

OPTION 2 – The Spanish Pyrenees & the Sierra de Guara

A very varied, two-centre trip based in the Spanish Aragon Pyrenees and the Sierra de Guara, with an optional 3-day extension to visit the Ordesa canyon.

The trip begins in the fortified village of Alquezar. From its commanding position, this hilltop village watches over the Sierra de Guara National Park. Here the landscape is one of dramatic contrasts with deep canyons and towering limestone pinnacles. We take the opportunity to explore the river gorges and abandoned historic sites, before moving to the larger Medieval town of Ainsa, with its cobbled streets and tapas bars. Ainsa is an ideal base from which to climb the iconic Peña Montañesa summit, as well as venturing into the depths of the dramatic Anisclo canyon. As a great culmination to this trip, an optional Gavarnie-Ordesa three day mini-trek takes us up to the high summits to hike through the unforgettable Breche de Roland pass, take the chance to climb a 3000m peak, and walk high above the Ordesa canyon – the Grand Canyon of Europe.

PROGRAMME

Day 1 Arrive at Alquezar (3 nights)

Day 2 Sierra de Guara natural park – Rio Vero lower gorge

Day 3 Rodellar, Otin and the Mascun canyon

Day 4 Transfer to Ainsa (3 or 4 nights) - Upper Vero canyon

Day 5 Free day

Day 6 Peña Montañesa

Day 7 Anisclo canyon circular walk, return to Ainsa or Torla

Day 8 Depart OR (Gavarnie-Ordesa mini trek - hike through to France from the Bujaruelo valley, night at the Refuge des Sarradets)

(Day 9) Refuge des Sarradets to Refuge Goriz via the Breche de Roland. Optional ascent of Pic le Taillon, 3144m

(Day 10) Refuge Goriz to Torla on the Faja de Pelay

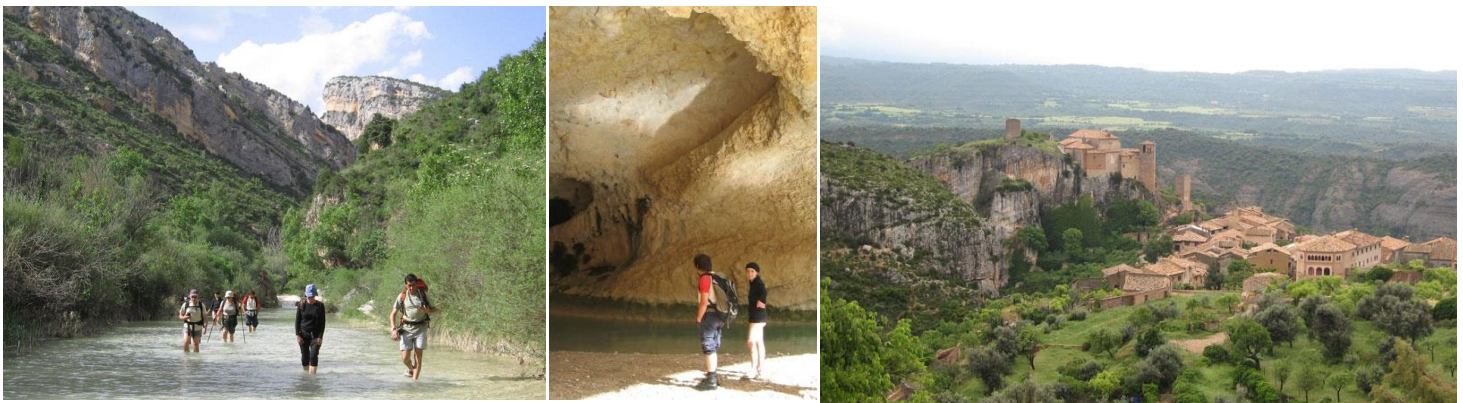
DETAILED PROGRAMME

Day 1 Arrive Alquezar – an ancient village situated at 680m, where the old castle-church stands high over red-tiled roofs and canyons of grey limestone and orange puddingstone. Our hotel is in the heart of the old quarter, just a short stroll from the pleasant plaza with bars and lovely views.

Day 2 Sierra de Guara natural park – Rio Vero gorge

Leaving from the hotel we take the old path to the Rio Vero, through a landscape of grey and orange limestone against weird, rounded puddingstone conglomerate in the lower gorges of the Rio Vero. From the old bridge, we climb to the modest but sublimely spectacular Pena de Vilacomtal. Going up the puddingstone ridges to the village of Ausque, we then return via olive groves to finish with a river walk (old shoes advised!).

Timing: 5-6 hours



Day 3 Rodellar, Otin and the Mascun canyon

The canyon of Mascun, to the West of Alquezar, is rightly famous for its fantastic landscape of towers, needles and arches, as well as the top-level climbing that it offers. We leave the village of Rodellar to explore the lower reaches of the canyon, crossing the high plateau via the Dolmen of Losa Mora, to the abandoned village of Otin.

Otin's atmosphere of desolation and peace is unforgettable. Looking carefully, we can see more ruined villages and farms, for the entire area saw its last inhabitants leave in the 1970s during the Franco administration. They left a legacy of rugged dry-stone architecture, now crumbling and disappearing. We carry on to the upper reaches of the Mascun canyon for some truly spectacular views.

The return trail is an impressive canyon-side path back to Rodellar. Along the way, we stop to marvel at the strange natural sculptures and watch the flight of the vultures, ravens and choughs.

Timing: 6-7 hours



Day 4 Upper Vero canyon, transfer to Ainsa (3 or 4 nights)

A fairly gentle day, with a 4 hour walk exploring the unique Upper Vero Canyon, spotting vultures and eagles. With its strange landscape of "beehive" limestone, the upper reaches of El Rio Vero are one of the gateways to the Guara Nature Park. Famous for its canyoning, we enjoy it on foot – leaving the village of Lecina to skirt the edges of the canyon, with the option to enjoy a splash in the shallow waters if the mood takes us.

This area has one of Europe's greatest concentrations of Griffon vultures, and we have the chance of seeing Lammergeier and Egyptian vultures too. Flora (tulips, daffodils and orchids) and fossils are on the agenda also.

After our walk, we have a 1h20min drive to the town of Ainsa.

Timing : 4 hours



Day 5 Free day based from Ainsa

Explore the cobbled streets of the old town, walk the castle walls, or up the adventure levels with a day-trip canyoning or white-water rafting on the mountain rivers.

Day 6 A circular walk exploring the Anisclo canyon and tackling the summit of Mondoto mountain, 1957m

Today's walk takes us into the spectacular Anisclo canyon – a 15 kilometre gash running down the Southern side of Monte Perdido. We start our walk at the canyon entry point, Sestrales mountain – rising over 1000m in great tiers of folded limestone – an open geology book. We walk up the lower reaches of the canyon before making the ascent to the summit of Mondoto. At 1957m, there are astounding views across the canyon and back towards Monte Perdido and the French frontier.

Timing : 6 hours walk



Day 7 *Peña Montañesa and the troglodyte hermitage of Espelunca*

The Peña Montañesa (2220m) is the focal point of the Sobrarbe region, rising like a huge, stranded vessel above the eroded foothills. The old monastery of San Vitorian was founded in the dark ages, at the foot of these immense cliffs. San Vitorian himself had spent years in the nearby cave of Espelunca, which we reach via a rocky path through eroded semi-desert then boulder-strewn oak woodland. The ruined hermitage is a magical place, steeped in atmosphere, but the summit of Pena Montanese beckons – a long but superb hike up limestone slopes dotted with pines takes us to the summit of the Pena Montanese – one of the most memorable viewpoints of the Pyrenees with vistas across the hills, valleys and great lake of Ainsa. There are shorter summit ascents if preferred, such as Castillo Mayor or Santa Marina.

Timing : 6-7 hours walk, 1100m ascent and descent



Day 8 *Depart OR Bujaruelo to the Refuge Sarradets mini trek - walk through to Spain following the pilgrims' path over the Port de Boucharo and into the Vallée de Bujaruelo.*

A short taxi transfer takes us from the village of Torla into the picturesque Bujaruelo valley. We pick up the GR11 long distance trail, walking beside a rushing torrent to a beautiful 9th century Romanesque hump-backed bridge in the valley bottom. This bridge, and the chapel at St. Nicholas, was originally an overnight stopping point for pilgrims on the trail to Santiago de Compostela. On a warm morning, the deep blue pool beneath the bridge is a great spot for a dip.

Beginning our long climb now, a steady zig-zag path takes us up to the Port de Boucharo and the passage through into France. Here the path becomes rocky, but easily navigable as we traverse above the Espécières valley. We climb through a series of cascades and fallen rocks, to reach the Col des Sarradets, where we are rewarded by our first, breathtaking views down into the Cirque de Gavarnie. This gigantic limestone amphitheatre was the birthplace of a huge glacier, now virtually disappeared. From our viewpoint, we can see directly across to the top of the Grande Cascade – the highest free-hanging waterfall in Europe, and up to the snow-capped 3000m peaks of the Spanish

frontier looming above us. One last, short push takes us to the Sarradets refuge (Refuge de la Breche), perched in the most unlikely position beneath the iconic Breche de Roland pass – tomorrow’s route back through to Spain.

Timing : 7 hours walk, 11.1km, 1600m ascent.



Day 9: Refuge Sarradets to Refuge Goriz, optional ascent of Pic le Taillon

A momentous day’s walk, beginning with a 1 hour steep climb from the refuge des Sarradets, 2587m, to the Breche de Roland. The trail is over scree and crosses the nub of the Breche glacier, but it is a well-travelled route. From the Breche de Roland, 2807m, we have panoramic views back into France and across the Monte Perdido National Park into Spain, and the hazy foothills where we have been walking for the last few days. After a good stop to admire the views, for those who are feeling energetic there is an optional ascent of peak “Le Taillon”, a classic 3000m peak (3140m). Heading back into Spain now, we descend on a scree path to the Milaris plateau – a grassy plateau surrounded by karstic rock formations and the impressive limestone wall of the French frontier. The route is mainly on an easy path, with a short scramble in a limestone chimney. Soon afterwards the Goriz refuge pops into view, in its commanding location at 2150m, at the head of the Ordesa canyon and the foot of Monte Perdido.

Timing : 7 hours walk, 14 km, approx. 600m ascent, 650m descent.



Day 10 Goriz refuge to Torla on the Faja de Pelay - Ordesa canyon views

Today’s walk takes us along the length of the Ordesa canyon, but avoids the busy base of the valley in favour of a high-level path in the South wall of the canyon, from where we have superb views back towards the peaks of the French border. The day begins with a rocky descent towards the head of the canyon, crossing limestone pavement, before picking up the Faja de Pelay cliff path. This route is not technically difficult, but has some sense of exposure due to the far-reaching views and look-out points overlooking the canyon itself. At the end of the Pelay trail there is a steep zig-zag descent into the canyon bottom, where we meet the long-distance GR11 walking trail. In the afternoon, we have a long but leisurely descent beside the Rio Arazas as it rushes down the valley through a series of cascades. At the entrance to the village of Torla, 1015m, there is a superb blue river pool if anyone fancies an afternoon dip. The trip ends in the historic village of Torla – a great place to enjoy the local beers, tapas and Spanish hospitality.

Timing : 8 hours walk, 20 km, 1600m descent.



LEVEL

The day walking proposal is an intermediate-level programme, while the mini-trek would be categorised as adventurous, with walks through high-mountain terrain, generally on good well-travelled paths, but with some sections of sheep track, scree, boulders etc. Most day walks include around 600-800m of ascent per day (maximum 1000m), with distances of between 10 and 16km /6 to 10 miles. The mini-trek extension has longer days, in high-mountain terrain, with our biggest climb of 1600m ascent on day 2.

Weather : generally warm and sunny. At this time of year you can expect temperatures in the mid teens to low 20s°C on the French side, and high teens to mid-20s°C on the Spanish side, 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. You should also carry lightweight waterproofs at all times, in case of wet weather. Everyone would need to have decent kit, including comfortable, sturdy hiking boots and a rucksack to carry spare clothing, drink and lunch.

Accommodation:

In the Spanish Pyrenees and Sierra de Guara National park, accommodation is at comfortable 2- or 3* standard hotels. Some of the hotels have their own restaurant, while at others we have the opportunity to eat out and sample the typical, local cuisine.

Accommodation includes continental breakfasts, packed lunches and evening meals.

In the Sierra de Guara we will be based in the ancient red-tiled hilltop village of Alquezar, before moving on to the fascinating medieval town of Ainsa, with its Romanesque 12th century church and 11th century castle. The maze of cobbled streets and tapas bars around the Plaza de San Salvador are a joy to explore in the warm evenings.



Accommodation is based on twin/double room share at 2 and 3* standard hotels, with continental breakfasts, picnic lunches on walking days and evening meals included. Drinks and extra snacks are at your own charge.

PRICE:

~~**7 night programme: £805 per person.** With 7 nights hotel accommodation - 3 nights in Alquezar, 3 or 4 nights in the medieval town of Ainsa (1 night in Torla for the Ordesa extension) 7 breakfasts, 5 packed lunches, 6 evening meals, 5 days of accompaniment with a qualified mountain walking guide, guide's meals and accommodation and local transport.~~

~~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.~~

We can help out with arrangements for airport or station transfers at extra charge 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.