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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

# Walking Trips Aren't Just for Hard-Core Backpackers. Just Ask These Boomers.

Multiday walking trips, where the emphasis is on taking in the sights rather than crunching miles, are on the rise—and not just among the young and sprightly.



Christine Harrold, a 59-year-old aficionado of walking trips, takes a break during a trek through Sweden she took in 2017. PHOTO: CHRISTINE HARROLD

*By Stacey Lastoe*

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After her first self-guided walking trip in 2011, Christine Harrold, 59, decided she was done taking do-nothing beach vacations. On the eight-day meander through Scotland with her teenage son, the now-retired school counselor discovered a love of adventure travel, sore muscles and all.

It's persisted: In September, Harrold will embark on her 17th self-guided walking tour, an eight-day itinerary through Tuscany drawn-up by Macs Adventure, a company that organizes walking and cycling tours around the world.

Harrold is among the many American baby boomers and Gen Xers smitten with a style of travel that rejects lazing by the pool in favor of walking, sometimes for upward of 10 miles a day. According to the Adventure Travel Trade Association, trips that involve walking are

trending more than other types—including food-focused vacations or safaris—with people over 45 years of age.



Hikers on a Macs Adventure trip walk between the colorful villages of Cinque Terre in Italy. PHOTO: MACS ADVENTURE

For its walking trips in Europe, Macs Adventure reports a 200% spike in bookings year over year. Niall Corcoran, founder of Wild Rover Travel, a Danish company that arranges self-guided hikes, says Americans constitute its second biggest customer base (after Danes). Most of these trekkers? Couples in their 50s and 60s.

A “walking trip” might conjure images of tending to painful blisters, but treks can actually be soothing affairs. Travelers who prefer some independence might opt for the self-guided variety, where companies like Macs Adventure, Wild Rover Travel and Ryder-Walker Alpine Adventures provide the itinerary and navigational aids, book accommodations and can even arrange luggage transfer. Want more structure? With guided walking tours, everything’s left to a pro.

Bob Henningsen, 73, a retired English schoolteacher living in St. Louis, saw self-guided walking tours as a natural progression from his days backpacking and pitching a tent. Trips in Scotland, France and England let him and his travel companion, Steven Graves, connect with nature at their own clip and avoid lugging everything on their backs.

Macs Adventure’s baggage-transfer service from inn to inn sold Henningsen initially, though he admits that he and Graves, friends since high school, also came to love staying at bed-and-breakfasts and not in tents.



Walking buddies Bob Henningsen and Steven Graves on a trip in Scotland; early morning on the Great Glen Way, a walking route in Scotland.

STEVEN GRAVES

In October, Henningsen and Graves will walk through the Scottish Highlands on an eight-day Macs Adventure route, which follows the footsteps of the outlaw Rob Roy past ancient stone circles and Roman ruins. Daily legs range from nine to 15 miles, but Henningsen says that when picking a trip, pay more attention to elevation than mileage: “How many climbs?”

Navigating your own way down narrow country paths can be intimidating. Harrold’s first tour with Macs Adventure “was like a scavenger hunt,” she said, with paper maps and route notes.

But even the most directionally challenged traveler can undertake self-guided treks now, thanks to GPS technology. Both Wild Rover Travel and Macs Adventure equip travelers with digital map tools featuring turn-by-turn directions easily accessed on their phones or other navigational devices.

Catherine and Michael Maywood (65 and 64), physicians in the San Diego area, like the way guided walking tours help them meet locals and explore the culture of a place, while still being comfortable. Also appealing: the five-star hotels and special access to tourist attractions that can come with some guided trips. Since the couple no longer has time to plan six-month trips through Southeast Asia as they once did, they appreciate how the guided tours by the company Classic Journeys take all planning out of the equation.



Michael and Catherine Maywood pose in Torres del Paine, Patagonia while on a Classic Journeys trip. PHOTO: MICHAEL AND CATHERINE MAYWOOD

Michael, who has an autoimmune disorder, also finds guided trips reassuring; if something goes wrong, an expert can step in to help immediately. When a hike through North Africa's Atlas Mountains in 2009 became too much for him, a Classic Journeys guide arranged for a donkey to carry him the rest of the way.

Edward Piegza, 58, founder and CEO of Classic Journeys partly attributes the appeal of this kind of travel among health-conscious baby boomers to its fitness benefits. But it isn't just about reaching "those 10,000 steps," said Piegza. Rather, it's the "low-impact form of exercise that's connected to exploring new destinations."

For Harrold, the retired school counselor, however, walking trips aren't about hitting fitness milestones. She doesn't religiously upload all her walks to Strava or push herself to hit marathon distances. "Anything over 12 miles is no longer fun," she said.

As a self-professed "very slow walker," Harrold does her share of smelling the roses: "I always average about 2 miles an hour because I will take a break and just sit in a spot and look around."

