

# A Pyrenean Odyssey: Day hiking in the French Pyrénées June 27 – July 11, 2015 (trip#1532)



Reserve Naturelle Néouvielle

## OVERVIEW

The Pyrenees mountain range forms the 310 mile frontier between France and Spain. This natural barrier divides the dry, baked landscape of Northern Spain from the green and fertile hillsides of Southern France. There are permanent glaciers on both sides of the border. The weather and plant life differ wildly on opposite sides of the border.

The Pyrenees are still a relatively untouched tourist destination. It is easy to find rare wild flowers, elusive birds and timid animals. This trek enables us to explore some of the best of the central French Pyrenees where the mountains rise up to over 10,000 feet, the valleys are dotted with delightful villages, the hillsides covered in forests of beech and fir and the high pastures allow magnificent views. Much of the hike follows well defined “Grande Randonnée” routes – a network of long distance paths. It includes sections of the GR10 - a 434 miles route that traverses the whole mountain range from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea. We will take in two national parks and also the famous Breche de Roland. We also hike over into Spain to explore the magnificent Ordesa Canyon, located in a UNESCO world heritage site, and visit the beautiful town of Torla.



The Pyrenean Region: The red dot indicates our starting point in St. Lary, France



The Pyrenean region (magnified): Labels indicate towns where we will be staying



Our journey will provide a visual feast as we hike for thirteen days through this captivating region. To facilitate our access to the most spectacular trails we will stay in six charming villages in the course of the trip. All breakfasts, most dinners,



Trek to Gavarnie

and all local transportation is included. Trip leader Steve Cohen lived in Europe for four years and is competent in French, the predominant language used during the trip. The trip will be locally guided by Malcolm, a British national, who has been living and guiding in the Pyrenees for 20 years. He speaks fluent French and is a qualified mountain guide.

## TRIP ITINERARY

**Saturday, June 27:** Fly from USA to Toulouse France.

**Sunday, June 28:** Arrival at the small town of St. Lary.

**Monday, June 29:** A short bus ride to the Col d'Azet (4900') where there are magnificent views over the valley and into the main mountain range. From there a climb along the ridge to Cap de Boupillac and then a well-graded descent back to our hotel at St Lary partly following the GR10 trail and passing through some typical mountain villages. 12.5 miles, 5.5 hrs, ascent 1,300' ascent, descent 3,565', highest altitude 5,210'.

**Tuesday, June 30:** St Lary to Barèges. Take hired transport for a 45 minute ride into the heart of the Néouvielle Nature Reserve. Setting off from the edge of the Lac d'Oredon we climb past several lakes and spectacular granite scenery to the high pass of the Hourquette d'Aubert (8,210 ft). Following the GR10 we pass more lakes descending to hay meadows and into the village of Barèges. 11.2 miles, 6 1/2 hrs, ascent 2,112', descent 4,092', highest altitude 8,210'.

**Wednesday, July 1:** Barèges to Luz St Sauveur. Follow the GR10 via beech forests & open pastures with stunning views across two valleys down into the town of Luz St Sauveur. 9.3 miles, 4 1/2 hrs, ascent 1,395', descent 3,069', highest altitude 4,818'.

**Thursday, July 2:** Rest day at Luz with the option of some gentle local walks, a visit to the National Park center or take a bus to the famous pilgrimage centre of Lourdes.



**Friday, July 3:** Luz to Gavarnie. A bus will take us to start the walk at Ayrues from where we follow the GR10 through beech & fir forests to the Plateau de Saugé where we start to get views of the huge glacial “cirque” at Gavarnie, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The route continues towards and then down into the village of Gavarnie. 11.9 miles, 6 hrs, ascent 2,260’, descent 1645’, highest altitude 5645’.

**Saturday, July 4:** A day at Gavarnie. Snow and weather conditions permitting, we use minibuses to take us up to the Col des Tentes (7,286’) we can then reach, via a small glacier, the famous “Breche de Roland” - huge natural doorway in the cliffs which form the frontier between France & Spain. The return path to Gavarnie takes us over the “Plateau de Bellevue” with great views into the Cirque de Gavarnie. 9.9 miles, 6 ½ hrs, ascent 1922’, descent 4,340’, highest altitude 9,263’. Note: snow conditions in July vary from year to year and it may not be possible to hike safely to the Brèche de Roland. If this is the case another circular hike from Gavarnie will be offered taking in the Pateau de Bellevue (great views), the Grande Cascade in the Cirque de Gavarnie (1,308’ drop) and the Cabane d’Alans (views to Vignemale, the highest mountain in the French Pyrennes). 10.6 miles, 6 hours, ascent 2,883’, descent 2,883’, highest altitude 5,905’.



**Sunday, July 5:** A rest day at Gavarnie with the option of local walks, museum, leisurely lunch etc.



**Monday, July 6:** Again using minibuses up to the Col des Tentés (7,286 ft) where we set off. We soon pass a lake and the Col d'Epeçières (7,735') into the Aragon region of Spain. A long, gentle and varied descent takes us over grassy meadows and woodland down to the delightful small town of Torla. 10.6 mi, 5 ½ hrs, ascent 1,240', descent 4,650', highest altitude 7,266'.

**Tuesday, July 7:** A short shuttle bus ride takes us up into a National Park and the Ordessa Canyon, a huge glacier carved-valley with side walls rising 3100' above the valley floor. After a well graded ascent we reach the "Faja de Pelay" – an almost level 5 mile balcony path with extraordinary views across the canyon towards the high frontier mountains. At the head of the valley we return along the valley. 12.5 miles, 6 hrs, ascent 2700', descent 2700', highest altitude 6076'.



Scorpion Gorse on the way to Torla

**Wednesday, July 8:** The return from Torla to Gavarnie is shortened by using transport part of the way back up the valley to the Bujareulo bridge. From there it is a 2 ½ hr ascent back to the border at the Col de Boucharo. From there we take the charming Pouey-Aspé valley which wends its way down to the village of Gavarnie. 8 mi, 5 1/2 hrs, ascent 3,200', descent 2,970', highest altitude 7500'.

**Thursday, July 9:** Gavarnie to Cauterets. A long day with

scenery which will make it all worthwhile! We need to take

minibuses up a side valley to the Barrage d'Ossoue before we set off following the GR10 into a remote & wild area to the Hourquette d'Ossoue (9,022') a pass on the flank of the highest peak in the French Pyrenees, the Vignemale (10,883'). We then descend through the Pyrenees National Park, passing the picturesque Lac de Gaube, down to the Pont d'Espagne. By then we will appreciate the bus ride down to the town of Cauterets. 13.6 miles, 7 hrs, ascent 2,970', descent 4,290', highest altitude 9,022'. Note: snow conditions in July vary from year to year and it may not be possible to hike safely over the Hourquette d'Ossoue. If this is the case we will take transport to the ski resort of Luz-Ardiden to explore the Col de Riou/Pic de Viscos ridge where there are spectacular views in all directions followed by a well graded descent on the GR10 to Cauterets. 9 miles, 5 hours, ascent 1,550', descent 3,410', highest altitude 6,473'.

**Friday, July 10:** In the morning, take the bus and train to Toulouse. Spend the afternoon touring historic and culturally diverse Toulouse. The city is famous for the soft color of its bricks.

**Saturday, July 11:** Fly home.

Below is a day by day summary of the itinerary:

Date	Day#	Booktime (hrs)	Distance (miles)	Elevation Gain (ft)	Elevation Loss (ft)	Lodging
6/27	1					Depart for Toulouse
6/28	2					St. Lary
6/29	3	5.5	12.5	1300	3565	St. Lary
6/30	4	6.5	11.2	2112	4092	Bareges
7/1	5	4.5	9.3	1395	3069	Luz
7/2	6					Luz (free day)
7/3	7	6.0	11.9	2260	1645	Gavarnie
7/4	8	6.5	9.9	1922	4340	Gavarnie
7/5	9					Gavarnie (free day)
7/6	10	5.5	10.6	1240	4650	Torla
7/7	11	6.0	12.5	2770	2770	Torla
7/8	12	5.5	8.0	3200	2970	Gavarnie
7/9	13	7.0	13.6	2970	4290	Cauterets
7/10	14					Toulouse
7/11	15					Depart for US

Notes:

- 1) Hiking time is “pure” hiking time excluding stops. Rest breaks, lunch, time for photos, etc. typically adds ~two hours to each day’s activity.
- 2) The leaders reserve the right to change the itinerary for reasons such as weather, trail conditions, availability of accommodations, group preference, etc.
- 3) Free day mean that there are no scheduled hikes for the entire group. Everyone can relax in town, take a day trip to another destination (e.g. Lourdes, the well-known Roman Catholic pilgrimage site), or go on local walks.

## WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU



How we like to end a great day of hiking

You should be curious about other cultures and comfortable traveling in areas which are unfamiliar to you. You should recognize that you may find yourself in closer quarters or be less comfortable than you are used to at home. You should make it a priority to help others on the trip and contribute to their having a great time. If you do that, I guarantee that you will have a great time.

You must be able to hike six or seven hours a day, not including breaks at a moderate pace, with elevation gains of up to 3,400 feet, while carrying enough equipment in your back pack to keep you safe in the event of bad weather or injury. While no technical climbing is required, there are areas with narrow trails bordered by steep drop-offs: where appropriate there are steel cables for protection. Please see the gear list below.

## WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT OF ME

My number one trip priority will be to see that you have a wonderful experience on the trip and return home safely.

### ACCOMMODATIONS (two persons/room)

Day 2,3. St Lary. Mercure 3\*. [www.mercuresensoria.com](http://www.mercuresensoria.com)  
Evening meal, bed & breakfast. 1 night.  
Bed & breakfast. 1 night.

Day 4. Barèges. Hotel Central. 3\* [www.central-tourmalet.com](http://www.central-tourmalet.com).  
Evening meal, bed & breakfast. 1 night.

Days 5,6. Luz St Sauveur. Hotel le Montaigu 3\*. [www.hotelmontaigu.com](http://www.hotelmontaigu.com).

Evening meal, bed & breakfast. 1 night.  
Bed & breakfast. 1 night.

Days 7,8,9. Gavarnie. Hotel le Marboré 2\*. [www.lemarbore.com](http://www.lemarbore.com).  
Evening meal, bed & breakfast. 3 nights.

Days 10,11. Torla. Hotel Edelweiss 2\* [www.edelweisshotelordesa.es](http://www.edelweisshotelordesa.es)  
Bed & breakfast. 2 nights.

Day 12. Gavarnie. Hotel le Marboré 2\*. [www.lemarbore.com](http://www.lemarbore.com).  
Evening meal, bed & breakfast. 1 night.

Days 13. Cauterets. Hotel Christian 2\*. [www.hotel-christian.fr](http://www.hotel-christian.fr).  
Evening meal, bed & breakfast. 1 night.

Days 14. Toulouse. Hotel Athénée 3\*. [www.hotel-toulouse-athenee.com](http://www.hotel-toulouse-athenee.com)  
Bed & breakfast. 1 night.

## **COST**

The trip cost is \$2,700 for AMC members. Non-members can join for \$50, and get the same price. This will cover the following items:

- All lodging, breakfasts, and eight out of thirteen dinners
- All local transportation
- Emergency medical and evacuation insurance coverage

All lunches, trail snacks, alcohol, entrance fees (if any) and other personal expenses are NOT included. Lunch supplies can be purchased at local groceries. Your transportation to St. Lary and from Cauterets to Toulouse is your responsibility.

Most participants will choose to fly to the Toulouse airport and continue on to St. Lary. The trip leaders will advise you as much as you need and will facilitate group travel. At this time, we estimate that the cost for a round trip ticket between the East Coast and Toulouse will be in the vicinity of \$1500.

The final trip cost will be adjusted in accordance with the best final arrangements we can make and currency fluctuations. Any savings we achieve, as well as any cost increases, will be passed back to you. Our cost estimates are conservative, and so a refund is considerably more likely than a price increase.

AMC Adventure Travel trips are run on a non-profit basis. Leaders are volunteers who are not compensated except for their travel costs associated with the trip. The advertised trip cost includes a surcharge, which goes toward the administrative expenses of the AMC Adventure Travel program.



The trip fee includes emergency medical and evacuation insurance coverage, which is required by the AMC. It does *not* include insurance for travel delay, interruption, or cancellation, or for baggage loss. If the possibility of such problems concerns you, individual travel insurance is suggested. The AMC has a recommended vendor whose material will be sent to you if your application is accepted.

Any unspent funds will be refunded to the participants. If the trip's financial position is strong enough at the start, the leaders may make partial refunds during the trip, in the form of payments toward some meals and/or free time activities which would otherwise not be included.

## **REGISTRATION and CANCELLATION**

To apply, complete and submit the Application, Confidential Medical form, and Acknowledgement and Assumption of Risk and Release forms. These can be downloaded from here: [Application Documents](#) Send the registration deposit of \$1000 (payable to the *Appalachian Mountain Club*) and all required forms to Steve Cohen at 104 Manet Road Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. You will not actually be accepted, and your check will not be deposited, until the leader has determined by telephone conversation with you that you and the trip are a good match. The final balance of \$1,700 is due March 1, 2015. Deposit checks from wait-listed applicants will not be cashed until he/she is accepted into the trip AND continued interest is confirmed.

Cancellation will not be allowed to raise the cost to the other participants or to the leaders. If you cancel after the trip is declared a go, then the minimum cancellation fee is \$200. If actual costs (expenses already incurred on your behalf, and any unavoidable future expenses that will be incurred as a result of your registration and cancellation) are higher, they will be assessed instead, unless another acceptable participant can be substituted.

We expect a group size of 14 participants. This trip is likely to fill quickly. If you are interested, you should apply as soon as possible. When registration is complete, we will send all participants the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all those going on the trip.

In the unlikely event that the trip is cancelled because not enough acceptable participants apply, everything you have paid will be refunded in full.

## **EXPERIENCE and RISKS**

When you participate in this activity, you should be prepared both physically and mentally, and equipped with the appropriate gear. You should always be aware of the risks involved and conduct yourself accordingly. We are not responsible for your safety; you are. Prior to your being accepted as a participant in this trip, you will be asked to discuss your capabilities and experience.

The weather is likely to be temperate and sunny, although there is always a possibility of some precipitation. That said, mountain climate is unpredictable and can range from 30 to 85 degrees.

## QUESTIONS

Steve can be reached at 617 997-6861 (before 9PM) or at [scohen1234@gmail.com](mailto:scohen1234@gmail.com)

## TRIP LEADER



**Steve Cohen** leads hikes for the Hiking/Backpacking Committee of the AMC Boston Chapter. He has been a participant on many major excursions in the past decade including trips to Alaska, the Smoky Mountains, Maroon Bells (near Aspen, CO), Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, Tour du Mont Blanc, Escalante Canyons (Utah), etc. In 2010 he organized and

led a 14-day non-AMC trek along the Haute Route from Chamonix, France to Zermatt, Switzerland. In 2011 he went rock climbing in the Dolomites (Italian Alps). In the last few years he led AMC hut-to-hut treks in the Dolomites, the Jungfrau region of Switzerland, Patagonia, and the Austrian Alps. He lived in Europe for four years and has a good command of both the French and German languages.

**GUIDE** Originally from England, Malcolm has lived in the Pyrenees over 20 years. He is a UK Certified Mountain Leader who has been leading groups in the Pyrenees since 1994 and delights in showing people the area that he loves. Malcolm speaks fluent French, and has an insider's knowledge of the best hikes, local flora and fauna, and area history and customs. He will join us at St Lary on day two and stay with us until after breakfast on day fourteen.



## **EQUIPMENT LIST**

Below is a list of the required and recommended gear for the trip, as well as a list of items, which some people will bring and share.

### **Required and Essential Gear**

- broken-in waterproof hiking boots
- at least 2-3 set of hiking socks with liners
- non-cotton shorts (or long pants if you prefer) and shirt for hiking
- day pack
- waterproof wind and rain gear (tops and bottoms) [you may want to consider a light rain jacket for days with good weather forecasted and a heavier one for days when rain is predicted]
- wool sweater, or synthetic pile/fleece jacket
- long underwear top and bottom
- hat for warmth, and gloves or mittens
- polypropylene, Coolmax, Bergelene or other synthetic extra layer clothing
- sunglasses
- hat or bandanna for sun protection
- sunscreen
- Texas, Crocs or other non-hiking footwear
- headlamp or flashlight with fresh batteries
- unbreakable bottles or hydration bladder (at least 2 liters total capacity)



- waterproof pack liner and/or pack cover
- high-energy trail snacks
- toiletry kit
- ear plugs
- personal first aid kit (leaders will have a group first aid kit)

### **Optional Gear**

- casual clothing
- gaiters
- hiking poles
- whistle
- knife
- camera
- batteries/recharger/adaptor plug

Join us on this great adventure in one of the world's most spectacular mountain regions!

**Photographic acknowledgements:** Many thanks to Malcolm (Scorpion Gorse on the way to Torla) and Sue Rose (all other pictures except the one under "What is expected of you") for permitting me to use their photographs in this brochure. Sue's were taken on this same trip in 2012.