

The road less travelled

Avoid the crowds with an active break to Europe's undiscovered gems, says Aby Dunsby

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Skied through the snow-dusted Alps? Splashed around in the Med? Cycled around France's meandering country lanes?

Europe is like a giant and very beautiful adventure playground, making it a popular, easy-to-reach option for clients seeking a healthy dose of adrenaline on holiday. So if they've 'been there, done that' in the most popular destinations across the Channel, there are still heaps of off-the-beaten track options to discover in this hugely diverse continent.

Not only will picking a lesser-known location for an active holiday mean clients will be able to evade the camera-wielding

tourist throngs, they'll likely save themselves some money in the process and reap the joy of discovering a new, character-filled enclave of the world.

Europe offers something for all abilities and tastes, whether it's exploring volcanic terrain on the Canary Islands, kayaking through azure fjords in Norway or cycling through quaint, sun-blessed corners of mainland Greece.

▶ MOUNTAIN HIGHS

Those seeking fresh mountain air and bracing walks should consider the magnificent, rose-tinted peaks of Italy's Dolomites, whose panoramic views and towering summits appeal to



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walkers and rock climbers.

The area's well-developed system of walking trails means there's something for all abilities, while the more adventurous can try their hand at mountain biking, horse riding or even paragliding.

In winter, clients who are itching to try something new can ditch the obvious skis in favour of snowshoes, allowing them to get off-piste and explore. The Chalet Selvan in Selva val Gardena has easy access to walking routes, and starts at £731 for a week's full-board with flights to Verona with Thomson Lakes & Mountains.

If clients are more seduced by the prospect of mountain treks through the iconic Alps but are looking for a cheaper alternative to France or Italy, suggest a holiday to Slovenia. "While Ljubljana is probably



RIGHT:
The Dolomites

FAR RIGHT:
Rafting in
Slovenia



Taber Holidays offers a five-night Trolltunga Experience holiday from £1,370 including return flights from Heathrow to Bergen, car hire, three nights' accommodation in Lofthus and two in Bergen. Departs daily until September 30. taberhols.co.uk

Balkan Holidays has a seven-night Julian Alps Explorer holiday from £624 including half-board accommodation, flights to Ljubljana and transfers. balkanholidays.co.uk/agents

➔ the destination that most people would know, in the Julian Alps clients can discover breath-taking scenery and miles of unspoiled countryside," says Chris Rand, sales and marketing manager at Balkan Holidays.

Clients will be accompanied by an experienced mountain guide, and hikes are graded according to difficulty, ranging from moderate to challenging. As well as the opportunity to enjoy the jagged limestone peaks of the Julian Alps, clients can choose to take to the alpine streams for white-water rafting, or cycle along scenic lakeside paths.

Intrepid Travel this year added an eight-day Active in Slovenia holiday, whose highlights include hiking on Mount Vogel, cycling in Triglav National Park and rafting on the Sava Dolinka.

▶ COUNTRY LIFE

Italy lovers can eschew the crowded



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piazas of Venice or Verona to discover the wider region of Veneto by foot instead. The town of Valdobbiadene is the capital of prosecco country, though the rolling vineyards that grow the grape stretch past Treviso and as far as Vittorio Veneto, meaning there's plenty for clients to discover. Chloe Knott, senior walking and trekking programme manager for Exodus, says the popularity of its holiday there is partly due to its active group element.

"With little English being spoken in the area and very few tourists, clients are quickly absorbed into the destination and all it has to offer, including lots of delicious prosecco," she says.

For adventurers looking to explore some of Europe's lesser-known gems in one stint, an escorted tour is a good option that allows clients to learn about new cultures and traditions at the hands of an expert guide. Insight Vacations used feedback from past clients to devise a bespoke, one-off departure, and the outcome reflects the overall increase in interest in eastern Europe. The 18-day Mystical Heart of Europe tour includes walks through baroque palaces and castle ruins, and allows clients to marvel at natural sights including mountain peaks, waterfalls and forests.

In the same region, G Adventures' National Geographic Journey to the Balkan Peninsula takes clients from Montenegro – popular with hikers and kayakers – to Plitvice Lakes National Park in central Croatia.

▶ WHEELY GOOD

The British obsession for cycling holidays shows no sign of braking, especially as Olympic fever sets in. Budding Chris Froomes or Lizzie Armisteads who wish to pedal the road less travelled should consider Sivota in Greece, which benefits from far fewer tourists than islands such as Crete or Kefalonia. The scenic region is dotted with hills cloaked in pine, cypress and olive, and there are plenty of rocky coves and sandy bays to discover by bike along coastal roads.

LEFT:
Prosecco vineyards,
Veneto



➔ offering in Sivota, adding two new expert tours for road cycling in the area, as well as giving guests at its Retreat Beachclub the option of booking premium full-suspension mountain bikes from £95 per week. (A one-week holiday starts from £449).

As well as cycling, clients visiting Sivota can explore the surrounding waters of the traditional Greek village by sailing boat, or take advantage of the mild conditions and flat water for waterskiing, wakeboarding or kayaking.

An off-the-beaten-track holiday doesn't have to be inaccessible: a direct flight will take clients to La Palma, the greenest of the Canary Islands, and one which has avoided mass hotel development to maintain a serene sense of beauty. La Palma benefits from balmy temperatures in the autumn months, making it especially appealing to hikers at this time of year, though its dramatic volcanic landscape and reputation as one of the world's steepest islands make it a tougher choice.

Alison Hall, head of product development at Inntravel, says: "True adventure-seekers should take a hike in the spectacular Caldera de Taburiente National Park, with its towering five-mile-wide crater walls, or walk in the Natural Cumbre Vieja Park, a string of volcanoes that form a ridge from the caldera to the south of the island." Inntravel's La Palma Volcanic Trails trip costs from £690.



ABOVE: Caldera de Taburiente National Park, La Palma



ASK THE EXPERT



Clare Collins, Europe product manager, Explore
 "There are plenty of alternative European destinations which lend themselves to adventure or activity holidays. To help sell some of these lesser-visited countries, focus on the quirky activities clients can enjoy there – it could be anything from spending the night in the Romanian Ice Hotel and snowshoeing in the Transylvanian Alps, to exploring former Yugoslavia by train or kayaking on the Sava River in Serbia."



The hike to Trolltunga takes a gruelling eight to 10 hours but reward comes in the form of epic panoramic views



LEFT: Trolltunga, Norway

CHILLING OUT

A winter holiday to undiscovered Romania will allow clients to marvel at the country's captivating towns and cities in a romantic, snow-covered setting. Explore has a trip incorporating a night at an ice hotel above Lake Balea, visits to Transylvania's Bran Castle and Brasov, and snowshoeing and tobogganing excursions (from £799).

For an active break the whole family can enjoy, Nordic Experience recommends a trip to the Vesterålen archipelago in northern Norway, where clients can see the northern lights, encounter Arctic wildlife and avoid the tourist hordes. Its Winter Aurora and Wildlife Encounter is an educational trip where clients can learn about Norwegian culture, spot eagles, sail through the fjords, take a husky ride and go on a reindeer safari.

Serious hikers can head to Norway's Hardanger region, where the craggy cliff of Trolltunga juts out across Lake Ringedalsvatnet. The hike takes a gruelling eight to 10 hours but reward comes in the form of epic panoramic views. Clients can tag on a couple of nights in the charming coastal city of Bergen as part of Taber Holidays' Trolltunga Experience itinerary. **TW**