



PATHS OF GLORY
A hiking club treks along the coast of the Isle of Man, in the Irish Sea.

Hiking With the In Crowd

Who needs a tour guide? With walking clubs, locals show you the scenery they usually save for themselves

● IT'S A WARM, SUNNY DAY on the Normandy coast, but my wife, Nancy, and I aren't lolling on the beach or visiting the area's World War II monuments and museums. We are, instead, strolling alongside the coast road at Ravenoville-Plage with several dozen members of the *Marcheurs de la Sinope*, a local walking club. Our new companions—many in shorts and T-shirts, a few sporting walking sticks—chat in twos, threes, and fours as they walk. Nancy talks with Jacques, an Air France retiree who wants to practice his English and who shares her obsession with cooking. It's clear that everyone is out for socializing as much as for exercise.

As we set off to the south, the group's

volunteer leader, a take-charge woman named Martine, shows me a detailed map of our carefully prepared route: we'll walk along the beach, then inland through farms and a few secluded hamlets, then back to the water. In three hours or so, we'll cover eight or nine miles, all flat. Some people in the group, she explains, will leave us partway through the trek for a shorter option. "We usually walk with 50 to 85 people, most of them retired," Martine says. "Today we have 74. Anytime we walk by the sea, more people come out," she adds.

Martine and the *Marcheurs* are happy to have us—and similar hospitality can be found from walking clubs the world over. These groups offer an appealing way to meet local

folks and fully experience a region's not-in-the-guidebook charms. Sure, you could sign on with a tour company that specializes in walking vacations. Or you could find recommended routes online, or buy a good map of the area, and go it alone. But tagging along with a local walking club on one of its scheduled outings is, for my money, a safer, surer way to see the very best of a place.

For a donation of a few dollars, or sometimes just for the asking, you'll get a tested route, plus companions who will keep you away from busy roads, point out not-to-be-missed attractions that only locals know about, and dispense advice on where to stop for a memorable snack. Club walkers tend to be

SON CLAIRES/LORELY BLANCHET/WIREIMAGE.COM

over 50. And as I found in Normandy, they usually like company.

Tourist offices and local newspapers often announce scheduled walks that are open to all, so you can pick up information at the last minute and simply appear at the appointed time. Better still, around the United States and in even the remotest parts of such walker-friendly countries as England, France, and Germany, local clubs are easy to find with a computer search, or by asking the local tourism department. (If you read French, for example, you can find information about 3,200 clubs in France and its territories at frandonnee.fr/assos.aspx, the website of La Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre.) Many walking groups post their schedules online, or you can e-mail or phone to ask about walks on specific dates. Some good resources:

- **The American Volkssport Association** This 34-year-old U.S. affiliate of an international organization maintains a list of more than 300 local walking and fitness clubs covering most states. AVA walks are ranked from 1 (easy) to 5 (for those in top shape) and generally take up to two hours (210-659-2112; ava.org).

- **The Ramblers** An umbrella organization for about 500 local clubs in England, Scotland, and Wales, this group offers hundreds of walks per week. The website has a searchable database of scheduled walks throughout Britain (011-44-20-7339-8500; ramblers.co.uk).

- **The European Ramblers' Association** Another umbrella organization, this group can direct you to walking federations in 26 European countries (011-420-251-627-356; era-ewv-ferp.org).

A footnote: Before you add a walk to your itinerary, make sure it's appropriate for your experience and physical condition. Find out the length of

Adventures Afoot From Coast to Coast



Winter Park, Florida

Explore a 19th-century resort town with its elegant houses, historic buildings, museums, lakes, and thousands of live oaks.

Mid-Florida Milers Walking Club
407-695-9181; midfloridamilers.org



Denver, Colorado

See the Mile High City on foot, taking in the capitol building, college campuses, gardens, bike trails, and the statue of the Big Blue Bear.

Rocky Mountain Wanderers
303-680-7118; rockymountainwanderers.info



Folsom, California

Take a stroll back in time to gold rush days and visit a gold-panning exhibit, a Pony Express station, an old powerhouse, and a Chinese cemetery.

Sacramento Walking Sticks Club
916-283-4650; sacramentowalkingsticks.org



Newton County, Arkansas

A photographer's dream, this easy three-mile country walk to Hawksbill Crag and back offers great views over the Buffalo National River.

Takahik River Valley Hikers
479-968-7922; www.takahik.com



Eagle Creek Park, Indianapolis, Indiana

A short drive from the city center you'll find deer, waterfowl, and reservoir views along this nature preserve's mostly wooded trails.

Indianapolis Hiking Club
317-328-9946; www.indyhike.org

the route and the kind of paths you'll be on—and bring footwear suitable for the terrain. Then get ready to get acquainted with a place from a local's unique perspective.

That's what Nancy and I find on our French adventure. As we wander with the Marcheurs along the coast of Normandy, we pass a few abandoned German Army concrete blockhouses, then walk inland on grassy farm trails and narrow back

roads lined with hedgerows, the terrain little changed since GIs trudged through here 65 years earlier.

We listen to frogs, admire swans in a pond by a lovely restored manor house, and take turns crowding into a small 15th-century church for a look before retracing a bit of the coast route back to our starting point. It is exactly the kind of rich, beneath-the-surface experience we were looking for. —Dan Carlinsky