

FRANCE “WALKING THROUGH HISTORY”

INTRODUCTION:-

“Walking through History” trips are designed to take you to many of the fascinating and sometimes relatively remote destinations which we have treasured on our hiking trips, and to stay at many of the wonderful inns and hotels which are such a feature of the experience we offer, without the longer and more strenuous hiking options of our traditional format.

“Walking” on these trips, as opposed to hiking, implies leisurely enjoyment and exploration of beautiful countryside and interesting, historic places without the demands of lengthy, rigorous exercise. On a visit to a fascinating village or town in Europe, you will often be given a guided tour for some of your time, and then given an hour or two to explore on your own. We like to treat our guests as independent adults ! You will not be given choices of ten-mile mountain traverses, but nor will you be on a bus trip, delivered to the very door of your restaurant, castle or church.

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING CAREFULLY:-

Our walking will not exceed four or five miles a day. Ascents will generally be easy or moderate: occasionally an option of a steeper, short climb will be offered if the goal is particularly alluring. As with most of our regular hiking trip days, there will sometimes be a carefully explained choice of activities, so that our guests will be able to judge whether some of the more active walking alternatives are for them. There will be many opportunities to wander and savor at one’s own pace. Walkers should remember, however, that many of the places we visit have steps, paths which are not smooth and sometimes positively rough, and that visiting a medieval castle or a beautiful look-out point usually involves walking uphill. Our trips, therefore, cannot cater to those who rapidly become out of breath climbing a flight of steps, or who find walking on uneven surfaces troublesome. Travel itself can also be tiring, especially for the relatively inexperienced. We urge you to assess yourself, to seek medical advice if you suffer from any condition which might impair your enjoyment of an active vacation, and not to undertake a trip if you are not used to daily exercise. We want those who come with us to enjoy themselves wholeheartedly, and without anxiety. Our guides will always take a conservative view of your abilities, and will not hesitate to advise you accordingly, and we urge you to be realistic about yourself at this planning stage.

THE ROMANTIC SOUTH OF FRANCE

AN EXTRAORDINARY MEDIEVAL WORLD:-

(Walking through history - with some choices of easy and moderate hiking.)
Deep in Occitane, the beautiful and culturally distinct region of southern France , an incredibly rich and diverse experience awaits you. Much of this area is little

known, even to many French people. Vestiges of an ancient rural life survive tenaciously among friendly, courteous locals proud of their separate identity, which dates from before the time when this region was annexed to France in the thirteenth century. In the ancient towns and villages, and on the venerable ways and footpaths still connecting them, the Middle Ages are a palpable presence. We walk through history, and seem to breathe the same air as the pilgrims, the Cathars, and the many other peoples who have left their indelible marks on the landscape. We continuously find evidence of a rich medieval culture, so admired and envied by the rest of Europe that the great Italian poet, Dante, first assumed that he would write the Divine Comedy in the Occitane language the civilized tongue of the troubadours and the great romances.

Our hotels are themselves highlights of the trip; comfortably restored historic buildings with classic French gourmet cuisine, as well as distinctive local dishes such as "cassoulet."

ARRIVAL DAY:-

Our pick up is at the Toulouse Airport at 3 p.m. From Toulouse we travel down onto the plain of Carcassonne, and into the foothills of the Pyrenees on our way deep into Cathar country and the castle of the "Jolie Ducs de Joyeuse." This gracious hotel in Couiza was built for the governor of the area during the religious wars of the sixteenth century. We will have a pre-dinner get-together to orient ourselves and go over our plans for the trip.

DAY TWO:-

Today we explore the historic limestone country around Cuiza, visiting a Templar Castle, a hermitage perched in a spectacular gorge and the ancient hilltop village of Rennes le Chateau, site of one of the most intriguing mysteries of recent European history. Several short excursions involve climbing and steps, each under one mile.

Dinner and Lodging: Chateau Des Ducs de Joyeuse.

DAY THREE:-

This morning we complete our journey to the Corbieres, the first wall of the French Pyrenees, the region of amazing fortresses where the Cathars made their last stand. These legendary holy men and women, whose dualistic religion was branded a heresy, were much loved by the local population but were eventually persecuted and hunted to extinction by the Albigensian crusaders within a few tragic and dramatic decades. In a rugged land of limestone gorges and isolated tiny villages a succession of breathtaking castles still dominate the region. Treading the high stone steps of Queribus and Peyrepertuse, the historical associations are so pervasive and pressing that the barriers of time seem to evaporate. The routes up to these fortresses involve 1 and 2 miles of sometimes steep walking. There is also the possibility of a 1 to 2 mile walk in the vicinity of the castles.

Dinner & Lodging: Chateau des Ducs de Joyeuse

DAY FOUR:-

After another brief excursion in the Couiza area, we drive the short journey to Carcassonne , the most completely restored medieval city in Europe, set on a plain backed by ranks of mountains. The city is a mirage of towers and concentric walls. We have the rest of the day to explore and wander in the city's maze of narrow streets, with ample time for both guided and individual exploration. We stay the night inside the medieval city, in the famous Hotel de la Cite, the former bishop's palace right by the cathedral church. This gives us the chance to experience this unique community after the majority of visitors have left the narrow streets and walks by the walls, or early the next morning.

Dinner & Lodging: Hotel de la Cite.

DAY FIVE:-

From Carcassonne we head north, through the Black Mountains towards the southernmost part of the Massifs Centrales, the backbone of France. We shall make a midday stop in the famous walled town of Cordes en Ciel "Cordes in the Heavens", a wonderfully unspoilt example of an independent medieval community set in lovely countryside. This fascinating old town has wonderful old merchants' houses, and sits remarkably intact on its hill. We explore its steep narrow streets and squares before resuming our journey towards Conques. the small pilgrim town universally recognized as a jewel of medieval France . Here we shall lodge for three nights at the Sainte Foy Hotel, an elegant, charming hostelry "looking out on the year one thousand". The hotel is near the beautiful pilgrim church which is the central focus of the community. Dinner & Lodging: Hotel Sainte Foy.

DAYS SIX AND SEVEN:-

Conques, hidden away in a lush, densely wooded pass at the southern end of the Massif Central , was a key stopping place for thousands of pilgrims converging on the Pyrenees from all over Europe to make their way to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela. In this timeless atmosphere we walk along some of the Sentiers, or ancient routes between wayside chapels. We explore remote villages, and venture further a field to magnificent landmark sites and religious centers, such as Rocamadour and St. Cere. Possible walks include short climbs along wooded trails to pilgrim chapels, a longer descent along minor roads and farm tracks to the Lot River , and a shaded walk following the river from one ancient community to the next. These choices cover anywhere from 1 to 4 miles. Many of the village walks do include short climbs. At day's end there will be talks to illuminate the fascinating history of the region. We shall also have the opportunity to spend time after dinner in the church listening to the music played to see us into the twilight as the light changes color in the extraordinary modern stained glass windows that blend so exquisitely with the Romanesque architecture.

Dinner & Lodging Hotel Sainte Foy .

DAY EIGHT:-

This day we head west along the gorge of the river Lot, visiting and exploring the perfectly preserved medieval village of Saint-Cirq Lapopie . The village is a maze of steep narrow streets with many different short climbs up to lovely viewpoints, with an option of walking along the river with a steep, 15 minute ascent.

After lunch we make a detour to an even earlier period of human history, the famous caves of Peche Merle and their 25,000 year old prehistoric paintings.

The caves encompass approximately half a mile of mainly large, airy caverns with a few narrower passages, but no tight squeezes or very low ceilings.

Continuing along the River Lot, we drive through Cahors to the dramatic site of the village of Mercues.

Our last night's lodging is at the Chateau de Mercues, a magnificent castle and former bishop's palace, perched high above the River Lot in the celebrated wine district of Cahors north of Toulouse . From there we return to Toulouse Airport the next morning.

DAY NINE:-

After breakfast we pack up and return to the Toulouse Airport by 10 a.m.

THE INNS:-

DAYS ONE, TWO AND THREE

CHATEAU DES DUCS DE JOYEUSE

11190 COUIZA

TEL: 468 74 02 80 FAX: 468 74 14 65

e mail: d.avelange@chateau-des-ducs.com

www.chateau-des-ducs.com

DAY FOUR

HOTEL DE LA CITE

15, RUE SAINT LOUIS , 11000 CARCASSONNE

TEL: 468 71 37 37 FAX: 468 71 50 15

e mail: reservations@hoteldelacite.com

www.hoteldelacite.orient-express.com

DAYS FIVE, SIX AND SEVEN

HOTEL SAINTE FOY,

12320, CONQUES EN ROUERGUE

TEL: 565 69 84 03 FAX: 565 72 81 04

e mail: hotelsaintefoy@hotelsaintefoy.fr

www.hotelsaintefoy.fr

DAY EIGHT

CHATEAU DE MERCUES

46090 CAHORS , FRANCE

TEL: 565 20 00 01 FAX: 565 20 05 72

mercues@relaischateau.com

www.chateaudemercues.com

If you are interested in additional information about the inns/hotels we will be staying with, we invite you to visit their web sites, or call and request a brochure.

(Note: From the U.S. first dial 011 33 followed by the number, within France dial 0 followed by the number.)

FRANCE ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE / GENERAL INFORMATION:-

We will have a pick up from the Toulouse Airport at 3 p.m. on day one of the trip. The meeting point is the British Airways ticket counter (please call to confirm pick up).

If you are traveling by train, it is possible to take the TGV (the high speed train) to Toulouse. If you take the train to Toulouse on arrival day you will need to take a taxi to the airport for our 2 p.m. pick up.

A good choice for pre- or post- trip nights in Toulouse is the following hotel:

Le Grand Capoul

13, Place Wilson

Toulouse , FRANCE

Tel.: 011 33 561 10 7070 / Fax: 011 33 561 21 9670

E mail: hicapoul@f-e-a.fr

www.capoul.com

(this hotel is affiliated with Holiday Inn and can be booked through them)

On the last day we can return you to the Toulouse Airport by 10 a.m.

PLEASE CHECK YOUR ITINERARY CONCERNING THIS DEPARTURE.

FLIGHTS

The most reasonable fares are available if you purchase you ticket well in advance and do not change your dates. As there are penalties in changing dates it is a very good idea to take out travel insurance (see our general information sheet).

TRAVEL SERVICES

You may want to take advantage of our travel service to arrange your travel to France . They are: Better Travel and can be reached at (800) 331 6996.

TRAVELERS CHECKS

If your bank offers the service, it is preferable to order travelers checks in Euros. Please check for exchange rate at time of your trip.

PASSPORTS

If you don't already have a current passport, remember to allow enough time to be processed for one.

PAYMENT

We do require full payment 60 days in advance of the trip date. After that time there can be no refund of monies paid unless we are able to fill the space, in which case, we may be able to issue you a credit towards a future trip. Again, we recommend trip cancellation insurance.

GENERAL INFORMATION SHEET / WHAT TO EXPECT:-

Our hiking and walking holidays, including our new "Walking Through History" tours, are active, outdoor vacations. Most of our days are spent in the open air and you should, therefore, be prepared for many different weather conditions. In the following section you will find our recommendations for clothing and footwear. The most important thing is to bring layers so that you can adjust to whatever weather conditions are present!

WEATHER

Our trips to France and Italy in June tend to have warm days (in the 80s usually). A very good idea would be to check the Weather Channel's forecast a few days before your trip departure.

WALKING

Our walks are generally between 2 and 4 miles a day. We do have 2 guides on the trip, which often allows us to provide a choice of pace. On some days, however, one guide may be visiting an historical site while one guide is leading the walk. Even though these trips are less strenuous than our regular hikes, it is still very important that you be in good physical condition to get the most out of the trip. We recommend that you prepare for the trip by doing some form of physical activity regularly. There will also be a few options of a short but steeper path with terrain that will involve uphill walking (often involving steps, especially when visiting the castles and fortresses) and we do suggest that if your only form of exercise is walking that you do try to find more hilly routes or, if you live in a flat region, that you increase your walking speed. Some of our walking is also along trails that wind through forests and parks and you should be aware that the footing often includes rocks and roots as well as smooth sections. If you have any questions about the walks please don't hesitate to contact us.

WHAT TO BRING:-

Note: On longer trips when we move from inn to inn we do ask that you pack light as we will be packing and unpacking several times!

CLOTHING

Required: Shorts & shirts for hiking , Wind jacket,
Rain gear (poncho or pants & top)
Sweater and pants (fleece, nylon or sweatpants are more comfortable than

jeans) just in case we get some cooler spells.

Plenty of heavyweight socks,

Swimsuit and towel

Evening wear in the inns is mostly casual - slacks are fine, but some of the inns prefer no shorts or jeans, so you should have some alternative to those items.

Note: European inns tend to be slightly more formal than those in the US .

OTHER ITEMS

Water bottle (1 per person)

Small day pack (at least 1 between 2 people - 1 each if you could choose different activities)

Sun protection cream,

Insect repellent,

Spare shoelaces

OPTIONAL ITEMS

Sunglasses,

Camera ,

Binoculars

SHOES

We strongly recommend comfortable, worn-in hiking boots. There are now many very good, moderately priced, light-weight hiking boots on the market. Running and walking shoes tend not to give an adequate grip. It is very important that your boots have good tread and if you have any problems with your ankles that you do wear boots that come over your ankles.

ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE:-

You should arrive at the starting inn between 4 and 6 p.m. on the first day of the trip. We will have an introductory talk at 6:30 and dinner will be at 7 or 7:30 .

TRAVEL

We work with a travel service that is very familiar with all our itineraries and can help you with all your travel plans. They are: BETTER TRAVEL of Waitsfield , VT. Please call: (800) 331-6996 or e-mail: bettravl@madriver.com

MEALS

On most of our trips, the inns offer a selection of entrees to choose from. It does help us, however, if you let us know if there are any foods that you do not like or cannot eat, as some of the inns that are smaller and have innkeepers who are also the chefs, do serve a set menu. Those inns that do not have a liquor license invite you to bring a bottle of your choice to enjoy with dinner.

PAYMENT

The balance of your trip cost is due two months before trip departure. You may pay by calling our office with Visa, Mastercard or American Express or by sending a bank check or personal check.

CANCELLATION POLICY

Refunds are given less a 10% cancellation fee provided that written cancellation is received at least 60 days before the trip departure date. After that time any monies paid are forfeited.

INSURANCE

We strongly recommend that you take out trip cancellation, baggage and accident insurance. You should have received an application form from Travel Insurance Services (800) 937 1387 or you should contact your local travel/insurance agent. Please note that if you are planning on using Travel Insurance Services you should do so as soon as possible, as they will waive their pre-existing exclusion if the insurance application is postmarked within 14 days of our receipt of your deposit.

RELEASE FORM

When you arrive we will ask you to sign a release form stating that you assume the risk of the upcoming hiking holiday. For international trips this will be mailed to you in advance.

GRATUITIES

All taxes and gratuities on lodging and meals are included in the trip cost. You only need tip on any drinks that you buy at the inns. Many of you have asked for some guidance regarding tipping of our guides, so with that in mind, a tip of around 3 to 4% of trip cost (total, not per guide) would be customary for excellent guiding, though this remains at your discretion.

N.E.H.H. reserves the right to make any changes to the schedule if necessary.

If you should need any help with your travel plans, please call our travel service Better Travel at 1-800-869-0949.