

TRAVEL

Surrounded by breathtaking scenery, walkers gain a very personal perspective while treading ...

PATHS OF GLORY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNN COLE



The dictionary gives many synonyms for walking: striding, plodding, sauntering, shuffling, loping, ambling and hobbling are just a few. In the course of 14 days in Europe with Walkabout Gourmet Adventures, our group of 12, lead by Graeme and Gabriela Clarke, did a little of all of these as we made our way through Alsace, the Black Forest in Germany, and Switzerland.

Having walked with the Clarkes in Australia (see *Coasting along* in our March 1990 issue), I knew that this trip would be something special, but it surpassed all my expectations. Walking provided not only a perspective different from that gained in any other mode of travelling, but also a variety of experiences that captured the very essence of each place. Rambling through the pretty villages and sun-drenched vineyards of Alsace and sampling crisp, chilled local wines at the end of the day; picking cherries along the way; dining on onion tarte flambé slightly scorched from the fire; eating Black Forest cake or lemon cheesecake made with quark at a majestic medieval castle in the very heart of the Black Forest; strolling knee-deep in wildflowers in Switzerland; enjoying fondue and rösti in the land that invented them; watching the mountains turn pink in the sunset as we sat on the darkening verandah in Lauterbrunnen; and having a grandstand view of a spectacular thunderstorm high in the mountains.





We were a rather mixed group – during the trip, we celebrated the birthday of our oldest member. At 67, he was wiry and fitter than most of the others. The youngest was about 30. We also varied in our levels of fitness but, encouraged by Gabriela, we all managed to arrive at our destination each day. We were never under too great pressure to keep up, the slower ones taking their time. And Gabriela was right when she assured us that it would be worth the effort. As each day passed, we began to feel rather proud of our achievements.

On several days, the walking was quite strenuous – scanning the far, and high, horizon for St Odile, the monastery where we were to stay that night, springs to mind – it was a mere speck on the top of an 825m ridge, but when we arrived, what a place. The site has been used since Roman times. Surrounded by a 10km wall, the monastery is now run as an hotel with simple rooms looking on to a peaceful courtyard. We enjoyed wine from the monks' vineyards with our meal and slept soundly in their former beds. On another day, we explored the lower reaches of a violently rushing melted glacier, negotiating a catwalk that clung to the rock and sometimes tunnelled through it. Then we climbed up to the level at which it was still ice, creeping inexorably down the mountain. That particular day

Facing page, top, half-timbered houses in Molsheim, near Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace, and setting off through the vineyards along the Wine Road. Above, top left, a striking cottage in Riquewihr, one of the prettiest of the little medieval walled towns in France; a church door decorated with flowers; and wild poppies along the way

Splendid vistas reward walkers on the high ridges around Lauterbrunnen. Facing page, deep in the green glades of the Black Forest. Although dwarfed by the waterfall, this cablecar holds about 80 people. It is one of a series that ascends the Schilthorn at an alarming rate of climb

was late in the trip when, theoretically, we were a lot fitter than when we started, but it left us panting.

Looking back, I realise that we were thoroughly spoiled. It was so easy – we carried just a light day pack with drinking water, lunch and wet-weather gear (I was glad of my lightweight rainproof Gortex jacket), and there was the van at the door to cover the longer stretches and to take the luggage. We were able to buy a few bottles of wine in Alsace to drink in Switzerland, where most things are expensive – no backpacker could do that. We didn't have to cope with the hassles of driving on the “wrong” side of the road or awful driving conditions, all the accommodation and meals were organised and we had the Clarkes' extraordinary fund of local knowledge to draw on. They treated our blister and found a bootmaker when a shoe needed a new heel. Even mundane things such as finding a public toilet can take valuable time in a strange town.

Gabriela was born in Germany and has been a keen walker since she was a child, and Graeme has spent a lot of time there. They also research each walk thoroughly, something the average tourist doesn't have time to do, and carry reference books on the wildflowers, trees and animals. In places where we stopped for only a few hours, they were able to point out what was available so that we could



each choose according to our own priorities. There's nothing worse than stumbling across a reference to something wonderful that you'd love to have seen just after you've left a place.

No doubt, the experience they have gained organising walking trips in Australia also stands them in good stead. When operating from their home base during our summer months, they prepare all the food, which is such a feature of the walks, but, for obvious reasons, they don't do the cooking in Europe. Instead, they try to present some of the local specialties that not everyone would be able to track down. A substantial breakfast and evening meal are included, and for lunch each day there are usually three options – a picnic, a cafe, or a meal at a more expensive restaurant. Dressed for walking, we usually opted to make a selection from the wonderful array of meats and cheeses at a deli – Gabriela was always able to point out the best – and then stop off at a bread shop. The “dinkel” bread in Germany made a lasting impression – it's topped with a delicious nutty grain that is one of the older forms of wheat. The pastry shops were also hard to ignore.

One of Qantas' one-stop direct flights to Frankfurt will get you to the assembly point at Frankfurt Airport not at all tired. I arrived with time in hand to check out the old part of the city. From Frankfurt

we drove into Alsace, walking through vineyards and along part of the Wine Road, and exploring some charming little walled towns, including Riquewihr, which dates from 1509 and must be one of the prettiest. Each night, we stayed in a different place, chosen for location or points of special interest, in guesthouse-style accommodation with a quaint local atmosphere. On our last night in Alsace, in Ribeauville, we were fortunate enough to see storks nesting on the roofs, a sight that is becoming uncommon in Europe, much to the regret of people there, who regard them as lucky.

On the sixth day, we crossed into Germany and headed for the Menzenschwand area, where we stayed for the next three days. This little village is cradled in a lush green valley high in the Black Forest. It's a popular spot year-round – with spa baths, walking on well-made paths in summer and cross-country skiing in winter. Ski lifts climb in all directions, but we were there to walk, so walk we did – even on our rest day. (But I have to confess that without our guides, and even with a map, we managed to choose the long way home and were out for longer than we intended.)

Lovely wood carving is done in this area – it's probably the best place to buy cuckoo clocks or wooden toys. In St Blasien, many in the group also succumbed to the temptation of Mephisto walking



boots, the most comfortable you'll ever put on your feet – we didn't even have to break them in.

After we reached Lauterbrunnen, in Switzerland, we stayed in the same guesthouse for the remaining five days. This charming little village looks up at the magnificent Jungfrau, Eiger and Mönch, the big three of Swiss mountains. Waterfalls gush from the rockfaces and plummet incredible distances to the valley floor. Little trains crawl like so many caterpillars up the slopes – an especially beautiful sight as dusk falls and lights begin to twinkle all over the hills. To reach the top of the Jungfrau, the railway disappears inside the mountains, with stops at intervals for passengers to alight and marvel at the views from windows cut through the rockface. The journey is a must for train enthusiasts, but no one could fail to be impressed by such feats of engineering.

It was hard to decide which was the "best" day – most chose the trip up the Jungfrau when the weather was perfect and the vistas of glaciers and the surrounding peaks were magnificent. From the last station, a lift ascends to a weather station perched nearly at the summit. There was plenty of snow to frolic in and we ate a picnic lunch in one of the observation lounges. Going home, we walked down from about half-way, just to keep the "down" muscles in trim and enjoy the hot spring sunshine.

If I had to choose my most wonderful day, it would be either one of the walks through the trees at Menzenschwand when Graeme lead us through deep dells and glades, and then up to Hoehenschwand, "the village in the sky", or the morning descent from St Odile through the forest with a gentle drizzle softening the light and accentuating the forest stillness. A thick bed of pine needles cushioned our steps. And then, of course, there was the day at Lauterbrunnen when we all took the funicular up to Grütschalp, and climbed high into the mountains through patches of trees to the alpine valleys where the cows spend the summer months. On a festive day in spring, the cows are decorated with garlands and bells and herded up after wintering at lower altitudes. Later in the season, huge cheeses are carried down by packhorses to market. We drank quantities of fresh milk with our lunch at one of the alms (farms). Many young Swiss drop out and spend a summer up there – it's not hard to understand why.

Another memorable experience was ascending the Schilthorn via an amazing series of cablecars – on top is the revolving restaurant, Piz Gloria, which you may have seen in the James Bond film *On Her Majesty's Service*. To mark his table, 007 has been etched on one of the windows. The complex is

TRAVEL DETAILS

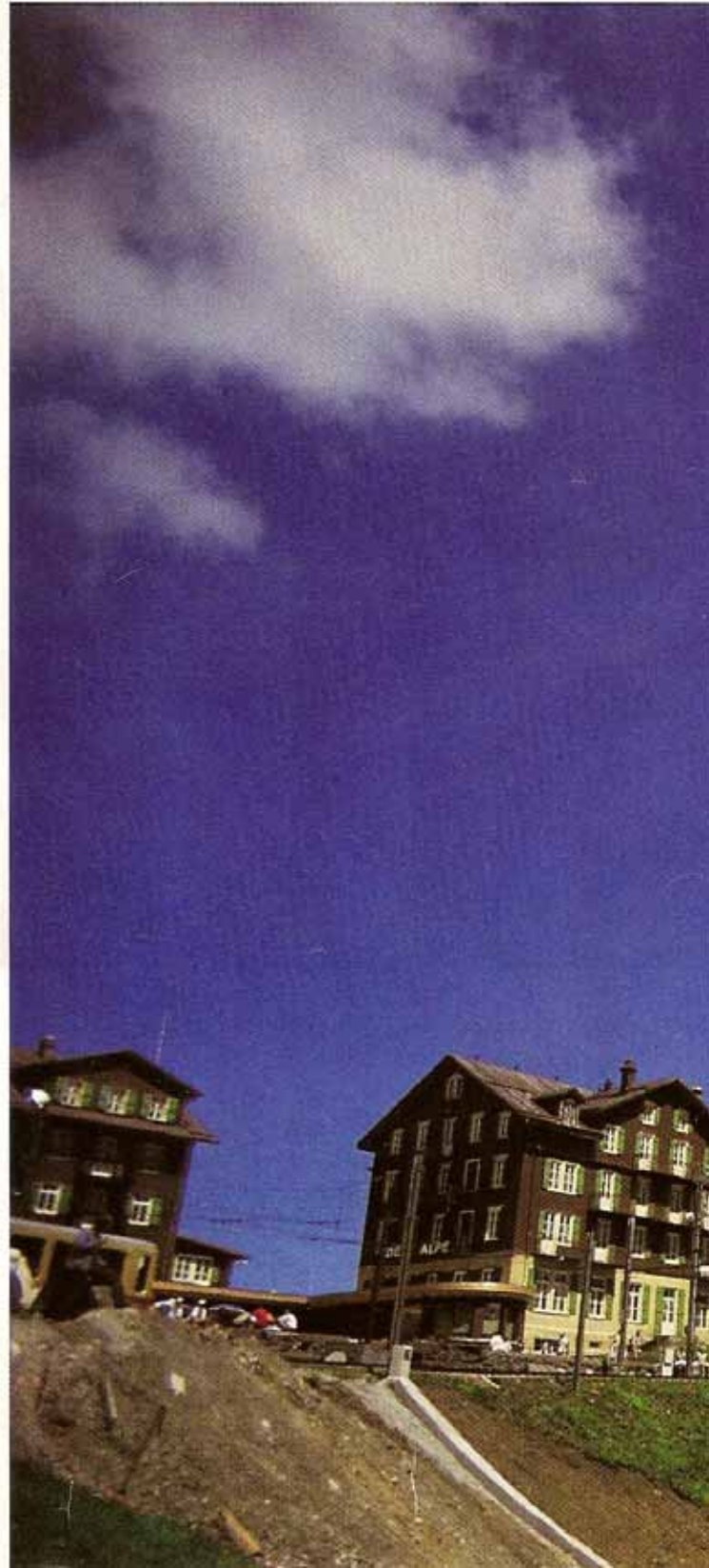
For bookings and further information, contact Graeme and Gabriela Clarke at **Walkabout Gourmet Adventures**, PO Box 2179, North Brighton, Vic 3186, phone (03) 598 4904, fax (03) 670 0985. The Clarkes offer a range of walks from 1-11 days in Australia and from 10-16 days in Europe, including France, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Crete. It is sometimes possible to join the European walks for shorter periods.




Bookings and inquiries can also be made at **Wandana The Travel Professionals Pty Ltd**, 209 Toorak Rd, South Yarra, Vic 3141, phone (03) 826 8188, fax (03) 826 9976; **Ausventure**, 860 Military Rd, Mosman, NSW 2088, phone (02) 960 1188; **Peregrine Travel (SA) Pty Ltd**, 19 Rundle St, Adelaide 5000, phone (08) 223 5905; **German-Austrian Travel Agency**, 3rd Floor Bowman House, 276 Edward St, Brisbane 4000, phone (07) 221 0629, fax (07) 221 0400; and at **Victour** offices in all states.



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being developed as a tourist attraction with vast observation deck and restaurant facilities. We watched a hang-glider take off from the top and soar gently down on currents of air. On the way home, we explored the charming picturebook village of Murren, where motor vehicles are banned, and watched some of the villagers making hay – hot work, but I'll never forget the smell of that freshly cut meadow, like a salad of wildflowers.

By the time we were dropped off in Luzern, after travelling through the fabulous Interlaken area by van, to go our separate ways, some had a fine collection of souvenir badges to embellish the walking sticks they had cut along the way and we all had a fine collection of memories. We had packed so much into each day that I can't possibly do justice to it. How can I make you hear the birdsong in the early morning or church bells ringing across the valleys? How can I describe the gleam of a wet silver birch or the profusion of flowers, red poppies, lupins, foxgloves, chamomile, borage – too many to mention? Or picture the unbelievably quaint houses with their incredibly neat woodstacks and windowboxes of geraniums? You'll just have to go and see for yourself. And if you do a bit of exercise and get into shape before you go, you'll enjoy it all the more. 

Below, the formidable north face of the Eiger which challenges climbers from all over the world. Facing page windowboxes and ornate signs add colour to the shopping scene in the historic old quarter of Waldshut, a great place to stop for coffee and luscious cakes.



