



BETH M. HOWARD

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## escapes

Like to run? Here's a vacation that will keep you on your feet.

By Beth M. Howard

**I**t sounded like an oxymoron — a “running vacation.” And more like a chance to run myself ragged than relaxed.

But this was no marathon, stressed the folks at Backroads, the Berkeley, Calif.-based adventure travel company offering the trip.

It was a real inn-to-inn *vacation* — and if we

could run, jog or walk a minimum of 15 miles a week, as well as get up and go on consecutive days, we were qualified.

For the next five days, we would travel on foot three to 15 miles per day (depending on our fitness level), taking as many snack and breather breaks en route as we needed to reach our lodging for the night.

And if the lodge was too far to get to by foot, we'd run/jog/walk to a predetermined spot, where a shuttle would be waiting to take us the rest of the way.

Backroads also promised plenty of leisure time, with most of the running in the morning, and the rest of the day free for kayaking, mountain biking, hiking, horseback riding or just sitting under a tree reading.

I'd done tougher things for the sake of a

# running away

good story — dog sledding in subzero Alaska, mountain biking through the drop-dead heat of Tahiti, trekking New Zealand's treacherous glaciers. And while I was certainly no Mary Decker-Slaney, I was a runner, and I was in pretty good shape. “Sign me up!” said my inner road warrior.

### Over hill, over dale . . .

The first day, we gathered on a beautiful beach at Point Reyes National Seashore, a peninsula haven of wilderness just two hours north of San Francisco. I felt like a scared kid going to summer camp, nervous about meeting new people and, more so, about being able to keep up with a sort of vacation I feared might solicit hardcore runner types. My days of high school track were long past. But I did run 15 miles per week, if not all of them at once.

I surreptitiously surveyed the muscle tone of the group, hoping to gauge how intense the week would be and what would be my approximate pecking order. (Our ranks included a New York businessman and his companion, a doctor from France, a cartographer from St. Louis in training for the Boston Marathon, a 40-year-old





## escapes

woman training for her first marathon, two male Backroads guides and me.)

Half the people in the group looked as if they could run me into the

speeding along at breakneck speed, they kept what was a comfortable pace for me, padding along a forest floor covered in pine needles and taking deep breaths of the heavily scented air.

As we completed the ninth and final mile, I was surprised to find myself pleasantly rather than painfully

route, but averaged three to seven miles daily.)

### No water, an unintended trip

For the next four days, we rose at 7 a.m., wolfed down a healthful breakfast, then hit the road, following hiking trails and dirt roads through redwood forests, up to coastal peaks with awesome views, along pristine beaches and through a wildlife refuge where the deer and the tule elk play.

After replenishing lunches of gourmet salads and fruit, we frolicked away the afternoon with activity (or non-activity) of choice, coming to rest each night at a different elegant inn where we soaked in claw-footed bathtubs or relinquished our sore muscles to massage therapists.

Afterward, we feasted on gourmet cuisine like grilled pork chops, garlic mashed potatoes and chocolate soufflé washed down with Napa Valley wines — with nary a passing thought to calories. And as a sliver of moon rose over the mountains, we collapsed in

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ground, while the other half, well, let's just say they looked like they could stand to log a few miles in their running shoes.

Any trepidation disappeared after the first mile on the trail, as the pack divided into walkers, joggers and runners. Loping alongside the runners, I was relieved to find they knew a thing or two about pacing. Rather than

exhausted. In fact, the run had been easier (and certainly more scenic) than my normal five-mile workout.

Surging with confidence, I announced that my goal for the week was to run the longer of two routes offered each day. (The long options ranged from nine to 15 miles a day, alternating easy and hard days. The short option followed the same



giant, fluffy beds, falling asleep to the sound of the wind rustling the leaves.

I'm happy to report that I did achieve my goal — but not without suffering a few mishaps en route: A gasping bushwhacking to the top of 1,407-foot Mount Wittenberg in intense heat with an empty water bot-

tle; an unintentional trip over a tree root on mile 13 of a 14-mile run, which left me with a scar along my shinbone; and a wicked case of poison ivy.

But the group dynamics more than made up for all of it. Despite our varying ages, backgrounds and fitness

## details

Dates for 1996 are Sept. 22–27 and Oct. 13–18. Cost is \$1,293 all inclusive. For more information, call Backroads at (800) GO-ACTIVE.

levels, we bonded like a bunch of kids at camp, sharing trail tales as well as stories of the lives we'd left behind.

And while the week was certainly no vacation from exercise, from a mental standpoint it was just the break I needed from my workaday world. Relieved of all responsibilities except to get up, lace up and go, for five days my mind ran wild and free, taking me far beyond the trails we traveled. ■

**Beth M. Howard** is West Coast editor of *Sports Traveler* magazine and a free-lance writer in Santa Monica, Calif.