

Bespoke HRP itinerary – Etsaut to Gavarnie plus a tour of the Ordesa canyon

A bespoke trip, including 10 days of hiking, based around a central section of the Pyrenean Haute Route, HRP. In its entirety, this long distance trail traverses the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean coast, roughly following the French-Spanish border. This stage features several of the highlights of the HRP, passing beneath the mighty Balaitous, the Pic du Midi d'Ossau and the Vignemale before crossing into Ordesa, the Grand Canyon of Europe, and back through to France via the iconic Breche de Roland pass. An optional extra day hiking the Cirque de Gavarnie completes the tour of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Gavarnie and Ordesa.

This route criss-crosses between French “Atlantique” and the “Haute” Pyrenees, and the Spanish Aragon Pyrenees, which vary enormously in terms of landscape, food and language. You will be accompanied by an experienced, qualified International Mountain Leader, who will not only ensure your safe navigation, but will share his knowledge of the flora and fauna, history and culture of the Pyrenees.

SUMMARY PROGRAMME (11 nights)

Day 1 Arrival, night in a backpackers' hostel in the mountain village of Etsaut

Day 2 Etsaut to Refuge d'Ayous

Day 3 Refuge d'Ayous to Refuge Pombie

Days 4 Refuge Pombie to Refuge Arremoulit

Day 5 Refuge Arremoulit to Refuge Respumoso

Day 6 Refuge Respumoso to Refuge Wallon

Day 7 Refuge Wallon to Refuge Bayscellance

Day 8 Refuge Bayscellance to Bujaruelo refuge

Day 9 Taxi transfer from Bujaruelo to Pradera parking. Hike Ordesa canyon to Refuge Goriz

Day 10 Refuge Goriz to Refuge Sarradets (or pick-up at Col des Tentes)

Day 11 (optional) Refuge Sarradets to Gavarnie, via the Cirque de Gavarnie

Day 12 Depart

DETAILED PROGRAMME

Day 1: Arrive, night in the quaint mountain village of Etsaut in the Vallee d'Aspe

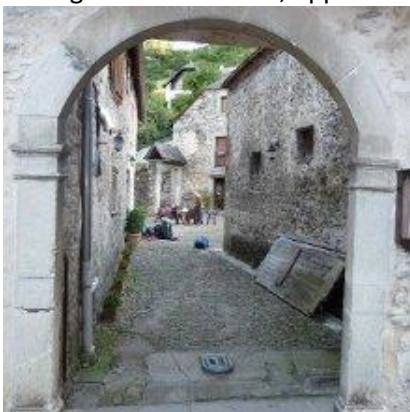
Meet in the traditional mountain village of Etsaut, nestling deep in the imposing Vallee d'Aspe. Welcome chat and an opportunity to study the local maps and discuss the route before enjoying a hearty meal.

Day 2: A day following the GR10 route from Etsaut to the Refuge d'Ayous, via the spectacular Chemin de la Mature

The route begins on the GR10 trail, starting with the impressive “Chemin de la Mature” – an airy pathway hewn into the rock. This cliff-side pathway was cut in 1772 to allow the passage of enormous felled trees, dragged out by cattle and destined to make the finest ships' masts.

The path climbs up a pretty valley, steadily gaining height to reach the Col d'Ayous with an awe-inspiring view over the Pic du Midi d'Ossau, and our refuge sitting beside its own lakes. Plenty of time for a swim before dinner!

Timing : 7-8 hours walk, approx. 14km, 1600m ascent and 225m descent



Day 3: Refuge d'Ayous to Refuge Pombie, joining the HRP trail

Leaving from the Lacs d'Ayous, the path descends gently into the valley bottom, through pretty pastureland, with the opportunity to buy fresh Pyrenean sheep's cheese along the way.

Here we leave the GR10 and pick up the official HRP trail, ascending on a progressively more rocky path to the foot of the Pic du Midi d'Ossau. This distinctive peak is the emblem of the Bearn area, and is a favourite amongst mountaineers. Our route takes us over the Southern flank, then down past a series of lakes to the refuge Pombie.

Timing : 6 hours walk, approx. 9.5km, 800m ascent and descent.



Day 4 HRP route from Refuge Pombie to Refuge Arremoulit

A gentle start to the day as we walk down the valley through grassy meadowland, but the route soon gains altitude on a good trail. After lunch we traverse above the Lac d'Artouste on the airy Passage d'Orteig and across a dramatic granitic landscape to the Arremoulit.

This pretty little refuge sits amongst a chaos of granite boulders, beside a bright blue lake – tempting for a dip, but the water is very cold!

Timing : 6 hours walk, approx. 11km, 1200m ascent and 1000m descent.



Day 5: Refuge Arremoulit to Refuge Respumoso, HRP Southern Variant into Spain

A challenging ascent this morning takes us through a maze of granite blocks, climbing on the Southern variant of the HRP, towards the Spanish border. Soon we are rewarded with a fabulous view of the Balaitous mountain, and a string of lakes far below sitting deep in its shadow. The route descends through boulders to the valley floor, and a welcome return to the path. Crossing into Spain, the Respumoso valley plunges away beneath us, and we see the impressive Embalse the Respumoso – an enormous dammed lake. Keeping our height, the path traverses high above the valley to reach the Respumoso refuge, where there is plenty of time to relax and explore in the afternoon.

Timing : 4-5 hours walk, 9 km, approx. 370m ascent, 480m descent.

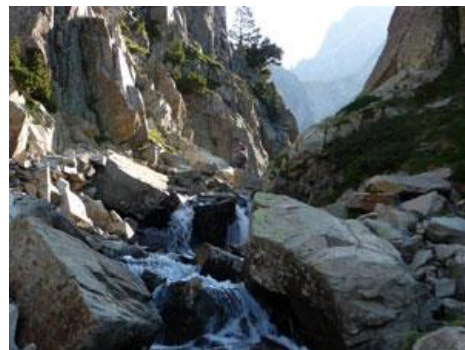


Day 6: Refuge Respumoso, 2220m, to Refuge Wallon, 1865m, over the Col de la Fache

A relatively short, but challenging day making our way back through to France over the Col de la Fache at 2664m. The path meanders past a series of lakes before steepening and making its stiff ascent to the French frontier. In the upper reaches the route is rocky, and there may still be traces of *névé* – old snow stubbornly lingering from the previous Winter.

From the Col we enjoy a dramatic high-mountain vista, and an almost martian-landscape of broken red rock. The path descends through scree and boulders, working its way down to the valley base at the Refuge Wallon. Set amongst grassy meadows and beside a pretty mountain stream where there are pools for bathing, the Wallon is one of the original Pyrenean refuges.

Timing : 4-5 hours walk, 9 km, 450m ascent, 800m descent.



Day 7 Refuge Wallon to Refuge Baysellance

A long and challenging day, beginning with a pleasant ascent on a good path to the Lac d'Aratille. Above the lake, an easy scramble takes us to the Col d'Aratille with views south into Spain again. The route dips briefly into Spain, traversing an arc of scree to reach the Col des Mulets, where we catch our first views of the mighty Vignemale and its North Face glacier. The path now descends steeply in a rocky gulley, opening out onto the "*oulettes*" – a strange, open area of grass and meandering gravelly streams seeping from the glacier.

In the afternoon, after hot chocolate at the Oulettes de Gaube refuge, we climb again to the Hourquette d'Ossoue (optional ascent of the Petit Vignemale, 3032m) to reach the Refuge Baysellance – the highest manned reuge in the Pyrenees, at 2651m.

Timing : 8 hours walk, approx. 14km, 1340m ascent, 880m descent



Day 8 *Refuge Baysellance to Bujaruelo campsite refuge*

Expect an early start this morning, as other hikers rise to make their ascent of the Vignemale. It is worth popping outside to admire the views at dawn, when the distant peaks crowning the Cirque de Gavarnie glow pink as the sun rises.

Our route heads down towards Gavarnie, passing the East face glacier of the Vignemale, and the lake at the Barrage d'Ossoue. The GR10 continues towards the village itself, but we branch South to climb back to the Spanish border at the Col de Bernatoire. Here it is easy to appreciate the contrast in the landscape, with the green pasture of France behind us, and an arid array of sculpted peaks and deep erosional valleys before us in Spain. We work our way down into the Bujaruelo valley – picking up the pilgrims' trail over the medieval bridge at St. Nicholas de Bujaruelo, where we can end the day's hike with a refreshing dip in the blue pool beneath the bridge. Our refuge for the night is just a few minutes away.

Timing : 8 hours walk, approx. 17km, 900m ascent and 1300m descent



Day 9 *Bujaruelo to Refuge Goriz, via the Ordesa canyon*

A short 4x4 taxi transfer this morning takes us up to the mouth of the Ordesa canyon, where we have two route options. In fine weather, a steep zig-zag ascent to the Faja de Pelay takes us up to a cliff-side trail offering stupendous views out over the Ordesa canyon and back towards the French frontier and the Breche de Roland. In wet weather, the valley bottom route continues beside the river, with a series of impressive waterfalls opening out into Alpine meadows in the valley base. Here the canyon walls tower hundreds of metres above us, on the scale of the Grand Canyon.

At the head of the canyon, the two paths merge to make the final ascent over limestone pavement to the Goriz refuge. This is one of the busiest refuges of the Pyrenees, due to its unique and spectacular location at the end of the canyon, but the hearty meals and bustling atmosphere make for an enjoyable stay.

Timing : 5 hours walk, approx. 12km, 900m ascent



Day 10 *Refuge Goriz to Refuge Sarradets, through the Breche de Roland*

Today's walk takes us through a unique high-mountain landscape of Alpine meadows and limestone pavement. Despite the impressive altitude, the Milaris Plateau is an open, relatively flat grassy platform – one of our favourite places to spot grazing Pyrenean Chamois.

After a pleasant morning walking through the high meadows, the going underfoot becomes more challenging as we start our ascent to the Breche de Roland. The French border – a wall of towering limestone cliffs and 3000m peaks – looms above us as we climb through limestone blocks and scree. The hard work is well worth it, though, when we reach the Breche de Roland – a natural break in the frontier cliffs at this point only a few metres thick. From the pass we look back across the Ordesa National Park, and ahead into the Cirque de Gavarnie – for good reason classed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Nestled below us, at the foot of the glacier de la Breche, the Sarradets refuge looks into the upper reaches of the Cirque de Gavarnie and across to the Grande Cascade – highest free hanging waterfall in Europe.

We make our way down from the Breche with hands-on-rock, then cross the vestiges of the Breche glacier – just a large snow patch by September, but impressive nonetheless. Reaching the Sarradets refuge, we now have the option to stop for the night, or continue for an additional 2 hrs of walking for a pick-up at the Col des Tentes.

Timing : 7 hours walk, approx. 8km, 750m ascent and 350m descent (plus 2 hours, 500m descent, approx. 5km additional walking for Col des Tentes pickup)



Day 11 (optional) *Refuge Sarradets, 2587m, to Gavarnie village, 1375m; a tour of the Cirque de Gavarnie*

This morning we take the pilgrim's path down towards the Gavarnie valley, but keep our height to skirt above the valley floor and walk into the heart of the cirque. The view here is dominated by the gigantic "Grande Cascade" – falling in a plume of spray over 400m to the base of the cirque. We have the option to scramble up to the foot of the waterfall, if you don't mind getting wet!

In the afternoon we take the balcony path on the East side of the Gavarnie valley, following a natural rock ledge high above the valley floor. The village of Gavarnie gradually grows larger as we approach our trek end-point, with a final zig-zag descent taking us to the valley bottom and a well-earned icecream!

Timing : 7 hours walk, 14km, 180m ascent and 1400m descent



Transfer to Luz-St. Sauveur for a night in civilisation – either at a trekkers’ hostel or with a hotel upgrade. Luz is a picturesque village with an old centre and fascinating fortified church. There are plenty of bars and restaurants for a celebratory final meal back in civilisation.

Day 12 Depart

LEVEL

This is a challenging high-mountain trek. The route is committing, as the refuges are booked in advance and there is no option to change or shorten each day’s walk. The route travels through high-mountain terrain, alternating between good well-travelled paths, and remote sections of sheep track, scree, boulders and the possibility of some short snow crossings (at a minimum during September).

Most days include between 1000m and 1600m of ascent, with distances of 10 to 18km each day.

Weather :

Generally mild and sunny during the day, with cool evenings. At this time of year you can expect temperatures in the mid teens to mid 20s°C but it can be significantly cooler at altitude, or warmer if we have a hot spell. We recommend that you carry at least 2 litres of water per person, as it is best to avoid drinking from streams.

Equipment:

This is a hiking itinerary, with no requirement for mountaineering equipment. Mattresses and blankets are provided at the refuges, so there is no need to carry any camping gear. You should aim to keep your rucksack as lightweight as possible, with just a couple of changes of clothes, spare underwear, a warm jacket or fleece, warm hat and gloves, sunhat and glasses, a basic wash kit and suncream, headtorch, sleeping bag liner (lightweight silk or cotton), personal first aid kit and full, lightweight waterproofs. Meals are provided at the refuges, but you will need to carry your picnic lunch each day, and around 2 litres of water. We recommend a pack-size of 35 to 45 litres maximum.

Accommodation:

Mountain refuge or trekkers’-style accommodation. This is generally clean and comfortable, but basic – with communal dormitories (either bunk beds or shared sleeping platforms) and simple toilet and washing facilities. Most refuges do not have showers, and you are expected to carry your rubbish away with you. There is a friendly atmosphere and they serve tasty, hearty meals.

The final night is spent in the lively little market town of Luz-St. Sauveur. Situated at the base of an open, sunny valley, Luz is surrounded by high peaks and charming perched mountain villages. The town itself has shops, bars and restaurants, an historic church and castle, and thermal baths for relaxing after your hike.

All meals (continental breakfasts, picnic lunches and generous evening meals) are included, but drinks and extra snacks are at your own charge.



PRICES:

~~11 night programme (10 days of hiking): **£1175 per person**~~

~~Including 11 nights' accommodation at mountain refuges or backpackers' hostels, 11 breakfasts, 10 packed lunches, 11 evening meals, 10 days of accompaniment with a qualified International Mountain Leader, guide's accommodation and meals, baggage transport between trek start and end points and local transfers.~~

~~IMPORTANT NOTE:~~

~~This price is based on a group size of 8 people. For a smaller group there would be a supplementary charge.~~

OPTIONS:

- ~~• Shorten the trek by one day, with a pick-up at the Col des Tentes on day 10 – reduce price by £95 per person~~
- ~~• Hotel upgrade in Luz-St. Sauveur - £25 per person for a 3* standard, en-suite room, based on 2-sharing~~
- ~~• We can arrange airport or railway station transfers to/from the trek start and end points. In this case we would use a local taxi company and the cost would be passed on directly to you.~~

We are very much open to suggestions and we can adapt the programme to suit your specific interests and abilities. The final route choice and refuge bookings would need to be confirmed by early June.