

# Purely PYRENEES

walking and cycling holidays

## The Best Of The Pyrenees Coast-to-Coast In 2 Weeks



**Walk the length of the Pyrenees, all the highlights on foot with private transfers in between. Quality, authentic accommodation. The Atlantic to the Med in 2 comfortable and rewarding weeks a walking holiday that is sure to create memories which you will always treasure.**

**15 nights - 13 walking days**

- Minimum required 2 (For safety and cost)
- From point to point
- With luggage transportation
- Self-guided

Code :  
**FP2PUPY**



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### **The plus points**

- **Comfortable or challenging walking - your choice**
- **The huge satisfaction of walking across the Pyrenees, starting from one ocean and ending at another**
- **All the Pyrenean highlights a 2 week walking holiday with daily private transfers, quality accommodation and cuisine**



*Before departure, please check that you have an updated fact sheet.*

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[https://www.purelypyrenees.com/best\\_pyrenees\\_coast\\_coast\\_2\\_weeks.html](https://www.purelypyrenees.com/best_pyrenees_coast_coast_2_weeks.html)

*What an itinerary! What a memorable journey! Cross from the green Atlantic Basque Country to the blues of the Mediterranean, visiting all the most interesting highlights (often on the iconic GR10). Private transfers are included so you only walk the "best bits". You will experience everything from the magnificent grandeur of the UNESCO Cirque de Gavarnie, the delights of the Val d'Azun, the amazing Spanish Pyrenean lakeland, the largest canyon in Europe, the sunny Cerdagne plateau, and right through to the vineyards overlooking the Med. Every night you stay in comfortable, authentic hotels where good food comes as standard, and our 24/7 English speaking service is there if you ever need it.*

*This journey includes daily private transfers and the price has to reflect this.*

## ■ THE PROGRAMME

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### **DAY 1**

#### **Arrival at Saint-Jean-de-Luz**

We meet you at the airport or station at Biarritz for the short transfer to Saint-Jean-de-Luz. *Pick-ups also available from Toulouse, Bordeaux or Pau (please consult us for prices).*

Saint-Jean-de-Luz is a wonderfully atmospheric and typically Basque fishing port - well worth exploring before and after dinner.

You stay at the three star boutique Hôtel Les Almadies right in the historic centre of this small town, and we leave you free to enjoy whichever of the many portside restaurants takes your fancy - our recommendations are available too.

**Transfer : 15mins.**

### **DAY 2**

The 3,000 foot La Rhune is a magnificent place to start your walk across the Pyrenees. We transfer you to the historic rack railway that takes you gently, clatteringly and scenically to the top from where you can descend at your own speed among alpine pastures and beech woods. There is a choice of a longer route if you'd prefer it, but either way we transfer you to the ancient and atmospheric pilgrim citadel town of St Jean Pied de Port nestling beneath high mountain passes.

You stay at the typically Basque two star Hôtel Ramuntcho facing the walls of the citadel, so ideal for wandering around on foot before dinner in a nearby restaurant - again a typically Basque experience we are sure you will enjoy.

**Walking time : 2h or 4h30. Descent: 800m. Transfers : 1h and 1h30.**

### **DAY 3**

You begin today with a transfer up to the ski resort of La Pierre-St-Martin with its panoramic views, and walk, more down than up, following the route of the iconic GR10 footpath that crosses the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Med. You walk around the impressive Pic d'Anie (and its similarly impressive "sister" peaks) on a limestone plateau cut through with small canyons before reaching the gentler agricultural landscapes of the Apse valley, one of the most protected and delightful in the whole of the Pyrenees surrounded, as it is, by a stunning array of mountain peaks.

Tonight you will be warmly welcomed at the lovely little Auberge Des Isards at Aydius. With it's beautiful setting and great food we are sure you will leave with fond memories of this little gem.

**Walking time: 4h or 5h. Ascent/descent: + 350m / - 550 or 950m. Transfer: 1h45m.**

#### **DAY 4**

Several memorable highlights today. The Chemin de la Mature was cut into a sheer cliff face to enable timber to be brought down for use by the French navy (when they had wooden ships, of course!), and is now a renowned (but perfectly safe) part of the Pyrenees National Park where you will spend today. The 4,000 feet high Bious Artigues lake is made all the more beautiful by reflecting the magnificent Pic du Midi d'Ossau (once a volcano) which towers above it. You stand a reasonable chance of seeing isards (Pyrenean mountain deer), and will certainly see Griffon vultures circling overhead. You can also enjoy strolling round other lakes in this wonderful area before being transferred up to your 6,000 feet high hotel - and what a hotel!

The three star Hôtel du Pourtalet has superb views across to the Pic du Midi d'Ossau from its bedrooms and restaurant. Now in the hands of the 4th generation of the Casadebaig family, this is a thoroughly contemporary hotel with style and "class" offering an hospitable combination of tradition and innovation.

**Walking time : 3h30 or 5h. Ascent/descent : + 550 or 700m / - 550 or 700m. Transfer : 2h30m.**

#### **DAY 5**

We drive you up and over the Col d'Aubisque, so you can mainly walk high up along the magnificent GR10, initially among summer pastures with stunning views, then descending gradually down into the Azun valley with waves of mountains running seemingly endlessly eastward. You will pass the interesting, high altitude stone barns at Artigaux built for summer use, before walking along the valley with attractive, traditional stone-built villages and green fields. You may well be frequently distracted by the contrasting mountain peaks above.

Maison d'hôtes Sempé is one of our favourite places to stay because the ancient house with its wood pannelled walls and creaking stairs is so atmospheric, because of the warm welcome from Sylvie and Jean-Paul and the conversations with them about the region, and because of the lovingly prepared home made food, often coming from the garden and foraging in season. See what you think.

**Walking time : 4h or 5h. Ascent/descent : + 230m or + 300m / - 830m or - 900m. Transfer: 1h.**

## DAY 6

Your day begins with a transfer to the impressive waterfalls and ancient bridge called Pont d'Espagne from where you climb up to the lac de Gaube in which is reflected the imposing north face of Vignemale, the highest mountain in the French Pyrenees at 10,820 feet, which also has the largest glacier in the French Pyrenees. It's quite a sight reflected in the limpid waters of the lake. Take your time enjoying these simple but inspiring panoramas of this high, but not highly developed, area before descending comfortably back down to Pont d'Espagne (two different descent options). If you want to extend your walk, you can also keep going up along this marvellous valley until you come to the Refuge des Oulettes de Gaube, nestled right at the foot of Vignemale's north face - it's truly awe-inspiring!

Now, the Hôtellerie du Pont d'Espagne is not a luxury hotel, but it is, all the same, a privileged place to stay because of its location facing the ancient bridge and right by the wonderful waterfalls right in the middle of nowhere. We are confident you will enjoy it.

**Walking time : 2h or 6h. Ascent/descent : + 300 or 700m / - 250 or 650m.  
Transfer : 50mins.**

## DAY 7

Today is Cirque de Gavarnie day, arguably the major highlight of the High Pyrenees. You'll follow quiet wooded paths up onto the Plateau de Bellevue (it lives up to its name - there really is a "beautiful view"!) and then down into the magnificent almost circular crater with high waterfalls and 5,000 feet sheer cliffs. The French call it a giant's cauldron, and that's not a bad description because its scale makes you feel miniscule by comparison. However, the walking is surprisingly easy and enjoyable with good footpaths enabling you to explore it all, including walking right up to the highest waterfall in Europe - over 1,000 feet high. To get back to Gavarnie, you can either head there directly or take another amazing path, carved into a cliff face - well worth trying for the more daring among you!

You stay at the excellent three star Hôtel La Brèche de Roland, the best in the area - well located, attractive, contemporary, hospitable, good food, and views up to the Brèche de Roland itself - located 9,000 feet up, it is a 300 feet wide gap in the mountain range said to have been cut by Durendal, the sword of Count Roland after his defeat in the 778 battle of Roncesvalles.

**Walking time : 5h or 6h. Ascent/descent : + 500 to 750m / - 500 to 750m.  
Transfer : 1h30.**

## DAY 8

Tourmalet is a name that strikes fear into Tour de France cyclists, but for walkers it is a beautiful, dominant mountain pass standing guard over the numerous lakes that have made the Réserve Naturelle du Néouvielle renowned and much loved. Today, you will stroll past lakes like Coubous, and over the col of Hourquette d'Aubert before descending to the lovely lakes of Aubert and Aumar. You can choose to stop here, leaving you plenty of time to stop and stare, or extend the walk in order to take in more lakes. We will then transfer you for a memorable night in the medieval perched village of Ainsa in Spain.

The historic, atmospheric and charming two star Hôtel Siete Reyes is situated in the heart of this marvellously unspoilt village with its panoramic views over hills, mountains, and the lakes far below. The bedrooms have bare stone walls, but also a style that matches the quality of the cuisine. You won't forget it for all the best reasons.

**Walking time : 4h30 or 5h30. Ascent/descent : + 1050m / - 350 or 650m. Transfer: 40mins.**

## **DAY 9**

Today you take the small mountain bus to Nerin and up a dirt track from where you get some of the most impressive views of the immense Canyon of Ordesa, which gives its name to this marvellous National Park. You walk across cliff tops with spectacular views of the truly magnificent Mont Perdu (or Monte Perdido in Spanish) and down to a superb waterfall called the Cola del Caballo (the horse's tail). You can then follow the canyon through alpine pastures and forests, passing numerous waterfalls before being transferred to Torla, the gateway to the Ordesa canyon, and a lovely village.

The smart but traditional two star Hôtel Bujaruelo is right at the heart of the village with unforgettable views, not least from the bedroom balconies, over a dramatic landscape dominated by Monte Perdido. The Spanish Pyrenees at its natural best many of us think.

**Walking time : 5h30. Ascent/descent : + 250m / - 1100m. Transfer : 1h15.**

## **DAY 10**

Benasque valley. After breakfast, we transfer you to Benasque at the foot of the highest mountain in the Pyrenees, the 11,000 foot Aneto, but we're not expecting you to reach the summit! In fact, you can choose a spectacular route walking up to the Port de Venasque on the French-Spanish border, with panoramic views of Aneto and Maladeta and their extensive glaciers. Or you can take a less demanding, but still highly scenic, route on the alpine pastures of Aigualluts that passes one of the most famous sources of the Garonne river at the Forau d'Aigualluts, commonly known as the "Trou du Toro" for French speakers (literally the hole of the bull).

You stay the night at the warmly welcoming, stone built mountain hotel located all by itself at the foot of Aneto, the three star Hôtel-Spa Hospital de Benasque with its great views, swimming pool, spa and very good restaurant. A well deserved experience.

**Walking time : 5h30. Ascent/descent : + 300 or 850m / - 300 or 850m. Transfer : 2h.**

## **DAY 11**

49 lakes. That's all we can offer you today, a day spent ambling (joyously many people find) through the Spanish Pyrenean lakeland, the National Park of Aigues Tortes and Sant Maurici. You stroll on lovely footpaths alongside the grassy banks of these usually vibrantly blue lakes. You sit, you stare, you wonder about the miracles of nature and about how there can be so few people in such a magnificent landscape, and you take photograph after photograph. Well, that's our experience anyway. You end the day walking down through woods to the Sant Maurici lake which seems to reflect all the glorious mountain peaks that surround its deep, deep waters.

The three star Hôtel-Spa Els Encantats combines a wonderfully unspoilt heart-of-the-mountains location with comfortable rooms with balconies, good food, and a spa, jacuzzi and gym (although more exercise may not be your priority).

**Walking time : 5h15. Ascent/descent : + 600m / - 600m. Transfer : 2h30**

## **DAY 12**

We transfer you to the Sierra de Cadi for a hike through hilly landscapes and high-altitude villages, from the village of Villec (Cava production) to Querforadat and Estena. Great mountain walls resembling the Canadian Rockies tower above these open landscapes just a stone's throw away from the region of Cerdagne. You could also take a quick out-and-back hike to visit the incredible Prat de Cadi, a wonderful clearing bringing you right up close to the cliffs.

You stay in the Moli de Bramasacs at Villec, originally a 17th Century mill and now a remarkable country hotel. You have great views of the Sierra del Cadi, and the typical and tasty local country cuisine is excellent.

**Walking time : 4h or 6h30. Ascent/descent : + 400 or 800m / - 800 or 1200m. Transfer : 2h.**

## **DAY 13**

We take you to the sunny high-altitude plateau of La Cerdagne, home of the highest villages in the Pyrenees. Starting from the Bouillouses lake, you will complete a great circular walk past dozens of other shimmering high mountain lakes of all sizes, with the summit of Carlit standing proudly over them at almost 3000m. Some of the lakes are surrounded by pine trees or flowering fields and others are pinned in by piles of multi-coloured boulders, their banks inviting you to come and relax, read a book or have a siesta. For the fitter among you, it is possible to hike to the top of Carlit, adding 550m of ascent onto your day. You will then be taken on to La Llagonne.

While thoroughly contemporary in its facilities, the family run three star Hôtel Corrieu is located in the heart of the village of La Llagonne, and still retains much of the character of an authentic Pyrenean mountain hotel. It now also offers a sun terrace, a spa zone, and panoramic views from its restaurant that is justly popular with locals. A great night is assured !

**Walking time : 3h or 6h. Ascent/descent : + 350 or 900m / - 350 or 900m. Transfer : 2h.**

## **DAY 14**

Today we take you to the 1,000 year old "eagle's nest" abbey of St Martin du Canigou impossibly located on a ridge with many of its buildings clinging vertiginously to sheer cliff faces. Its early Romanesque walls almost feel seeped in history and the countless lives of Benedictine monks "lost" in this most peaceful of locations. Before or after visiting the abbey, you can choose from several more or less challenging walks through this warm and pleasant wooded landscape encouraging a certain amount of retrospection, perhaps appropriately as you near the end of your journey. En route to your hotel, you will see the magnificent Orgues d'Ille sur Tet - like organ pipes steeping up into the sky with a backdrop of the 9,000+ foot summit of Mount Canigou, also visible from the coast as you will see tomorrow.

A luxurious four star hotel by a lake in the heart of the Mediterranean "garrigue" is a fair description of Hôtel Riberach, and its Michelin star restaurant located in an ancient winery, still with its huge wooden barrels, makes it all the more special.

**Walking time : 2h or 3h30. Ascent/descent : + 300 or 600m / - 300 or 600m. Transfer : 1h45.**

## **DAY 15**

This morning we whisk you to the ancient fortified Mediterranean fishing port of Collioure, made more famous by being the haunt of artists like Braque, Matisse, Picasso and Charles Rennie Mackintosh - and the home for decades of author Patrick O'Brian (Master & Commander series of naval novels). You will have time to explore the museum, royal castle and back streets - some with artists' reproductions located exactly where they were painted. Then you can make the most of finally arriving on the Med by walking along its surprisingly undeveloped coastline passing tiny beaches with crystalline waters, often deserted, strolling around rocky and wild headlands as well as small working ports, or climbing up to the Madeloc tower and walking higher up through vineyards with magnificent Mediterranean panoramas. This is where the Pyrenees finally tumble down into the sea as you arrive at journey's end in Banyuls-sur-Mer. A riot of mixed emotions? Probably. A celebration drink? Certainly.

Cheers!

Suitably located right on the Med with a lovely beach in front, the elegant and determinedly contemporary three star Hôtel Les Elmes is a good place to spend your last night of the journey, or indeed any night, and we are sure you will have a great evening. Oh, and congratulations!

**Walking time : 4h15 or 5h. Ascent/descent : + 500 or 700m / - 500 or 700m. Transfer : 1h.**

## **DAY 16**

### **End of stay**

After breakfast, we take you to the station or airport at Perpignan. *Transfers to Toulouse, Montpellier, Girona or Barcelona also available (please consult us for prices).*

**Transfer: 45 mins.**

*Elements beyond our control (the weather, level of the group, logistical risks, other miscellaneous reasons...) may lead our team to modify the programme. We aim to please, but your safety will systematically be our priority.*

## **■ PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

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### **DISPOSITIONS COVID-19**

Because of the added health precautions relating to COVID, you must be equipped from the start of your trip with:

\* a sufficient quantity of masks (at a rate of 2 per day minimum). Wearing a mask will be compulsory during any transport, in certain accommodation, crowded places etc.

\* zipped pockets for masks and other items such as used tissues

- \* hydro-alcoholic gel
- \* a thermometer to take your temperature in case of symptoms appearing during your stay
- \* a pen (sometimes necessary to sign an agreement in certain accommodation).

The hosts who will welcome you (hoteliers, refuge guards, restaurateurs, transporters, local teams ...) are the people who will help to guarantee the smooth running of your stay and will ask you to conform with certain health related protocols. Out of respect for them and other people who frequent the same places, we ask you to commit to respecting the instructions given to you.

Be reassured and optimistic, because as you know, hiking is an activity that will allow you long and enjoyable periods of time during which the wearing of a mask is not mandatory!

So breathe fresh air and smile!

## **PROGRAMME OF DEPARTURES**

1 June to 30 September

### **MEETING POINT**

We meet you at the airport or station at Biarritz for the short transfer to Saint-Jean-de-Luz. *Pick-ups also available from Toulouse, Bordeaux or Pau (please consult us for prices).*

### **END OF STAY**

After breakfast, we take you to the station or airport at Perpignan. *Transfers to Toulouse, Montpellier, Girona or Barcelona also available (please consult us for prices).*

### **TO GET TO THE MEETING POINT**

There are trains and flights to Biarritz from Paris, London and several other European airports, and from Perpignan to Paris, London and other European airports, but there are more frequent flights to Bordeaux, Toulouse, Girona and Barcelona. Driving is not advised as it would require a long and very expensive transfer from Banyuls to collect your car on the Atlantic coast.

### **PARKING**

## **IF YOU WANT TO ARRIVE THE NIGHT BEFORE OR STAY AFTER THE TRIP**

Let us know if you would like to stay extra nights before, during or after the holiday, and we will first price it for you.

### **GUARANTEED DEPARTURE FROM (PERS)**

2 (For safety and cost reasons, not recommended for one person)

### **LEVEL**

## **LUGGAGE TRANSPORTATION**

Transferring your luggage each day to the next accommodation is included in the price.

## **SUPERVISION**

This is an independent, self-guided holiday, but we provide comprehensive walking instructions.

## **ACCOMODATION**

You stay in double/twin rooms with 2 nights in \*\*\*\* star hotels, 7 nights in \*\*\* hotels, 3 nights in good quality\*\* hotels, one night in a \* hotel in an exceptional location, and 2 nights in particularly characterful chambres d'hôtes.

## **MEALS**

Dinner and breakfast are included on all but the first night, which is breakfast only. You can shop locally or order a picnic from the hotel the night before, and pay locally.

## **TRANSFERS**

Usually transfers are in people carriers, mini-buses, cars or taxis. Often they will be exclusively for you.

## **THE PRICE INCLUDES**

14 nights dinner, bed and breakfast, one night bed and breakfast; transfers as described at the beginning and end of the holiday; daily luggage transfers; people transfers as described; comprehensive walking notes with maps marked to show the routes; 24/7 English speaking customer service.

## **THE PRICE DOES NOT INCLUDE**

Lunches or picnics; dinner on the first night; entry to museums, galleries etc; the La Rhune train journey (15.50 Euros per person one way); the mountain bus on day 8 (4 or 5 Euros per person); personal insurance.

## **FORMALITIES**

You need to keep your passport with you at all times, and ideally insurance information. You need to make your own arrangements to claim local healthcare. There are requirements in France and Spain for all vehicles to carry safety equipment.

## **CONTENTS OF YOUR TRAVEL FOLDER**

We provide you with comprehensive information about one month before departure including general walking advice, advice on travelling in France and Spain, equipment list, walking instructions including maps, and vouchers etc for hotels where required. If you ever have any queries, please call or email us.

## **■ EQUIPMENT**

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**Do** pack everything into one suitcase (preferably soft form) and bring a weatherproof daysack (small rucksack) each. We transport your luggage, and large rucksacks are difficult for flights and cars.

**Do** invest in "tech" clothing - light, waterproof, breathable, quick drying etc - and good walking boots with ankle protection (trainers will not be good enough).

**Do** simplify your "tech" equipment if you can: for example, can you get communications, internet access, entertainment, music and books all on your smartphone ? There's plenty of space in your luggage for a Kindle, so do you need to take books as well ?

**Do** choose comfortable clothing for evenings too - usually people dress casual, or at most smart casual, but remember you are usually staying and dining in quality hotels.

**Do** remember that while you are enjoying some of the most unspoilt and magnificent scenery and landscapes in the world, and walking for hours without seeing another soul, you will be staying in villages and towns with shops that have most of the things you might need as replacements, or if you've forgotten stuff. After all, you are in France and Spain, not the middle of nowhere !

## **LUGGAGE**

- A soft travel bag, avoid suitcases, which are more cumbersome and limit the weight of your belongings to 10 kg if possible.
- A small backpack of 30 litres minimum for your daytime requirements.

## **CLOTHES**

- Waterproof and breathable anorak (Gore-Tex type)
- Fleece or a sweater (depending on the location and season)
- Waterproof over-trousers
- Pair of gloves (depending on the location and season)
- Sun hat (with all round brim)
- Shorts
- Swimming costume + packaway towel
- Several pairs of proper walking socks
- Underwear
- Pair of trainers or light evening shoes
- Comfortable clothing for the evening

## **EQUIPMENT TO BRING**

- Walking boots (with ankle protection)
- Sunglasses, sunscreen and lip protection
- Water bottle or backpack container (allow 2 litres per person per day)
- Tupperware type container for the picnic + cutlery
- Compass
- Waterproof cover for walking instructions and map
- Head torch
- Survival blanket
- Mobile phone (signal strength is often surprisingly good, but cannot be relied on)
- Your identity documents (including driving licence - you never know when...)

## **FIRST AID KIT**

- Small shared kit (gauze, plasters, analgesic, blister plasters, earplugs, pain killers, indigestion tablets)

## **■ MORE INFORMATION**

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## THE AREA

The Pyrenees is above all a land of contrasts. Contrasting climates, contrasting landscapes, contrasting cultures. From the fury of the Atlantic to the warm waters of the Mediterranean, and from the green plains of Roussillon in France to the aridity of the Spanish deserts on the banks of the River Ebro. The complexity of these valleys and mountains has given rise to an astonishing multitude of different worlds waiting to be discovered. Nowhere else in Europe are such enormous contrasts to be found in such small distances, making the Pyrenees one of the most interesting mountain ranges on our planet.

Behind each mountain pass there is a new experience awaiting us in the neighbouring valley: the climate is different, the plant life varies, the way people speak and dress is not the same, there is a shift in architecture and a new aspect to the scenery, not to mention the local products, foods and traditions. Whether you like coastal walks, high peaks, languages, culture, star-gazing, wine, gastronomy or wildlife, you are sure to find something here for you. And thanks to the hospitality of the inhabitants you will want to come back again and again to discover something different on each trip.

Pirinioak, pirenèus, perinés, pirineus, pirineos, pyrénées..... all the local languages are different but agree on the fact that the root of the word "Pyrenees" comes from the ancient Greek word for fire: "pÿr". One theory says that the Greeks must have seen large fires in these mountains as they sailed across the Mediterranean Sea. A well-known legend also tells us that Hercules created these mountains in violent mourning for a Greek princess he had raped in a bout of drunken stupidity. The name of the princess was Pyrène.

However, to talk only about the Pyrenees as a single uniform entity would be misleading. There are the green rolling hills and quaint fishing ports of the Basque Country; the soaring peaks, cirques and canyons of the central Pyrenees, a paradise for climbers, astronomers and botanists; the arid plains and foothills teeming with wonderful Romanesque temples, churches and monasteries to the south; National Parks with thousands of lakes giving inspiration to famous romance writers such as Victor Hugo; valleys shared by men, marmots, mountain antelopes and goats, endemic flowers and plants, shepherds, vultures, wild bears and grazing cattle; medieval villages, citadels and 13th Century castles on the French plains; and the wonderful art and gastronomy of Catalonia. And everything else in between.

However, despite the contrasts there is also an incredible amount of unity. Although each region and valley is different, commerce and exchange has always existed. Spanish cattle herders bring their cows to graze on the other side of the border during the summer months, there are two large trans-national communities sharing common languages (Catalonia and the Basque Country), the towns on the plains needed the mines in the mountains to feed their industries, and the different populations would proudly help each other out when there were wars between nation states.

**Geology and climate:** Our mountains are special. Whereas most of the world's famous mountain ranges were formed by just one major tectonic movement, ours was formed by two. The first movement (500-600 million years ago) formed an immense chain of mountains known as the Hercynien Range, stretching from what is now Norway all the way down to what is now Galicia, in the north-west corner of Spain. These mountains were comparable in size to today's Himalayas, with peaks well over 8000m. Around 50 million years ago these same peaks had become small and rounded (much like most of the hills in Scotland or Wales today) due to millions of years of relentless erosion, and huge quantities of Mesozoic sediments had been washed into giant seas in the foothills. It was at this point that the second major period of tectonic activity had its impact. Our mountains were pushed up into the skies once again and twisted and folded by the violent collision between the Iberian Plate and the European

Plate. This created areas of sedimentary rocks like limestone, other areas of igneous rocks like granite, and further areas of metamorphic rocks such as slate or schist. If we add to this mix several million years of rivers and quaternary glaciers carving out and shaping our valleys, we obtain the beautifully varied landscapes of today's Pyrenees.

We are often asked what the climate is like in the Pyrenees... but in fact there is no simple answer! There is a significant rain-shadow on the Spanish side of border, meaning that some northern valleys can get over 2500mm of rain per year whereas 400mm is not uncommon in the Spanish foothills. Slope-aspect is also an important factor: southerly slopes get a great deal more sun meaning that Mediterranean plant species are able to grow just a handful of kilometres away from north faces which are world class ice-climbing venues. Rainfall is more frequent in the Basque Country but can occasionally be much more intense in the easterly hills due to the influence of winds from the Mediterranean.

The advantage of having such a lot of micro-climates is that many different kinds of crops can be grown, and if it is raining you can often find somewhere fairly nearby where it is not!

**Flora and Fauna:** Many botanists, bird-watchers and animal lovers come to the Pyrenees because of the large number of site-specific and endemic species living here. The Pyrenees are often described as being much "wilder" mountains than in other parts of Europe. Although we mustn't forget the important influence of human activities (see following section), the superb wildlife is certainly one of the most attractive aspects bringing people to the Pyrenees. There are approximately 4500 plant species in the Pyrenees, of which 160 are endemic.

The National Nature Reserve of Néouvielle contains almost 600 species of algae in its lakes and due to its micro-climate and it is home to the highest growing trees in Europe: the mountain pine, which can be found at altitudes of over 2600m!

Other symbolic plants which you are likely to see include the Ramondia (a pink sub-tropical endemic flower that survived the ice-age by drying itself up and which is named after the first man to climb Mont Perdu), long-leaved saxifrages that detach themselves from rock faces after flowering, or the insect-eating long-leaved butterwort that traps its prey in a sticky goo on the surface of its leaves.

Symbolic animals include the cute marmots squeaking their way in and out of holes up in the higher valleys, a strange kind of elephant-vole known as a desman, lots of mouflons (a type of mountain sheep with large curly horns), ibex goats and a local variety of chamois known in French as an isard, in Spanish as a rebeco, or in Aragonese as a sarrio.

Our many birds of prey will also almost certainly catch your eye. There are eagles, griffon vultures, Egyptian vultures, bearded vultures, kites, kestrels, peregrine falcons... add to this the capercaillies, ptarmigans and partridges and you are in for a good ornithological show.

A special mention must be given to the most symbolic animal of all of them - the brown bear. Once an endangered species in the Pyrenees, it has been saved thanks to a re-introduction of Slovenian bears and there are now thought to be over 40 of them roaming around the hills. The re-introduction scheme was quite controversial and met a lot of opposition from certain sectors of the local population, but most people are happy to have them here.

**The impact of man:** In response to the question "how were the Pyrenees formed?" most people will start talking about plate tectonics and erosion. However, today's Pyrenean landscapes have been above all shaped and sculpted by human activity. Even in the highest mountains you will never be that far away from a shepherd's hut or a lake that has been enlarged as part of a hydro-electric scheme.

Traditionally an agricultural region (corn, beans, onions, etc), the people later turned to the raising of sheep and cattle for milk, cheese, wool and meat. The activity known as transhumance (where shepherds drive their animals up onto high altitude grazing areas in the spring and then take them back down onto the plains again in the autumn) has created and maintained many of the tracks and paths that we can see today. This activity is still very much alive and can be seen regularly if you visit us at the right time of year.

In the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries spa-tourism became an important economical driving force due to the large number of thermal baths located in the different valleys. During the World Wars, the amount of mining increased - lots of iron, lead, marble and even some silver.

The notoriety created by the Tour de France now brings many cyclists here to ride famous passes such as the Tourmalet or the Col d'Aubisque.

In the 1950s an enormous amount of dams and penstocks were constructed by EDF for a huge hydro-electric scheme. Some hydro-electric power plants can now be visited by tourists too.

There are also quite a lot of ski resorts, many of which have reached nation-wide or world-wide fame: Cauterets, Saint-Lary, Grand Tourmalet, Grandvalira, Formigal, Candanchu...

Nowadays, farming and agriculture run in parallel to large increases in tourists who come to visit the spas and ski resorts or go walking, cycling or climbing.

**Exploring and enjoying:** Active tourism is booming in the Pyrenees. Millions of people per year come here to go cycling (both on-road and off-road), walking, climbing, skiing (both in the resorts and in the back country), parapenting, dog-sledging or bungee jumping.

Many are purely attracted by the sports themselves but the majority also want to see some of Europe's most famous and awe-inspiring landscapes, learn about our spectacular flora and fauna, or escape from the hustle and bustle by getting off the beaten track and into some of the more remote mountain areas.

Others come to study the stars (there is a designated Dark Sky Reserve centred on the world-class observatory at the Pic du Midi), experience the transhumance, go trout-fishing or swimming in one of thousands of high altitude lakes, dine on local specialities, learn about local architecture and traditions, or relax in one of the many spa resorts.

## ■ **INSURANCE**

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According to the regulation of our profession, La Balaguère is covered by a Civil Professional Liability. However, each client must hold an individual civil liability as well as an individual multi risk guarantee in order to protect themselves from incidents or accidents that may occur before or during their hiking trip.

We remind you that a credit card covers, in general, only assistance in repatriation and not the cancellation of your trip, and this only provided you use the card to pay for the total of the trip.

We offer a choice of three insurance options which you can purchase at the time of booking.

### **Package 1: simple cancellation insurance at 2.5%**

This insurance provides reimbursement of the amount incurred (excluding fees and the cost of insurance) in case of cancellation due to one of the following causes: serious accident, illness or death of insured, spouse or person accompanying them, and certain family members.

### **Package 2: simple cancellation insurance and assistance / repatriation at 3.7%**

This insurance allows, in addition to the benefits described in the plan No. 1; - To benefit from assistance in case of illness or injury during the trip and covers your return home if necessary. - A reimbursement paid on a pro rata basis (excluding transportation costs and with a waiting period) in the case of an interruption of your trip following an accident, the death of a loved one or other specified accidents.

### **Package 3: Package "super multi-risk": 4.8%**

This insurance offers, in addition to the benefits described in the packages No. 1 and No. 2, - A wider cancellation insurance with the repayment of amounts incurred (net of deductible) in case of cancellation for any justifiable reason including an exceptional and unexpected event. - The management of some of the costs incurred at the time in case of return not linked to an exceptional and unexpected event. - Compensation (capped) for loss, theft or destruction of baggage. - Payment of compensation for delayed baggage delivery of more than 48 hours.

**The repatriation is not valid for all countries, please check with us before subscribing the insurance.**

You will receive with the confirmation of your booking an extract of the general conditions of contract chosen (in french). Take this document with you on your journey. The validity of all guarantees corresponds with the travel dates indicated on the invoice and applies only to services sold. For departures and returns postponed, please contact us. Warning: If you buy only the contract No. 1 (simple cancellation insurance), this means that you need to have your own insurance, repatriation assistance (related notably to certain credit cards). We advise you to check your contract and cover guaranteed. In this case, we ask you to tell us when you book the name of your insurance company and your policy number. You will assume, therefore, the responsibility of certain risks, especially in the advance payments of certain costs.

Important: If you must use the assistance during the trip, you must obtain the prior consent of Europe Assistance before taking any action or incur any expenditure by telephoning: 33 1 41 85 85 85 and quoting the number of contract: 58662860

## ■ ACTING FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

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La Balaguère is a founding member of Action for Responsible Tourism.

The label "Action for Responsible Tourism" was awarded The Balaguère in 2009. It is controlled, every year, by ECOCERT.

Based on common values of respect, solidarity and quality, ATR aims to harmonize professional practices of its members.

To win the confidence of customers, it focuses on four key commitments, which arise from many activities in the field and at home.

- Clear information and awareness of responsible tourism given to the traveller.
- Selection of providers in the spirit of responsible tourism.
- Setting up of a transfer of competencies to the providers.
- Commitment in relation to the tour operator's own structure.

More information on the label ATR on /[www.tourisme-responsable.org](http://www.tourisme-responsable.org)

## ■ CONTACT US

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## ■ NOTES

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