

Wintertime Rambles

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The urge to hibernate during the winter months is hard to shake. This year, battered by the recession and besieged by H1N1, even the heartiest travelers may be tempted to get under the covers with a Kindle and a cup of chai, and wait for the crocuses. But those willing to swap their slippers for hiking boots take a major step toward overcoming the season's doldrums. A winter walking tour, whether across desert, forest, or mountain, gets the blood flowing and offers a new perspective on the great outdoors. "Walking holidays work well for jaded folk who can't wait for the grim winter to end," says Tony Hayter, a Brit who has rambled with his wife for 20 years. "The first day is a bit of a jolt, but within a few days one is ranging easily over the hills, wondering why one is not always this fit."

For some, the biggest advantage of winter trekking is that summer's maddening crowds are nowhere to be seen. For others it provides an escape from jammed cities and jarring weather. Last year, after a snowstorm socked Shanghai, Laurel and Tim Stelzer escaped to New Zealand's Tongariro National Park. Utterly alone, the American couple hiked trails leading to volcanoes, gem-colored lakes, and a rainforest. "At times, it felt like we were walking on the moon," says Laurel.

For those who need a bit more guidance, a growing number of organized tours promise sunshine, exercise, and off-the-map adventure. Briton Carole Donovan first came to Andalucia, Spain, on an organized horse-riding trek 30 years ago. After a second trip a few years later, she stayed. Now the one-woman show behind Alpujarra Walking Holidays, she hosts visitors at her country home outside Órgiva and guides them on local hikes. Highlights of her Winter Sunshine Walk include wandering farmers' footpaths in the Poqueira Valley, where the Sierra Nevada looms in the distance and white villages fleck the landscape, and navigating jagged limestone outcrops and umbrella pine forests in the coastal mountains. When passing through citrus orchards, "a little [snacking] is not frowned upon," says Donovan (\$655 for eight days; alpujarra-walking-holidays.com).

Food also figures prominently on Morocco's Jebel Sahro Winter Sunshine Trekking tour, run by KE Adventure Travel. The hike begins in NKob village on the fringes of the Sahara and continues northward toward the Atlas Mountains, passing almond groves, Ait Atta Berber herding grounds, and rock formations resembling camel heads and organ pipes. Accompanying cooks whip up three meals a day—an assortment of tagine, couscous, and salads. The days are warm and sunny, but at night temperatures drop. Before retreating to their tents, hikers soak up the starlit skies (from \$995 for 15 days; keadventure.com).

An enchanting diversity of untouched wilderness awaits trekkers with Tasmanian Expeditions on the Overland Track. The terrain changes from plains to mountains to rainforest and owes its pristine condition largely to the trail's exclusivity: from November until May, the park service only allows 50 people on the trail at a time, and they must walk north to south. On the first day of the bush walk, trekkers scramble up Cradle Mountain for a view of the territory they have yet to cover. Encouraged to savor the journey, travelers first enjoy a picnic lunch (\$1,995 for seven days; tasmanianexpeditions.com.au).

To the uninitiated, snowy hiking might seem the realm of the hard-core trekker. But European alpine communities anxious to appeal to a broader swath of travelers are now grooming winter trails for walking, says Peter Walker, founder and president of Ryder-Walker Alpine Adventures. For its Self-Guided Winter Engadine Holiday, Ryder-Walker books lodgings, transfers luggage, and provides hikers with detailed maps of their routes. Between stops at rustic inns for hot tea or *glühwein*, trekkers drink in the sights of snowy peaks. Activities along the way include sled paths up to 10 miles long equipped with a funicular to the top (from \$2,125 for eight days; ryderwalker.com)

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A wildlife-tracking trip to Ladakh, India, also pursues heart-pumping thrills. Organized by KarmaQuest Ecotourism and Adventure Travel in cooperation with the Snow Leopard Conservancy, the Wintertime Quest for the Snow Leopard marches travelers along the otherworldly Indus River gorge to the base camp at 3,780 meters in Hemis National Park. Participants sleep in two-person tents and stay overnight in a Ladakh home. Villagers who monitor the leopards' movement provide clues for daily trek routes. During winter, snow leopards descend to lower altitudes to mate and search for food. Previous tours have spotted sated cats licking their chops and stretching their limbs (\$3,650 to 3,825 for 16 days; -karmaquests.com).

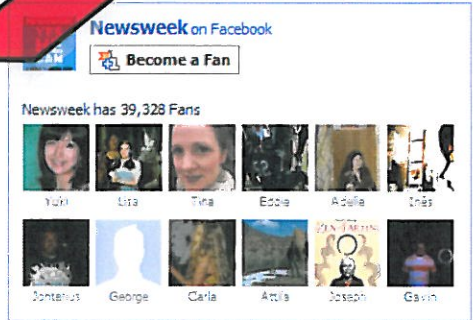
Those planning to make exercise a New Year's resolution can get an early start on the Grand Canyon New Year's Adventure with REI Adventures (from \$2,499 for six days; rei.com/adventures). Debuting in 2010, the trip is a response to the growing popularity of wintertime outings—December has become the company's biggest month after September, says REI Adventures manager Cynthia Dunbar. In winter, blanketed by snow and bereft of tourists, the Grand Canyon's stillness inspires reverence. Yavapai Lodge in Grand Canyon National Park serves as home base for hikers who take day treks that wind down switchbacks to 360-degree views of multicolored buttes and ancient Native American hunting grounds. On the morning of New Year's Eve, trekkers journey to Yavapai Point to watch the sunrise. If they hope to ring in the New Year at the evening's planned festivities, a nap might be in order—just a well-earned taste of hibernation.

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