

Purely PYRENEES

walking and cycling holidays

The Best Of The Pyrenees Coast-To-Coast By Electric bike



A rewarding coast to coast journey by electric bike that enables you to experience many highlights of the Pyrenees, discovering varying lifestyles, cultures and cuisines as you move from the Basque Country to the Mediterranean. While you need to be reasonably fit, this is absolutely not the "Tour de France".

13 nights - 12 days cycling

- Minimum required 2
- From point to point
- With luggage transportation
- Self-guided

Code :
FP9PUPY



The plus points

- **Electric bike included**
- **Luggage transfers every day so you only carry a daysack**
- **High-quality, authentic hotels with dinner included**
- **24/7 customer service**



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

https://www.purelypyrenees.com/cycling_enjoyably_atlantic_med.html

This trip is suitable for electric or non electric road bike or hybrid. Over 12 days, and averaging well under 50 miles a day, this is a comfortable and enjoyable way of independently cycling across the Pyrenees by electric bike. You stay in authentic, quality hotels, eat very well, and have 24/7 telephone support should you ever need it. It is not intended for "mad keen", super-fit cyclists, but rather those who enjoy cycling and recognise that an electric bike is the only realistic way of making the coast-to-coast journey in a fortnight.

This journey includes daily private transfers which are costly, and the price unfortunately has to reflect this.

■ THE PROGRAMME

DAY 1

Arrival at Hendaye

We meet you at Toulouse airport, rail station (trains from Paris) or city centre car park, and take you to collect your electric bikes, understand how to use them (very simple!), and then travel by mini-bus to Hendaye. *(It is also possible to collect you from Biarritz airport or train station but with no price reduction unless you come with your own bike)*

The boutique sized, very comfortable, two star Hôtel Lafon is wonderfully situated right by a glorious beach, so you can enjoy views of the Atlantic from most bedrooms. A memorable place to start your coast-to-coast journey from! You will eat in a restaurant just a few metres from the hotel.

Transfer time : 3 hours.

DAY 2

Hendaye - Itxassou

This is a gentle, warm-up day that takes you from Hendaye into the heart of the Pays Basque at Itxassou via two low altitude cols (the highest just 500 feet). As you can tell by the name of your destination, this is not "France". This is Basque country with its own language, culture, architectural styles and cuisine as you will discover during this first ride, but to the south you will see the highest mountain in this region, the magnificent La Rhune (and be pleased you are not cycling up it!).

Itxassou is a typical Basque village with white and red buildings unlike any other region, so worth exploring on foot, not least its 17C church. You stay at the charming Hotel de Chêne (Hotel Oak), located in the centre of the village, renowned for its regional authenticity, and the excellence of its cuisine. Dinner, bed and breakfast included as every other night.

Distance : 50km/31miles. Elevation : + 550m / - 500m.

DAY 3

Itxassou - St Jean Pied de Port

From Itxassou you wind your gentle way through foothill green valleys with white-and-red villages, wooded hillsides, and glimpsed, not so far away, the mountains of the Pyrenees. In the course of the day, you only cycle up a combined 1,000 feet, so you will hopefully feel ready for a beer when you arrive in Saint Jean Pied de Port, but far from exhausted.

You stay at the comfortable two star Hôtel Ramuntcho superbly located close to the walls of this ancient and attractive pilgrimage town in the shadows of the Pyrenees, which is on one of the Camino routes to Santiago de Compostella. An interesting town for a stroll around before and after dinner taken in a nearby restaurant that serves authentic Basque dishes.

Distance : 58km/36miles. Elevation : + 750m / - 650m.

DAY 4

St Jean Pied de Port - Gurmençon

This is a longer journey that includes one 1,000 feet col, but is mostly a scenic ride through river valleys visiting villages like Navarrenx, officially one of the most beautiful villages in France. It is also your last day in the Basque Country as tomorrow you begin your journey through the Bearn region.

Gurmençon is an ancient village (in 1383 called Grumensoo) on the bank of the lovely Aspe river, and is known as the gateway to the renowned Aspe valley. You stay at the authentic, stone built, family run two star Hôtel Le Relais Aspois that offers comfortable rooms - en suite, of course - and really good regional cuisine.

Distance : 85km/53miles. Elevation : + 900m / - 800m.

DAY 5

Gurmençon - Betharram

Today's route takes you through the ancient, once vast Bager forest still with its magnificent trees, waterfalls, unspoilt tracks and lanes, and attractive hamlets and villages, which you will see are completely different in style and character from those in the Basque Country - characterful and intriguing.

You stay near the famous Betharram caves (worth a visit on arrival as it is a fairly short ride) at the impressive three star Hôtel Le Vieux Logis, situated in a forested landscape. Based on a traditional farmhouse, it is now a most comfortable contemporary hotel renowned for Francis Gaye's excellent cuisine - and do try the local wines from vineyards dating back to Henry IV.

Distance : 50km/31miles. Elevation : + 450m / - 400m.

DAY 6

Betharram - Gèdre

Well, you are now getting into the heart of the High Pyrenees, and today you will visit Lourdes before climbing up through the remarkable Gave valley, and enter what the French call Pays Toy, the centrepiece of which is the utterly magnificent and majestic Cirque du Gavarnie. Understandably, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. You will find your own superlatives no doubt because the immensity of the glacier-created, natural bowl that is the Cirque is all-but overwhelming (4 miles wide, 4,500 feet high walls, and with the highest waterfall in Europe at 1,300 feet). Be sure to visit the extremely interesting pilgrims' church and cemetery (many famous mountain guides rest here) and make the most of the awe-inspiring panoramas before heading back down the hill to your accommodation in Gèdre.

You stay in the heart of Gèdre village at the "highly authentic, simply delicious" three star Hôtel La Brèche de Roland that is rightly the pride and joy of Philippe and Odile Pujo. According to legend Roland's Breach was cut by Count Roland with his sword Durendal in an attempt to destroy that sword after being defeated during the Battle of Roncesvalles in 778. This hotel is the only place in the valley from where you can actually see the Breach without having to climb up to a high pass or summit.

Distance : 73km/45miles. Elevation : + 1000m / - 250m.

DAY 7

Gedre - Beaudéan

Today you ride up through some rolling green hills with impressive views of both the high Pyrenees and the plains of Tarbes below. You are not far from the Col de la Croix Blanche. You then ride along the lovely Adour valley to Beaudéan. A memorable day's journey, we promise - in all the best ways!

Beaudéan is an unspoilt traditional village surrounded by magnificent scenery, and the three star, family run Hôtel Le Catala is a great place to stay - and very much cyclist oriented as it is close to some of the mythical Tour de France mountain passes (Tourmalet and Aspin for example). A warm welcome and good food are assured.

Distance : 70km/43miles. Elevation : + 700m / - 1150m.

DAY 8

Beaudéan - Labarthe Inard

This is marvellous cycling country for those who love mountains, and who do - or don't! - like cycling up them. Your route today takes you through some lovely river valleys, not least the Barousse, amid farming country, but with the high mountains providing wonderful panoramic views that you can enjoy because you are on electric bikes.

The modern two star Hôtel du Parc is indeed set in its own spacious grounds, and is very proud of its cuisine as much as the comfort of its rooms (most with balconies). A most relaxing place to stay.

Distance : 85km/53mileskm. Elevation : + 650m / - 950m.

DAY 9

Labarthe Inard - Saint Girons

This is a comparatively short and easy journey with plenty of time to discover villages and valleys en route to Saint Girons, although there is one 2,000 feet col to conquer, but we're sure you - by now - are up for that!

The three star Hôtel Eychenne is a great place to stay. On the edge of Saint Girons (well worth exploring) it has its own large gardens with a good sized swimming pool, a fascinating gallery of photographs, excellent refined, contemporary cuisine, and the option of eating in the garden.

Distance : 59km/37miles. Elevation : + 550m / - 500m.

DAY 10

Saint Girons - Lavelanet

You are now most definitely through the central Pyrenees, and are now closing in on the Mediterranean as you will see from the changes in trees, flowers, architecture, climate and cuisine. You are in the Ariège department, and entering the Cathar homeland. Indeed just south of where you end your journey today is one of the most iconic fortresses of the Cathars at Montségur.

You stay at the Mediterranean styled two star Hôtel Castel d'Olmes, which describes itself as in the heart of Cathar country, but with a swimming pool and good contemporary cuisine it offers you exactly what you need after an enjoyable day's cycling.

Distance : 81km/50miles. Elevation : + 800m / - 650m.

DAY 11

Lavelanet - Caudies de Fenouillèdes

Today you enter Pyrénées Orientales, so the east and the Mediterranean are clearly not that far away. It's good cycling country with a few, not-too-challenging cols, and plenty of pleasurable quiet roads and lanes through these warm, drier foothills between the Pyrenean mountains to the south, and the wine producing Corbières hills to the north.

The Relais de Laval is a chambres d'hôtes more than a hotel - and all the better for it in our view. It has just 5 rooms in a converted barn on what used to be a vineyard. It now looks more Spanish, although it is actually traditional Catalan in style. The rooms are simple, but comfortable, and the food authentic and enjoyable. We think you will really enjoy your stay here - and, of course, that's why we chose it.

Distance : 58km/37miles. Elevation : + 450m / - 650m.

DAY 12

Caudiès de Fenouillèdes - Belesta

This is almost a day off as it is a short and languid ride along the banks of the river Agly (far from ugly), but its highlight is a canyon that includes the remarkable Gorges de la Fou (the gorge of the mad!), so narrow in parts that you can touch both sides simultaneously. You'll enjoy it we're sure.

The primary reason for the short distance is to give you plenty of time to enjoy the truly wonderful four star Hôtel Riberach, and all it has to offer, which is a lot. Evolved from an ancient vineyard in rooms that held the wine presses, this now thoroughly contemporary and luxurious hotel (it calls itself an eco-lodge and spa) is a temple to wine (you must visit its winery for wine tasting session) and Michelin starred food created by rising chef-superstar Laurent Lemaître. Is that enough to get your juices flowing?

Distance : 34km/21miles. Elevation : + 250m / - 200m.

DAY 13

Belesta - Banyuls

Yes, the Mediterranean! You've done it. Congratulations. A thoroughly satisfying ride to the coast, then down along it, visiting Collioure and the vineyards overlooking the sea, until you arrive at Banyuls sur Mer, the recognised end of Atlantic-Mediterranean journeys. Sadness that it's over may well mingle with the sense of satisfaction, and why not?

The three star Hôtel des Elmes provides a fitting last night. A stylish hotel right by a lovely sandy beach in its own "private" cove. The rooms are excellent - sea views of course - and the gourmet restaurant overlooks the beach and sea. Just what the doctor ordered!

Distance : 71km/44miles. Elevation : + 400m / - 750m.

DAY 14

End of stay

After breakfast on the terrace overlooking the sea, we transfer you back to Toulouse station, airport or car park. *(We can also transfer you to Perpignan airport or train station, but with no price reduction unless you have come with your own bike)*

Transfer time : 3 hours.

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.

■ **USEFUL INFORMATION**

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, cycling is an activity that will allow you long and enjoyable periods of time during which the wearing of a mask is not mandatory!

PROGRAMME OF DEPARTURES

1st May to 31st October, subject to the dates of opening and closing of some cols in the Hautes Pyrenees, and extreme weather conditions. Do check with us, but normally all is fine between these dates.

MEETING POINT

We meet you at Toulouse airport, rail station (trains from Paris) or city centre car park, and take you to collect your electric bikes, understand how to use them (very simple!), and then travel by mini-bus to Hendaye. *(It is also possible to collect you from Biarritz airport or train station but with no price reduction unless you come with your own bike)*

END OF STAY

After breakfast on the terrace overlooking the sea, we transfer you back to Toulouse station, airport or car park. *(We can also transfer you to Perpignan airport or train station, but with no price reduction unless you have come with your own bike)*

TO GET TO THE MEETING POINT

SNCF runs overnight sleeper trains from Paris to Toulouse, and there are flights to Toulouse from London, and several other British and European cities. Or you can drive directly to Toulouse.

CAR SHARING

To reduce your travel costs as well as carbon emissions, think about car sharing, whether you are a driver or passenger. Connect to [Blablacar](#) it's simple and practical.

We recommend that you compare the cost of various different means of accessing your circuit start point by using the website [Comparabus](#). Contrary to what the name suggests, this site proposes several different means of completing a journey, including, flights, trains, buses or car sharing.

PARKING

Secure public parking is available in Toulouse city centre at a reasonable price.

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

You can book extra nights before, during or after the holiday. Just contact us.

GUARANTEED DEPARTURE FROM (PERS)

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LEVEL

This cycling journey avoids the highest of Pyrenean peaks and cols, and often keeps to the foothills. However, it does require a reasonable degree of fitness as these statistics tell you: 12 cols; 786km/491 miles; cumulative ascent of 3,922 metres (12,750 feet); 5 to 7 hours cycling most days. While almost all routes are on quiet roads, great care is necessary because of other road users and national traffic rules and regulations.

LUGGAGE TRANSPORTATION

We will transfer your luggage between each hotel, so all you need to carry when cycling is a daysack with whatever you regard as essentials.

SUPERVISION

This is an independent, self-guided holiday.

ACCOMMODATION

You stay in double or twin rooms for 1 night in a four star hotel, 5 nights in three star hotels, 6 nights in two star hotels, and one night in a particularly good chambres d'hôtes.

MEALS

You will eat well. Dinners are based on set menus featuring regional specialities usually with 3 or 4 choices for each of three courses, but you can pay locally for upgraded choices. Breakfast is included every morning, but lunches and picnics are not because there are plenty of places to make your own choices, although the night before you can ask the hotel for a picnic, which you can pay for locally.

TRANSFERS

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

LUGGAGE TRANSPORTATION

Your luggage will be taken on to the following night's hotel, so you will only need to carry the things that you will need during your day's ride.

CLIMATE

You are travelling through an essentially benign region for weather, but you are also in mountains, and occasionally high up in those mountains. As you know, weather in all mountains can be capricious, and you can experience all four seasons in one or two hours, never mind days. You can get snow at the highest points even in July and August, and equally it can sometimes get unpleasantly hot for cycling. Most days' journeys can be cut short by taking the most direct route. We provide a 24/7 English speaking customer service, and, if necessary, can arrange for you to be picked up, or taken to the next hotel to give you a day off. As ever, the Boy Scouts motto applies: Be Prepared.

THE PRICE INCLUDES

13 nights dinner, bed and breakfast; people transfers; luggage transfers; detailed route instructions; 24/7 customer phone service, and, of course, your electric bikes.

THE PRICE DOES NOT INCLUDE

The journey to the start point, and from the finish point, except as specified; lunches or picnics; drinks with meals; non-standard menu items; booking fee of 25€ / person, entry fees; personal and travel insurance. If you want to hire a GPS device, please tell us at the time of booking.

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

When we have received your balance of payment for your holiday, and in the month before departure, we send you all the documentation you need: detailed itinerary showing dates, times, contact details etc; a detailed guide to your walking route (with options) and lots of cultural, historical and nature background information; formal documents (invoices, contracts etc); luggage labels etc. If you book at the last minute, we can send this information to your first night hotel.

You can choose the bike that's right for you, and advice will be given as to the best tyre pressures etc. Puncture kits are included, and we can advise you of nearby cycle shops if needs be.

■ EQUIPMENT

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

For your upper body: in all countries and in all seasons, the principal of wearing 3 breathable layers works well in most situations (T-shirt - warmer layer - waterproof and windproof outer layer). Choose clothes that dry quickly (synthetic fibres) and avoid cotton (dries too slowly => discomfort). Wool is a natural fibre that also has excellent properties and has recently made a great comeback in the outdoor clothing industry due to new manufacturing processes. Make sure you cover up before you get too cold, but above all make sure that you take layers off before you get too hot - sweat should be seen as an enemy for a cyclist (especially in winter) as it dampens clothing which can later freeze or cool too quickly. Avoid anoraks - they can turn a pleasant ride into a absolute nightmare!

For your lower body: shorts and trousers made from tough, synthetic fabrics that dry quickly and therefore allow for greater comfort. Be particularly careful in your choice of socks: bring tough, reinforced cycling socks with flat seams (to avoid blisters). In winter, choose warm socks. You should also avoid cotton socks (even if they have been blessed!).

LUGGAGE

You should bring:

- 1 travel bag per person (or suitcase with wheels). Make sure they are not too big in order to avoid logistical problems (taking up too much room in transfer vehicles, for example). On holidays where you move from one hotel to another during your stay, try to keep the weight down to 10-12kg (the extra weight can make it difficult to get all the suitcases to certain hotels that are difficult to get to). Be certain not to leave any fragile or valuable objects in your main luggage.
- 1 rucksack (around 30-40 litres) with integrated water-bag (e.g. Camel-Back). These bags are more practical than carrying bottles. The rucksack should also have a waist belt and allow your back to be well ventilated for extra comfort. Keep the total weight of your rucksack plus belongings down to a maximum of 10kg.

CLOTHING

- 1 set of cycling clothes: cycling shorts, breathable T-shirt (long-sleeved or short-sleeved depending on the time of year)
- 1 other pair of shorts or trousers for cycling (padding essential)
- cycling shoes
- comfortable clothes and shoes for the evenings
- underwear

- spare long-sleeved breathable T-shirts (1 for every 2_3 days) and 1 or 2 short-sleeved T-shirts
- 1 warmer layer (a fleece or water-resistant "softshell"jacket). Or a "primaloft" jacket (warm and easily compacted down to fit into rucksacks).
- 1 breathable, windproof and waterproof out layer (e.g. Gore-Tex) with a hood

EQUIPMENT TO BRING

- 1 large plastic bag to be used as a rucksack liner for protecting your belongings from the rain and/or 1 waterproof rucksack cover
- 1 waterproof bag containing: travel insurance contract, ID or passport, health card, and all other documents mentioned in the "formalities" section.
- 1 pair of good quality sunglasses (protection factor 3) plus high-factor sun cream and sunscreen for your lips (should always be carried in your rucksack) • 1 folding pen-knife (Swiss Army knife or similar)
- For lunches: cutlery and 1 plastic/tupperware container (0.5 litres minimum). You may end up not using it but it is important to have it just in case
- washbag and 1 quick-drying towel (try to bring only essential items that don't take up too much space, biological soap...)
- 1 swimming costume / pair of swimming trunks
- ear plugs (to protect you from snoring neighbours or other annoying noises)
- 1 sleeping-bag liner if spending a night (or nights) in dormitory accommodation (hostels or refuge huts)
- handkerchiefs
- toilet paper
- 1 cigarette lighter (be careful not to provoke a fire - always use responsibly and not unless you have to)
- 1 torch or head-torch plus a survival blanket: always put this in your rucksack as set-backs due to accidents are always possible, even on easy rides
- spare glasses (if you wear glasses)
- camera, binoculars, paint brushes and canvas... (optional)

Depending on the characteristics of the holiday you are going on (if bike hire is included or not, or if you have indicated that you wish to bring your own bike anyway), it may be a good idea to bring some (or all) of the following cycling kit (please also check in the "bicycle hire" section to see what kit is already provided on the holiday you have chosen):

- cycling gloves (normal or fingerless depending on the time of year)
- 1 bike helmet (legal requirement in most countries)
- 1 or 2 cycling bottles or a hydration system such as a Camel-Back (1.5 litres), whichever you prefer
- 2 inner-tubes
- a few spare spokes (especially on mountain-bike tours)
- 1 spare derailleur
- 1 set of spare brake pads
- 1 spare cable for derailleurs or brakes
- 1 spare chain
- any other kit that you deem to be necessary...

You should try to be self-sufficient for all minor cycling breakdowns typical of these kinds of cycling tours (tyre-lever, puncture repair kit, multi-tool, quick-fix chain link...). If you have disk-brakes or high-tech bikes, be sure to bring the necessary kit for repairs.

FIRST AID KIT

Let us know about any illness, treatments or allergies that may complicate things should you have a problem or an accident and need taking to hospital during your stay.

- personal medication
- painkillers: preferably Paracetamol
- medication for indigestion
- throat tablets
- elasticated sticky bandage (e.g. Elastoplaste): 2.5m long and 5/8cm wide
- strip plasters (e.g. Steri-Strip)
- set of smaller sticky plasters plus some sterile compresses
- blister plasters (e.g. Compeed)
- hair tweezers (can also be used for extracting splinters and thorns)
- small scissors
- vitamin C tablets
- small bottle of bacterial hand-gel (e.g. Sterilium)

■ MORE INFORMATION

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: "pûr". 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

According to the regulation of our profession, Purely Pyrenees 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 rapatriation 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

Purely Pyrenees is a founding member of Action for Responsible Tourism.

The label "Action for Responsible Tourism" was awarded Purely Pyrenees 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

■ CONTACT US

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■ NOTES

