

USA TODAY TRAVEL | CRUISE OPTIONS LET YOU SAIL YOUR WAY

GO ESCAPE

SUMMER 2025

EXPLORE
AMERICA
REGION-BY-REGION
GUIDE

Indulge



BEAT THE HEAT
EMBARK ON A
'COOLCATION'

HEAVENLY HIKES
GUIDED TOURS
ACROSS EUROPE

MIND THE GAP
PAUSE MIDCAREER
AND EXPLORE

DISPLAY UNTIL JULY 29, 2025
\$5.99US \$6.99CAN



ADVENTURE'S AFOOT

Guided European
hiking vacations
bring local
culture to life

BY SAL VAGLICA



TREKTRAVEL



While all travel involves at least some walking, on a hiking trip the payoff is twofold — it's both the journey and the destination. With boots on the ground, you hike along a town's paths, streets and trails, gaining a sense of its history while rubbing elbows with locals who lend contemporary context.

Organizing a trip can be stressful — where to stay, what to visit, where to eat — and it's even more difficult if you want to explore the back roads of a foreign country. As a hiker, researching trails and routes online is no match for local knowledge.



A guided hiking vacation fills that gap with experts who go well beyond simply making sure you don't get lost. The guides on European hiking adventures know the routes, handle moving between hotels and restaurants, speak the local language along with English and ensure you leave with a better understanding of the route's sites and vistas.

If the idea of touring on foot triggers field trip flashbacks or seeing a horde of adults following a raised flag around a city, European hiking tour operators usually situate you in independent, smaller hotels and inns, tucked away from the touristy parts of town.

Laura Witherspoon and her husband, David Head, of Chattanooga, Tenn., recently returned from their eighth hiking trip, this one to France's Normandy region. She sees the value of having a guide and a team behind them arranging the itinerary and the logistics of the adventure.

Country Walkers, the Williston, Vt.-based operator the couple used, "makes it so easy for you to just show up, but the hotels and inns you stay at are not places you likely would have discovered yourself because they're out of the way," Witherspoon says.

Guided hiking tours can range from mild exercise to a strenuous workout — in either case, you'll earn that extra wine or dessert with dinner — but that's all you have to focus on because nearly every other detail is planned for you. Once booked, you can focus on finding perfectly fitting hiking boots and look forward to enjoying the vistas, which will feel sweeter because you worked a bit harder for them.

From Portugal's coast to Scandinavia's northern lights, you can find hiking tours to just about any part of Europe from providers such as Country Walkers, Exodus, Backroads, Trek Travel, Explore Worldwide and Off the Beaten Path. The difficulty of the hiking is as varied as the locations, with some tours designed for those who can walk about 5 miles throughout the day to more strenuous routes on technical trails that can have you trekking more than 15 miles daily with elevation gains of up to 4,000 feet — after you've provided proof of medevac insurance. >



Vernazza, Italy

There are tours for nearly every fitness level, but some are better suited to travelers who might want to opt out for an afternoon of less-intensive experiences. “This one afternoon we went on a hike to a waterfall,” Donna Neidert of Lakewood Ranch, Fla., says of an Explore Worldwide trip to Italy’s Amalfi Coast. “The guide knew exactly where we were going, because we went off the beaten path, and we sat in a field and ate our lunch.”

The guides, who are sometimes native to the tour region, are the backbone of this kind of travel experience. Guides handle the basics of keeping hikers safe and on schedule, but, in the end, they realize this is your vacation.

European hiking tours range from about a week to more than 20 days, depending on how ambitious the route is. A tour through Ireland’s Clare, Killarney and Dingle counties might be a week long with up to 8 miles per day of hiking, while the Tour du Mont Blanc, looping through Italy, France and Switzerland, requires 10



Camino de Santiago in Portugal

COUNTRY WALKERS (2); ALEX MOLING/IDM SUDTIROL (2); GETTY IMAGES



days while logging up to 12 miles daily. Tours can happen almost any time of the year outside of the depth of winter, though many operators tend to skip the peak heat of July and August unless the route is at higher, cooler mountain elevations.

Group size typically ranges from 10 to 20 hikers; normally, the tougher the route the smaller the group. Smaller groups might have one guide, while larger ones or routes that are more challenging might have two. While couples make up a large portion of the hikers, you can find solo travelers weaved in, along with friends, families with young children or teenagers, and multigenerational groups.

Browsing providers' websites should be your first stop. Pay attention to factors such as the cost, dates and number of days of a particular tour, along with details about the level of hiking. Pricing always includes lodging and most, but not all, meals, including beer and wine, fees >



Alto Badia in the Dolomites



Hiking in the Dolomites

to enter venues such as parks or pre-serves and the guide's services for the duration of the trip.

Some providers will include airfare in the price, but usually you're left to book round-trip flights. Some hikers prefer to arrive a couple of days early — especially ahead of longer tours or those at higher elevations — to get acclimated. Or they tack on a few extra days at the end.

Calgary, Alberta, native and avid hiker Bev Stevenson did just that after an Exodus tour through the Dolomites in northern Italy, heading to Majorca, Spain. "I made all my arrangements and visited Barcelona, which is kind of a jumping-off point for Majorca, and went up the coast and back down," she says.

All tour providers offer a detailed online itinerary of what sites and vistas you'll see and what you'll do that might not be hiking-related — like visiting a winery in France or taking a pasta-making lesson on an Italian farm. Expect to see a daily breakdown that includes how many miles you'll walk, the elevation, and where the tour might use a private bus to speed things along.

A typical tour day starts with breakfast at the hotel followed by a morning hike, lunch and an afternoon hike. Then it's back to your room to freshen up before dinner.

Days can be broken up with stops in town for shopping or gelato tasting, and guides lend those experiences local character. Because they're familiar with the routes, they can help steer you to a restaurant for those nights when you're not eating with the group.

"We were on Playa El Castelle (in Spain) and saw someone using a *purrón*," a traditional Spanish wine pitcher, says San Francisco-based content strategist Courtney Muro, recalling a Backroads trip. "We wanted to try it but didn't know how, so the guides got a hold of one, filled it with wine, and we spent an hour pouring it into our mouth, trying to get it as far from our mouths as possible while still hitting the mark. The Spanish people were laughing at us, and it was a great time."

Since everyone on the tour has hiking in common, it's not unusual to form friendships that lead to other trips together. "Four people I met in Majorca are coming here to hike the Rockies with me," Stevenson says.



While each brand offers a way to gauge how difficult the trip will be — typically a system of numbers and description, like grading a hike in the Dolomites as a level 3, moderate — the fitness level varies depending on the provider. "Most of the trips we've been on are easy to moderate hiking," Witherspoon says.

Some trekkers look at the ratings and feel emboldened to take on the challenge,

with the comfort of knowing that if you need extra time, the guides are there to lend a hand. "Dolomites was irresistible," says Cathy Dillard of Asheville, N.C.

"When I read the trip description and saw the energy index, I thought, 'I can do this,' though the elevation added an extra challenge at times. But if I needed a breather, I would simply pause, soak in the stunning scenery and continue." ■

BACKROADS: TREK TRAVEL; GETTY IMAGES





Alps near Kitzbuhel, Austria



Irish coast

