The Pyrenees

HIGHLIGHTS

- Looking over all Andorra from the spine of Cresta de l'Estanyó on the **Pic de l'Estanyó** walk (p107)
- Walking just about anywhere in **Parc Nacional d'Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici** (p109)
- Looking back and saying 'Oh yes, the Pyrenees – they were nothing', as you stagger to the end of **The Pyrenean Traverse** (p73)
- Trying to keep a steady head while peering into the abyss on the **Staggering Sestrales** walk (p121)

Number of bears: 17 to 24	Number of summits above 3000m: 129

Like a chain of castles protecting Spain from the advances of the rest of Europe the Pyrenees burst out of the waters of the Mediterranean, climb to the heavens and then sink, Atlantis like, into the deep cold of the Atlantic Ocean.

These mountains have an edge of both Spain and France to them, yet they have a character and flavour that makes them their own little world. In fact, so different can the life, climate and look of each valley be that you could say that each tiny section of these mountains is a world unto itself. And it's this wonderful variety and vitality that brings more hikers from across the world to these mountains than any other range in Spain. They really are one of the hiking highlights of Europe.

The core of this chapter is a 17-day traverse across the highest, wildest and most breathtaking section of these mountains.

But 17 days or so is more time than many walkers can spare. For those who prefer to radiate out from a base, linger in a particularly scenic area or simply just return to a fancy hotel at the end of the day there are 12 single day or overnight walks. These take in an exploration of the surreal principality of Andorra and hikes that skirt the frontier of the two nations that share these delightful peaks. Enjoy!

HISTORY

The distressing news for walkers is that the Pyrenees no longer exist. So that air ticket was a waste of money wasn't it? No, only joking, as your soon-to-be-panting lungs will ascertain they are still very much there. It's just that many Spanish use the metaphor of the Pyrenees' disappearance to describe Spain's coming in from the cold after centuries of relative isolation from the rest of Europe – a process that began soon after the death of General Franco in 1975 and culminated in Spain's entry into the EU in 1986.

Hydro schemes in the Pyrenees contributed to Spain's economic recovery from the ravages of the Spanish Civil War. In the 1950s and 1960s Spain invested significantly in developing small-scale hydroelectric plants, mainly to service the towns and villages of the Pyrenean valleys. Most of the reservoirs are natural, though dams at their heads have often augmented their depths.

Traditionally the mountains have maintained an agricultural economy based on sheep and cows. Summer pastures were used not only by local villagers but also by shepherds and cowherds who transmigrated from much further afield (see the boxed text La Trashumancia, p104). Many of the trails described in this chapter were created to provide access to these lush, upland grasses. And many of the tracks still indicated on maps were once shepherds' routes and are now overgrown and underused except by occasional trekkers hacking their own way with compass and map.

CHARLEMAGNE & THE THISTLE

As Emperor Charlemagne's army was passing through the Pyrenees, on its way to do battle with the Arab occupiers of Spain, the plague struck. When the emperor prayed to God for help, says the legend, an angel appeared to him and instructed him to fire an arrow into the air and whichever plant it pierced on its descent would prove to be an effective remedy. The arrow fell upon a kind of ground-hugging thistle, still common in the Pyrenees and still used as a natural remedy. It's called *carlina*, in both Catalan and Spanish, after Carlomagno – Charlemagne.

ENVIRONMENT

The natural history of the Pyrenees is long and turbulent. Some 350 million years ago they were already a formidable mountain chain of igneous rock formed by solidified magma from the earth's molten heart, their summits capable of dwarfing today's 3000m giants.

Over tens of millions of years of slow erosion the mountains were ground down to a vast plain which was then invaded by the sea. Grain by grain, shell by shell, sediments accumulated in layers on the ocean bed. (In places such as the Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido you can still see sandstone bands, sometimes straight as a layer cake, often in convoluted whorls.)

About 25 million years ago the Iberian tectonic plate slammed into the European one with a force sufficient to compress and fold upwards slabs as big as today's peaks, from which the seas streamed and departed.

From this moment on, erosion has been the principal force shaping the range we see today. During the successive ice ages of the last million years ice covered all but the highest peaks and has left a distinctive imprint on the landscape (see the boxed text Signs of a Glacial Past, p28).

Mountain or black pine, squat with grey-black bark and hardiest of the conifers, occupies the reaches just below the tree line. Fir and Scots pine thrives at lower altitudes. Deciduous trees include rowan, hazel – a rich source of nutritious nuts in autumn – silver birch, elm, mountain oak, elder and, particularly in Aragón, forests of beech trees. Down in the damp lower valleys, goat willow, common ash and aspen abound.

In all but alpine environments, low banks of azaleas brush against your knees. Around them grow juniper bushes with their characteristic greyish berries, broom with bright yellow flowers, bilberries and wild raspberries (ready to pick in late summer), heather, dog roses and, at lower altitudes, clumps and stands of boxwood.

In general, June is the best time for viewing wildflowers. Common at subalpine level are white and leafless crocuses, the *carlina*