

## TRAVELING WITH KIDS

# Take a hike this summer to celebrate the milestones

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Eleven hundred and six steep, stone steps that never seem to end.

We're hiking high above Positano along Italy's famous Amalfi Coast in the Lattari Mountains. This trail is less than three miles, but the elevation is steep and it's the toughest hike the Backroads hiking group, which includes my daughter Reggie and me, has attempted on this the fifth day of our trip. Reg is at the front of the pack; I'm in the back.

But from any vantage point, the views can't be beat -- 30-foot-tall cypress trees, juniper trees, the candy-colored houses marching up the steep hills, the terraced gardens with lemons, olives, vegetables and, of course, grapes, wild herbs (ever taste lemon thyme?) and yellow and purple wildflowers. Below us, sailboats and yachts bob in the sapphire-blue sea and ferries chug between the Italian islands. I feel like I've hiked right into a postcard.

California-based **Backroads** offers more than 1,000 trips around the world -- from family camping trips in the national parks (still room for this summer, they tell me) to biking and hiking trips like this one in Europe and forays to such exotic climes as South Africa, Vietnam and Peru. Hundreds are designed just for families and you can choose based on the age of your kids.

Maybe we're crazy to be in Italy when the

dollar's value has dropped so low here, but this trip to Europe is Reggie's college graduation gift, and I figure the weak dollar shouldn't keep you from celebrating those special moments where you want to, whenever you want to. (If you are considering a trip to Italy, we flew Eurofly which offers nonstop flights from JFK Airport to cities like Naples, Palermo and Venice at attractive rates. Check out the August friends and family fare, which allows four to fly for under \$3,500, including fuel surcharges.)

In fact, on our trip, more than half of the hikers in our group were parents with twenty-somethings celebrating a graduate degree or those anticipating an upcoming retirement. "Busy parents don't have to plan every detail," said Deborah Douglas, a writer and former lawyer from Santa Fe, N.Me., who was celebrating her daughter Emily's newly minted graduate degree. She'd done a Backroads trip when her older daughter finished college a few years ago. "It makes it so easy -- you sign up, you give them your credit card and you show up. It's hard to beat that."

"Even if you are traveling with your best friend you can get on each other's nerves," said 23-year-old Emily Douglas, who lives in New York. Though she and her mom are very close she adds, "It helps to have other people around and it was fun to have other people my age."

Not only do we not have to worry about logistics -- where we're staying, where we're eating, our itinerary -- but our leaders Arielle

Moreau, who is French, and Nate Rayman, a Californian, hand us detailed directions of our hiking route every morning along with trail snacks and suggestions on where to have lunch. On family trips, extra guides are along for the kids. No wonder family trips are up 24 percent in the last year.

“They gave us a chance to meet local people and eat local food that we never could have otherwise,” said Andrew Davies, a grandfather from Sydney, Australia. Davis was often my hiking partner, while his wife charged ahead with Reggie.

We’ve dined with locals in Amalfi (our host even made his own wine), stayed at small inns like the Montemare with its heart-stopping views down to the sea in Positano and were led by local guides like De Rosa Maurizio, who was eager to share his passion for the hiking trails, as well as local history and cooking, pointing out every wild herb and vegetable along the way.

Another plus with traveling with an American company like Backroads: You pay in U.S. dollars at prices that were set more than a year ago when the dollar was stronger.

But not even this trip was perfect. Some people got along better than others. Some of us wished for better wines, shorter hikes and more tiramisu. Even with terrific directions, we lost our way.

And, of course, the week is about more than the locale. For Chicagoans Jim and Brigid McCormick, it is the chance to celebrate Jim’s upcoming retirement with his 28-year-old son, Drew, and 25-year-old daughter, Beth, who laughingly acknowledged that the trip was more fun than she anticipated.

For 38-year-old Lori Gilbert, a Philadelphia physician, the trip is a gift to herself. “I’d forgotten how much I love to hike,” she said.

No one is in lockstep, though, on the hiking trails or off. Some opt to ride the van part of the way. Today, some in the group opt to forgo the

hike to poke around the utterly charming seaside town of Positano with its galleries, cafes, shops and beach, albeit rocky ones.

The rest of us start after breakfast at the trailhead of Montepertuso. I counted 1,106 steps we’d climbed when we stopped in the town (population less than 500 people) of Santa Maria del Castello at the family-run restaurant Zi’Peppe. We never would have found it on our own. “We spend a lot of time in the region building relationships with local people,” our leader Nate Rayman explains. “It helps to have eyes and ears in the field.”

Lunch is a feast -- rice salad and sauteed zucchini and eggplant, green salad and eggplant parmigiana, salami and prosciutto, juicy melon and potato puffs, local caciotta cheese, lots of wine and the best cannoli I’ve ever eaten.

Afterward, we practically rolled downhill to Positano.

That night, we toasted our success at a farewell dinner. Everyone had a favorite hike (the day we were serenaded by classical musicians on a misty trail was mine) and a favorite meal. What I loved best was not being in charge. Any parent who is usually leading the pack will appreciate that’s a vacation in itself!

“We just did what we were told,” joked Andrew Davies. “Like being in the Army.”

Except the food was a lot better.

*(For more Taking the Kids, visit [www.takingthekids.com](http://www.takingthekids.com), where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)*