

I have always had a bit of an inferiority complex when it comes to the French. I lived there for almost three years as a student, and looked on in awe at the women with their perfect skin, toned muscles, and their 'born to wear tight jeans' bottoms, I tried very hard to keep up but I didn't ski, couldn't talk philosophy and didn't know an aperitif from a digestif. Years later they still manage to seduce me, which is why I am not surprised when it's a small family-run French company which wins my personal Palme D'or for all things ethical in travel this year.

Itinerance-Trekking (www.itinerance.net) runs walking holidays in the Mercantour National Park, in the Maritimes Alps region of France, just north of Nice. Set up by Christine and Gerard Kieffer, both expert mountain guides, they live, work and breathe the Alps and have created the perfect responsible tourism product. Walking holidays in the Alps, following carefully managed routes, and supporting small locally-owned accommodation along the way. They encourage visitors to come by train, give detailed information on all flora and fauna, as well as how to protect it en route, and work very closely with their network of accommodation providers to offer high quality home-made and locally-sourced food.

However, what makes Itinerance-Trekking and the Kieffers stand out is that they also know that the future of the Alps lies in the hands of our children. That is why they have created a family-friendly organisation, rather than just marketing their product at rich, retired ramblers. Their secret trick is a simple one. Donkeys. They have become expert donkey breeders, so that families can take off for a week at a time, following detailed itineraries over mountains, along rivers and around lakes, while a donkey carries bags to their next bed for the night. It is inspired. The children are given strict instructions on how to lead the donkey, care for him, and make him part of the family for the week. Not only does this teach the children (and grown-ups) so much, it also encourages them along the tougher uphill stretches.

Itinerance also offers the chance to go wild camping in the mountains. Their sons, who have inherited their parents' infectious passion for mountain life, are the expert guides who lead you up to heights of between 1000 and 3000 metres, with donkeys and horses to carry bags, and then set up tents, campfires, cook and share bush skills for the week.

The Kieffers are active conservationists and have, for example, recently taken on one local council at Valberg for irresponsible disposal of building materials after the ski season. Some of the walking path signposts disappeared during construction work, and walkers weren't being given quite the same welcome as the huge numbers of skiers which arrive every year. They are right to complain too, as this particular resort has won awards for its 'responsible tourism' practices.

But what makes Itinerance-Trekking really exemplary, is that they are not just seeking to preach and convert. They have created, first and foremost, a superb tourism product to appeal to everyone, not just 'greenies'. They are slowly but surely bringing round many other people in the region to their way of thinking. From the small community-run 'auberge' in Sauze which used to offer basic accommodation and food, and now serves homemade ravioli, stuffed with locally-grown pumpkin and wild spinach. To the small hotelier in Peone whose picnic looks as if he has just raided the best organic farmers' market you can imagine.

When I was there, my various hosts talked adoringly of the Kieffers, the business they were generating for everyone in the area, their commitment to the region, and of their pure and honest goodness. They may not all have yurts, compost loos, and environmentally-friendly products, like they do at basecamp Kieffer, but they are doing their best to change their ways. So, there is no getting away from it. The French still do it with class, style and passion. I should hate them for it, but I don't. I just keep going back again and again for more.

- sporcanton