

Travel

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'The sky becomes a cyclone of whirling birds flashing red as they draw shapes in the rays'

Chris Haslam on the magic of Kilifi in Kenya

Walking in the Valbona valley, Albania



GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY

Europe's 25 best walking trips

From strolls through Albania to solo stomps in Iceland — **James Stewart**, our expert, has this year's top new hiking holidays

When I was 14 I borrowed a basic rucksack from my biology teacher and hostelled through the Peak District National Park with a pal. My peers thought the idea ludicrous — walking in the 1980s involved cagoules and mint cake. Not cool at all. Certainly, we had both on that trip, but we also discovered the joys of a walking break, its freedom, its small triumphs, its slow immersion into scenery no driver will see.

After that came a series of rugged self-organised hikes — in New Zealand, the Himalayas, through the Tasmanian wilderness — trusting in providence and

the fortitude of my twenties. So my first trip with a tour operator a decade later was a revelation.

While travelling light with a tent, packet pasta and unwarranted optimism have their place, what I've discovered over 20 years of strolling through Slovenia, ambling through Arcadia or making a pilgrimage of solace to Santiago de Compostela is that the great outdoors is considerably greater when it's experienced in comfort. That's where Europe excels. If walking destinations like Canada or New Zealand demand a certain rugged self-sufficiency, Europe offers good food and a comfy bed every day. While I still revel in the soft adventure of

a walk, I've learnt to appreciate its overnights. Places such as the Tuscan inn where a twinkly septuagenarian owner served me a superb dinner while her daughter sloshed red wine to the brim of my glass. Sure beats packet pasta after five hours' walking.

Nowadays I'll happily use navigation apps and hand over my luggage for transfer each day. Unless stated, each of these new European trips does likewise. I've focused on cooler destinations and mountains to avoid the heat of Mediterranean summers, though



Enjoy a guided hike on Vis, Croatia

Great walks next page



Three countries in the Balkans

Travel in the Accursed Mountains, where Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro rub up against each other, is measured in decades as much as in distance. Up here in the Balkans' attic are horse-drawn carts, shepherds herding flocks and men rhythmically scything by hand. The Valbona valley and Prokletije National Park in southern Kosovo are landscapes to experience slowly on daily hikes of six to eight hours. This regular guided trip typically has groups averaging a dozen-strong. Local culture is experienced via village guesthouses plus one mountain refuge in the Doberdol valley. The one caveat? Expect to share rooms.

Details Eight nights' full board from £1,599pp, including transfers (gadventures.com). Fly to Tirana

Seascapes in Malta

Go before June or save this until October. By then, the southern Mediterranean will be in the mid-twenties and the sea at its warmest — just the time to leave the UK's dishrag skies behind for a walk in a country, including the neighbouring island of Gozo, that is 80 per cent undeveloped. Unlike most walking tours, where you unpack nightly, this trip is based in two four-star hotels for day walks, accessed by transfer. In Mellieha in

Malta there are cliffs, epic seascapes and coves. And around the town of Xaghra in Gozo are swims and lemon orchards, Unesco-listed prehistoric temples and pilgrimage churches. Although the self-guided walks average five hours, the terrain is moderate.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £935pp, including transfers, ferries and some extra meals (theadventure.com). Fly to Malta



A beach next to the Rota Vincentina path in Portugal



The Cathedral of Oviedo, starting point for Spain's Camino Primitivo

Discover the Faroe Islands

The last time I walked in the Faroe Islands I saw a waterfall spin up a cliff and watched islands capsize into a sea that was all foam and glitter. I never once got used to the archipelago's mercurial light. Factor in seabirds whirling on cliffs — this visits Mykines island, known for puffins — Gasadalur village, which is like a *Game of Thrones* location, sinuous gorge harbours and the pipsqueak capital Torshavn, and the Faroes makes one hell of a destination in which to rediscover the soul-enhancing potential of a good walk. This small group trip takes in six islands.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £3,679pp, including transfers and some extra meals (explore.co.uk). Fly to Vagar

Stockholm archipelago in summer

Swedes are good at summer #bestlife. While we sweat it out in cities, they relax by the sea in Stockholm. In the Stockholm archipelago they enjoy simpler, purer lives, swimming off sand beaches, deep-breathing pine-fresh air and sleeping in rust-red family stays by the water. Here's your chance to join them. Bookended by nights in Stockholm, the trip takes a boat from Dalarna to access a string of islands: the playwright August Strindberg's favourite Kymmendo, Huvudskar, Uto and quiet Orno. On each one is a self-guided walk of about three hours and a nice hotel. The terrain is largely flat. Best life indeed.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,190pp (utracks.com). Fly to Stockholm

Walk and cruise in Croatia

You fancy a luxury cruise. You also think a week of lethargy is a bit, well, boring. This small ship holiday is the solution. *Salve di Mare*, a new(ish) ship with a hot tub and multiple sunbeds, sails from Split to Dubrovnik via the best islands of Dalmatia: hip Hvar, bohemian Vis, pretty Korcula and the nature island of Mljet. At each, should you choose, you'll disembark with up to 39 other guests for guided hikes of two to three hours. If not, you're welcome to swim, potter around a pretty harbour or simply stay on board with a book. Your holiday, your choice.

Details Seven nights' half-board from £1,479pp (sail-croatia.com). Fly to Split

Burgundy for gourmands

Jamais en vain, toujours en vin (never in vain, always in wine) runs the motto of the knights of Tastevin, an elite fraternity of Burgundian wine ambassadors. It could serve as the strapline of this self-guided holiday through some of the most hallowed names of French gastronomy: Marsannay, Gevrey Chambertin, Nuits St Georges, Beaune; *grand crus* such as Clos de Vougeot and Corton-Charlemagne; and dishes such as boeuf

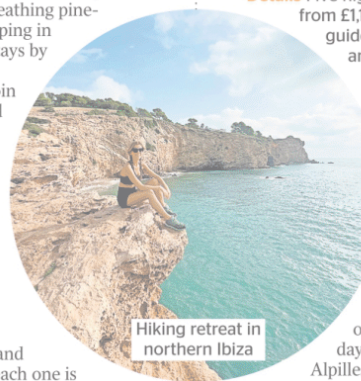
bourguignon and poulet de bresse à la crème. Given all that, they've sensibly planned this as an easy route. You've an average of seven flattish miles a day to cover on lanes, vineyard tracks and woodland trails.

Details Six nights' B&B from £1,279pp, including some extra meals (exodus.co.uk). Take the train to Dijon

A hiking retreat in Ibiza

Ibiza is a beautiful place to go hiking, especially in the quieter, rockier north. Having lived — and walked — on the island for over a decade, mother-and-daughter Lesley and Danielle Pyne decided they wanted to showcase this aspect of their adoptive homeland. They designed the kind of walking retreat that they would want to go on: something to suit all ages and fitness levels, with great food and with accommodation at a fabulous but homely villa. Their five-day retreats run in spring and late-summer/autumn. A typical day will start with a big hike followed huge lunch cooked by their private chef. There's usually another activity in the afternoons, from kayaking to Pilates.

Details Five nights' half-board from £1,198pp, including guided hikes, activities and transfers (footlooseibiza.com). Fly to Ibiza



Autumn hikes in Provence

They bill this holiday as "Provence winter sun" but that's not quite true. Its week of self-guided easy day hikes through the Alpilles and Luberon

natural parks is available from September. Still, I'd leave this three-centre trip until October. Villages relax after the summer and temperatures allow walking for pleasure through Van Gogh territory: thyme-filled fields and cypress trees, the Romanesque Sénanque Abbey, and beautiful villages such as Gordes and Saint Rémy de Provence. Van Gogh spent his final year in a monastery near the last of these. You're in a nice three-star hotel. Other stays are in L'Isle sur la Sorgue and Arles.

Details Five nights' B&B from £850pp (walkersbritain.co.uk). Fly or take the train to Avignon

Andorra's forgotten mountains

Have you visited Andorra? Perhaps if you're a skier but otherwise I expect not. Either way, this European mountain state, which is the size of Rutland and is wedged between France and Spain, makes for a fascinating walking break. From a four-star hotel with spa facilities in Grandvalira ski resort, guides lead small groups on a choice of two walks: one easy at about five miles, the other modestly harder. Either way you're up among the good stuff of the Pyrenees. Cows graze on high pasture in Comapedrosa Natural Park, lakes sparkle in Pessons valley and meadows are ablaze with wildflowers.

Details Six nights' half-board from £1,454pp, including flights and transfers (hfholidays.co.uk)

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► included a few of the latter as late-spring or autumn options.

Of course, the 20-year-old me would have thought the idea of paying someone to transport luggage while walking was madness. Getting older has its benefits.

Slow paths through Istria

It became fashionable a decade ago to call Croatia's Istria the new Tuscany. It isn't — it's more interesting. While arty Grozjan and smart Motovun, medieval towns spiralled on inland hills at the Adriatic's head, might fit in, does Tuscany have chic Venetian-style towns like Rovinj or an island such as Brijuni, where zebras graze among Roman ruins? Does it have a village-sized city like Hum, a place so small they invented a myth to explain it, or a dreamlike seaside promenade like the one beneath Lovran? It does not. All are included on this tour of self-guided walks, all of which are less than eight miles long.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,940pp, including flights and transfers (regent-holidays.co.uk)

The romantic German Rhine

Two hundred years ago the Rhine Valley was understood by the Romantics to be the quintessence of wild romance. The German poet Clemens Brentano wrote a myth about a tragic enchantress, Lorelei, to explain the splendour of a mighty river that swept past vineyards, castles and half-timbered towns. The west German region became a coach tour favourite in the Eighties but mass tourism has largely moved on. This group trip, averaging a dozen holidaymakers, is based in a riverside four-star at Boppard in the central Rhine and reaches trail heads by boat and train. Walks are between five and ten miles long.

Details Seven nights' half-board from £1,699pp, including flights and transfers (rambleworldwide.co.uk)

Yoga and hiking in Madeira

It's a great plan: walk, eat well, depart stronger and calmer. That's the aim of this hiking and yoga break to Madeira, the Portuguese island north of the Canary Islands whose moderate climate allows for pleasant autumn walks. The wild fecundity lends an exoticism that belies the four-hour flying time from the UK. Based in Quinta do Arco, a four-star hotel with a pool on the green-fuzzed hills of Sao Jorge valley, the schedule includes daily yoga daily plus four guided walks in the island's quieter north. Expect four to five hours of subtropical forest, waterfalls, cable cars to farm villages and swims in sea pools.

Details Five nights' B&B from £1,379pp, including transfers and some extra meals (muchbetteradventures.com). Fly to Madeira

Mountain villages in Spain's Costa Blanca

The Marina Alta is the Costa Blanca but not as you know it. Instead of the

fleshpots around Benidorm, it's a sparsely populated inland to the north, a place of mountain villages that are tied together by waymarked paths that teeter along ridges and amble through valleys of orchards and woodlands. This moderately tough self-guided route begins at Castell de Castells and visits the remote village of Benimaurells on a route east via the Catedral de Senderismo — the "cathedral of hiking". Expect roughly six hours on foot each day plus family B&B stays. Ahead is the sea at journey's end, Denia. One tip: save this until late autumn or early winter.

Details Six nights' full board from £1,150pp (onfootholidays.co.uk). Fly to Alicante

Iceland for solo walkers

No wonder solo travel is booming when specialist tour operators are running trips like this. You don't book this Iceland holiday to hike so much as to experience a land that creation hasn't finished building yet. Highlights include Kerlingarfjöll, an extreme central wilderness of steaming mountains, and paths through obsidian fields at Landmannalaugar, although it's

the glacial lagoon at Jokulsarlon that will bust your Insta account.

When time is tight, the tour sensibly focuses on three-hour walks in the south and centre of the country. Hotels are three-star jobs and your companions are a crew of about a dozen fellow adventurers who relish the freedom of travelling alone.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £4,475pp, including flights and transfers (solosolidays.com)

Relaxed walks in Tuscany

Mac's Adventure has two new Italy trips in its relaxed trails portfolio. I'm choosing the one in Tuscany because it lives up to the name. You can't really call day walks of two to six miles hiking — they barely count as strolls, especially when the trip notes for San Gimignano advise you to "sit in an outdoor cafe with a glass of wine". Still, I'm willing to bet that this series of self-guided ambles between Volterra and Siena will reinvent an area you may have thought you already knew, offering the ideal combination of beauty, escapism and relaxation. Accommodation is in historic characterful hotels along the route.

Details Six nights' B&B from £945pp, including transfers (macsadventure.com). Fly to Pisa

Slovenia with the family

Family walking holidays don't have to mean sulky kids and arguments about map-reading. The secret is to find somewhere with a bell-pealing beauty to wow the TikTok generation and to mix up walking with other activities: a morning's cycling here, some rafting there. Finally, ensure you have short drives between each night's hotel. In short, book this trip to the highlights of northwest Slovenia. It's a bespoke holiday that takes in favourites such as Lake Bled and Soca Valley but also visits the quieter Logar Valley and Lake Bohinj



Hiking in Andorra

before it swings to the Italianate coastal town of Piran.

Details Eleven nights' B&B from £2,000pp, including flights, activities and car hire (stubbornmuletravel.com)

Affordable Algarve

Don't read this entry yet: first look at the price at the bottom. Astonishing, isn't it? I've no idea how Ramble Worldwide

offers this for that price, although the Post Office's Holiday Money report in March named the Algarve the cheapest holiday destination in the world. It would be silly to book this self-guided walk just because it's cheap, though. Fortunately it cherry-picks the best sections of the Rota Vincentina path on the Algarve and Alentejo coasts: 70 miles of wild cliffs, epic surf beaches and small white towns where sardines sizzle on grills. Transfers skip out dull bits. Magic.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £639pp (rambleworldwide.co.uk). Fly to Faro

Northern Spain's quieter camino

This is a Jubilee year, a quarter-century event during which the Catholic Church grants plenary indulgences. A cleansed soul is yours for the price of completing a camino to Santiago de Compostela. After a record-breaking 499,239 certificates last year, authorities expect new highs on the French, Portuguese and Coastal Portuguese routes, which together accounted for 406,589 walkers, most travelling in May and August. Take the two-week Camino Primitivo through Asturias: rugged, rural and almost untouched from Oviedo to Lugo, it's like stepping back in time. It's a long trip but then no one said salvation came easy.

Details Sixteen nights' B&B from £2,527pp (caminoways.com). Fly to Asturias



Stroll Sweden's Baltic coast

Cultural walks in La Gomera

► When I walked with this company in Spain its guided experiences revealed how much self-guided travellers tend to overlook. So while this newish holiday to La Gomera includes self-guided walks through the quietest Canary island — paths to colourful villages such as Agulo and through the subtropical Vallehermoso gorge, which feels more Central American than European — it also has a route through the cloud forest of Garajonay National Park with a naturalist guide plus a demonstration of the islanders' former whistling language. Its revival makes sense when you see how sketchy mobile phone reception is. The final day on Tenerife offers more walking or time at a spa.

Details Six nights' B&B from £1,500pp, including transfers and some extra meals (pura-aventura.com). Fly to Tenerife

Dolce vita of the Italian lakes

The Italian lakes are an idea as much as a destination. We go for small-scale Grand Tours in the footsteps of Goethe and Lord Byron. So instead of overtouristed Lake Como, visit — as they did — the hill tracks and lakeside paths around Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta. Between Orta San Giulio and Ascona lie handsome resorts such as Stresa, baroque villas on the Borromeo islands, long lunches in villages that seem to have ripened in the sun and, above all, tranquillity. Walks on this four-centre break are short and, being self-guided, optional.

Details Eight nights' B&B from £1,499pp (headwater.com). Fly to Milan

Guided hikes in Lofoten, Norway

One benefit of the interest in cooler-climate holidays is that walkers are seeking new destinations away from southern favourites. Few deliver the goods like Norway's Lofoten islands. Where north Norway shatters into Arctic seas lies a region that was seemingly built after reading Viking myths, all walls of mountain and rust red fishing villages on blue-black bays. You'll see what I mean from the summit of Reinebringen and in the Kvalvika area of Lofotodden National Park — two of six moderately challenging hikes on this guided tour in an Arctic summer — and in Nusfjord, the standout village of the region.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £3,899pp, including transfers and some extra meals (exodus.co.uk). Fly to Bodø

Switzerland's Haute Route challenge

In an article for an 1862 edition of the Alpine Club journal, Frederick William Jacomb complained about the "great tourist tide" which stuck to "hackneyed tracks" between Zermatt and Chamonix. He praised club members who had pioneered a new high level route: the Haute Route of this group trip

across the attic of Europe. You'll need to be happy to carry a 40-litre pack on technical trails, ascend at least 1,000m daily and share rooms in guesthouses and refuges. The rewards include being among 4,000m peaks at Col de Torrent and the Matterhorn Valley. For wild escapism nothing else in this list comes close.

Details Six nights' full board from £1,587pp (muchbetteradventures.com). Fly to Geneva

Mountain trails in Slovakia

Here's a trip that's catnip for mountain walkers. In 1993 Unesco named the High Tatras of Slovakia a biosphere reserve for its ridiculous beauty: corkscrew peaks punching above 2,500m, forested valleys and glacial lakes such as Zelene Plesno (green lake). Holidaymakers seem slower to catch on. To make the most of the area choose this self-guided trip, based first at Strbske Pleso and then at Starý Smokovec, gateway to the biosphere. The benefit of an organised trip are the taxis, which scoop you off the trail after hikes of ten miles maximum. It concludes at a spa complex in Poprad.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,549pp, including flights and transfers (walksworldwide.com)

Albania beyond the beach

The hike from Kudhes in southern Albania nicely sums up this guided trip.

It starts at a hillside village crumbling among citrus trees and vines, follows a sketchy shepherd's trail up through forest then descends among meadows and olive terraces to Qeparo village, with views over the entire Albanian Riviera. You're right, the sea looks beautiful — and that's why the next stop is a swim at the coastal resort Himare.

Over a week of four-hour walks, this winks out the older rustic Albania behind the coastal resorts while still factoring in beach time. One highlight is the wild Karaburun peninsula, previously out of bounds as a naval site.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,145pp, including transfers (explore.co.uk). Fly to Tirana

Mountains and meadows in the Austrian alps

Austria unveiled the Kaiserweg path 20 years ago yet the Tyrol comes second in British walkers' affections to the French Alps. Ask Austrians about the Wilder Kaiser and they'll enthuse about mountains and alpine meadows, swims in Walchsee lake and towns such as Kufstein, with its castle and frescoed baroque buildings. You'll roll your eyes, book this good-value self-guided holiday then discover it's all true. Its winding 51-mile route includes two nights' high escape in mountain hikers' huts and occasional challenges: you have to carry your rucksack for two days. See it as an excuse to order the spud-heavy fry-up gröstl.

Details Six nights' B&B from £820pp, including some extra meals (macsadventure.com). Fly to Innsbruck

Guided hikes in Lofoten islands, Norway



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