

# In the company of women

Finding a niche travel experience that worked for her, Biddy Naylor is now having the time of her life and providing fabulous walking holidays for women travellers. By Briar Jensen.

“After 25 years of social work I wanted to do something completely different, something more light-hearted and fun,” says Biddy Naylor (pictured right) 57, “and something that would give me the opportunity to travel in the countries I love.”

Organising a 50th birthday holiday in Italy for a group of female friends was Biddy’s inspiration. “It was a wonderful way to have a holiday – in the company of other women – and it was very relaxing to have some space from our normal responsibilities. I thought since we had all enjoyed it so much, probably other women would too.”

So, in 1998 Biddy resigned from her job and established Valentine Travel, specialising in walking holidays for Australian women in Europe.

“I had no idea whether it would be ‘a goer’ or not, but the whole idea was so exciting I was intoxicated by it.”

Eight years and 300 guests later the company is definitely a success and Biddy is thrilled at being able to spend

four months a year in Italy and France.

Although the name is inspired by the *Shirley Valentine* movie, Valentine Travel is not a lonely-hearts club; in fact many guests are happily married, as is Biddy, but for various reasons enjoy part of their annual holiday in the company of other women.

## Walking with women

Biddy only markets to Australasian women. “They are by nature friendly and flexible, adaptable and curious. They are open to new experiences and situations and are adventurous with food,” she says.

“The term ‘walking holiday’ attracts a certain type of woman; one prepared to walk dusty, stony paths and sit on the ground for a picnic. They are down to earth and love experiencing nature and culture.”

After making their own way to Europe, guests stay in apartments in one town for the ten-day holiday and explore the surrounding countryside on day-walks that



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vary in difficulty from easy to moderate.

Biddy loves researching new locations for her holidays. “In a small town it’s not easy to find the three ingredients – suitable accommodation, reliable transport and walks in the vicinity.” It takes Biddy at least two visits to ensure an area is suitable, and says research is the key, something she also recommends to ‘first time’ travellers. “Being well-informed before you leave home is a good idea.”

Although aimed at women over 25, Biddy believes the trips best suit those in their 40s to 60s, but she has had women up to 82 years of age join the trip. With only six to eight people per group and two leaders (Biddy and a friend or family member) guests are treated like extended family.

The holidays have certainly hit the mark; many clients have done two and

## SHE SAYS...

three Valentine trips and one woman has done four. Bidy believes this is because the holidays fill a niche.

“The model is a good one; to have a home base in one town with a choice of shared or single accommodation and a combination of restaurant and home-cooked meals. Small groups of women mean a very personal experience in an atmosphere of mutual respect – guests feel they are part of something special.”

Bidy’s leadership style – a subtle mix of tour leader, hostess and friend – together with skilful behind-the-scenes organisation is why her guests feel this way. With a genuine interest in women, Bidy loves the group dynamics and fosters camaraderie. Softly, thoughtfully spoken, she exudes calm and tranquillity. Then there’s that smile, with a twinkle that hints at the fun she’s having.

“I never imagined I’d be doing this in my 50s. I can travel, meet new people, practise my languages and learn about new cultures. Organisationally it’s full on, but it’s just fantastic.” •

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On her first trip to Italy, Karen, a consultant from Auckland, liked the security provided by a Valentine holiday. “Someone in the group will inevitably be more travelled, have more experience and know more of the local language – there’s security in numbers. I also like the fact the decision-making process – what shall we do today, where shall we eat, which train should we catch – was taken care of.

“Leaders Bidy and Leslie were a great combination, subtly guiding but allowing us space to explore. I have a lot of respect for the manner in which the trip is organised and operated and staying in the one locale gave more permanence than hotel rooms and I loved the ‘village’ feel of both our home town and our group of women.”

Liz, a medical researcher from Melbourne, has been on three walking holidays and says ‘abdicated responsibility’ is her main reason for choosing this company, and there is much about the tours that suit her. “The size of the group is manageable and the mix of people has always been good. The women are very knowledgeable too and it’s interesting to sit around over dinner and converse.

“I enjoy home cooking some nights – it’s nice not to have to eat out every night. I enjoy walking with the group too because I wouldn’t do it on my own.” Liz also likes the fact she stays in one place the whole time and doesn’t have to pack and move on.

Margy, who is self employed, recently took her first Valentine holiday in Italy, and liked the idea of being with a group of people and getting some exercise at the same time. “It’s hard when you’re single as many tours are structured around couples.” Margy enjoyed the flexibility of the holiday and Bidy’s relaxed persona.

Patcee says it’s fun meeting new people in the group and has always found them good company. “Bidy does a wonderful job giving Australian women the chance to get out there. I see people grow within themselves on these trips.”