

# The Pyrenees

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The thrilling descent from **Col de Marie-Blanque** (p322)
- Conquering the **Col du Tourmalet** (p321) and **Col Bagargui** (p323)
- The lively Basque towns of **Espelette** (p324) and **St-Jean Pied de Port** (p330)
- Completing the **Raid Pyrénéen** (p309)

## TERRAIN

Extremely mountainous, with winding, narrow climbs (and descents) as long as 30km.

Telephone Codes – 04 / 05

[www.lespyrenees.net](http://www.lespyrenees.net)

Stretching for 420km from the Bay of Biscay on the Atlantic Coast to the Mediterranean Sea, the Pyrenees form a natural boundary between France and Spain. The mountain chain links the Basque Country (Euskadi in Basque) in the southwest region of Aquitaine, through the long, narrow Parc National des Pyrénées in the middle region of Midi-Pyrénées, to the Catalan lands of south Languedoc-Roussillon. It's spectacular cycling country.

The rugged ridges and precarious *cols* of the Hautes Pyrénées fall within the narrow strip of the Parc National des Pyrénées that shadows the frontier for about 100km. You can disappear into these protected mountains for days and spot only other walkers, marmots, *izards* (cousin to the chamois) and, perhaps, one of the Pyrenees' few brown bears. Pastoral valleys, such as the Vallée d'Aspe and the Vallée d'Ossau, cut laterally into the central Pyrenees, steepening and narrowing as they climb to shimmering lakes and tarns fed by swift mountain streams. Small-scale winter ski resorts and summer walking bases such as Bagnères de Luchon defer to the sheer grandeur of the mountains.

Eastwards, in the Pyrénées Orientales, the climate becomes warmer and drier, and the vegetation pricklier, squatter and more abundant as the mountains taper down into Roussillon, then finally dip into the Mediterranean.



## HISTORY

Like the Catalans at the eastern end of the Pyrenees (see p270), the Basques of the western reaches live in an area straddling the French–Spanish border. The origins of the Basque country are largely unknown. Although the Romans left records of a ‘Vascones’ tribe living in the area, the Basques spread through what is now southwest France in the 6th century. Converted to Christianity in the 10th century, they are still known for their strong devotion to Catholicism.

Basque nationalism flourished before and during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), when Franco’s fascists destroyed the city of Guernica, a centre of nationalist activity. Some Basques still dream of an independent Euskadi state carved from France and Spain. To that end, armed separatist organisations, like ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna; Basque Homeland and Freedom), still carry out terrorist acts.

## ENVIRONMENT

The Pyrenees are about the same age as the Alps (dating from the Tertiary era) but, being lower and further to the south, are less affected by glaciation. Exposed crystalline rock forms the uplands, while folded limestone makes up the lower slopes. Of the three main ranges, the central one is the highest, culminating in Pic d’Aneto (3404m) in Spain, south of Bagnères de Luchon. However, the French side is steeper, flowing with characteristic *gaves* (torrents) and chiselled into natural amphitheatres.

With the Pyrenean brown bear now almost extinct, over the past 15 years bears imported from Slovenia have been re-introduced to the Pyrenees. It hasn’t been without controversy, particularly in the western Pyrenees, where free-roaming sheep are bred for meat. You’ll see slogans painted on the roads, such as ‘*Non aux ours*’ (no to the bears) or ‘*Pas d’ours*’ (no bears).

## CLIMATE

Mediterranean hot summers and mild winters dominate. Frost is rare, except at high elevations, where snow endures from November to April (sometimes longer). Spring and autumn downpours are sudden but usually brief, and summer is mostly dry, except at the western end, where westerly

winds off the Atlantic bring higher humidity and frequent storms.

Prevailing winds are generally light. Despite strong beliefs to the contrary, their direction is not at all critical as riders on mountain passes make frequent changes of direction.

For *météo* (weather information), dial the relevant weather numbers: **Pyénées-Orientales** (☎ 08 92 68 02 66), **Ariège** (☎ 08 92 68 02 09), Haute-Garonne (☎ 08 92 68 02 65), **Hautes-Pyrénées** (☎ 08 92 68 02 65) and **Pyénées-Atlantiques** (☎ 08 92 68 02 64).

## PLANNING

### Maps

Use Michelin 1:150,000 local maps No 344 *Aude, Pyrénées-Orientales*, No 343 *Garonne-Tal, Pays de Foix* and No 342 *Hautes-Pyrénées, Pyrénées-Atlantiques* for full Pyrenean coverage. Only map No 343 is required for the Day 1 of the Pyrenean Foothills.

## Cycling Events

**Randonnée du Comminges** (departs from Gourdan-Polignan; June) For 71km to 126km, climb through the hills of the Haute Garonne along with the Cyclo Randonneurs Commingeois, which has been running this event for more than 50 years.

**L’Ariègeoise** ([www.cyclosport-arigeoise.com](http://www.cyclosport-arigeoise.com); departs from Tarascon-sur-Ariège; June) Several thousand people participate in this ‘*cyclosportive*’, one of France’s most famous. The distance of about 165km takes in around 3500m of climbing.

**Journée Bastit** (departs from Montauban; September) The **Véloce Club Montalbanais** ([www.veloce-club-montalbanais.com](http://www.veloce-club-montalbanais.com)) runs 70km, 100km and 130km routes through the foothills of the Pyrenees.

## Information Sources

**Confédération Pyrénéenne du Tourisme** (CPT; ☎ 05 34 40 78 40; [www.lespyrenees.net](http://www.lespyrenees.net); 10 rue des Arts, Toulouse) is a tourism-oriented confederation of the Pyrenean *régions* (regions) and *départements* (departments) – some whose own websites have cycling sections. CPT also has offices in Bordeaux, Nantes and Paris.

**Fédération Française de Cyclisme** (FFC; [www.ffc.fr](http://www.ffc.fr), in French) runs 16 VTT

