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## Adventure Tours Lighten Up

### Low-Impact Itineraries Offer Guests an Escape Without Big Workout

 By HANNAH KARP  
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Backroads, a 30-year-old bike-tour company that helped popularize active travel, is taking a load off.



Markham Johnson/Backroads

Low-sweat adventure tours with Backroads might include a little game of bocce ball

To attract new customers and retain its aging outdoor enthusiasts, the Berkeley, Calif., outfit this month is unveiling plans to offer 22 new itineraries that involve none of the biking, hiking, rafting or strenuous walking that have long defined its trips. Instead, guests will be shuttled in vans to museums, markets, temples and vineyards -- and they won't have to walk more than about a mile a day.


These "Insider Trips" will be offered at 12 destinations where Backroads has been leading its more-demanding vacations for years, including Tuscany, Peru, China, South Africa and California's wine country, and will cost about the same as its other tours -- an average of \$3,500 a week.

The move is a departure for Backroads, which still considers itself the world's "number one active travel company" and will continue to offer 238 other itineraries that still require physical exertion. The company says it is looking to expand its market base and respond to customers who have said they enjoy the four-star hotels, Michelin-star restaurants and gourmet picnics set up by Backroads staffers but are either unable to or uninterested in burning off the calories along the way.

Backroads is one of many adventure-travel companies toning down itineraries to attract families and aging baby boomers. Santa Fe Mountain Adventures, which started out in 2005 pushing trips involving "thrilling whitewater rafting, heart-thumping mountain biking and invigorating cross-country skiing" is also promoting Southwestern cooking classes, pottery, restorative yoga and "adventure spa" packages.

The National Outdoor Leadership School is offering several new lower-impact courses this year: a semester "without the hiking boots" in Baja, Mexico, and a monthlong course in

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Wyoming focused on fly-fishing. Austin-Lehman Adventures, a 23-year-old adventure-travel operator in Billings, Mont., says its average daily bike rides have been reduced by about 50 miles over the past 12 years.

Backroads and others face growing competition in Europe from bus-tour companies such as that operated by popular travel-show host Rick Steves, which last year added a series of "family tours." Rick Steves's company is taking 12,000 people on tours this year, up from 10,000 in 2006.

Backroads is hosting 16,000 guests this year, up from 14,500 in 2006.

"Activity is a barrier, and we know that," says Massimo Pioreschi, vice president of sales and marketing of Backroads, whose gentler trips begin in 2008.

"There's more craving for education and learning -- which by default means softer activities," says Chris Doyle, director of the Adventure Travel Trade Association. "It's not so much a toning-down but an expansion of how consumers themselves view adventure travel."

Austin-Lehman's director, Dan Austin, says the shift is partly a reflection of the fact that industry leaders themselves are tuckered out. "We're all getting older," says Mr. Austin. "When I first got into this business we were doing 60-, 70-, 80-mile bike rides. Now, you just want that 25-mile bike ride so you can justify dessert."

Backroads founder Tom Hale first proposed the idea in June 2006 to four high-level executives at an off-site meeting in Marin, Calif., held to explore strategies for growth. They considered calling the new category of trips "Active Minds" but have since scrapped the name so as not to make the trips sound "too bookish," says Mr. Pioreschi. While the executive team got on board quickly, the announcement this May to trip leaders was met with some concern.

Backroads staffer Angela Rice, who is leading trips through France and Alaska this summer, says that without the physical activity, it will be challenging to give guests this same sense of accomplishment and teamwork after each day. The Raleigh, N.C., native declined to comment on whether she would be interested in leading an Insider Trip herself.

"Some of the leaders who have been leading for 10-plus years were quite surprised," she says. "We like to bike."

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