



# The Pyrenees

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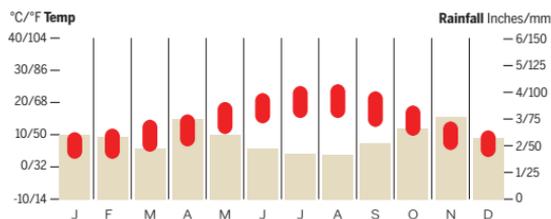
## Why Go?

They might not be on quite the same lofty scale as the Alps, but the Pyrenees still pack a mighty impressive mountain punch. Crested by snow for much of the year, these high, wild peaks form a natural frontier between southwest France and northern Spain. End to end, they cover a total distance of around 430km, including the 100km strip of protected land known as the Parc National des Pyrénées, created in 1967 and now an important haven for rare wildlife such as eagles, griffon vultures, izards (a type of goat) and some of the last remaining wild brown bears left in France.

Needless to say, if you're a hiker, biker or skier, or if you're simply a sucker for grandstand views, you'll be in seventh heaven in the Pyrenees. From historic ski stations to isolated valleys, from subterranean caves to snow-dusted peaks, there are enough sights to fill a lifetime of visits. Breathe deep: the wilds are calling.

## When to Go

### Pau



**February** Come for Pau's annual carnival. Visit during Easter for the Festival International de Musique Sacrée.

**July** Shepherds move their flocks in the Transhumance, and the Tour de France races through.

**November to March** Peak skiing season – book hotels well ahead.

## **i** 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 handles domestic services, and several other budget carriers fly to European cities. Lourdes' airport 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.

## 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 Brits and Americans, who left behind grand villas, English-style flower-filled public parks, and promenades with dizzying vistas of the snow-dusted peaks. These days Pau is still an elegant city, and makes an ideal base for exploring the northern reaches of the Pyrenees.

## Sights

The town centre sits on a small hill with the Gave de Pau (River Pau) at its base. Along its crest stretches the *bd des Pyrénées*, a wide promenade offering panoramic views of the mountains. A creaky old free **funicular railway** dating from 1908 clanks down from the *bd des Pyrénées* to *av Napoléon Bonaparte*, allowing you to avoid the uphill slog from the train station.

Pau's tiny old centre extends for around 500m around the château, but despite its minuscule dimensions, it's worth a stroll for its much-restored medieval and Renaissance buildings.

## Château

CASTLE

([www.musee-chateau-pau.fr](http://www.musee-chateau-pau.fr), in French; adult/18-25yr €5/3.50; ☎9.30am-12.30pm&1.30-6.45pm) Originally the residence of the monarchs of Navarre, Pau's castle was transformed into a Renaissance château amid lavish gardens by Marguerite d'Angoulême in the 16th century. Marguerite's grandson, Henri de Navarre (the future Henri IV), was born here – cradled, so the story goes, in an upturned tortoise shell (still on display in one of the museum's rooms).

Much restored, the château is now mainly worth visiting for its collections of Gobelin tapestries and Sevres porcelain, as well as its fine Renaissance architecture.

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.

## Musée Bernadotte

MUSEUM

(8 rue Tran; adult/student €3/1.50; ☎10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) The Musée Bernadotte has exhibits illustrating the improbable yet true story of how a French general, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte (nicknamed 'Sergent belle-jambe', apparently on account of his elegant legs), born in this very building, became king of Sweden and Norway in 1810, when the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) reckoned that the only way out of the country's dynastic and political crisis was to stick a foreigner on the throne. The present king of Sweden, Carl Gustaf, is the seventh ruler in the Bernadotte dynasty. You'll spot the museum by the blue-and-yellow Swedish flag fluttering outside.

## Musée des Beaux-Arts

ART MUSEUM

(rue Mathieu Lalanne; adult/student €3/1.50; ☎10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) Works by Rubens and El Greco both figure at Pau's fine arts museum, but the museum's prize piece is a famous Degas canvas, *A New Orleans Cotton Office*, painted in 1873.

## Festivals & Events

**Carnival Week** The prelude to Lent brings street parades and a carnival atmosphere to Pau around late February.

**Grand Prix Historique** ([www.grandprixdepau.historique.com](http://www.grandprixdepau.historique.com)) Vintage-car rally on the streets of Pau, currently held every other year.

**L'Été à Pau** Lively summer music festival, spanning late July and early August.

## Sleeping

Pau is a popular venue for congresses so it's a good idea to book ahead at any time of year. Rates can spike during festivals and special events.