

Lafayette's Kathy Wharton – happiest when hiking

By Diane Claytor



Kathy Wharton hiking up to Forcella Roa in the Dolomites in Italy during this year's Munich to Venice Trek. Photo provided

What's your idea of a perfect vacation? Lying on a white sandy beach? Sipping cappuccino at a quaint outdoor Parisian cafe? Relaxing at a spa? Or maybe it's a family trip to Disneyland, watching the pure joy on your children's faces. While all of these may sound wonderful to Lafayette native Kathy Wharton, nothing quite so sedate is on her vacation schedule. In fact, she's planning her next trip: the Irish Coast to Coast Walk, a 21-25 day, 350-mile trek across Ireland.

To say Wharton is a hiker is like saying the Beatles were a rock group. True, she's been hiking since she was young, spending most of her summers hiking and biking in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. She regularly walks the Lafayette Reservoir and hikes Mt. Diablo as well as other Bay Area trails. And in 2008, she decided to take it up a notch by hiking Yosemite's Half Dome. That walk was so successful and such fun, Wharton reminisced, that she started looking for more adventurous – and lengthy – hikes.

The following year, Wharton found the hike she was looking for – and began an adventure that has taken her on miles and miles of incredible trails where she has seen truly amazing vistas and lovely quaint villages, made new friends from all over and “learned so much about the world around us,” she proclaimed.

That first big 17-day, 205-mile hike in 2009 was the Coast to Coast Walk across England, once named the second best walk in the world by a survey of hikers. Having been to England before and “absolutely loving the English countryside,” Wharton believed this would be the perfect journey. “It would get me out in the countryside and seeing things I'd always wanted to see.” She went with a friend who, unfortunately, after four days, “blew her knee out and had to quit.” That didn't stop Wharton. She continued on, admitting that “it was pretty

lonely heading out that first day.” But she met people along the trail and soon joined other American hikers to finish out the journey.

She was hooked. In 2010, Wharton and three friends did the same Coast to Coast Walk, only in reverse (walking west to east across England). The next year, the same core group of women did the Tour du Mont Blanc, one of the most popular and classic long-distance walks in Europe. This was a mere 12 days and 110 miles with 6.2 miles of ascent/descent and passes through parts of Switzerland, Italy and France.

Wharton and her friends then ventured on the 95-mile Dachstein Round Trip Trek in Austria. This was followed by a trip closer to home – a 150-mile hike through Canada's Waterton Park and Montana's Glacier Park. “It's an incredibly beautiful hike,” Wharton said, “and looks very much like the Alps.” Next came the Offa's Dyke Trail, a 200-mile footpath, walking the entire length of Wales along the Wales-England border. After this came the longest walk to date: the Via Alpina, 252 miles across Switzerland – from Lichenstein to Geneva – considered to be one of the most spectacular hiking trails in Europe. It was “both physically challenging and awe inspiring,” Wharton reported.

In 2017, Wharton and her hiking pals walked Der Traumpfad, commonly known as the Munich to Venice trek. According to cicerone-extra.com, this is an “epic trans-alpine adventure ... combining challenging terrain, spectacular scenery and culture ... it's a journey across cultures as well as mountains.”

Wharton is a detailed planner and begins researching each trip months in advance. She goes on websites, buys books, looks at maps, and reads suggestions made by other hikers. “I comb everything I can find,” she said. And yet, she admits, before each trip she questions herself. “Have I trained

enough: Is this trek too ambitious? Is my backpack too heavy?”

These are not camping trips; Wharton and her hiking partners stay in B&Bs and inns when they can; other times accommodations are in refuges positioned along the trails. While these refuges may not be luxurious, they provide a bed as well as meals which, Wharton stated, are surprisingly good. “And this way, we don't have to carry camping equipment or food,” she noted. “As it is, our packs weigh about 20 pounds with water; if we were carrying gear and food, they could be closer to 35 pounds.”

Wharton trains by loading her pack several months in advance and walking every day, increasing her mileage daily. “Walking with a pack is vastly different than walking with a phone, listening to music,” she explained. She's definitely learned how to pack over the years. “The absolute key is to keep the pack light. I may get sick of wearing the same things over and over, but I thank myself as I climb ... that I decided not to be the trail fashion plate ... there may be things you think you need, but when you start carrying it around on your back, you realize, yeah, I can live without that.”

Now a grandmother of nine, Wharton has no plans to stop. She already has a list of other long distance hikes she hopes to take. As she states on her blog, hiketreks, “Hiking is my escape from the real world ... all the worries of everyday life melt away when I'm surrounded by the beauty of nature.”

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