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LUXURY MAGAZINE





Courtesy Trek Travel/Hotel Fanes. Opposite: Courtesy Explora Patagonia National Park

Prone to Wander

The world's best hiking trips highlight memorable sites at a pace you can enjoy.

BY LARRY OLMSTED

For as long as there has been human history, we've gone wandering in the wilderness. Some seek divine insights, others the inspiration of nature; some look for solitude, others want company. Thoreau had Walden Pond, Robert Frost took the road less traveled, and one of fiction's most revered travelers, Bilbo Baggins, famously opined that "not all who wander are lost."

On a hiking vacation, travelers find much

to justify the journey: stunning natural sites, rare wildlife, historic places, remote temples and ruins. Food satiates differently after a few miles on foot, and mountaintops mean more when reached by your own power. Book the right location, with the right tour operator, and navigating the complicated logistics of such a trip becomes a walk in the park. You do the walking, they do just about everything else—from moving your luggage to the next top-rated hotel to booking massages

and arranging exclusive access to sites and attractions along the way. Expert guides know the routes and the finest meals along them.

Now is the time to venture out, since the massive, post-pandemic increase in outdoor activities and active travel. There are more great hiking trip options in wonderful places than ever before, and almost all top-tier companies offer both small group scheduled trips and custom private departures for these, some of the world's best hiking trips. →



BASE CAMP HIKING
Patagonia and the Sacred Valley of the Incas
Chile and Peru

Many guided hiking trips move from hotel to hotel with luggage transfers included. Others allow hikers to stay in one place and more deeply explore their surroundings, which works well when staying with one of the world's best—and most unique—adventure travel companies, **Explora** (*explora.com*). The ultra-sustainable, family-owned business focuses on showing off the best of South America, from nature to wine to regional cuisine. They operate eco-friendly lodges in some of the continent's most beautiful settings, with multiday programs offering an array of half- and full-day hikes, plus other outdoor activities. Explora has an in-house army of highly trained local guides at each location—experts on culture as well as trails. In southern Chile, Explora raises its own Patagonian horses for those who want to ride. The most famous Explora lodge is in the world-renowned Torres del Paine National Park in Patagonia, accessing lakes, glaciers, rock formations, and some of the most photographed hiking terrain on Earth. A lodge in Peru's Sacred Valley of the Incas, below the fabled "Lost City" of Machu Picchu, offers access to a staggering array of important ruins. Explora runs its boutique lodges on an all-inclusive basis, with local foods, wines, activities, and guides.



TAKING HIKING TO A HIGHER LEVEL
Heli-Hiking
British Columbia

In 1978, **CMH Heli-Skiing & Summer Adventures** (*cmhsummer.com*), the world's largest heli-skiing operator, decided to try replicating its proven mountain concept in summer, out of one of its remote lodges. By the following year, summer trips were 100-percent sold out, and CMH has since expanded the entirely new adventure category they created—heli-hiking—to three locations in British Columbia. The CMH program operates like heli-skiing, where guests are flown to a point, dropped off, hike to a finish spot, are picked up, and then do it again and again in a variety of ideal locations, focusing on high alpine meadows, granite cliffs, old growth forests, mountain lakes, and everything else the region offers. Each "run" maximizes the best natural beauty and terrain of the region without all the time required to get there by foot. There is still plenty of hiking, with daily choices from moderate to high output, but all of it is the crème de la crème of the region's routes. Unlike many top hiking spots, you are unlikely to see another traveler. Guides are experts in the local flora, fauna, geology, and history, and lodges are operated with included meals, equipment, and transfers. Other companies have since started heli-hiking, but no one has been doing it with this frequency for half a century. →



Courtesy Images, From Top: CMH Summer Adventures/Katie Goldie; CMH Summer Adventures/Jesse Tamayo; CMH Summer Adventures/Taylor Burk. Opposite: Courtesy Explora Patagonia National Park (3)



MOUNTAINS, COASTS, AND CASTLES

Ireland and Scotland

Crisscrossed with ancient walking paths; rich in coastline, islands, castles, and history; and home to world-class distilleries and breweries, both Scotland and Ireland are marquee hiking destinations. Both are lush and green with well-marked trails connecting cities in a way that makes it possible to take in a huge breadth of sites, from downtown Dublin and Edinburgh with their museums and castles to 1,000-year-old ruins and towering waterfalls. The choice often comes down to family heritage or simply trying someplace new. **Backroads** (backroads.com), America's biggest and best-established active, high-end travel specialist (since 1979) covers both destinations very well. Scotland trips include the Highlands or along the Inverness Coast and Isle of Skye. Women-only and easy-going, lower output itineraries are unique company specialties made possible by the Backroads' huge catalog. In Ireland, explore the beautiful Cork and Killarney area (full of ancient Celtic monuments), or go from Dublin into Northern Ireland and Belfast. In both countries they use standout hotels such as the Old Course in St. Andrews and the fabled Slieve Donard in Newcastle. →



ANCIENT PILGRIMAGES

Japan

It's no coincidence that the suddenly trendy practice of forest bathing was coined in Japan, a country reverential about natural beauty, from zen gardens to cherry blossoms. Beyond the megalopolis of Tokyo, much of the country is rural and journeys into the wilderness are often spiritual rituals, such as hiking Mount Fuji, a mountain so sacred it is referred to by the honorific Fuji San. Japan is home to several pilgrimage trails linking holy sites, such as the Kumano Kodo: six routes pilgrims have walked for self-purification for over a thousand years, earning a UNESCO World Heritage designation. The Shikoku Pilgrimage connects 88 holy temples in four prefectures, and the Nakasendo Way is an ancient footpath connecting Tokyo and Kyoto. All are offered by English-language specialist **Walk Japan** (walkjapan.com), started in 1992 by two professors of Japanese history. In the three-plus decades since, they have greatly expanded tours, but only in Japan, remaining highly specialized with a bent on educating travelers about local culture and cuisine. The company's first offering was an 11-day Nakasendo Way trip, still popular and also offered in a five-day "best of" version. There is also an 11-day Shikoku Temple pilgrimage, a nine-day Kumano Kodo pilgrimage, and many others, including specialty culinary trips and winter snowshoe tours. →



Courtesy Images, From Left: Backroads, Jayson Niedermeyer, Walk Japan (2)



GREAT APES
Gorilla Trekking
Rwanda

Wildlife is a highlight of many hikes, from grizzlies and bison in Yellowstone to llamas and condors in the Andes, but there is nothing on Earth like walking with mountain gorillas, found exclusively in Rwanda and Uganda, the former being more luxurious with the best lodges. For many guests this is truly a life-changing experience, as these are the largest primates, and you get up close and personal in way you could not do with a bear. Traditionally a two- to three-day add-on to an East African safari, the world's best-known luxury active travel specialist, Canada's **Butterfield & Robinson** (*butterfield.com*), offers an immersive nine-day Rwanda hiking trip, including gorilla trekking. B&R is widely credited with inventing the entire luxury guided cycling and hiking category in 1966, and in the 60 years since, has built a loyal following for its highly trained guides and high-touch itineraries, from quality lodging (like One&Only and Wilderness Safaris) to exclusive experiences. Gorilla trekking permits are extremely limited, making it virtually impossible to do without an organized tour, and this is a great way to experience it. The trip also visits tea and coffee plantations and Lake Kivu, directs climbs into the forest canopy, tracks chimpanzees, and of course, leads the way to meet silverback gorillas.



ICONIC AND EPIC
Tour du Mont Blanc
Switzerland, Italy, and France

This circuit circumnavigating its namesake peak, the highest in the Alps, passes through three countries over 12 days, with a shortened 8-day "express" variation. Specializing in both is one of the America's oldest and most experienced active travel experts: **MT Sobek** (*mtsobek.com*). Hikers traditionally begin and end in France's ultra-charming Chamonix. In between they cross high-mountain passes, fields of cows and sheep, and meadows of endless wildflowers, and walk along cliffs with stunning alpine vistas at every turn. Highlights include the luxe Italian ski town of Courmayeur, and cuisine varies delightfully by country. This is a challenging hike, averaging about 10 hilly miles daily, and since much of the best lodging and dining requires short transfers from trailheads, it is key to use a topnotch operator.



GORGEOUS AND GASTRONOMIC
The Dolomites
Italy

Some of the most beautiful landscapes on Earth are in the mountains, from the Andes to the Himalayas, but even by these lofty standards, few spots are so naturally stunning as the Dolomites, a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its geology and amazing rock formations. These cover two neighboring valleys full of charming mountain and ski towns, in turn chock-full of luxury lodging, spas, and fine dining. Just about every top active tour operator offers trips here, but **Trek Travel** (*trektravel.com*) has a near-perfect itinerary, crossing the valleys from Val Gardena to Val Badia, past the most famous rock formation (the massive Sella group) and a living, open-air WWI museum. Unlike many other routes, this also traverses the stunning Alpe di Siusi plateau, Europe's highest mountain pasture. You can take a break in famously decadent *rifugios* (rustic mountain huts that often boast world-class wine lists) and enjoy Michelin-starred dinners and stays at well-equipped wellness spa resorts, the perfect après-hike experience. →



Courtesy Images, From Top Left: MT Sobek; Trek Travel (3). Opposite: Courtesy Butterfield & Robinson (3)



**BESPOKE,
ULTRA-LUXURY**
Almost Anywhere

Suppose you have done a lot of hiking and want something different? Or have a group with radically different interests for non-hiking hours? Or you simply have a passion for the finer things, dislike compromise, and can accept nothing less than the very best in travel. **Gray & Co.** (grayandco.ca) is the only outfitter to ever win *Travel + Leisure's* Best Tour Operator in the World without offering any preset tours. Cari Gray founded the company to do nothing but bespoke curated trips for high-net-worth clients, and her staff-to-guest ratios are the highest in active travel. The group's interests take center stage, arranging meetings with artists, historians, or chefs, so everyone can pursue their individual passions. Because her clientele is extremely well-traveled, she is always exploring the next big thing—or the old thing in a better way. One of Europe's most popular hikes in is the Camino de Santiago in Spain, France, and Portugal, but miles are spent getting in and out of cities, with little great lodging, so most operators compromise, making it a hard trip to do in style. "We can pick the best stages focused on your ideal mileage, leapfrogging you out of the Porto suburbs, for example, with a vehicle to pick you up along the trail if anyone is tired, and transport you to the best nearby hotel, since not many are actually right on the Camino." She also recommends a circumnavigation of the island of Menorca in the footsteps of the Knights; Austria's Salzalpensteig Trail; New Zealand and Australia; and Bhutan, a hot emerging destination in the world's highest mountain range that is very difficult to do well on your own. In many spots, there are no luxury tour operators offering the routes Gray prefers.



All Images Courtesy Listed Manufacturer. Opposite: Courtesy Gray & Co. (3)

GEAR UP
Come prepared and you can go anywhere.



RAIN JACKET
Weather is the one thing no tour operator can control, so pack a light, breathable, but ultra-protective hooded jacket in your pack just in case. That would be the **Patagonia Torrentshell 3L Rain Jacket** in nine colors and both men's and women's fits. Fair Trade Certified and made from the company's proprietary H2No fabric. \$180; patagonia.com

HIKING PANTS & SHORTS
Comfortable movement, breathability, well-designed pockets, and protection from dirt, thorns, and rain are what you want in the perfect hiking pants. Outdoor specialist Kuhl delivers with the **Kühl Renegade**. They are soft, stretchy, and breathable, but also abrasion resistant and treated for water resistance, in multiple colors. The Renegade also comes in shorts for warmer climates. \$79 (shorts), \$99 (pants); kuhl.com

DAY PACK
Your luggage is moved for you, so no heavy lifting on the trail. You need a rain jacket, layers, snacks, water, and maybe a camera or binoculars. But you still want the comfort of a big technical pack: padded straps, waistbelt, ventilated back panel and hands-free hydration. For these big features in a small package, the best is the no-nonsense lifetime-guaranteed **Osprey Hikelite 28**. \$150; osprey.com

HYDRATION SYSTEM
A hydration bladder and hose hold far more than a bottle, with less bulk and hands-free access, so you drink more, and more often. But some are hard to fill and clean. Not the perfectly designed, leakproof **Osprey Hydraulics Bladders**, in 1.5-, 2-, and 3-liter sizes, which work with any pack but integrate perfectly with special storage in Osprey models. From \$38; osprey.com

POLES
The most important accessory after comfy shoes, trekking poles might be a first for you, but you won't go back. They burn more calories and give a better full-body workout, while increasing endurance and making ascents easier and descents safer; they also reduce knee strain. Ultralight, highly packable, and quickly adjustable with interchangeable tips for the wild, pavement, or snow, the **LEKI Black Series FX Carbon** poles are the Ferrari of walking sticks. \$250; lekiusa.com

NAVIGATION & METRICS
It's hard to get lost with a top tour operator, but why take chances? Garmin has always been the leader in recreational GPS mapping, but recently it has also become the go-to sports and fitness technology provider for tracking everything from steps and heart-rate zones to triathlon training. The top-tier hiking **Garmin Enduro 3 Adventure GPS Smartwatch** has unrivaled mapping and navigation functions, plus every other health, fitness, and environmental feature you can imagine—even a flashlight. Industry-best battery life runs up to 90 days on a charge. \$900; garmin.com ♦