

MY TRAVELS



APENNINE MOUNTAINS

I'D RATHER WALK, THANKS

Why a hiking holiday is the tonic for modern life

KENDALL HILL

Walking with Hedonistic Hiking in the Apennine Mountains, Italy; heading towards Puente Nuevo bridge in Ronda, Spain; and the Bay of Fires Walk on Tasmania's northeast coast.

PICTURES: KENDALL HILL, ISTOCK, TOURISM AUSTRALIA

Perhaps it's a reflection of my age – not so old but not so youthful anymore either – that these days I become a bit excited at the prospect of a walking holiday. It's the pace, I think. Driving holidays can be brilliant. Ditto trains and boats and bikes. But travelling at more than human speed sometimes leaves me frustrated for the photographs I miss or the scenic landscapes I never get to explore up close.

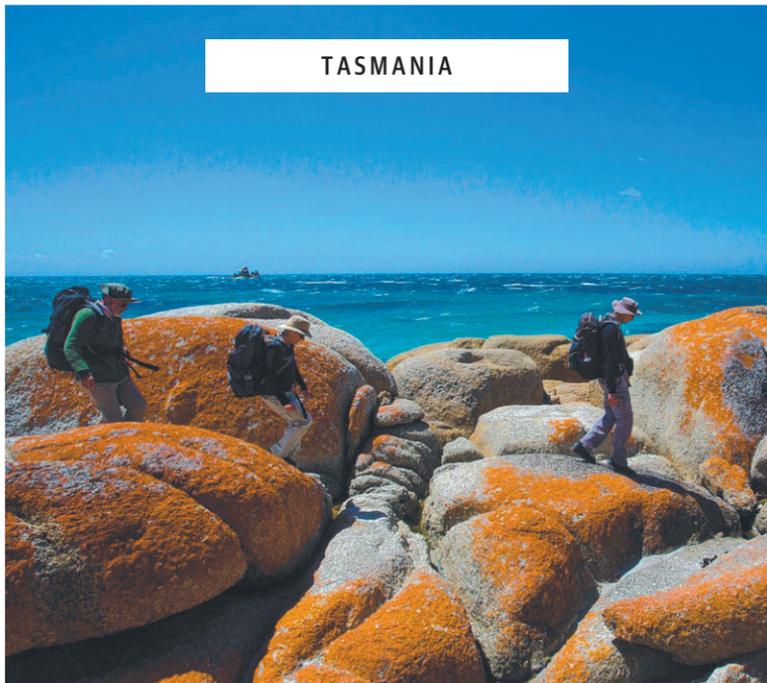
On two feet, you move slowly enough for the senses to take in the world completely. There's always time to smell the roses. It's an obvious distinction but one that was brought home for me last week during a hike through Lunigiana, a little-known slice of Italy where Tuscany meets the Apennine Mountains. The views were stunning – vast panoramas of steep, contoured valleys, stone villages and dense forests framed by a backdrop of mighty peaks.

But equally memorable was the perfume of sun-warmed mint, oregano and fennel, the wild herbs crushed underfoot as I trudged across the countryside in late summer. And the slightly manic melody of sheep's bells as the animals grazed the hillsides of the Zeri Valley, or the swooshing winds funnelled up from the Ligurian coast to ruffle the leaves of beech and chestnut forests as I wandered in their dappled light.

On our longest day we hiked 23km along an ancient pilgrim trail, starting at 9am and ending, footsore but euphoric, just after 6pm. The length of an average workday, but instead of being stuck at a desk I'd been set loose in nature.

You forget what a tonic the great outdoors can be. By the end of the week I felt fitter, healthier, happier, and quite pleased I'd just conquered a slice of the Apennines.

I didn't know this region at all beforehand. Now I could name its villages, list its wildflowers and trees and describe in luscious detail the taste of the lamb raised on its slopes.



TASMANIA

I FELT FITTER, HEALTHIER, HAPPIER, AND PLEASED I'D CONQUERED A SLICE OF THE APENNINES

My soles were slayed. My calves were tight and bulging. But my mind felt less cluttered than it had all year and my spirit was light, optimistic.

The fresh air and exercise, the disconnect from technology and the reconnect with nature all played a part in my rejuvenation. So did the fantastic food and wine consumed along the way and the fact I didn't

have to make a decision about where to stay, what to order or how to get from A to B. That's all taken care of.

I went with an Australian company, Hedonistic Hiking (hedonistichiking.com), whose founders Jackie and Mick Parsons spend most of the year leading hikers all over Italy.

They spend summers back home in Victoria, doing walks in the High Country and along the Great Ocean Road coastline. Their sales pitch is simple – Food, Wine, Walking – and it's that combination of healthy exertion rewarded with indulgence in Italian cuisines and wines, seasoned with sharp insights into local culture and history, that makes their walks so wonderful.

They launched their business just over a decade ago and Jackie tells me the business has grown six-fold since. Demand for guided walking holidays with Canadian active-travel outfit Butterfield & Robinson has averaged 10 per cent growth each year of the



SPAIN

past decade, an average yearly increase 13 per cent. They now offers more than 110 walks in destinations as diverse as Bulgaria and Bhutan.

Simon Scutt from UK-based On Foot Holidays reports 20-25 per cent growth in walkers, "with a particular spurt this year and last".

Italy and Spain are their most popular destinations; Northern Spain's the latest hotspot, he says.

Wanderlust is definitely in vogue but you don't have to schlep all the way to Europe to stretch the legs. We've got our own continent to explore.

Tasmania's my favourite state for two-foot holidays. Besides the new Three Capes Lodge Walk on the Tasman Peninsula, there are perennial favourites at Freycinet National Park, Maria Island (where walkers dodge wombats, wallabies and Cape Barren geese) and my favourite – the Bay of Fires Walk (bayoffires.com.au).

The natural beauty of the

magnificent northeast coast bowled me over, but I expected that. What I wasn't prepared for was the bond that formed with my fellow hikers.

We all came from different backgrounds, even different countries, but walking side-by-side for four days forged special friendships. (On our last night we celebrated so enthusiastically that we broke the record for the most bottles of sparkling wine drunk by one group on one night at the Bay of Fires Lodge.)

I get a similar human high every time I do a big walk with strangers. It was the same last week in Italy. And while I struggle to describe the chemistry that takes place on a long trek, Jackie Parsons knows it well.

"Hikers are sociable, friendly, interesting, and they look out for each other," she says.

"I think these types of holidays attract lovely people."

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