

Hiking with your dog



Here are some details of our favourite dog friendly hikes in this beautiful valley, along with some safety guidelines and helpful advice.

In France, **dogs must be kept on a lead in public areas**, including during walks and hikes. This is especially important in forested and rural areas, where local regulations may impose stricter rules to protect wildlife, particularly during sensitive periods like the nesting season.

Failure to comply with these regulations can result in fines of up to €750.


Therefore, when exploring the beautiful trails of the Giffre Valley, please ensure your dog is on a lead at all times. This not only keeps you in compliance with the law but also helps protect the local environment and wildlife.

There are several protected areas within the valley where dogs are not permitted under any circumstances, even on a lead. These are generally the Sixt-Passy nature reserve so if your hike includes an area around Sixt, check carefully first.

⚠ Important: Livestock Guardian Dogs (*Patous*) – Serious Safety Warning



When hiking in the Giffre Valley and surrounding alpine areas, **you may encounter large white dogs called *patous*** (short for *chien de protection* or *chien de montagne des Pyrénées*). These are **not pets** — they are **working dogs trained to protect flocks of sheep or goats** in open mountain pastures from predators such as wolves.

 **Although this is a serious warning, please don't be alarmed** — patous are not aggressive without reason. If you **follow a few simple rules**, you can safely enjoy the mountains with your dog **without fear**. Awareness and caution are key.

They are extremely effective at their job — and they do **not** distinguish between a real threat and a tourist with a dog.

These Dogs Are NOT Friendly

- **Patous may bark, growl, charge, or bite** if they believe their flock is at risk.
 - If you are walking with your dog — especially off-lead — **you are highly likely to be perceived as a threat**.
 - They do not want to be approached, touched, or reassured. **Trying to be friendly can escalate the situation**.
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Serious Incidents Have Happened

There have been **several recent cases right here in the valley** of patous attacking tourist dogs — and sometimes their owners — because they failed to follow safety advice. These dogs are bred and trained to **confront and neutralise predators**, and will act accordingly if they feel provoked.

! If you allow your dog to approach a flock or a patou, you are putting your animal, yourself, and the dog at serious risk.

How to Stay Safe


- **Keep your dog on a short, strong lead at all times** when hiking. No exceptions.
 - If you see a flock of sheep or goats on the mountainside, **assume there is at least one patou nearby**, even if you don't see it.
 - **Do not walk through a flock.** Detour around it as widely and calmly as possible, even if it adds time to your hike.
 - If a patou approaches you:
 - **Stop walking immediately.**
 - **Stay calm.** Do **not** raise your voice, make sudden movements, or wave hiking sticks.
 - Put your dog behind you and keep it under control.
 - Wait quietly until the dog calms down or returns to the flock.
 - If you feel unsafe, **slowly retreat** the way you came, maintaining a calm and non-threatening posture.
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Plan Ahead

Before heading out on a hike, it's a good idea to:

- Ask at the local tourist office whether flocks are present in the area
- Choose trails where patous are less likely to be encountered
- Avoid high mountain pastures in midsummer when flocks are most active

You can find up to date locations of patous on the interactive map available at <https://www.pasto-kezako.fr/ou-sont-les-chiens-de-protection-2/>

 **Summary:** Your dog must stay on a short lead at all times when walking in the mountains. Patous are not dangerous by nature, but they are extremely protective and will defend their flock — forcefully — if they feel threatened. Respecting the rules means you and your dog can enjoy the beauty of the Alps safely.




Mountain Refuge Hikes

Hiking to a mountain refuge in the Vallée du Giffre offers a unique escape into breathtaking alpine scenery, far from the crowds. Whether you're after a challenging trek or a peaceful walk through flower-filled meadows, the reward is the warm welcome of a remote refuge—where you can enjoy hearty Savoyard food, meet other hikers, and wake up to sunrise over snow-capped peaks. It's a perfect way to reconnect with nature and experience the serenity of the high mountains.





General Tips:

- 🦴 Always bring a water bowl for your dog (many streams are seasonal).
- 🦴 If you hope to stay overnight, call the refuge in advance to check the current dog policy.
- 🦴 Be respectful: terraces are shared with other hikers - keep dogs under the table, leashed.
- 🦴 Don't assume you will be able to charge your phone, the refuges run on very little power, generally there will not be sockets in your room. Put your phone in airplane mode to substantially lengthen its battery life
- 🦴 Even though the hikes below are family friendly they take place in the high mountains where the weather can quickly change, or where accidents can happen. If you book a meal or a stay at a refuge and fail to show up without calling them they may contact emergency services to search for you. Be considerate, if you need to cancel make sure you inform them.

Refuge du Folly

- **Start Point:** Bois d'En Bas, Samoëns
- **Duration:** Around 1.5–2 hours (each way)
- **Elevation Gain:** Approx. 550m
- **Trail Type:** Forest path, shady and cool
- **Dog Policy:**
 -  Dogs welcome on the terrace
 -  Dogs **allowed overnight**, in a private room only (must be arranged in advance)
 -  Not allowed in dormitories. If you choose to sleep in a dormitory your dog must remain at the entrance and cannot go in the dormitory with you
- **Notes:** A quiet refuge with a relaxed atmosphere. Run by friendly hosts — call ahead to check about overnight stays with your dog.




Refuge de Bostan

- **Start Point:** Parking du Plan des Arches (beyond Les Allamands, Samoëns)
- **Duration:** 2 to 2.5 hours (each way)
- **Elevation Gain:** Approx. 600m
- **Trail Type:** Forest and pasture track, steady incline
- **Dog Policy:**
 -  Dogs welcome on the terrace
 -  Dogs **not allowed inside the restaurant**
 -  Dogs **cannot stay overnight in the refuge**
 -  **Dog-friendly camping nearby allowed** — you can bring a tent and camp close to the refuge (as long as you're respectful of the terrain and livestock). You're still welcome to use the restaurant and toilets during opening hours.
- **Notes:** Streams along the way provide water for dogs. Lovely open views across the Bostan valley and Mont Buet. Busy in high summer — best enjoyed early or late in the day.





Refuge de Bostan via Col de la Golèse

- **Start Point:** Start with the route to either the Refuge de Bostan or the Refuge de la Golèse. Once reaching your chosen first refuge you can then hike over the other in around 45 minutes.
- **Access:** Combine this with a hike over from Refuge de la Golèse for a full circular route
- **Duration:** 5–6 hours loop
- **Notes:** Spectacular scenery and a long day hike. Make sure your dog is in good condition for the distance.

Refuge de la Golèse

- **Start Point:** Les Allamands, Samoëns
- **Duration:** Around 2 hours (each way)
- **Elevation Gain:** Approx. 650m
- **Trail Type:** Pasture and open alpine track
- **Dog Policy:**
 -  Dogs welcome on the terrace
 -  Dogs **not allowed inside**
 -  Dogs **cannot stay overnight**
- **Notes:** This is a quiet and peaceful route with excellent views — ideal in the morning before the sun is too strong.

Refuge de Gers

- **Start Point:** Lac de Gers car park (accessible from Samoëns via Vallon d'en Bas)
- **Duration:** 1.5 to 2 hours (each way)
- **Elevation Gain:** Approx. 450m
- **Trail Type:** Track through woodland and alpine pasture, with a steady but gentle ascent
- **Dog Policy:**
 -  Dogs welcome on the terrace
 -  Dogs **not allowed inside**
 -  Dogs **cannot stay overnight**
-  Wild camping nearby tolerated — you may pitch a tent not far from the refuge, provided you're discreet and respectful of nature, livestock, and other hikers
- **Notes:** The trail follows a scenic route alongside a stream, offering water access for dogs and shaded sections through pine forest. The final approach opens up to panoramic views of the surrounding peaks and the tranquil Lac de Gers. A peaceful spot, especially outside peak summer weekends.

Dog-Friendly Walk Details

Cirque du Fer-à-Cheval

Cirque du Fer-à-Cheval is one of the most breathtaking natural amphitheatres in the Alps, with towering cliffs, cascading waterfalls, and dramatic mountain views. It's an unforgettable place to walk, picnic, or simply soak in the wild beauty of the Giffre Valley.

At the **Cirque du Fer-à-Cheval**, dogs are permitted **only up to the Buvette de Prazon**, provided they are kept on a leash at all times and remain on designated walking paths. Beyond this point, dogs are strictly prohibited, even on a leash, as the area falls within the **Sixt-Passy Nature Reserve**, which aims to protect sensitive wildlife and ecosystems.

- **Starting Point:** Main parking area at Cirque du Fer-à-Cheval (paid parking)
- **Trail:** A well-maintained path leading to the Buvette de Prazon, offering stunning views of the surrounding cliffs and waterfalls. Suitable for all the family.
- **Distance:** Approximately 5 km round trip.
- **Duration:** About 1.5 to 2 hours at a leisurely pace.
- **Facilities:**

The Buvette de Prazon offers refreshments and has outdoor seating where dogs are welcome.

Chalet Du Fer-à-Cheval, the restaurant near the car park, is open all year round for lunch, drinks and snacks, dogs welcome. Think about making a reservation. It gets busy for lunch especially at weekends.

Le Chalet de Laura, a cafe fairly near the parking for a more relaxed pit stop. Sells drinks, fries, doughnuts, snacks. Also offer pony rides for the children (paid)

There are toilets near the car park.

- **Important Note:** Do not proceed beyond the Buvette de Prazon with your dog, as this enters the protected reserve area.

Le Joux Plane

The walks around Col de Joux Plane offer some of the most accessible yet stunning alpine scenery in the region. With gentle trails winding through wildflower meadows, forests, and ridgelines, it's a perfect spot for relaxed walking, picnicking, or spotting marmots and birds of prey. The views stretch across the Mont Blanc range on a clear day, and the area is refreshingly quiet compared to better-known spots—making it ideal for a peaceful, family-friendly outing in nature.

Please ensure your dog is on a leash at all times and stays on the designated paths to protect the local wildlife and comply with regulations. These walk offers a memorable experience with your canine companion amidst breathtaking alpine scenery.

La Bourgeoise (Panoramic Ridge Walk)

My favourite walk in the region. I love it so much I almost didn't want to include it here and just keep it to myself! Suitable for most of the family. Not too steep, not many sharp edges, occasionally a bit scrambly in places. Lots of people do it with young children or with baby carriers.

- **Duration:** 1.5 - 2 hours
- **Route:** Approx 5km in total. This easy ridge walk leads from Col de Joux Plane to the panoramic **La Bourgeoise** viewpoint, offering wide open views over the Giffre Valley and Mont Blanc range.
- **Tips:** This is especially stunning at sunrise or sunset. Bring water, there is none on the route. Although it's stunning in all weathers if the clouds are low you won't get the full benefit of the spectacular views.

Lac de Joux Plane Loop

- **Duration:** 30–45 minutes
- **Route:** Gentle walk around the lake, looping through the pastures and back to the parking area
- **Dog tips:** There's a small stream running into the lake for drinking, and some natural shade on the far side.
- **Important:** LEPTOSPIROSIS IS PRESENT IN THE LAKE. No matter how inviting it looks, do not let your dog swim or drink from this lake. Use the stream instead. The same advice, of course, applies to yourself and your children.

Col de Ranfolly Ridge Trail

- **Duration:** 2–3 hours return
- **Route:** Follow signs from the parking area up the ridge line towards Col de Ranfolly
- **Scenery:** Spectacular panoramic views of Mont Blanc on clear days
- **Dog tips:** No water sources along this route — carry water and avoid midday heat. No technical terrain but some steep sections and severe edges/drops

Chardonnieres Pastures Trails

- **Duration:** 1–1.5 hours
- **Route:** Explore the open pastures beyond the car park along farm tracks
- **Dog tips:** These tracks are quiet and beautiful, but cross active grazing land — leads are essential and recall must be reliable. Avoid during fog — it's easy to get disoriented.

Facilities at Le Joux Plane

- **Free Parking** – A large parking area right at the col
- **Toilets** – Basic public toilets near the main parking area (seasonal)
- **Snack Chalet / Small Restaurant** – Usually open in summer, serving drinks, sandwiches, and local snacks (check seasonal hours)
- **Picnic Tables** – Scattered near the lake and parking, great for lunch with a view
- No toilets or bins in low season — take waste (including dog poo bags) with you.

Safety & Reminders

- Always **keep your dog on a lead**, even in open spaces.
- Do **not approach or pass through herds** of sheep or cows — go around widely, calmly, and quietly. Watch for **patous** — if one approaches, remain calm, keep your dog tight and quiet at your side, and back away slowly. Avoid noise, sudden movement, or eye contact.

Lac de Gers (from Samoëns 1600) – A Quiet Mountain Lake Hike with Your Dog

- **Location:** East of Samoëns, in the secluded Gers valley
- **Altitude:** ~1,540 metres
- **Distance:** Approx. 8–10 km round trip
- **Duration:** Around 3 to 4 hours return, depending on route and pace
- **Difficulty:** Moderate (steep in places, requires reasonable fitness)
- **Best for:** Tranquillity, stunning views, and a refreshing mountain experience
- **Access:** Drive up to Samoëns 1600 via the road from Samoëns village.
- **Start Point:** Car park at Samoëns 1600 ski station
- **Route:** From the car park, follow the track marked for **Lac de Gers** or **Refuge de Gers**. The route descends gently at first, then traverses through meadows and pine forest into the remote Gers valley.
- **Trail Type:** Alpine tracks, grassy paths, occasional rocky sections
- **Navigation:** The path is marked, but download a map in advance — signage is limited after the ski area.

Lac de Gers (from Lédechan Parking) - A cool, shady hike, perfect for hot days

- **Location:** East of Samoëns, in the secluded Gers valley
- **Altitude:** ~1,540 metres
- **Distance:** Approx. 11 km round trip
- **Duration:** Around 4 hours return, depending on route and pace
- **Difficulty:** Moderate (steep in places, requires reasonable fitness)
- **Best for:** Tranquillity, stunning views, and a refreshing mountain experience
- **Route:** From Lédechan, follow the marked trail heading south into the **Bois de Gers**. The path steadily climbs alongside the **Giffre des Fonds** stream, passing through shady woodland and occasional clearings. The route is easy to follow, with yellow signposts and plenty of natural water sources along the way—ideal for dogs..
- **Trail Type:** Mostly on a 4x4 track so not too challenging terrain
- **Navigation:** The path is marked, but download a map in advance — signage is limited after the ski area.

Dog Notes:

- Water and shade available most of the way
- No tricky sections or steep drops

Dog Policy

- Dogs are **allowed on the route to Lac de Gers**, but must be **kept on a lead at all times**, as required by French law.
- The area is **not in a nature reserve**, but it is alpine pasture — cows and **patous (livestock guardian dogs)** are commonly present in summer.
- Off-lead dogs may provoke guardian dogs or cause harm to livestock — **strict lead control is essential**.
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At the Lake

- Lac de Gers is a **wild alpine lake** nestled beneath cliffs and peaks. There is no built infrastructure except the **Refuge de Gers** nearby, which does allow dogs on the terrace.
- **Picnic friendly**, but **no bins** — take all rubbish (and dog waste) home with you.
- There is a stream for drinking water, but bring a backup supply just in case.

Important Notes for Dog Owners

- **Leads are legally required at all times** on French public trails — even in remote areas
- In grazing zones, stay well clear of herds and avoid any interaction with **patous**. If one approaches, stop, remain calm, and back away slowly.
- **No phone signal** in the valley — ensure someone knows your route
- **Early morning or late afternoon** walks are best in summer, as the trail from 1600 down is exposed to sun and can become hot. The trail up from Ledechan is shadier.

Lac de Gers is one of the valley's true hidden gems — peaceful, remote, and rich in alpine beauty. With the right preparation and respect for the terrain, it's an unforgettable experience for you and your dog.

Giffre River Trail – Easy, Flat & Family-Friendly

- **Location:** Follows the Giffre River between Sixt-Fer-à-Cheval, Samoëns, Morillon & Verchaix
- **Distance:** Flexible — from short 30-minute strolls to full-day walks (up to ~10 km one way)
- **Difficulty:** Very easy
- **Surface:** Mix of gravel, dirt, and occasional paved sections
- **Best for:** Families with children, older guests, older dogs, pushchairs, and guests wanting a relaxed walk

✓ Dog Policy

- Dogs are **welcome along the full length of the river trail**, but must be **kept on a lead at all times** in accordance with French law.
- The trail passes through public areas, grazing land, and near roads — so leash control is essential for everyone's safety.
- You'll pass many other walkers, dogs, cyclists, and children — please keep your dog under control at all times
- Dogs are not allowed in or around Lac Bleu.
- Dogs, on lead, are allowed around the Lac Aux Dames. I am not certain whether they are 'officially' allowed to swim in Lac Aux Dames. Certainly I have noticed that calm dogs, far away from the human swimming area, any fishermen, or the water golf, often go in for a dip and I have never seen anyone have an issue. I advise you to check the rules yourself if you are not sure.

🐕 Tips for Dog Owners

- **Plenty of opportunities for your dog to paddle in the River Giffre**, especially in calmer areas — but always watch for rafters, current, especially after heavy rain and other users.
- Bring **waste bags** — there are bins along the route, especially near the villages.
- In summer, walk **early or late** in the day to avoid heat, although much of the trail is shaded.

Suggested Section: Morillon (Lac Bleu) to Samoëns

- **Distance:** Approx. 4–5 km one way
- **Time:** 1 to 1.5 hours at a gentle pace
- **Highlights:**
 - Shady woodland sections
 - Wooden bridges over the Giffre
 - Open meadows and picnic spots
 - Water access for dogs to paddle safely
 - Beautiful views of the Criou and surrounding peaks
- **Access Points:** You can join the path from Morillon (near Lac Bleu), Samoëns (by the outdoor pool), or Verchaix (river path near the football field)

Family Friendly Features

- Suitable for pushchairs and young children
- Picnic tables and benches along the route
- Plenty of spots to stop for snacks or a break
- Close to cafés and shops in Morillon and Samoëns
- Public toilets available at Lac Bleu and near Samoëns pool

This is one of the most flexible, relaxing, and scenic walks in the valley — perfect for stretching your legs or unwinding with your dog while staying close to civilization. A great way to enjoy the valley without tackling a mountain. Our favourite is to walk from Samoëns to Morillon, have our lunch in a restaurant at Morillon and wander back, maybe stopping off for a drink on our return to Samoëns at L'Entre 2 Lacs next to Lac Aux Dames.