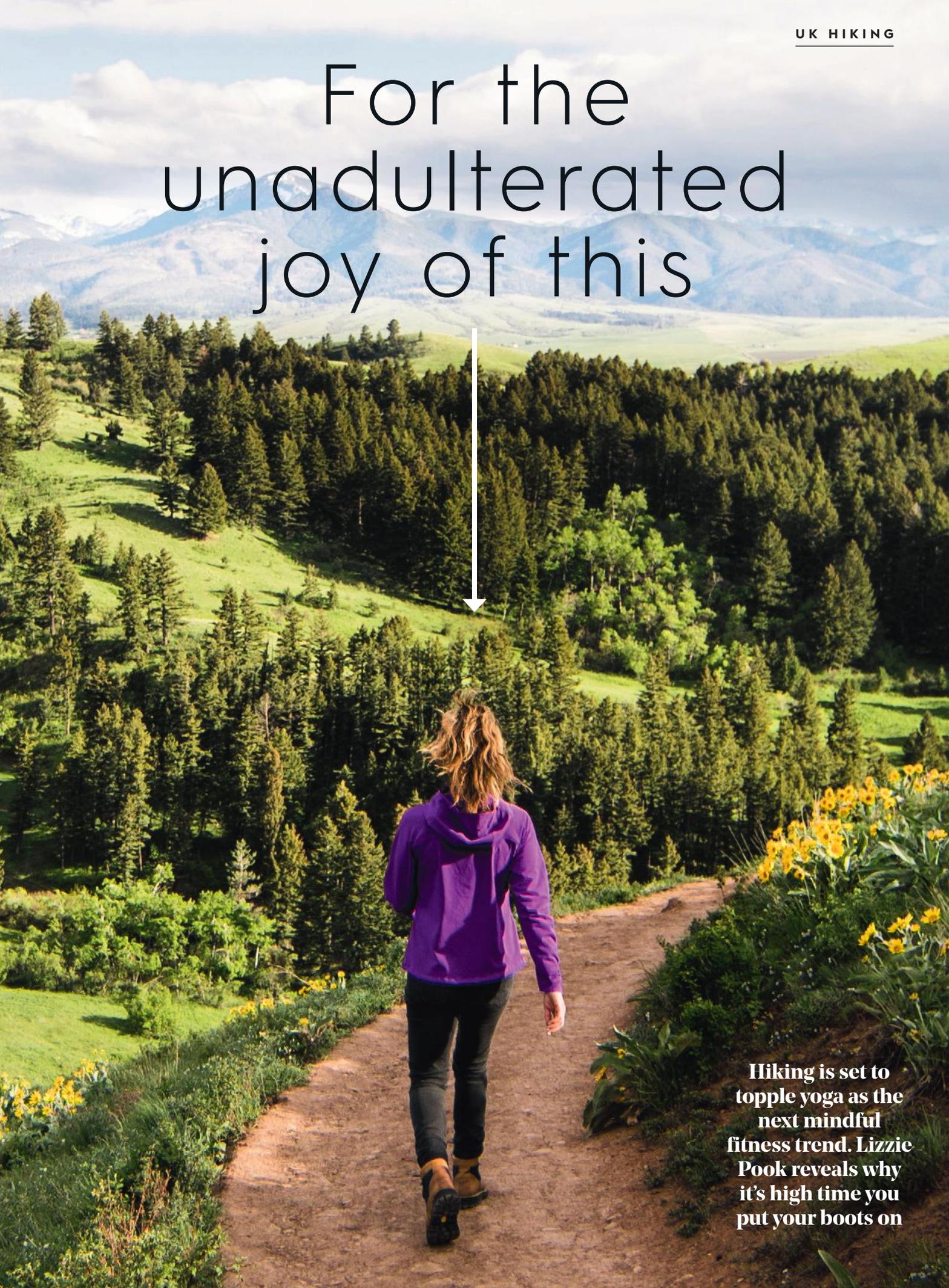


Why we're  
all swapping  
this



# For the unadulterated joy of this



Hiking is set to topple yoga as the next mindful fitness trend. Lizzie Pook reveals why it's high time you put your boots on

I'm on my hands and knees, a few hours into my mountain hike. With wind whipping at my bobble hat and hair lashing across my face, I pull tiring limbs and grazed hands over boulders, the loose grit showering down below me with a hiss. It's a struggle. My muscles scream and a burning sensation tears across my clammy chest. But I persevere, inching my way higher until I eventually reach the summit, unfolding myself into a standing position to survey the view. It's incredible. The patchwork of the Yorkshire Dales opens up around me: russet-coloured fields flecked with tiny sheep, shafts of breaking sunlight through mackerel clouds and two buzzards wheeling lazily around my head. It's quiet here, above the life below of grown-up problems and accountability. As I reach for my water and run an arm across my brow, I feel one thing only: elation. I love a hike.

I'm increasingly not the only

## "WALKING HOLIDAYS HAVE OVERTAKEN BEACH BREAKS IN TERMS OF POPULARITY, WHILE FASHION IS TAKING INSPIRATION FROM HIKING"

one spending weekends buffeted by winds and tugged at by bogs. Last year, trend forecaster WGSN predicted hiking to be a key trend of 2018, anticipating that it will replace yoga as the new 'it' activity by 2019. It helps that finding yourself on a mountain in mud-caked boots is highly Instagrammable, with celebrities including Reese Witherspoon and Gigi Hadid eschewing boutique fitness classes to conquer peaks, and Instagram movements such as #sheisnotlost and @outdoorwomen dedicated to women taking on the great outdoors.

But the tendrils of this trend are creeping way beyond social media. *The Independent's* recent Travel Insight Survey found that walking holidays have overtaken beach breaks in terms of popularity, while fashion is also taking inspiration from heavy-duty hiking – with brands such as Prada and Calvin Klein sending wellington boots, foil blankets and hi-vis overalls out on their catwalks earlier this year. Of course, the one thing that makes hiking so appealing is its ease. It doesn't require a huge amount of specialist gear, financial

investment or even fitness to get started. Anyone can get involved. Regardless of whether you amble along for 20 minutes before a pub lunch or strap a tent to your back to wild camp on the Scottish Cairngorms, there's not much skill required. All that is needed is a willingness to put one foot in front of the other.

### THE PERKS OF PERAMBULATION

Hiking is also *really* good for you. The list of physical benefits runs long. In terms of basic biology, hiking recruits our leg muscles – quadriceps, hamstrings, glutes, gastrocnemius, tibialis and soleus muscles – while strengthening the core, leading to better balance, stability and posture. "Hiking is an effective, low-impact cardio workout that lowers blood pressure and increases lung capacity," says Henry McDermott, sports therapist at ProBack. Some research suggests benefits may extend to helping cancer patients with recovery. Negotiating the type of uneven terrain that comes with hiking – boggy nature trails, wobbly

cliff paths, deep-sand beaches – raises our heart and metabolic rates significantly. Research shows your body uses 28% more energy than it would walking on flat ground when hiking these types of terrains.

But regardless of how good it can be for our bodies, what's staggering is the quieting impact it can have on our brains. Research shows that time spent in nature can increase our attention spans and creative problem-solving skills by up to 50% – although this could have as much to do with unplugging from technology as anything else. A 2015 study from Stanford University found that time spent in natural environments, such as fields, mountains and coastal paths, compared with urban ones, also reduces the mind's propensity to ruminate – a term psychologists use for the negative, self-sabotaging patterns of thought that can plague our brains. Another study, from the University of British Columbia, found that aerobic exercise such as hiking can help to improve our memory and cognitive ability.

There's also something tremendously cathartic about

## Take a walk

*The British Isles are home to some of the most*



TAKE THE HIGHLAND ROAD

### THE WEST HIGHLAND WAY

A 96-mile route from Glasgow along the eastern shores of Loch Lomond, through mountains to the foot of Ben Nevis and Fort William. Many see it as a bucket-list trek, with desolation, drama and bewitching forests. The perfect intro to the Scottish Highlands. **(7-8 days)**



IF THE COAST IS CLEAR, TRY WALKING IT

### PEMBROKESHIRE COAST PATH

From craggy cliffs to sweeping beaches, sheltered coves and boat-dotted harbours, you'll also see a bounty of wildlife on this 186-mile path (almost entirely within Pembrokeshire Coast National Park) including dolphins and cliff-nesting coughts. **(12-14 days)**



SOUTH-EAST ENGLAND'S HIGHEST POINT

### OCKLEY TO LEITH HILL, SURREY

One of the most picturesque hikes, and only seven miles. This walk passes through meadows, past cottages and up steps for the final push. Climb Leith Hill Tower (pictured) and on a clear day you can see Big Ben's clock face, 14 counties and the English Channel. **(1.5 hours)**

going back to basics and trudging through the great outdoors with only a few cawing crows and the odd wily stoat for company. "We humans have a long history of walking, so it feels like a natural thing to do, to go on a journey," says Ruth Allen, founder of outdoor therapy company White Peak Wellbeing. "I see the benefits of going on a physical journey – as well as an inner, metaphorical one

– in my work. This can be a powerful form of personal development for people with issues in their lives." This I can relate to. I often hike to muffle the cacophony in my brain. If I'm feeling anxious or, at low points, worthless, hiking instils achievement and strength. If I'm sad, if my world is fuzzed around the edges by grief, the sound of birds and the feel of the wind,

# on the wild side

beautiful hikes around. Here's where to start...



ONE FOR ARTY TYPES AND ROMANTICS

## HELVELLYN, THE LAKE DISTRICT

England's most popular mountain was loved by Wordsworth and has a mix of terrain for everyone – from a pancake-flat summit to rocky areas for scrambling. A plaque near the peak tells of a dog that stayed with its dead owner on the mountain for three months. **(4-5 hours)**



SEVEN SISTERS' ICONIC WHITE-CHALK CLIFFS

## THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY

Amble through some of England's finest countryside on this 100-mile series of paths from Winchester to the white cliffs near Eastbourne. Look out for woodpeckers, weasels and deer; some of the oldest yew trees in living history, plus quaint pubs and pretty villages. **(8 days)**



SPEND SOME TIME SEEING GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

## THE HAWES CIRCULAR WALK, YORKSHIRE

For something more sedate, this circular walk around market town Hawes segues past three waterfalls and through beautiful countryside. The 10-mile route takes in the impressive Hardraw Force Waterfall – England's highest single-drop waterfall, raining down at 100ft. **(3 hours)**

sun or rain on my skin brings me a small, recuperative sense of joy. Allen believes hiking also offers the chance to 're-wild' ourselves – a very rustic sort of self-care. "Re-wilding is about reconnecting to our wilder, more instinctive selves as an antidote to hurried work and personal lives," she says. "It's about becoming present to our surroundings and noticing what our minds and bodies need

to heal. It is returning to our natural, undomesticated selves. It doesn't always require big, drastic changes; sometimes just a shift in mindset and consciously making time for more nature in our lives can make things better."

### MINDFULNESS OVER MATTER

Picking your way through sprawling fields or weaving in and

out of sun-dappled forests are also the perfect settings for practising mindfulness: recent research by Cambridge University found that mindfulness can help improve mental health and prevent mental illness. "If meditation isn't your thing, hiking is an incredible way to practise a sort of 'soft' mindfulness as it forces you to slow down," says UK-based adventurer Pip Stewart. "For me, hiking is the equivalent of hitting the refresh button. We're so bombarded with tech, noise and 'business'; hiking forces you to take a moment out," she says. "When we connect with the world, be that noticing the colour and shape of leaves in the trees, the wind on your face or tone of the sky, we become more aware of how the planet fits together – and reminds us that we're part of this beautiful world." Next time you're hiking, says Stewart, try to analyse the environment around you, using all your senses. "Take a forest, for example," she says. "You'll see how beautiful it is – from the colours and texture of the bark to the noises from the canopy of birds above. I challenge you to find something more beautiful in anything that's man-made."

What is handy is that the UK is home to some of the most breathtaking, easily accessible hiking routes on the planet – from salt-soaked coastal paths to craggy farmland. The National Parks network – 15 parks including The Lake District, the South Downs and the North York Moors – offer some of the UK's most comprehensive hiking, and the Mend our Mountains campaign aims to repair paths in every one of them (see nationalparks.gov.uk). The opportunities are almost endless. "The South West Coast Path is one of my favourite walks: you'll find plenty of well-established day and multi-day hikes," says Stewart. "Scotland's north-west coast is also sublime – you can't go wrong with a trek on the Isle of Skye – as is Pembrokeshire. We're spoilt for choice in the UK. Chances are wherever you are in the British Isles, there's something amazing on your doorstep."

So with countless benefits for your mental and physical health, Instagram bragging rights and a chance to see some of the UK's most beautiful countryside, why not join me? It's easy. Pull on some leggings, invest in a pair of sturdy boots and pack a sandwich or two. All you need do, after that, is walk.



# Boot camp

The best footwear to get you walking



### FOR HILLS

Plenty of ankle support for steep inclines, plus a waterproof Gore-Tex lining. Lowa Women's Renegade GTX Mid Hiking Boot, £127.49, outdoor.org.uk



### FOR RIVER WALKS

Waterproof, durable and supportive, pick these for hurrying yourself across rivers. Columbia Women's Newton Ridge Plus, from £60, amazon.co.uk



### FOR STYLE

Worn by Reese Witherspoon in the film *Wild*, these comfy boots have since gained cult status. Danner Women's Mountain Light Cascade, £280.97, danner.com



### FOR ALL WEATHER

A great all-rounder, with extra padding on the ankle and heel and super-soft fabric. Salomon X Ultra Mid 2 GTX Women's Hiking Shoe, £70, gooutdoors.co.uk