

COLLIER GRAHAM itinerary – The French and Spanish Pyrenees : Trekking across the border

A bespoke one-week programme based in the French Haute Pyrenees and the Spanish Aragon Pyrenees, including six days of private guiding with a qualified International Mountain Leader.

The first half of the week takes in some of the highlights of the French Pyrenees National park, including the UNESCO World heritage site of the Cirque de Gavarnie and the Cirque de Troumouse. This part of the trip is based from the small mountain town of Luz-St. Sauveur, 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.

For the second half of the week we cross on foot through to the Spanish Pyrenees and the Monte Perdido National Park to visit the Ordesa canyon – also part of the Gavarnie & Ordesa World heritage site. Our trek takes us from the lush green meadows of France into the sculpted badlands of Spain. Parts of this route were also used by prisoners during World War II escaping from France into the Spanish Pyrenees. We spend time in the charming mountain village of Torla, with its cobbled streets and tapas bars, as well as the Medieval town of Ainsa. There is the option to extend the stay in Spain to visit the Sierra de Guara Natural Park. Here the landscape is one of dramatic contrasts with deep canyons, towering limestone pinnacles and fortified hilltop villages.

SUMMARY PROGRAMME (7 nights)

Day 1 Arrival, night in the pretty market town of Luz-St. Sauveur

Day 2 Cirque de Gavarnie day walk

Day 3 Cirque de Troumouse day walk

Days 4 & 5 Gavarnie-Ordesa mini trek, overnight at the Goriz mountain refuge

Day 6 Anisclo canyon day walk

Day 7 Peña Montañesa day walk

Day 8 Transfer to Barcelona

DETAILED PROGRAMME

Day 1: Arrive, night in the picturesque market town of Luz-St. Sauveur

Our base for the first three nights is the charming “Hotel les Templiers”, based in the heart of the old town of Luz beside the interesting fortified Templars church. Spend your first afternoon strolling up to the Chateau Ste. Marie – a ruined 12th and 13th century castle overlooking the town, or follow in the footsteps of Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie and visit the Chapel of Solferino and the Pont Napoleon – an impressive single-spangled arch bridge, spanning almost 300 feet above the gorge of Luz.



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

Depart from Gavarnie village to take the spectacular balcony path that skirts above the Gavarnie valley. The path is a natural ledge etched into the limestone wall, with sheer drops into the valley below. The balcony brings us out at the mouth of the Cirque de Gavarnie from where we ascend steadily into the cirque itself. Reaching the base of the

1000m cliffs that form the Spanish frontier, there is the possibility to walk up to the foot of the Grande Cascade – the highest free hanging waterfall in Europe. Return to the village via the valley route, crossing Alpine meadows scattered with beautiful rare orchids, and with the chance to cool our feet in a chilly mountain stream.

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



Day 3: Day walk –the Cirque de Troumouze, also part of the Gavarnie UNESCO World Heritage site.

This 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 an unforgettable lunch spot overlooking the glacial U-valley. Now we traverse round into the Cirque de Troumouze itself, with a good chance of seeing marmots playing amongst the boulders. Exploring the cirque, we just have time to see the glacial Lacs de Troumouze before returning to Heas on a zig-path directly out of the mouth of the cirque.

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.



Days 4 & 5: A two-day mini-trek from France into Spain Depart from the Col de Tentés to cross into Spain via the Breche de Roland. Night at the Goriz refuge.

Day 4: A momentous day’s walk, beginning with a climb to the Col de Sarradets, which offers spectacular views across into the upper reaches of the Cirque de Gavarnie and the Grande Cascade (highest free hanging waterfall in Europe). From the refuge de Sarradets, there is a 1 hour steep climb takes us 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 we have panoramic views back into France and across the Monte Perdido National Park into Spain. After a good stop to admire the views, 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 position at the head of the Ordesa canyon.

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



Day 5: A long day's walk following the length of the Ordesa canyon on the Faja de Pelay cliff-side trail, then taking the GR11 route into the historic Aragonese village of Torla. Transfer to the medieval town of Ainsa.

Today's walk takes us along the length of the Ordesa canyon, but avoids the well-travelled 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 Ordesa river as it rushes down the valley through a series of cascades. At the entrance to the village of Ordesa, there is a superb blue river pool if anyone fancies an afternoon dip. We have time to enjoy a beer and perhaps sample the local tapas before a 45 minute transfer to a comfortable hotel in the historic town of Ainsa – our base for the second half of the trip.

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



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

Today's walk takes us into the dramatic 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 Day walk - Pena Montanesa and the troglodyte hermitage of Espelunca

The Pena Montanesa (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 Montanesa beckons – a long but superb hike up limestone slopes dotted with pines takes us to the summit of the Pena Montanesa – 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 Transfer to Barcelona

LEVEL

The day walking proposal is an intermediate-level programme, with walks through high-mountain terrain, generally on good well-travelled paths, but with some sections of sheep track, scree, boulders etc. Most walks include around 600-800m of ascent per day (maximum 1000m), with distances of between 10 and 16km /6 to 10 miles. **PLEASE NOTE** that the day-walking programme is entirely flexible – we can adapt the itinerary to include longer or shorter days. As there is a baggage transfer provided between France and Spain, there is the option to miss out the mini-trek walk through the Breche de Roland, although in this case there will be no alternative day walks available.

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, particularly in Spain where the climate is typically warmer and drier. 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 French Pyrenees we will be based from 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, an outdoor pool and thermal baths for relaxing after your day's hiking.



In the Spanish Pyrenees we will be based in 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 long, 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.

PRICES:

7 night programme: **£845 per person**

~~Supplement for 6 nights single room occupancy: £100~~

~~Including 3 nights' accommodation at a 3* hotel in Luz-St. Sauveur, 1 night's accommodation at the Refuge Goriz, 3 nights in a comfortable 2* hotel in Ainsa, 7 breakfasts, 6 packed lunches, 7 evening meals, 6 days of accompaniment with a qualified International Mountain Leader, guide's accommodation and meals, baggage transfers from France to Spain and local minibus transport.~~

~~The single supplement would be waived in the case that you are happy to use one double and one triple room at the hotels, rather than three separate rooms.~~

IMPORTANT NOTE:

~~This price is based on a group size of 5 people. For a group of 6, we can offer a discount of £50 per person, reducing the rate to **£795 per person.**~~

OPTIONS:

- Extend the day walking programme to an 8-10 night trip. We can highly recommend some extra days in the French Pyrenees, to visit the Neouvielle Nature Reserve (an unspoilt granitic massif, known as the lake district of the Pyrenees), the Lac de Gaube and the Pont d'Espagne above Cauterets, or the traditional mountain villages, farms and meadows of the Pays Toy around Luz.
- Add a third centre with a tour of the Sierra de Guara National Park based from the fortified village of Alquezar in the foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees for an additional 2 or 3 nights.
- We can arrange airport transfers to Barcelona at the end of your trip using a local coach company. In this case, we would pass on the cost to you directly (around 380 € for up to 6 people with Zip Transfers).

We are open to suggestions and we can adapt the programme to suit your specific interests and abilities.