



7 Best Walks

*These boots are made for walkin' ...
Catherine Murphy maps the ways.*

Chamonix, France

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the golden age of alpinism in Chamonix and we can't think of a better time to explore its impressive network of hiking trails. In 1865, Victorian alpinism peaked with 65 first ascents across the Alps, including seven of the Mont Blanc Massif. To this day, Chamonix remains a base camp for pioneering sportspeople but it has something for walkers of all levels. As the hardcore prepares for the **Marathon du Mont Blanc** (montblancmarathon.net) in June or the **Mont Blanc Ultra Trail** (ultra-trailmb.com) in August, you can opt for easier treks such as the **Grand Balcon Sud** walk, a lakes trail that takes two-and-a-half hours and offers magnificent mountain views. Or, combine hiking with music and culture: between late June and November 2015, Chamonix will showcase the 19th-century treasures of the **Alpine Club** with events, exhibitions and heritage tours. Drop into the Majestic conference centre to admire the imposing paintings of Gabriel Lophe, who painted during expeditions and was part of that golden age of alpinism. For hiking with a twist, the annual **Cosmo Jazz Festival** (cosmojazzfestival.com) runs from July 25 to August 2, and features concerts at high altitude (up to 2,800 metres) with natural stages next to the glacier. Hike for up to two hours to concert sites – or cheat a little and take the lift. For more info, visit chamonix.com.

Stay at ... The five-star **Hameau Albert 1er**, a five-minute walk from the centre of Chamonix and home to the very lovely La Maison Carrier restaurant, which boasts an impressive chimney for smoking meat and a dessert buffet deserved only by those who have hiked all day. The hotel's one-night Granite Package costs €680 for two, including dinner and spa entry. (38 route du Bouchet, Chamonix, Mont Blanc, +33 450 530 509; hameaualbert.fr)

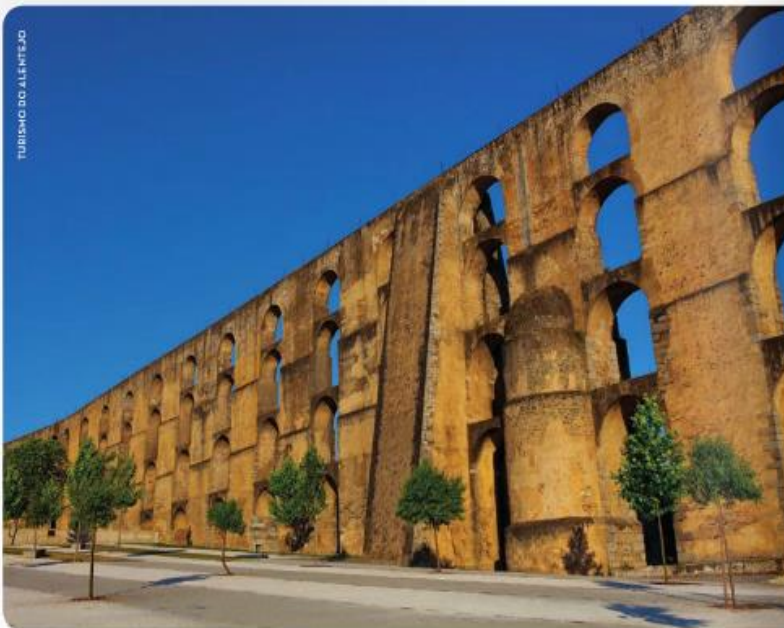
Rock Creek Park, Washington DC, USA

Walking the **National Mall** is just a three-kilometre hike through parkland and green areas, and tours such as **DC By Foot** (freetoursbyfoot.com) or **Cultural Tourism DC** (culturaltourismdc.org) will help keep you on your toes. But if you want to get out for a day's hiking or trail running close to the capital, head for **Rock Creek Park** (nps.gov/rocr), a national park with a long history. Native Americans once quarried rock to make tools, fished the creeks and hunted here. These days the park is still home to wild coyotes, and red and grey foxes. A nearby highlight is the **C&O Canal Trail**, a 297-kilometre canal-side walk that connects to Rock Creek Park from Georgetown.

Stay at ... Loews Madison, a four-star heritage hotel that's said to be almost as good an address as 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and has hosted every US president since 1963. Situated in the heart of downtown DC, it has a historic soul and modern style with celebrity chef Jose Garces at the helm in its restaurant Rural Society. The hotel's Washington Experience break during May costs from \$299 per night. (1177 15th Street NW, +1 202 862 1600; loewshotels.com)



MARQUE ORTIZ

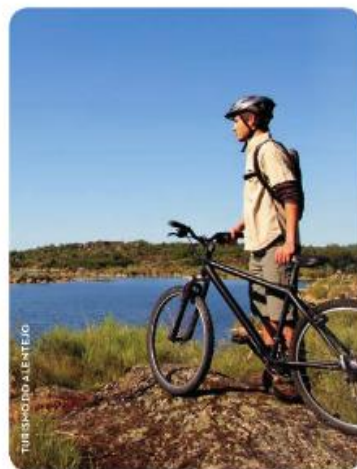


TURISMO DO ALENTEJO

Rota Vicentina, Alentejo, Portugal

Think stunning, unspoilt routes along the wild south-west coast of Portugal and you'll have some idea of this 350-kilometre route between Santiago do Cacém and the Cape of St Vincent in the western Algarve and Alentejo regions. There are two routes, both set in natural parkland. There's the **Historical Way**, a classic route that's accessible to mountain bikers as well as hikers and takes visitors through cork tree forests, valleys, over mountain ranges and along rivers and creeks in a journey through time. And then there's the **Fisherman's Trail**, a single track along cliffs that can only be done on foot and exposes walkers to stunning scenery, lovely fishing villages and, at times, wild and powerful ocean winds. One of the best things about the Rota Vicentina is the sense that you are away from it all - accommodation is in simple but welcoming Portuguese guesthouses. Then there are the beaches. After a few hours hiking, stop for a dip in the ocean at the mesmerising **Cabo Sardo**. It's also one of the world's most favoured areas to observe storks' nests in a maritime environment. For more info, visit visitalentejo.pt.

Stay at ... Herdade do Touril, a traditional, tranquil, country home with just twelve bedrooms and a saltwater swimming pool. Close to the fishing village of Zambujeira do Mar, it's a farm by the seaside, with private terraces and great views in a home-from-home atmosphere. Double rooms from €90 per night. (Zambujeira do Mar, Odemira, +351 937811627; touril.pt)



TURISMO DO ALENTEJO

The Eagle Walk, Tyrol, Austria

So-called because of its shape on the map and because it crosses mountain ranges "as the eagle flies", the 320-kilometre Eagle Walk takes hikers through 24 stages. With a mix of terrain that varies from gentle to steep, it offers something for both novice and expert walkers. Starting at the **Wilder Kaiser** range in St Johann, which is around 120 kilometres from Munich and set in the **Kitzbüheler Alpen**, it goes all the way to the **Arlberg**, via Kufstein, and hikers can choose day-long or multi-week hikes. Whichever you choose, stop to visualise the early summiteers and appreciate the passion of people who cut trails and built shelters along the way. Highlights along the Eagle Walk include the **Schleier waterfall**, which, despite having a 60-metre drop, can be climbed because the water falls well away from the rock. Another stop on the route is the **Klamml Gorge**, which offers stunning views of the pinnacles, spires, ledges and buttresses of the surrounding peaks and also has a high level Via Ferrata for experienced climbers. Die-hards will also find a shorter Eagle Walk in east Tyrol with 93 kilometres of trails set beneath the Grossglockner, Austria's highest peak. For more info, visit tyrol.com.

Stay at ... **Hotel Kaiserhof**, Ellmau. The Tyrol's smallest five-star hotel has 36 bedrooms, alpine decor, five restaurants, a 300-square-metre terrace, spa and outdoor bathing lake. One week's half-board for two people in summer costs €1,750. (Harmstatt 8, Ellmau, +43 5358 2022; kaiserhof-ellmau.at)



PETER VON PELLIERT

Via Francigena, Italy

This medieval pilgrims' route spans 1,900 kilometres, taking walkers through some of the most stunning regions of Europe, including Italy's history-soaked **Aosta Valley** and the rolling hills of Tuscany. **The Way to Rome** follows in the footsteps of tenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric the Serious, who kept detailed written descriptions of his journey. Today, the route is broken up into 16 week-long stages and, although the Via Francigena doesn't have the same number of walkers as the Camino de Santiago (which has its obvious benefits), Lucca to Sienna (in section 14) and the final stage to Rome are amongst the most popular sections. Tuscan highlights include two Unesco-listed sites, **San Gimignano** with its 14 imposing medieval towers and **Sienna**, famed for its



cuisine, art, museums and the Palio medieval horse race, held each July and August. Section 14 – San Miniato to Siena – costs €648pp half-board, including luggage transfers, hotels, and a holiday pack, with caminoways.com.

Stay at ... The four-star **Miravalle Palace Hotel**, San Miniato. A former medieval palace, it overlooks the Piazza del Duomo and Tuscan countryside. (Piazza del Castello, San Miniato, +39 0571 418075; albergomiravalle.com)

Camino del Norte, Spain

The roads of the **Northern Way** are less travelled than the French Way to Santiago de Compostela – all the better for those who recognise the beauty of "Green Spain". This pilgrims' route stretches from San Sebastián

to Oviedo but section three – from elegant **Santander** to **Ribadesella** – stands out. This section takes walkers along the Atlantic coast, through rolling green hills, deep valleys and into the medieval villages of **Cantabria** – with



the Picos de Europa mountain range visible in the distance. Another constant is the allure of excellent, reasonably priced, local cuisine in family-run restaurants throughout the region. Stop in villages such as **Santillana del Mar**, **Cóbreces** or the little seaside village of **Suances**, where many Cantabrian families have holiday homes. Walkers then move on to **Asturias**, famous for its *sidrerías* (cider bars), the seaside town of **Llanes** and, again, excellent indigenous cuisine at great prices. One must-see along the way is **El Capricho de Gaudí** (elcaprichodegaudi.com) in the Cantabrian village of Comillas. One of only three Gaudí buildings outside Catalunya, it's also one of his earliest buildings and proved to be a marker for his subsequent work. Gaudí is said to have walked the route to Santiago de Compostela incognito, passing by Comillas on the way. Six-night half-board packages with followthecamino.com cost from €542pp including luggage transfers.

Stay at ... The four-star **Hotel Mar Comillas**, a modern hotel with beautiful views, which features in **Follow the Camino's** Northern Way programme. (Paseo del Jarón s/n Urbanización Rovacías, Comillas, Cantabria, +34 942 720 490; hotelmarchomillas.net)



Bluestack and Slí Cholmcille, Co Donegal, Ireland

This walking trail combines the **Bluestack Mountain Way**, **St Colmcille Coastal Way** and the **Slieve League Pilgrim Way** in Co Donegal. If one of your main aims is to capture fantastic images while hiking, this corner of the country certainly won't disappoint. Along with spectacular coastal views and mountain passes, hikers are treated to a rich cultural and archaeological heritage, with numerous historic monuments, including the **Glencolumbkille Cross Pillar** - a three-metre high Christian monument dating back to 700-800 AD and named after one of the three patron saints of Ireland - and the Napoleonic signal tower at **Glen Head**. The **Slieve League** sea cliffs are a literal high point of the route. Towering 600 metres above the sea, they're the tallest in Ireland, three times higher than the Cliffs of Moher and some of the highest in Europe. Half board walking tours cost €659pp including luggage transfers and holiday pack. For more info, visit irelandways.com.

Stay at ... Lough Eske Castle, right, hotel and spa. Reward yourself after a day's hiking at Donegal's only five-star hotel. An award-winning, Tudor-baronial castle that dates back to the 14th century, Lough Eske Castle was lovingly restored in 2007, and is set amid 17 hectares of forest woodland, with the Bluestack mountains as a backdrop. (Lough Eske, Co Donegal, 074 972 5100; solishotels.com)



AERLINGUS FLIES FROM DUBLIN TO **ROME** DAILY, FROM DUBLIN TO **GENEVA** DAILY, FROM DUBLIN TO **LISBON** DAILY, FROM DUBLIN TO **MUNICH** DAILY, AND FROM **CORK** TWICE WEEKLY, FROM DUBLIN TO **BILBAO** THREE TIMES WEEKLY, AND FROM DUBLIN TO **WASHINGTON-DULLES** FOUR TIMES A WEEK FROM MAY 1.