

The Pyrenees



Snow-capped for much of the year, the jagged peaks of the Pyrenees (les Pyrénées) form a natural, 430km-long boundary between France and Spain.

With sufficient time and energy, you could follow the GR10 walking trail that bucks and twists from Hendaye beside the Bay of Biscay on France's Atlantic Coast all the way to Banyuls beside the Mediterranean Sea – but you'll probably have to select from its three distinct zones.

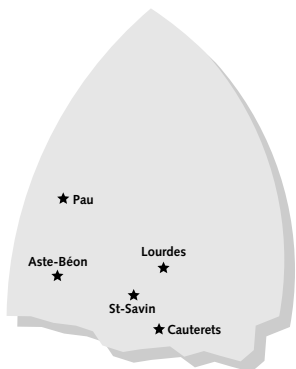
Rising steadily from the Atlantic through mist and cloud, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques cradle the mountains' largest and most stylish town, Pau.

The Hautes Pyrénées, the focus of this chapter, are wilder and higher. Their rugged ridges and precarious cols 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 Cauterets and Bagnères de Luchon defer to the sheer grandeur of the mountains. To the north sits Lourdes, one of Christianity's most revered pilgrimage sites.

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.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ride the century-old, timber-seated funicular to the panoramic **bd des Pyrénées** (opposite) in Pau
- Swoosh down the slopes from the ski station of Cirque du Lys, linked by *télécabine* (cable car) to **Cauterets** (p727)
- Immerse yourself in an icy **bath** (p715) at the spiritual sanctuary in Lourdes
- Learn to make traditional Pyrenean dishes at a **cooking class** (p720) in the storybook-pretty village of St-Savin
- Watch griffon vultures nest, hatch, feed and glide in the skies above **La Falaise aux Vautours** (p725) in Aste-Béon



■ POPULATION: 3,050,000

■ AREA: 8400 SQ KM

Getting There & Away

The two main towns, Pau and Lourdes, are well served by rail. Both also have airports. Pau is served by Ryanair flights to and from the UK and Belgium, while Air France has domestic services, and Transavia connects Pau with Amsterdam. Lourdes' airport primarily handles charter flights, but also has scheduled services to Paris.

Outside of the towns there are limited bus services but to really explore you'll need your own wheels. Drivers needn't worry – the roads are well maintained and nowhere near as hair-raising as other precipitous regions such as the Alps. Alternatively, you can get around with good hiking boots and a healthy amount of lung power.

THE TOWNS

PAU

pop 80,600

Palm trees might seem out of place in this mountainous region, but its chief city, Pau (rhymes with 'so'), has long been famed for its mild climate. In the 19th century it was a favourite wintering spot for wealthy English and Americans, who left behind grand villas, English-style flower-filled public parks and promenades with dizzying vistas of the snow-dusted peaks.

In recent years the city has owed its prosperity to a high-tech industrial base and a huge natural-gas field, plus spin-off chemical plants, at nearby Lacq. It's also at the cutting edge of communications technology. Yet it retains the elegance and style of its past, bolstered by an energetic student population.

Orientation

The town centre sits on a small hill with the Gave de Pau (River Pau) at its base. Along its crest stretches *bd des Pyrénées*, a wide promenade offering panoramic views of the mountains. The town's east-west axis is the thoroughfare of *cours Bosquet*, *rue Maréchal Foch* and *rue Maréchal Joffre*. Separating the latter two is the main square, *place Clemenceau*.

Information

Cyber Café (☎ 05 59 82 89 40; 20 rue Lamothe; per hr €4.50; ☎ 10am-2am Mon-Fri, 2pm-2am Sat & Sun) One of over a dozen internet cafés around town.

Laundrette (☎ 05 59 83 90 51; 81 rue Castetnau)

Librairie des Pyrénées (☎ 05 59 27 78 75; 14 rue St-Louis) Sells an excellent selection of walking maps.

Main Post Office (21 cours Bosquet)

Tourist Office (☎ 05 59 27 27 08; www.tourisme-pau.com; place Royale; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Sun, closed Sun afternoon Sep-Jun) Stacks of information on the city and surrounds, including a pair of free booklets in English: *History & Heritage* and *Parks & Gardens* for DIY walking tours around town.

Dangers & Annoyances

Pau itself poses no problems, but avoid *Parc Lawrence*, which can be dodgy both day and night.

Sights

CHÂTEAU

Originally the residence of the monarchs of Navarre, Pau's **château** (☎ 05 59 82 38 02; www.musee-chateau-pau.fr, in French; adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €5/3.50/free; ☎ 9.30am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.45pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9.30-11.45am & 2-5pm mid-Sep-mid-Jun) was transformed into a Renaissance château amid lavish gardens by Marguerite d'Angoulême in the 16th century. Marguerite's grandson, the future Henri IV, was born here – cradled, so the story goes, in an upturned tortoise shell.

The painstakingly restored château holds one of Europe's richest collections of 16th- to 18th-century Gobelins tapestries and some fine Sèvres porcelain. These items apart, most of the ornamentation and furniture, including an oak dining table that can seat 100, dates from Louis-Philippe's intervention. In the room where Henri IV was born is the tortoise-shell cradle.

Within the brick-and-stone **Tour de la Monnaie** below the main château, a modern lift (free) hauls you from *place de la Monnaie* up to the ramparts.

Admission includes an obligatory one-hour guided tour in rapid-fire French (departing every 15 minutes), but you can pick up an English-language guide sheet at the reception desk.

PYRENEES PANORAMA

A mesmerising panorama of the Pyrenean summits unfolds from the majestic *bd des Pyrénées*. An **orientation table** details the names of the peaks. For information on the funicular, see p714.