

French Pyrenees : a walking and activity holiday, September 2013

A flexible itinerary to include 3 or 4 guided day walks, and two or three days of mountain activities during a 7 night stay in the mountain village of Bareges. We would also propose an optional extension to your holiday, with a 3 day mini-trek expedition spending 2 nights out at mountain refuges. This programme combines the benefits of comfortable accommodation and a choice of walks that is adaptable depending on weather and interests and abilities of the group, with the adventure of an expedition into the remote mountains which are not easily accessible on a day walk.

SUMMARY: A variety of day walks exploring the picturesque farmland, villages and historical castles and churches of the Pays Toy, venturing into the massive limestone cirques of Troumouse and Gavarnie - the birth places of the glaciers that carved the dramatic erosional landscape of the high Pyrenees, and discovering the clear blue lakes of the Neouvielle Nature Reserve. The walking programme will be interspersed with two or three days of activities. We suggest canyoning, via ferrata, rafting, Chlorofil treetop park and/or rock climbing.

An optional extra mini-trek exploring either i) the Neouvielle Nature Reserve – an untouched wilderness of granite boulders, miniature pines and mirror lakes, with the chance to climb to impressive peaks, or ii) the Pyrenees National Park

PROGRAMME

Day 1 *Arrive in your own time. We can help out with arrangements for transfers from the airport or railway station, or advise on public transport options.*

Day 2 GUIDED DAY WALK *Exploring the Bastan valley – a village-to-village walk from Bareges to Luz-St. Sauveur*

Depart directly from Bareges, climbing into the idyllic meadows of the Transarrious plateau, where we see some historic farms and field systems still in use today. Following the old drovers' paths, we make our way to the ancient village of Sers, with its 12th century church and narrow, cobbled passageway. The trail continues down through the pretty villages of Viey and Viella, before a short ascent to the Ste. Marie castle, commanding fantastic views over the village of Luz-St. Sauveur. In Luz there is time for an icecream and a visit to the fortified Templars church before our ride back up to Bareges.

Timing : 5 hours walk, 600m descent, 150m ascent



Day 3 ACTIVITY DAY – Canyoning and Via Ferrata *Divide into two groups for a morning and afternoon activity*

Half day canyoning in the beautiful aquatic Canyon de Heas, with its rushing mountain torrent, blue pools, jumps, slides and natural water chute.

Half day on the dramatic "Via Ferrata" (iron way) beneath the Napoleon Bridge. This is a fixed climbing course with metal rungs and pins, enabling you to scale the vertical canyon wall beneath the 90m high arch of the Pont Napoleon.



Day 4 GUIDED DAY WALK *Minibus transfer to 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 of the valley, bringing you out at the mouth of the Cirque de Gavarnie. 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 route, crossing Alpine meadows, 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 5 ACTIVITY DAY – Rafting and Chlorofil treetop park

Half day rafting on the Gave de Pau river. Taking two rafts, work your way down the fast-flowing mountain river trying your best to stay dry! Picnic lunch beside the river.

Half day at Chlorofil treetop park – a vast network of monkey bridges, aerial walkways, ziplines, scramble nets, tarzan swings and crawl-ways. The park really does have something for all levels and is great fun.



Day 6 GUIDED DAY WALK *Minibus transfer to the Cirque de Gavarnie, UNESCO World Heritage site and the Spanish frontier.*

Minibus transfer to the Cirque de Troumouse, also part of the 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 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 just have time to see the glacial Lacs de Troumouse 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.



Day 7 GUIDED DAY WALK *To the Lac de Gaube and the Refuge des Oulettes de Gaube*

A minibus transfer over to the next valley, and the Pont d'Espagne – gateway to the Pyrenees National Park. We start the day with a stiff climb over sculpted granite blocks to arrive at the Lac de Gaube. This glacial lake is one of the most famous sites of the Pyrenees, and it shimmers green or blue, depending on the time of day. In the distance, the Vignemale mountain (highest summit in the French Pyrenees) and its North Face glacier are visible at the head of the valley. For hardy walkers, there is the option to continue up the valley to the Oulettes de Gaube refuge, where we can enjoy a hot chocolate in the shadow of the Vignemale. On our return to the Pont d'Espagne, we pass a series of thundering waterfalls that have carved a narrow gorge beneath the Spanish Bridge.

Timing : 4-5 hours walk, 350m ascent and descent to the Lac de Gaube. Extension to the Oulettes refuge – approx. 3 hours/500m ascent and descent



Alternatively this walk could be substituted for an additional activity day. The granite blocks and crags above Pont d'Espagne offer a huge variety of excellent rock-climbing suitable for all abilities. There is still the opportunity to visit the waterfalls, and great walking, so this day trip would work well for a group with mixed interests.

Day 8 *Depart in the morning. Again, we can assist with arrangements for transfers to the railway station or airport.*

PLEASE NOTE that the day walking itinerary is completely flexible, so this is a suggested programme only. The activity choices are also flexible, but these will require advance booking, so the activities must be selected in advance.

Days 8-10 OPTIONAL 3-DAY EXTENSION – 2 night hut-to-hut refuge trek *A three-day mini-trek into the Neouvielle Nature Reserve, one of the wildest and most untouched parts of the Pyrenees*

Day 8 Expedition day 1

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’Etsoubous, 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 9 Expedition day 2

Another day with a lake-land theme. 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 Neouvielle. 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.

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



Day 10 *Expedition day 3*

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 Baresges 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.

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



Depart at the end of day 10, or we can arrange a final night’s accommodation to fit in with your travel plans.

LEVEL

This is an intermediate to adventurous 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 up to 16km / 10 miles. **PLEASE NOTE** that the programme is flexible – we require more information about your group before we can finalise the itinerary, but it could be made shorter or less challenging if necessary.

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. You should also carry lightweight waterproofs at all times, in case of wet weather.

Options:

As this is a centre-based week, the itinerary is flexible and can be adapted depending on weather conditions and the interests/mood of the group. It would also be possible to include a free day mid week – a chance to relax and explore in your own time, in which case the price would be adjusted accordingly.

The mini trek option is also flexible, but needs to be decided in advance as the refuges require pre-booking. For example, rather than a three day hike, the Neouvelle Nature Reserve trek is also very practical as a two day mini-trek, in which case we would propose 3 guided day walks rather than 2. Alternatively, you might prefer to visit the Pyrenees National Park above the Pont d'Espagne (with a suitable adjustment to the day walking programme), with a tour of the Vignemale. We are open to suggestions.

Accommodation:

Based in Baresges for the first 7 nights at the Hotel du Tourmalet – very comfortable, and including continental buffet breakfasts, packed lunches and 3 course evening meals on 6 nights. This is a brand new 3* hotel with a bar, restaurant, hot tub and drying room.



See www.hoteldutourmalet.com for more information and photographs.

The optional trek includes mountain refuge accommodation for 2 nights. 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. Mattresses and blankets are provided, so there is no need to carry any camping equipment.

PRICES:

~~7 night programme: 875 € adult, 800 € child (60 € supplement for rock climbing day)~~

~~With 7 nights accommodation at the 3* Hotel du Tourmalet, 7 breakfasts, 6 packed lunches, 6 evening meals, 6 days of accompaniment by ourselves, local transfers, all activities with qualified guides/instructors and specialist equipment hire as described.~~

~~Extra activity day option: 60 € per person supplement for a day of guided rock climbing at Pont d'Espagne~~

~~9 night programme: 1065 € adult, 990 € child~~

~~As above, plus 2 nights mountain refuge accommodation, additional 3 days of guided walking with qualified International Mountain Leaders, guides' meals and accommodation, local transfers.~~

We can help out with arrangements for airport or station transfers at extra charge if required. If you need accommodation at the end of the optional mini-trek, this can also be arranged at extra charge.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

This price is based on a group size of 14-15 people. If the group is larger than 15 people, we would need to make alternative transport arrangements, which would alter the price.

The activities are suitable for, or can be adapted for children over 12 years of age. For younger children, we may need to substitute activities on the canyoning and via ferrata day. All activities are suitable for children aged 8 and above. Depending on the ages and previous experience of any children in the group, the walking programme may also need to be adapted to take into account their abilities.

Transport will be provided using two 7- or 8-seater minibuses. If there is any requirement to divide the group, it will be necessary to split into two groups of 7- or 8-people, to accommodate the transport arrangements. Smaller groups could only be managed with the use of an additional vehicle and driver (either your own vehicle, or a taxi at extra charge).