



WORDS ELISABETH KING

STAR TREKS

IF YOU'VE already “done” the major European capitals and fulfilled your quota of can't miss landmarks. Perhaps it's time to head for a spot that gets a - You're going where? - query from friends and strangers. Treks that are as much an inward as an outward journey. With some indulgent pleasures along the way, of course.

GR stands for Grande Randonnees (Great Trails) and one of the best ways to enjoy a trip through France is to map out one of these DIY treks. GR2013 is the most recent addition to the national network and opened three years ago to celebrate Marseilles' turn as the European Capital of Culture. Billed as “the first metropolitan and artistic hiking trail”. It runs for 365km in a figure of eight circuit, zig-zagging through the real Provence - not a Peter Mayle fantasy.

Created by three artists who are also keen hikers, the 15-day ramble dips in and out of the suburbs of Marseilles, past oil refineries and an abandoned train station to open your eyes to the reality of Joni Mitchell's anthem - Big Yellow Taxi. There's plenty of paradise between the parking lots though, including Cezanne's most painted peak Mont Sainte-Victoire, the historic town of Aix-en-Provence and rugged limestone crags overlooking the Mediterranean.

Several wine trails fan out from Aix-en-Provence when you've finished using shanks' pony as your mode of transport, including the Bandol, Les Baux and the 42km stretch from the old town that takes in the standout Chateau La Coste Winery and art trail. The Villa Gallici Hotel and Spa is the perfect place to refresh a weary body, from the opulent bedrooms through the gardens, gourmet restaurants and huge wine cellar.

The Camino de Santiago, a.k.a The Way of St James, is the definitive medieval

pilgrimage route. The not-too-rugged journey has enjoyed a huge revival over the past decade and offers an unbeatable way to meet people of all ages from all over Europe. There are long and short routes to the final destination - the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela - but the most popular choice is the World Heritage-listed French Way.

Beginning in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France, one of the best walking routes in Europe takes you over the Pyrenees and through the wine-growing region of Rioja, Leon and Pamplona of bull-running fame. Confessing or praying in the cathedral is said to wash away all the sins you may have committed on the 760km journey.

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There's no need to be too much of a penitent on the journey, though. Walking the Camino can also be turned into a foodies pilgrimage. Names to note are the Hotel Echaurren in Ezcaray with its Michelin 2 star restaurant El Portal (olives and nuts and a bottle of Rioja are complimentary in every room) and Casa Marcelo and A Tafona at journey's end in Santiago de Compostela – both dishing up some of the best food in Spain.

The Bibbulmun Track and Larapinta and Heysen Trails form the core of bucket list

Australian walking trails. But the Jatbula Trail in the Northern Territory is the tropical counterpart to Tassie's Overland Track. Inaugurated seven years ago, the scenic panoramas embody the raw spectacle of a big country. Centred on Nitmiluk (Katherine) Gorge, the trail follows the Songline of the Jawoyn people and is no groomed path. A medium to hard walk, trekkers cover 10 to 17km a day through creeks, monsoon forests and open country, and ending each day with a swim in an Outback freshwater pool. Pine Creek, 17 Mile Falls and the legendary Edith River Soak - its all about the waterholes.

The best time to plan a trip - independent or guided - is from June to early September. The most luxurious accommodation near Katherine is the award-winning Cicada Lodge on the lip of the gorge. A welcome spot of sophistication before the next few days of camping, the individual rooms are huge and gourmet dining and a seriously good wine list seal the deal.

Forget photo-ops of tourist crowds at Badaling, the Great Wall of China isn't known as Heaven's Ladder for nothing. It can take a week to trek across even a small segment of its 2414km length. It's not flat either and steep steps lead to huge crags in some parts to remind you of Sun Tzu's Art of War observation - all armies prefer high ground to low. DIY trekking is frowned upon because the Great Wall can be dangerous under foot in parts and only 4m wide in others. Many companies, including World Expeditions offer treks staying in the villages alongside the greatest building project in the history of the world.

But to see how far China has come since the greatest man-made structure

on earth was built, a stay at the five-star Commune by The Great Wall is an eye-opener. A collection of boutique hotels each designed by a different Chinese star architect, you can enjoy Chinese-made wines in the Pink Bar and a selection of regional cuisines in the austere modern Courtyard Restaurant. The best spot for a sundowner is the Terrace Lounge with its view of the Shuigan Mountains.

Known as a brown pants job, Aonach Eagach is the most thrilling and scary ridge walk in Scotland. Located near Glencoe of Highland massacre infamy, the descent is the tricky part of “notched ridge” to translate from the Gaelic. You need to be reasonably fit and have a head for heights says Stephen Fallon, one of the best guides in the area who offers a 1:3 guide to client ratio for the climb.

Nearby Glencoe House is the default choice for a playing the laird fantasy. Built in 1896 by Lord Strathcona, an ambitious Scotsman who made his money as a railroad magnate in Canada, its grandeur comes courtesy of the same architect who refurbished Balmoral Castle for King Edward VII.

Every room has its own private sitting room where dinner is served to reinforce the “homely” touch amid baronial splendour. Lunch boxes are made up for guests who want to see more of the surrounding landscape dubbed the Outdoors Centre of the UK - hiking, fishing, climbing or sailing on Loch Leven. Exhausted after a day on Aonach Eagach? If a stiff malt whisky isn't enough, Glencoe House also has a massage therapy centre and spa to ease any aches and pains. 🍷

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