can make excellent meal stops, especially in summer, but they are seasonal. Always carry enough water and emergency food for the day, particularly on longer ridge stages or outside the main summer period.

Extra costs to allow for

Allow a small buffer for weather changes and route adjustments. Fast-changing High Vosges weather can make a taxi, extra night in a valley town, or alternative lower-level walk the sensible choice.

The Sentier des Roches is closed from 1 November to 30 April and is unsuitable for dogs; fines apply where dogs are banned. If this path is part of the plan, avoid building any non-refundable transport or accommodation chain around it without checking current conditions and closures.

Luggage transfer and guided or self-guided packages may be available for some itineraries, but there is no single route-wide system covering the whole Club Vosgien network. Availability and prices are itinerary-dependent and should be checked before travelling.

Luggage Transfer, Guided Tours and Support Services

Support on the Ballons des Vosges trails is best planned around the exact itinerary, not around a single fixed trail. The Club Vosgien network is dense, and the flagship GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges crosses a mix of valley towns, high cols, fermes-auberges (farm-inns) and mountain accommodation, so baggage and transfers need arranging stage by stage.

Luggage transfer

There is no single route-wide luggage-transfer system to rely on across the whole network. For short breaks based in Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann, luggage transfer is usually unnecessary: stay in one valley base and use circular walks, public transport or the seasonal Navette des Crêtes to reach the ridge.

For point-to-point sections on the GR53/GR5, especially multi-day ridge stages between places such as Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon, Thann and Ballon d'Alsace, baggage transfer is possible only if it has been arranged in advance. The practical options are:

Option	Best for	Planning notes
Self-guided walking-holiday package	Walkers who want accommodation, route notes and luggage arranged together	Typically the simplest way to walk with a day pack, especially on a 2–7 day High Vosges section. Check exactly which nights and bag moves are included.
Accommodation-arranged transfers	Short point-to-point itineraries using hotels, gîtes or fermes-auberges	Some hosts may help organise local taxis or bag movement, but do not assume this service exists. Ask before booking.
Local taxi transfers	One-off moves between valley towns, cols and accommodation	Useful where public transport does not fit the walking day. Availability and cost should be checked before travelling.
Carrying all kit	Independent GR53/GR5 walkers and flexible section-hikers	Often the most reliable option if staying in seasonal high accommodation or changing plans with the weather.

High-level accommodation can be seasonal, and fermes-auberges on the chaumes (high summer pastures) may have limited services outside the main walking season. If a baggage move depends on a high pass, farm-inn or hut being open, confirm opening dates and transfer arrangements before committing to the itinerary.

No dependable fixed price applies across the park, because transfers depend on distance, road access, season and whether the service is arranged privately or as part of a package. Confirm current prices before booking.

Self-guided packages

Self-guided packages suit walkers who want the independence of walking without a guide but prefer not to manage every booking themselves. A typical package may include pre-booked accommodation, route

notes, maps or GPX files, luggage transfers where available, and occasional taxi links where public transport is thin.

They are most useful on the GR53/GR5 through-route or on a High Vosges ridge itinerary where accommodation spacing, seasonal openings and weather alternatives need careful planning. They are less necessary for day walkers based in a town such as Munster, Gérardmer or Guebwiller, where the main task is choosing suitable walks and checking transport.

Before paying for a package, check whether it follows the red-rectangle GR53/GR5 line or uses easier variants, whether exposed paths such as the Sentier des Roches are included, and what happens if weather makes a ridge stage unsuitable. The Sentier des Roches is closed from 1 November to 30 April and is for sure-footed walkers only.

Guided walking

Guided walking is worth considering if the aim is to understand the dense Club Vosgien waymarking network, walk harder routes safely, or explore the high ridge without managing navigation and logistics. It can also be useful for mixed-ability groups, families, or walkers unfamiliar with fast-changing mountain weather.

A guide is not essential for most straightforward forest, lake and pasture walks. The network is well waymarked, but hikers still need appropriate mapping, route choice and weather judgement, especially above the valleys.

For exposed routes such as the Sentier des Roches, guided support does not remove the need for sure footing and a head for heights. Dogs are banned on the Sentier des Roches, and fines apply.

Taxi and public-transport support

The most useful non-walking support is often not a baggage courier but a well-timed transfer. The ridge has no railway, so one-way walks need planning around valley transport, taxis or the seasonal Navette des Crêtes.

The Navette des Crêtes, on the Fluo Grand Est network, links valley stations and towns such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points along the Route des Crêtes. It is particularly useful for linear ridge walks where returning to the start on foot would make the day too long. Timetables should be checked before travelling, especially outside July and August when service is more limited.

TER rail access works well around the edge of the massif, including Colmar and Mulhouse on the Alsace side, Gérardmer, Remiremont, Épinal and Saint-Dié-des-Vosges on the Lorraine side, and Belfort at the southern end. The Colmar–Munster–Metzeral branch line is especially useful for walks into the Munster valley.

Private taxis are the fallback for early starts, missed connections, bad-weather exits and accommodation that is not close to a station or shuttle stop. Book ahead for high cols and smaller villages, and agree the pickup point clearly; many trailheads are on roads, passes or farm access points rather than in town centres.

Shorter Hikes and Best Sections

Because this is a Club Vosgien-waymarked network rather than one fixed trail, the best short itinerary depends on how much ridge walking, ascent and transport planning you want. The easiest approach is to choose a valley base such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann, then use marked paths and, in season, the Navette des Crêtes to reach the high ridge.

For any of the options below, carry IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping and understand the Club Vosgien colour-symbol waymarks. Several routes overlap on the high ground, and the GR5 red rectangle is only one line within a much denser network.

Best High-Level Day Walk: Col de la Schlucht to Hohneck

Detail	Planning notes
Start / finish	Col de la Schlucht, returning to Col de la Schlucht or linking onward on marked ridge paths
Approx distance	Route-dependent; plan as a typical 8–20 km High Vosges day walk depending on the loop or out-and-back chosen
Best for	A compact taste of the high ridge, open chaumes (high summer pastures), glacial cirque scenery and a major summit
Key objective	Hohneck, 1,363 m, the third-highest summit in the Vosges
Transport	Col de la Schlucht has no railway. In season, the Navette des Crêtes can be useful from valley towns and stations such as Colmar, Munster and Gérardmer; current timetables should be checked before travelling

This is the cleanest short introduction to the High Vosges ridge. It gives a proper mountain feel without committing to a multi-day traverse, but it should still be treated as a mountain walk: weather can change quickly, visibility can drop, and the open crest is more exposed than the wooded valley paths.

Do not confuse a Hohneck day with the Sentier des Roches unless the harder path is deliberately planned. The Sentier des Roches is an exposed, partly cabled route for sure-footed walkers only, is closed from 1 November to 30 April, and dogs are banned.

Best Weekend Section: Col de la Schlucht to Thann

Detail	Planning notes
Start	Col de la Schlucht
Finish	Thann
Approx distance	About 50 km over 2 days, using the GR5-style stage distances: Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein, then Le Markstein to Thann

Detail	Planning notes
Overnight	Le Markstein area; seasonal opening of high accommodation and fermes-auberges (farm-inns) must be checked ahead
Best for	A strenuous but rewarding weekend crossing of the central High Vosges ridge
Transport	Use the seasonal Navette des Crêtes where possible for ridge access. Thann is a practical valley finish; onward transport should be checked before booking

This is the strongest short through-walk on the network if you want the character of the GR5 without taking a week off. It links two of the route's headline summits: Hohneck on the first day and Grand Ballon on the second.

The second day, from Le Markstein to Thann over Grand Ballon, is especially satisfying because it crosses the highest point of the Vosges and the Grand Est region before dropping to a valley town. Book the overnight stop before committing, as high huts and fermes-auberges are seasonal.

Best 3-Day High Vosges Section: Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie to Thann

Detail	Planning notes
Start	Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie
Finish	Thann
Approx distance	About 80 km over 3 days
Suggested breakdown	Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie to Col de la Schlucht via Col du Bonhomme; Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein over Hohneck; Le Markstein to Thann over Grand Ballon
Best for	The most concentrated 3-day sample of the flagship Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif) within the southern High Vosges
Transport	Start and finish logistics require current local transport checks. The high ridge has no railway, but the Navette des Crêtes may help in season

This is a demanding short traverse, not a casual long weekend. The daily distances are substantial, with sustained ridge walking and cumulative ascent, so it suits fit walkers who are already comfortable with full mountain days.

Its advantage is concentration: Col du Bonhomme, Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein and Grand Ballon all fall naturally into the line. It also gives a clear sense of the north-south structure of the Vosges without walking the full Wissembourg to Belfort traverse.

Best 5-Day Southern Finish: Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie to Belfort

Detail	Planning notes
Start	Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie
Finish	Belfort
Approx distance	About 133 km over 5 days
Suggested breakdown	Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines / Col de Sainte-Marie to Col de la Schlucht; Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein; Le Markstein to Thann; Thann to Ballon d'Alsace; Ballon d'Alsace to Belfort
Best for	A substantial GR5 section ending at the southern terminus of the Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges
Transport	Belfort is the strongest finish logistically, with rail access and a TGV station nearby. Access to the start should be checked before travelling

This is the best choice for walkers who want a genuine point-to-point section with a proper finish. It includes the central high summits, the descent to Thann, the Ballon d'Alsace and the final approach to Belfort.

The section is long enough to need proper accommodation planning. Do not rely on high-level farm-inns or huts being open without booking, especially outside the main summer period.

Best Section for Scenery: Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein

Detail	Planning notes
Start	Col de la Schlucht
Finish	Le Markstein
Approx distance	About 24 km
Best for	High ridge views, Hohneck, open pastures and glacial cirque landscapes
Transport	Best suited to the Navette des Crêtes season if walking one-way. This should be checked before travelling

For pure High Vosges scenery, this is the standout single stage. It keeps to the crest around Hohneck and gives the clearest sense of the rounded "ballons" landscape above the forested valleys.

The distance makes it a full day for most walkers. In poor weather, the exposed ridge can become slow and navigationally more serious, so allow enough time and carry layers even in summer.

Best for Beginners: Lake, Forest and Valley-Based Loops

Detail	Planning notes
Start / finish	A valley base such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann, returning to the same base
Approx distance	Choose a half-day walk or a typical 8–20 km day hike
Best for	Easier gradients, shorter commitment, straightforward accommodation and the option to stop early
Good objectives	Lac Blanc, Lac Noir or Lac des Corbeaux on marked paths, where appropriate to your chosen base
Transport	Valley bases are generally easier to reach than the ridge; train and local onward transport should be checked before travelling

Beginners should avoid making the high ridge the first commitment of the trip. A valley base gives more flexibility: weather can be judged on the day, walks can be shortened, and accommodation is simpler than on the crest.

The glacial lakes are especially good short-walk objectives, but route choice matters. Some approaches are gentle forest walks; others climb steeply towards the ridge, so check the map profile before setting out.

Best for Public Transport: One-Way Ridge Walks Using the Navette des Crêtes

Detail	Planning notes
Best option	Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein, or Col de la Schlucht to Thann if extending to a weekend
Approx distance	About 24 km to Le Markstein; about 50 km to Thann over 2 days
Best for	Walkers without a car who want a linear ridge route rather than an out-and-back
Transport	The Navette des Crêtes links valley stations and towns such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points along the Route des Crêtes in season

The ridge shuttle is the key to car-light walking in the High Vosges. It makes one-way ridge days far more practical, but it is seasonal and does not run like an urban bus service.

Timetables should be checked before travelling, especially outside July and August, when services may be limited mainly to weekends in the shoulder season. Always plan a fallback if the last shuttle connection is missed.

Best for Villages and Accommodation: Le Markstein to Thann over Grand Ballon

Detail	Planning notes
Start	Le Markstein

Detail	Planning notes
Finish	Thann
Approx distance	About 26 km
Best for	Combining a major summit day with a practical valley-town finish
Key objective	Grand Ballon, 1,424 m, with its radar dome and Monument des Diables Bleus (Blue Devils memorial)
Accommodation	Fermes-auberges and high accommodation may be available seasonally on the chaumes; Thann gives a more conventional town finish

This is one of the most useful single stages for independent planning. It crosses the roof of the Vosges, then finishes low enough to make food, beds and onward travel easier than if the day ended on the ridge.

It also works well as the final day of a shorter high-level trip from Col de la Schlucht. Check accommodation opening dates before building an itinerary around a ferme-auberge or high hut.

Best for Camping-Based Trips

Detail	Planning notes
Best format	Base yourself at a campsite in or around a valley town, then walk day loops or use transport to reach the ridge
Suggested bases	Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller or Thann
Approx distance	Half-day walks to typical 8–20 km day hikes, depending on route choice
Best for	Keeping pack weight low while still sampling lakes, forest paths and ridge sections
Wild camping / bivouac rules	This should be checked before travelling

Camping is easiest when treated as a valley-base strategy rather than a full ridge traverse. The brief supports campsites in and around the valley towns, while the high ridge is better planned around booked huts, gîtes or fermes-auberges where available.

If attempting a multi-day camping traverse on or near the GR5, check legal restrictions, campsite spacing, water availability and seasonal closures before committing. Do not assume that a tent solves the accommodation problem on the high chaumes.

Highlights and Points of Interest

Because this is a dense Club Vosgien path network rather than one fixed trail, the main highlights can be combined in different ways: as short lake walks, high ridge days, a 2–7 day traverse, or as part of the full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif). If time is limited, the strongest concentration of classic High Vosges scenery sits around Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein and Grand Ballon.

Highlight	Why it matters	Practical notes
Grand Ballon	Highest summit of the Vosges and the Grand Est region, with the white radar dome and Monument des Diables Bleus (Blue Devils).	A clear summit objective on the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) and GR5; worth prioritising on a short high-ridge itinerary.
Hohneck	Major 1,363 m summit on the Alsace-Lorraine border, above glacial cirques.	A key high point for walks from Col de la Schlucht and for GR5 ridge sections.
Sentier des Roches	Famous exposed cliff path with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables.	For sure-footed walkers only; closed 1 November to 30 April. Dogs are banned.
Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux	Glacial cirque lakes below the high ridge, set in steep forested terrain.	Good choices for shorter walks or picnic-focused days; linked into the wider GR5/GR531/GR532 network.
Hartmannswillerkopf / Vieil Armand	Major First World War battlefield and national memorial.	Reached by marked paths above Cernay; allow time for the preserved trenches, chapels and crypt/ossuary.
Route des Crêtes	Historic panoramic ridge road built by the French army from 1915.	Useful for accessing high-level walks and linking with the seasonal Navette des Crêtes shuttle; timetables should be checked before travelling.
Fermes-auberges and chaumes	Farm-inns and high summer pastures that define the pastoral side of the High Vosges.	Good places to plan a long lunch or overnight stop, but opening dates are seasonal and should be checked ahead.
Ballon d'Alsace	Rounded 1,247 m summit at the southern end of the massif.	A classic GR5 objective before the final approach towards Belfort.

Grand Ballon

Grand Ballon, also known as Ballon de Guebwiller, is the most obvious high-point target in the Ballons des Vosges. At 1,424 m, it is the roof of both the Vosges massif and the Grand Est region.

The summit is easy to identify from its white air-traffic-control radar dome and the Monument des Diables Bleus (Blue Devils), a memorial to the Chasseurs Alpins. For walkers building a short itinerary, Grand Ballon is the summit most worth arranging a day around, particularly when combined with the Route des Crêtes or a GR5 ridge section.

Hohneck and Col de la Schlucht

Hohneck is one of the essential High Vosges summits: 1,363 m, on the GR5 ridge and on the Alsace-Lorraine border. It stands above glacial cirques and is one of the strongest reasons to base a walking day around Col de la Schlucht.

Col de la Schlucht is also important because it gives access to both moderate ridge walking and the much harder Sentier des Roches. Choose carefully here: the area has options for capable hillwalkers, but not every path is suitable for every party.

Sentier des Roches

The Sentier des Roches is one of the most memorable paths in the Vosges, but it is not a casual scenic detour. It uses rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables on exposed ground between Col de la Schlucht and the Frankenthal cirque.

It should be treated as a hard mountain path for sure-footed walkers with a head for exposure. It is officially closed from 1 November to 30 April, and dogs are banned on the route.

Glacial cirque lakes

Lac Blanc, Lac Noir and Lac des Corbeaux are among the best natural objectives for walkers who want a shorter day without losing the mountain character of the High Vosges. They sit in steep forested cirques below the higher ridge and connect into the wider GR5, GR531 and GR532 path network.

These lakes are especially useful for mixed-ability groups, rest days, or walkers who want a less committing alternative to a full ridge stage. Even on shorter lake walks, carry proper layers and navigation: the High Vosges weather can change quickly.

Hartmannswillerkopf / Vieil Armand

Hartmannswillerkopf, also called Vieil Armand, is the most important historic stop on this walking network. The 956 m summit was a First World War battlefield where an estimated 25,000 soldiers died.

Today it is a national memorial with preserved trenches, three chapels and a crypt/ossuary. It is reached on marked paths above Cernay and is worth extra time for walkers interested in the military history of the Vosges.

Route des Crêtes

The Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) shadows the main High Vosges ridge for about 89 km between Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and Cernay. Built by the French army from 1915, it now gives practical access to many of the best summit and pasture walks.

For hikers without a car, the seasonal Navette des Crêtes on the Fluo Grand Est network can make one-way ridge walks much easier, linking valley towns and stations such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points along the ridge. Current shuttle and train timetables should be checked before travelling.

Fermes-auberges and the chaumes

The chaumes (high summer pastures) are central to the feel of the High Vosges. Their fermes-auberges (farm-inns) are working farm-inns that serve the traditional repas marcaire (marcaire or herdsman's meal), and some offer simple beds.

They are not just food stops: they can shape an itinerary, turning a ridge walk into a slower day with a long lunch or an overnight halt. Opening dates are seasonal, especially outside high summer, so book ahead and check current arrangements before relying on them.

Ballon d'Alsace and the southern approach to Belfort

Ballon d'Alsace, at 1,247 m, is a classic rounded summit at the southern end of the Vosges massif, where Alsace, Lorraine and Franche-Comté meet. It is an important objective on the GR5 before the route continues towards Belfort.

Belfort itself makes a strong finishing point for through-walkers, with the city known for its citadel and famous lion. If walking the southern section, it is worth allowing time for the transition from high massif to city finish rather than treating Belfort only as a transport exit.

Common Mistakes and Planning Tips

Treating the Ballons des Vosges as one fixed trail

The biggest planning error is assuming there is a single route with one official distance, duration and ascent total. This is a dense Club Vosgien-waymarked network, with day walks, local loops, GR routes and the flagship GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif) from Wissembourg to Belfort.

Fix: choose the exact walk first, then calculate distance, ascent, transport and accommodation from that itinerary. Use the full GR53/GR5 figure of about 430 km and roughly 20 days only if walking the complete traverse; it does not describe every Ballons des Vosges trip.

Planning from waymarks alone

The Club Vosgien network is well marked, but it is also very dense. Local paths and long-distance GR routes overlap, split and rejoin, so simply following paint marks without knowing the intended symbol can send you onto the wrong valley path or ridge variant.

Fix: carry IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping and understand the Club Vosgien colour-symbol system before setting out. The GR53/GR5 through-route is marked with a red rectangle, but many other marked paths use different symbols nearby.

Copying over-long ridge stages without checking the terrain

High Vosges days can look modest on paper because the summits are rounded and the highest point, Grand Ballon, is only 1,424 m. In practice, ridge sections such as Col de la Schlucht to Le Markstein, or Le Markstein to Thann over Grand Ballon, involve sustained mountain walking, repeated ascent and descent, and exposed weather.

Fix: plan stages from realistic walking time, ascent and escape options, not just kilometres. The example southern stages of around 24–30 km suit fit walkers; shorter itineraries based around Col de la Schlucht, Le Markstein, Thann or other valley bases may be better for mixed groups.

Underestimating transport on the ridge

The Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) gives excellent access to high walking, but the ridge itself has no railway. Valley towns are better connected by TER train, while the Navette des Crêtes shuttle is seasonal and does not run like an urban bus service.

Fix: build one-way ridge walks around current TER and Navette des Crêtes timings before booking accommodation. The shuttle links places such as Colmar, Munster, Gérardmer and Thann with high points on the Route des Crêtes, but timetables should be checked before travelling, especially outside July and August.

Leaving high accommodation and meals to chance

Fermes-auberges (farm-inns), mountain huts and simple high-level beds are one of the pleasures of Vosges walking, particularly on the chaumes (high summer pastures). They are also seasonal, and

opening dates can vary.

Fix: book ahead for ridge nights and check opening dates directly before relying on any ferme-auberge or hut. Valley bases such as Munster, Gérardmer, La Bresse, Guebwiller and Thann give more accommodation flexibility, but high routes need tighter planning.

Assuming every food stop will be open

A repas marcaire (marcaire/herdsman's meal) in a ferme-auberge is a classic High Vosges stop, but it should not be treated as guaranteed trail infrastructure. Seasonal closures, rest days, full dining rooms or a route change can leave a long gap between services.

Fix: carry enough food and water to finish the day independently. Treat fermes-auberges as planned stops to be checked and booked where necessary, not as emergency fall-backs.

Treating the High Vosges as low-risk hills

There is no glacier travel or technical climbing on the network, but the High Vosges are still a mountain environment. Weather can change fast on the open ridges around Hohneck, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace, while forest and lake walks can still be wet, cold or slippery in poor conditions.

Fix: take proper mountain layers, waterproofs, navigation and water even for shorter walks. Check the forecast specifically for the high ridge, not just the nearest valley town.

Adding the Sentier des Roches too casually

The Sentier des Roches is not a normal easy Vosges path. It is a hard, exposed route with rock-cut steps, footbridges and fixed cables, and it is only suitable for sure-footed walkers.

Fix: avoid it in bad weather, if anyone in the group is uneasy with exposure, or outside its permitted season. The Sentier des Roches is officially closed from 1 November to 30 April, and dogs are banned on the route.

Ignoring winter and shoulder-season limitations

Spring and autumn can be excellent, but high routes are more weather-dependent than valley walks. Winter snow closes or complicates many higher paths, and the hardest routes are not suitable year-round.

Fix: for the simplest logistics, plan high ridge walking between roughly June and October. In shoulder season, check path conditions, hut and ferme-auberge openings, and Navette des Crêtes services before committing to a point-to-point stage.

Misreading ascent figures for a network

A single elevation-gain figure is not meaningful for the Ballons des Vosges network. A lake loop may involve only a few hundred metres of climbing, while the full GR53/GR5 traverse accumulates a very large amount of ascent over many days.

Fix: calculate ascent for the actual day's route using current mapping. Do not treat an indicative day-walk ascent figure as a total for the whole park network or for the Wissembourg to Belfort traverse.

Final Advice

The Ballons des Vosges Park Trails suit walkers who want choice: easy forest and lake days, flexible ridge sections, or the full GR53/GR5 Grande Traversée du Massif des Vosges (Crossing of the Vosges Massif) from Wissembourg to Belfort. The network is especially good for independent hikers who are comfortable building their own itinerary from Club Vosgien waymarks, valley transport and seasonal accommodation rather than following one fixed trail plan.

For most visitors, the strongest approach is a section hike in the High Vosges rather than the full traverse. A 2–7 day ridge itinerary around Col de la Schlucht, Hohneck, Le Markstein, Grand Ballon and Ballon d'Alsace gives the best concentration of summits, chaumes (high summer pastures), fermes-auberges (farm-inns) and broad views without committing to the whole 430 km route.

The main planning task is not navigation difficulty in isolation, but itinerary control. The Club Vosgien network is dense, routes overlap, and nearby paths can lead to very different valley exits, so carry the relevant IGN/Club Vosgien TOP25 1:25,000 mapping and understand the local colour-symbol waymarks before setting off. For one-way ridge days, check TER and Navette des Crêtes timings before booking accommodation or assuming a same-day return.

The most rewarding walking is on the high ridge in settled weather: Hohneck, the Route des Crêtes (Ridge Road) corridor, Grand Ballon and the open summer pastures give the route its distinctive character. Fermes-auberges add a practical and cultural highlight, but opening dates and bed availability are seasonal, so book ahead and confirm current details before relying on them.

Treat the High Vosges as real mountain terrain despite the modest altitudes. Weather can change quickly, winter snow complicates many high routes, and exposed paths such as the Sentier des Roches are only for sure-footed hikers; the Sentier des Roches is closed from 1 November to 30 April and dogs are banned there. If in doubt, choose a lower forest, lake or pasture route — the strength of this network is that there is nearly always a safer, still worthwhile alternative.