

OPTION 1 – The French Pyrenees National Park and the Neouvielle Nature Reserve

Highlights of the French Pyrenees National park, including the UNESCO World heritage site of the Cirque de Gavarnie and the Cirque de Troumouse, and the wild and unspoilt granitic massif of the Neouvielle Nature Reserve – known as the Lake District of the Pyrenees. This trip is based from the mountain village of Bareges, situated in the Pays Toy region of the Hautes Pyrenees. This area has a particularly interesting history and culture, with its own unique “patois” language, local traditions and hearty cuisine. Surrounded by some of the highest and most dramatic 3000m+ peaks of the Pyrenees, the valleys have lush pasture, stone barns and picturesque perched villages. This trip combines visits to the most dramatic high peaks and passes, with the chance to see the valleys, villages and farmers’ trails.

SUMMARY: A combination of guided day walks and refuge-based mini treks. This trip can be taken as a 7 night option, or with a 3 night extension. Two day walks visit the massive limestone cirques of Troumouse and Gavarnie - the birth places of the glaciers that carved the dramatic erosional landscape of the high Pyrenees, while the mini treks explore the granite lake land of the Neouvielle Nature Reserve, and the iconic high peaks and passes of the Pyrenees National Park above Cauterets and the Pont d’Espagne.

PROGRAMME

Day 1 Arrive at Bareges

Day 2 Cirque de Gavarnie day walk

Day 3 Cirque de Troumouse day walk

Day 4 Free day

Days 5-7 Neouvielle Nature Reserve mini trek

Day 8 Depart OR (Pyrenees National Park mini trek - Pont d’Espagne to Refuge Wallon via the high lakes)

(Day 9) Refuge Wallon to Refuge Bayscellance on the HRP

(Day 10) Refuge Bayscellance to Gavarnie

DETAILED PROGRAMME

Day 1: Arrive Bareges, night at chalet Les Cailloux

Day 2: Transfer to the Cirque de Gavarnie, UNESCO World Heritage site and the Spanish frontier.

Gavarnie is one of the must-see “Grand Sites” of the Pyrenees – a spectacular natural amphitheatre carved from the limestone cliffs of the French-Spanish frontier. Today’s walk departing from Gavarnie village to take the magnificent balcony path that skirts above the Gavarnie valley. The path is a natural ledge etched into the limestone wall of the valley, bringing us out at the mouth of the Cirque de Gavarnie. We ascend steadily into the cirque, with the chance to walk up to the foot of the Grande Cascade – the highest free hanging waterfall in Europe. Return to the village via the valley bottom trail, crossing Alpine meadows scattered with wildflowers, with the chance to cool our feet in a chilly mountain stream. Night at chalet Les Cailloux.

Timing : 5-6 hours walk, 600m ascent and descent including the climb up to the waterfall (optional)



Day 3: Transfer to the Cirque de Troumouse, also part of the Gavarnie UNESCO World Heritage site.

The Cirque de Troumouse is Gavarnie's "big brother" – a massive limestone crater of an almost unimaginable scale. Our walk departs from the tiny hamlet of Heas, 1519m, which was a stop-off point on the escape route to freedom of escaped prisoners smuggled through to Spain during World War 2. The walk begins with a steep, but steady 400m ascent on a good trail to the Cabane de l'Aguila. From here we leave the path and climb through grazed meadowland to our high point at 2200m, and a beautiful lunch spot overlooking the glacial U-valley. Now we traverse round into the Cirque de Troumouse itself, with a good chance of seeing marmots playing amongst the boulders. Exploring the cirque, we find a hidden shepherd's cabin – built up against a rock and with almost invisible beneath its turf roof, cross Alpine meadows and visit the ephemeral lakes, before returning to Heas on a zig-path directly out of the mouth of the cirque. Night at chalet Les Cailloux.

Timing : 6-7 hours walk, 700m ascent and descent.

OPTIONS: a variation of this walk is also available, at an easier level with a maximum of 300m ascent/descent and 4-5 hours of walking.



Day 4: Free day

Visit the local market, relax and recuperate in the thermal spa at Baresges, or set out for an independent mountain walk exploring the pretty scenery above the village. Alternatively, you might like to try a mountain adventure sport such as paragliding, canyoning or rafting, or take a site-seeing trip up to the Pic du Midi – a working astronomical observatory offering endless views across the whole of the Pyrenees mountain chain. Night at chalet Les Cailloux.



Days 5-7: Mini trek 1 – Néouvielle Nature Reserve, the Pyrenean Lake District

A high mountain trek, exploring the Neouvielle Nature Reserve - one of the wildest and most untouched parts of the Pyrenees, known for its wild granitic landscape, miniature pines and sparkling lakes

SUMMARY : A circular walk from the Pont de la Gaubie above Baresges, spending two nights at mountain refuges. Parts of this route follow the famous GR10 trail, while other sections are incredibly wild, with little visible path, where your guide will take you to the most unspoilt and picturesque lakes of the reserve.

Day 5: Pont de la Gaubie to the Refuge Oredon

Just 5 minutes drive from Bareges, the GR10 sets out into the Neouvielle Nature Reserve from the Pont de la Gaubie at 1550m. A vigorous wake-up climb takes us 500m up to the Lac d'Etscoubous, the first of a multitude of lakes that are scattered across the reserve. Making our way across rounded boulders (on a marked trail) we head steadily uphill to the dark Lac Nere, where we take a break beside a lonesome pine before the final push on a little-used cairned route up to the Col de Tracens and the (optional) Pic de Madamete at 2657m. This is a magnificent peak, offering 360 degree panoramic views across the whole of the Neouvielle Nature Reserve, North to the Pic du Midi de Bigorre and South towards the Spanish border. After descending to the Col de Madamete, we again pick up the GR10 and follow a scenic trail passing the Lacs d'Aumar and d'Aubert, before reaching our destination for the night – a comfortable trekkers' auberge beside the lac d'Oredon.

Timing : 8 hours walk, 1100m ascent including the Pic de Madamete, 800m descent



Day 6: Refuge Oredon to Refuge Bastan, through the lake-land wilderness

This morning's climb takes us 500m up into a secluded valley where we will almost certainly not see another soul. This valley of small lakes, sculpted pine trees, cotton grasses and far-reaching views really typifies the wilderness of the Néouvielle. Here you will really rely on your guide's local knowledge, as there is barely a trace of a path! Towards the end of the afternoon, we make our way back to a well-travelled route, passing another series of lakes and a final climb of 150m to a col from where we look down into the next valley and should soon be able to spot the idyllic Refuge de Bastan, nestling beside its own lake – a great spot for a refreshing swim at the end of the day.

Timing : 8 hours walk, Height gain 650-800m depending on precise route chosen, descent 200-400m undulating



Day 7: Refuge de Bastan to Pont de la Gaubie via the Pic de Bastan and the Port Bielh

Wake up at the Refuge Bastan, and set out early whilst the big peaks to the South are still lit pink. A steady 250m climb takes us to the Col de Bastan – departure point for the optional ascent of the Pic de Bastan. This is a classic “pointy” peak, visible from all sides in the surrounding valleys and seemingly un-scalable from most angles! To reach the pic there is a 200m ascent on a steep path, ending with a short, exposed scramble to the summit. The scramble is not

technically difficult, but there is an impressive drop down to the big lake directly below the peak. Return to the Col de Bastan then traverse to the Hourquette de Caderolles before descending to the Lac de Port-Bielh. You may be tempted to take a dip, but this vast lake is icy cold all summer long. After a good break, a steady and pleasant climb takes us up to the Port Bielh, where we cross back onto the Bareges side of the watershed. Now we have a beautiful, scenic descent passing more lakes and countless colourful wildflowers to reach our path beside the rushing Aygues Cluses torrent, once again following the GR10, back to the Pont de la Gaubie. Return to Bareges and chalet Les Cailloux.

Timing : 7-8 hours walk, Height gain 750m, descent 1400m



Saturday Depart OR Optional extension – Pyrenees National Park mini trek

Mini trek 2 – Pyrenees National Park: Pont d’Espagne and the Vignemale

Day 8: Pont d’Espagne to Refuge Wallon, via the high lakes

Transfer to the Pont d’Espagne above Cauterets. Begin the day with a visit to the notorious waterfalls beneath the Spanish bridge, before we set off into the mountains along the beautiful Marcadau valley. This splendid glacial U-valley was historically a trading point for French and Spanish farmers, who would bring their cattle and sheep to market here. After a gentle warm-up walk along the valley bottom, the path climbs steeply, passing a series of pretty lakes – the Lacs de l’Embarrat. The landscape quickly becomes much wilder, with fallen granite blocks beneath craggy peaks. We stop beside the upper lake to enjoy a break for lunch, with the option of a swim for hardy lovers of cold water! The trail continues to make its way through a chaos of granite boulders, and past several smaller lakes before beginning its descent. The valley opens out, with views across to the Spanish frontier. We descend steadily through sparse pines, before reaching the Refuge Wallon, where there should be time to relax on the panoramic terrasse, or take a dip in the river pools below the refuge.

Timing : 8 hours walk, approx. 13km, 1200m ascent, 880m descent



Day 9: Refuge Wallon to the Refuge Bayscellance, highest manned refuge in the Pyrenees

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 gully, 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 Bayscellance – the highest manned refuge in the Pyrenees, at 2651m.

Timing : 8 hours walk, approx. 14km, 1700m ascent, 900m descent



Day 10: Refuge Bayscellance to Gavarnie, 6 hours

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, beneath the East face glacier of the Vignemale – one of the largest remaining glaciers in the Pyrenees, to reach the lake at the Barrage d'Ossoue. On the way we pass some fascinating man-made caves, which were carved out of the limestone on the request of Count Henry Russell, a half-French, half-Irish explorer during the late 1800s. After making several important first-ascents in the Pyrenees, Henry Russell became obsessed with the Vignemale mountain, spending many nights out near the summit, and holding sumptuous banquets for princes and notables in his caves. Eventually he agreed a 99 year lease of the mountain, beginning in January 1889. During the course of 60 years, he made thirty three ascents of the Vignemale, and he is still respected for his scientific studies as part of the Société Ramond.

On reaching the Barrage d'Ossoue, we begin to see the first signs of civilisation, and our path takes us down through marmot-filled meadows towards the village of Gavarnie.

Timing : 8 hours walk, approx. 17km, 650m ascent, 1781m descent



LEVEL

This is a challenging week, classified as “adventurer” level. The hikes are through high-mountain terrain, generally on good well-travelled paths, but with some sections of sheep track, scree and boulders. The highest passes should be free of the previous winter’s snow during September, although at this altitude there is the possibility of Wintery weather at any time of year.

The days are variable in length and difficulty, as necessitated by the location of accommodation in the mountains. Please note that the route cannot easily be changed after the refuges are booked, so you are committed to completing the mini-treks, while the day walks are very much flexible.

Most walks include around 800 - 1000m of ascent per day (max. 1700m on Day 9, during the National Park mini trek), with distances of up to 16km / 10 miles.

Accommodation:

This trip is based from our own comfortable 3*-standard guesthouse, chalet “Les Cailloux” in the mountain village of Baresges. The chalet has private 2- or 3-person bedrooms, each with an en-suite shower room. Generous meals are provided, including a continental buffet breakfast, picnic lunches on walking days, afternoon tea & cakes, and delicious three course evening meals. There is one evening off, when you can eat out at a local restaurant. You also have use of all of the facilities at the chalet – boot room, sauna, spacious lounge with bar, books & games, free internet access and big-screen home cinema, as well as our sunny patio garden. Les Cailloux is situated in the centre of the small village of Baresges, which has plenty of facilities including several bars and restaurants, bakery, pharmacy, supermarket and an excellent thermal spa.

See <http://www.mountainbug.com/Chalet-Accommodation-Pyrenees.aspx> for more information and photographs.



During the mini-treks, accommodation is at mountain refuges. Refuge accommodation 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. Mattresses and blankets are provided, so there is no need to carry any camping equipment.

Weather : generally warm and sunny. At this time of year you can expect temperatures in the high 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 1.5l of water per person, as it is best to avoid drinking from streams, unless you use purification tablets or carry a filter. Drinking water can be obtained at the refuge sources, or you can purchase mineral water.

PRICE:

7 night programme: £735 per person based on 2-sharing. The price includes 7 breakfasts, 5 packed lunches, 6 evening meals, all accommodation, 5 days of guiding with a qualified International Mountain Leader, guide's meals and accommodation and local transfers.

There is one free night when you can enjoy the local specialities at a restaurant. Drinks are not included.

3-day/2-night mini-trek extension: £295 per person, including an additional 2 nights' refuge-based accommodation, meals and three days of guiding and transfers.

OPTIONS:

- The programme can be made longer or shorter, with more or fewer day walks. The rest day is optional, so an additional day of walking could also be included, at extra charge.
- We can help out with arrangements for airport or station transfers at extra cost if required.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

This price is based on a group size of 6 people. If the group is larger or smaller, the price would be altered accordingly.