

WALK THIS WAY

Great walking holidays around the world

By Johanna Read

“Walking is man’s best medicine.”

While it might not have actually been Hippocrates who said it, the claim nonetheless has merits not only for the activity’s physical health benefits but mental, too. And, in these uncertain times, who couldn’t use a little more well-being?

There are a plethora of vacation destinations best explored on foot — summiting Mount Kilimanjaro on the great African continent, a week-long amble along the mysterious moors and lochs of Scotland’s West Highland Way, and a march across Spain on one of the Camino de Santiago routes, just to name a few.

But there’s no need to walk 500 miles (or even 10,000 steps) to reap the benefits of a hiking holiday. Studies show taking regular strolls is good for your heart, your sleep, your stress hormones and more. Not only do walkers live longer, but hoofing it can increase the size of your hippocampus (the part of the brain critical for memory and learning), improve executive functions, and slow cognitive decline.

Here are five remarkable rambles around the world that can be done in a day or two, sometimes even an afternoon. These romps will take you through some of the planet’s loveliest landscapes with no need to carry more than your camera and a water bottle. And not to worry — at the end of the day, there’s always time to indulge in cocktails, cuisine and a well-deserved stop at the spa before sinking into those luxe linens and resting up for the next big adventure.



The Incan citadel of Machu Picchu is nestled between two towering Andean peaks and surrounded by stunning vistas.

Peru's Machu Picchu

One of the New Seven Wonders of the World, Machu Picchu is set in a breathtaking natural wonderland, nestled between two towering Andean peaks and surrounded by lush forests, rolling hills and stunning vistas.

Modern-day explorers reach this ancient Incan citadel in the Andes mountains via the Inca Trail, among the most famous hikes in the world. Beginning and ending in Cusco, this four-day, 26-mile course climbs to 13,828 feet above sea level and requires some camping and perseverance. While completing this journey is bragworthy in itself, you can bookend seeing Peru's most popular tourist destination with breakfast in bed and an evening massage at the hotel spa.

But for those short on time, seeing Machu Picchu's precisely-constructed granite buildings and llamas nibbling on its andén terraced green lawns can be done in a day trip, though it makes for a very long day. If seeking a visit longer than four hours, you'll need to buy an extra ticket.


Those who wish to test their knees and their ability to withstand vertigo, for example, can book the extra ticket for the hour-long scale up Huayna Picchu, the crag that provides the iconic backdrop to Machu Picchu's ruins. Nicknamed "The Stairs of Death" for the steepness of its stone steps, the name actually translates to "young peak" in the Quechua language. The summit is at 8,835 feet above sea level, and reaching it takes you through stone structures supposedly inhabited by Incan priests, providing a bird's eye view of the Urubamba River and this entire UNESCO site, not to mention the switchback road the busses navigate to get visitors there and back.

Machu Picchu's base town, called both Aguas Calientes and Machu Picchu Pueblo, is only reachable by rail. The train from Cusco stops in several communities in the Sacred Valley, with the last place to board before Machu Picchu being Ollantaytambo, which boasts the starting point of the Inca Trail. Ollantaytambo is known for its pyramid-like tiers of what were once gardens that lead up to a massive temple and fortress — the site of one of the Incas' few successful battles against the Spanish conquistadors.

To sleep in before experiencing Machu Picchu — and to get to your end-of-day spa treatment that much faster — stay in Aguas Calientes. At Sumaq Machu Picchu Hotel along the Vilcanota River, get an exfoliation with local salt or a coca leaf massage before retiring to a suite with a muscle-soothing whirlpool tub. Or, right next to the entrance to Machu Picchu, choose a stay in Sanctuary Lodge, A Belmond Hotel, where the hot compresses of the Inca Trail Ancestral Therapy will relieve any residual aches and pains. Afterward, contemplate your climb in the hotel's alluring orchid garden that faces Huayna Picchu.

Tambo del Inka, a Luxury Collection Resort & Spa, is a convenient Sacred Valley hotel for a Machu Picchu day trip. With its own private train station and its destination spa's thermal circuit, the resort will have you primed for walking around other nearby sites. At Moray, 30 minutes away, wander (and wonder) at the 12-layered amphitheater-like craters purportedly used to create microclimates for Incan agricultural experiments. Even closer is the surreal site of thousands of salt ponds at Maras. Looking as if made of ice, these rectangular pools of briny water cascade down the mountainside (yes, the pale pink salt used in your spa treatment is from here, and yes, it's available to take home as a memento of Peru).

Tourists climb "The Stairs of Death" to the summit of Huayna Picchu — 8,835 feet above sea level.



Watching the waves near Bondi Beach is a favorite pastime of visitors trekking Australia's Bondi Beach to Coogee Cliff Walk.

Australia's Bondi Beach to Coogee Cliff Walk

A hot spot for those who prefer their hikes to be urban and near plentiful cafés is in the Land Down Under, specifically in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, Australia. The four-mile cliffside coastal walk between the beaches of Bondi and Coogee fits that bill. It takes about an hour and a half if you stroll straight through, but you'll want to add more time to wade into the waves or stop for "a bevvie and an icy pole" (that's Aussie slang for beverage and popsicle).

With its vast stretch of pale sand crowded with sunbathers and its excellent surfing swells, Bondi is one of Australia's most famous beaches. "Bondi" is an Indigenous word meaning "breaking over rocks," and watching the crests crash dramatically into the rock-cut pool at the beach's south end — near the entrance to the way to Coogee — is a favorite pastime. Note that, despite Australians adding an "ie" diminutive to many words, Bondi is pronounced "bon-dye," not "bon-dee."

Coogee Beach is named for an Indigenous word meaning, "stinking place," likely from the rotting seaweed that used to wash up on shore. Despite the literal translation, it's just as lovely but a bit more relaxed than Bondi. Coogee Beach boasts several oceanside swimming pools including Ross Jones Memorial, which

looks a bit like the battlement wall of a castle with its concrete crenels that break the surf before splashing into the pool.

With 2.3 million people visiting Bondi every year, early mornings are much less crowded and provide the bonus of watching the sunrise over the South Pacific. The cooler morning temps also make it much more agreeable for sipping a flat white — Australia's favorite coffee drink — while you wander.

The coastal path is flat, punctuated by a few staircases, and sometimes cantilevered out over the rocks and heathland with its tussock grass and banksia shrubs. Your eyes will linger on the big-windowed houses that seem to march down the sandstone cliffs, but be sure to look out to sea to check for any cetaceans swimming by (dolphins are here year-round and humpback whales migrate from Antarctica between May and November). During the Southern Hemisphere's spring, the Sculpture by the Sea Festival draws attention with its art installations between Bondi Beach and Tamarama Beach.

The Bondi Bubble has plenty of post-hike meal options. Top picks for watching the waves while you wine and dine include Promenade Bondi Beach's outdoor patio for noshing on Sydney rock oysters, king prawns and flatbreads, and Sean's Panorama, which sources much of its veg from the owner's farm. For a boutique beach stay, try art-filled QT Bondi near the beach's Bondi Pavilion or, for views of the Opera House, opt for the Park Hyatt Sydney downtown.



Colorful umbrellas line the cobblestone piazza of Vernazza, Cinque Terre, providing explorers a break for shade and an espresso.





Evenings near the Cinque Terre village of Manarola are both dramatic and Instagram-worthy.

Italy's Cinque Terre

With strict limitations on cars in the UNESCO-protected Cinque Terre (meaning “five lands”), traveling on foot is a must. Perched along the rugged Italian Riviera coastline, these tiny seaside villages resemble picture-perfect postcards — their colorful buildings clinging to the hillsides above the sparkling blue-green waters of the Ligurian Sea.

Known as Italy's most scenic hike, the Cinque Terre footpaths offer 74 miles of marked pathways to explore. You could aim to maximize burning calories on the staircases and high-forested crossings that connect the villaggi, but a sojourn here is much more about wandering the quaint streets and soaking up the sea views than vigorous all-day trekking. And, of course, it's of utmost importance to interrupt every day in Italy with regular stops for a tazzina of espresso, a cornetto of gelato, or a plate of pasta.

While each seaside hamlet has a few hotels or at least guest houses and apartments, five- and even four-star hotels are more easily found outside of Cinque Terre proper.

The westernmost and largest coastal municipality is Monterosso, the only town of the five lands that allows cars into its city center. This village sits at sea level with several sandy beaches to roam and a few four-star hotels where you can rest your weary head. Travelers know this area for its anchovies, olive



Though right along the coast of the Ligurian Sea, Cinque Terre has but a few sandy beaches like this one in Monterosso al Mare.

oil and lemons and the festivals that celebrate them. The third weekend in May celebrates citrus with the Sagra dei Limoni festival, the third Saturday in June is reserved for anchovies, and olive oil gets all the attention on the third Saturday of September.

While you might see workers tending to the fruit trees as you take the two-hour trek between Monterosso and Vernazza, the anchovy boats are moored in the harbors during the daytime. Locals fish for the silvery-blue acciughe after darkness falls, when the moon illuminates the small fishing boats and attracts the sea creatures to the fishermen's nets.

Vernazza is the next picturesque village to the east, where pink and ochre buildings curve prettily throughout the piazza, tiny beach and harbor, changing hues as the sun navigates the sky. The best photo ops are from high on the hillside, and you can get a shot showing the trails you've tackled from Castello Doria, Cinque Terre's oldest surviving fortification. The castle's waterside tower dates back to the 11th century and was once used as a lookout for pirates.

Traditional hotels can't be found in Vernazza, but the village does offer several guesthouses and apartments. Meals here — be sure to make a reservation in advance — come with a side of spectacular scenery. Near Castello Doria, for example, is Ristorante Belforte with its tables on a stone balcony above the sea. Corniglia's Ristorante La Torre is known for some of the region's most breathtaking seascapes from its clifftop, especially at sunset.

At quiet Corniglia (Cinque Terre's oldest, tiniest and least accessible village), those who want both tiramisu and gelato every night of their Italian vacation will want to climb the 33 flights of the 383-stair Scalinata Lardarina to reach the small hamlet (though there's often a shuttle bus from the train station).

The next stop is Manarola, with a handsome harbor popular for swimming and sunbathing on its large rocks. Wander through town and check out the medieval stone church called Chiesa di San Lorenzo across from the yellow clock tower, then amble past the church to see the terraced vineyards. The best way to sample the local grapes is via a wine-tasting experience, which will include Cinque Terre's sweet, fortified Sciacchetrà produced by just 21 makers.

Riomaggiore, the last of the five lands, beams with pastel houses cascading down the cliff almost to the pebble beach and small harbor. The region's most popular promenade, Via dell'Amore (meaning the Way of Love), is here — named for the lore that sweethearts living in Riomaggiore and Manarola in ages past traversed this passage to see each other. Under repair due to landslides, the easy, mile-long cliffside path is scheduled to reopen in 2024.

Argentina and Brazil's Iguazu Falls

Another wondrous walking spot in South America lies at the border of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Iguazu Falls has found itself on UNESCO's World Heritage list since 1984. "My poor Niagara!" Eleanor Roosevelt purportedly lamented when she saw this array of 275 waterfalls and compared them to the three chutes between Ontario and New York. Iguazu's cataracts are higher than Niagara's and wider than Zambia's and Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls — though the latter does hold the title of the largest single curtain of falling water in the world, at 5,600 feet wide.

Exploring these massive cascades is best divided into two days — an easy morning or afternoon stroll with several panoramic lookouts at Foz do Iguazu in Brazil and more of an exploratory adventure up and down the varied terrain at Las Cataratas del Iguazú in Argentina. Sunny skies bring out Iguazu's kaleidoscope of colors, as the waterfalls' mists create rainbows upon rainbows. Even the wildlife flushes with color, as the jungle's butterflies pause on the arms and necks of hot tourists to lap up the sodium from their sweat.

On the Brazilian side, at the Parque das Aves, the toucans, hummingbirds, pink flamingoes, parrots and other avian species flash their feathers, and the raccoon-like coatis scamper around hoping to grab any dropped or dangled food from visitors. From Brazil, there's just one route with multiple spots to stop and admire the falls, 80% of which are on the Argentine side. At the pavement's end, you can get right up close to Garganta do Diabo (Devil's Throat) where a massive horseshoe of water roars and pours from the river 269 feet above.

Hundreds of waterfalls line the border of Brazil and Argentina, with an almost-solid curtain at Garganta do Diabo, the Devil's Throat.

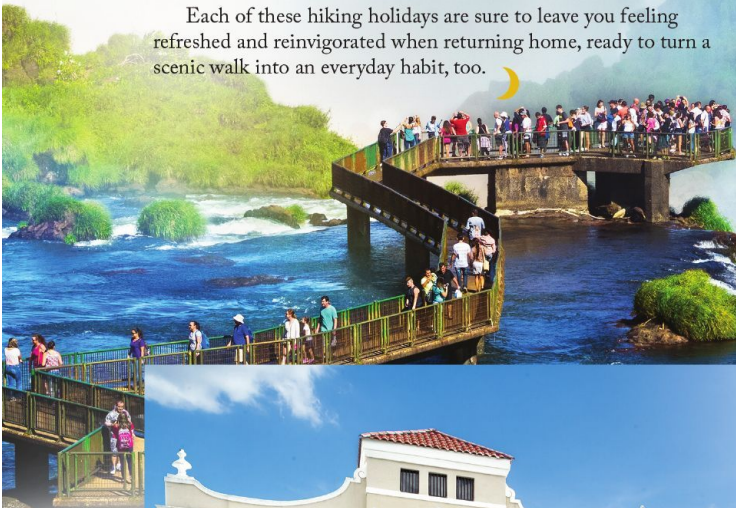


The Argentine side has ten miles of trails to scout, reached by a train ride from the park entrance. The easier Upper Circuit leads to elevated metal platforms past chutes both tall and wide, while the Lower Circuit gets you close to the river and some of the pools formed by the seemingly endless falling water. The rail's last stop provides access to the awe-inspiring overwater catwalks at the Paraná Plateau above the thundering Devil's Throat.

The best stays are in the national park rather than in nearby towns. You can see the top of the Devil's Throat and its tower of mist from the Gran Meliá Iguazú's infinity pool and from some rooms of this modern Argentine hotel. Brazil's luxurious colonial-style Belmond Hotel das Cataratas has a sloping lawn that brings you to a lookout high above the river and dozens of falls. Belmond guests also get extra hours to explore the park before and after it's open to the public and, during the full moon, there's even a chance of seeing lunar rainbows.

Each of these hiking holidays are sure to leave you feeling refreshed and reinvigorated when returning home, ready to turn a scenic walk into an everyday habit, too.

On the Brazilian side of Foz do Iguazú, pathways wind over the river to deliver spectacular views of the falls.



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ABOUT US

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