

Adventurer walking holiday – 3000m peaks special

A spectacular week of high-mountain hiking, including two one-night refuge expeditions into the Pyrenees National Park, to summit the Petit Vignemale, 3032m, and exploring the Neouvielle Nature Reserve to climb the Turon de Neouvielle, 3035m.

SUMMARY : The Haute Pyrenees are one of the highest and wildest areas of the Pyrenees mountains, with two of the big highlights being the Pyrenees National Park above Cauterets, and the Neouvielle Nature Reserve above Bareges, known as the Lake District of the Pyrenees. Both areas are dotted with 3000 metre peaks, set in a beautiful mountain landscape of crystal clear lakes, flower-filled alpine meadows, imposing cliffs and soaring ridges. This week of Adventurous walking visits two 3000 metre peaks, both offering their own challenges, but with no technical equipment or mountaineering skills required to reach the summits. During the week we also take one day to climb to the Spanish frontier, where a secret path takes us across the border to the summit of “Escuzana”, 2847m. This peak does not quite make the 3000m cut-off, but it is a majestic summit, commanding views over the Ordesa canyon and the Spanish foothills, and back to the iconic peaks of the French frontier and the Breche de Roland.

PROGRAMME

Day 1 Arrive Bareges

Day 2 Sunday Day walk to cross the Spanish border and summit the via the “lost path”

A scenic drive takes us South towards the Spanish border. We take the Gavarnie ski road all the way up to the Col des Tentes at 2200m – giving us big advantage at the start of the day! A gentle warm-up stroll takes us to the Port de Boucharo and into Spain, where we skirt on a narrow sheep track beneath limestone cliffs. Depending on the time of year, we might see blue thistles and bright pink moss campion flowers poking through the rocks. The going gets rocky underfoot as our route climbs a short side valley towards a ridge. Scrambling over boulders, we pop out on the ridge top, rewarded by our first big views across the hazy peaks of the Spanish Pyrenees. From here it is difficult to make out the continuation of our route, hence its name, the “lost path”. After a quick pause at the top, we tackle a short section of hands-on-rock as we traverse an easy scramble with plenty of hand and foot holds. Now back on the path, we quickly find ourselves in deep shadows, as we follow a natural ledge in the cliff side, all the time admiring the colourful rock formations away in the Spanish foothills. The path continues to climb, eventually leaving the cliffs behind, for a zig-zag ascent to the Col d’Escuzana. Standing on this watershed we look down onto the Milaris plateau, and get our first glimpse of the Ordesa canyon. An straightforward ascent on packed scree brings us to the Escuzana peak. Tucked away behind the imposing ridgeline of the French-Spanish frontier, this seldom-visited peak is likely today to be ours alone.

Return via the same route, or for strong groups there is the option of a long circuit, returning to France through the Breche de Roland and the Col des Sarradets (2 hour extension).

Timing (with full extension) 8-10 hours : Breche de Roland 2807m Distance: 17.27 km Altitude: +1381m -1338m



Days 3 & 4 Mini trek into the Neouvielle Nature Reserve – peak ascent, Turon de Neouvielle, 3035m

Monday Plateau de Lienz to Refuge de la Glere, 2153m, via the Bolou valley

A 5 minute drive from Bareges, takes us to our walk start-point at the Plateau de Lienz. A gentle stroll through beech forest brings us out onto the Plateau de Lumiere, with its picturesque stone barns, and views down the Bareges valley towards the Ardiden massif. Following the old GR10 route, we keep our height as we skirt into the Bolou valley on a good trail. At the crux of the valley, we leave the GR10 and begin our steady climb into the Neouvielle Reserve. The path is little more than a sheep path, passing a farmer's cabin and interesting remnants of the metal mining that once took place here. As the terrain becomes more mountainous, the gradient increases, and we find granite boulders underfoot as the path rises up the valley side. Ahead, the tiny, unmanned Refuge Packe can be seen perched at the head of the valley. Leaving the Bolou valley behind, our path crests onto a wide ridge of giant granite blocks and clinging miniature pines. A view of the Glere Lakes opens up beneath us, and shortly the Refuge de la Glere appears ahead. This large, comfortable refuge has commanding views across a wilderness of boulders and blue lakes, with the backdrop being dominated by the vertiginous Pic de Neouvielle. Tomorrow's goal, our summit, the Turon de Neouvielle, sits at its side. There's time to enjoy a beer on the terrasse before the sun goes down.

Timing : 10.4km 6 hours walk, 1200m ascent, 300m descent



Tuesday Refuge de la Glere to the Turon de Neouvielle, return via the Lacs de Glere and the Glere valley

This morning we retrace our steps along the ridge, passing the Bolou path and beginning our ascent into the Neouvielle Nature Reserve. We follow a well-travelled path to the Lac det Mail, behind which the steep North face of the Pic de Neouvielle begins to loom above us. Our route heads South, picking a passage through a jumbled chaos of boulders interspersed with smaller lakes. Approaching 3000m the air may feel a little thin as we make our final push across the vestiges of the Turon glacier and onto the rounded summit of the Turon itself. From the top we have fantastic views down to the vast Lac de Cap de Long and towards the Spanish frontier, where we walked on Sunday. After a well-earned lunch on the summit, we make our way back towards Lac det Mail, and continue our descent past a series of beautiful lakes – each a different, striking shade of blue or green. Passing the Lac de Glere, we see the refuge above us as we leave the boulders behind and join an easy track for our descent into the Glere valley.

Timing : 14.5km 8 hours walk, 1000 ascent, 1500m descent

Day 5 Free day

Days 6 & 7 Mini trek into the Pyrenees National Park – peak ascent, Petit Vignemale, 3032m

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

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



Day 8, Saturday Depart

LEVEL

This is a challenging week, classified as “adventurer” level, with long days and some big ascents of over 1000m. The walks are through high-mountain terrain, generally on good paths, but with some sections of sheep track, scree, boulders and the possibility of some short snow crossings.

In order to access the 3000m peaks, most walks include around 800 - 1500m of ascent per day, with distances of up to 20km.

Accommodation:

5 nights comfortable 3* standard accommodation at chalet Les Cailloux in Barèges, with en-suite bedrooms, guest lounge and sunny patio garden. 2 nights in mountain refuges during the mini-treks. Continental breakfasts, picnic lunches on walking days, afternoon tea (Barèges days only) and generous evening meals are provided on 6 nights. On the free day mid-week, breakfast is supplied, and in the evening you can eat out at one of the local restaurants.

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. Drinking water can be obtained at the refuge sources, or you can purchase mineral water.

Based on 2-sharing. The price includes 7 breakfasts, 5 packed lunches, 4 afternoon teas, 6 evening meals, all accommodation, 5 days of guiding with a qualified International Mountain Leader and local transfers.