



FRANCE: SNOWSHOEING IN THE PYRENEES



This information should answer some of your questions about the trip and give you a better idea of what we do day to day. It doesn't hope to answer everything however, if you have any questions, please get in touch.



Accessing the high Pyrenean peaks by snowshoe

- **Snowshoeing on beautiful Pyrenean snow covered peaks and ridges**
- **Easy to master fun winter activity**
- **Stunning winter panoramas**
- **Experienced and qualified English guide living locally**
- **Based in charming family run hotel in the spa resort of Ax les Thermes**
- **Opportunity for some extreme luge!**

The Eastern Pyrenees

Illogically less known than the western end of this beautiful mountain range, the eastern Pyrenees offers its visitors the opportunity for true escapism off the beaten track. The area around the border with Andorra and Spain has some of Europe's wildest mountain terrains.

The region of the Ariège, just north west of Andorra, where our base of Ax les Thermes is found, is one of southern France's best kept secrets, full of hidden valleys, accessible peaks and ridges, mountain lakes and forests. In winter its carpet of snow rounds off the more jagged surfaces, leaving a smooth and inviting panorama made more accessible by using snowshoes.

Snowshoeing

A basic form of snowshoe, made from hazel twigs and cat gut, has been used for thousands of years for getting about on snow covered lands. The principle of increasing the surface area to reduce sinking is not rocket science, but modern materials have revolutionised the activity, making the snowshoe a versatile 'all mountain' bit of kit complete with a 'free heel' and crampon style points.

The technique is easy to master, opening up the snow covered mountains which were previously the domain of the highly skilled back country skier. Free from the constraints of footpaths and vegetation we can wander along undulating ridges, through thick forest and over frozen lakes. For those new to the sport, full instruction will be given and you will be amazed how easily you pick it up.

The trip

This trip was designed and is run James Thompson IML, who chose the area as his home over 5 years ago and is a keen walker, snowshoer, cross country skier and cyclist. He is supported in his guiding role by his wife Cathy.

This holiday offers a variety of snowshoeing experiences within a huge variety of winter landscapes, all within an easy transfer distance from our hotel. In suitable weather conditions, the trip includes 5 days of guided snowshoeing walks, plus one day off for optional activities (see below). Daily distances covered will be approximately 10 to 15km with about 500 to 700m of ascent. There is always the option of some 'extreme tobogganing' for those wanting a quick way down – it's fantastic fun! We will be walking for generally about 6 hours a day depending on the snow conditions, including plenty of breaks/photo stops and lunch.

Please note that weather conditions may differ on the two departures: in January, the trip is likely to have a more 'wintery' feel to it, and there is likely to be more powder snow around. Depending on the conditions we may do some lower level walking. At Easter, the snow is more consolidated, allowing different walks higher up. We will tend to head higher for some ridge walks, but may start our walks below the snow line, thus using a mix of walking boots and snowshoes.

On some days weather conditions may indicate a forest snowshoe walk or a valley walk without snowshoes.



James, loving his job

Trip grade

We have graded this trip 'Steady' and for most days we will be out for approximately 6 hours.

Clothing and equipment

You do not need any specialist equipment for this trip as snowshoes and walking poles are provided. You will need a pair of walking boots (stiffer models are better) and gaiters are highly desirable. As with many outdoor activities, layering is the best principle where clothing is concerned and we recommend warm layers, a fleece and waterproofs as well as 2 pairs of gloves and a pair of waterproof trousers especially if you are up for some tobogganing. Due to the high number of sunny days, you will also need sunglasses and a sun hat. A full kit list will be sent with your booking confirmation.

Climate

The eastern Pyrenees have a good snow record combined with a high sunshine rate meaning a typical winter's day can reach temperatures of up to 15 degrees with cloudless skies and magnificent views. When it does snow however, temperatures can plummet to below freezing.

Accommodation

The Hotel Terminus is a comfortable, family run hotel with en suite rooms, just 5 minutes walk from the centre of Ax les Thermes. It is run by Alain and Elizabeth, who pride themselves on their customer service and attention to detail. Conveniently opposite the train station, the hotel is also along the banks of the River Ariège, and all of the tranquil bedrooms have a river view. The hotel has a popular restaurant and Alain is a keen chef, using local and often organic produce. The hotel also has a bar which serves excellent vin chaud!

Meals

All meals (breakfast, packed lunch and dinner) are included except for lunch and dinner on the 'day off', left free to allow you to experience some of the other restaurants in Ax. Wine and coffee are not included in the trip price. Vegetarians will be well catered for as will those with other specific dietary requests, if these are known in advance.

Optional activities/free day

The spa town of Ax is a pleasant place to relax – and dipping your feet in the outdoor thermally heated foot baths is a must. Ax also offers a spa centre with the option of enjoying a massage. For those wanting to try an alternative winter sport on the free day, there is a cable car from the centre of Ax to the downhill ski station of Ax Bonascre which has plenty of pistes to entertain even an experienced skier (both Alpine and Telemark equipment is available for hire locally). The medieval town of Foix is a 30 minute train journey from Ax.

Maps

Most of our snowshoe walks are on the 1:50000 - Haute Ariège No.7.

Transport

We offer group transfers to/from Toulouse. There is an excellent train service between Paris and Ax les Thermes via Toulouse.

There will be a private minibus available throughout the trip, suitably fitted with snow tyres and chains.



DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

The itinerary below is a guideline and may need to be altered to suit the snow conditions. On days where there is a lot of snow falling in Ax we will normally opt to do a walk from the hotel. The high snow covered ridges usually hold their snow until mid May. On each day we will be walking for approximately 6 hours including breaks. 'B,L,D', Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, refers to meals included in the trip cost.

DAY 1 Arrive in Toulouse in time for the group transfer to the spa resort of Ax les Thermes, which nestles at a height of 720m in the Ax valley. (Independent train transfer possible from Toulouse) Hotel (D)

DAY 2 The area around the Col du Marmar (1361m) provides us with the perfect terrain with which to get used to the snowshoes. In the summer this limestone plateau provides grazing for the beef cattle but in winter a sea of white stretches across the horizon. Our aim is the Rocher de Scaramus (1868m) which is one of the most northerly peaks in this part of the Pyrenees and has great views over the plains of southern France and towards the Mediterranean. Hotel (B,L,D)

DAY 3 Tossa Rodona (2601m). Starting at the Col du Puymorens (1940m) this high mountain peak is within easy reach and the views from the top are breathtaking. Our route takes us up the wide U shaped valley where sightings of Izzard (Pyrenean Chamois) are fairly common. We return down a snow filled river valley which forms a natural bob-sled run for those wanting to try out the toboggans. Hotel (B,L,D)



From Tossa Rodona

DAY 4 The frozen lake of Font Viva (1900m). Today's walk starts in the pine forest around the village of Porte Puymorens and climbs over a jumble of snow covered boulders to the stunning lake in an amphitheatre of towering peaks. This is a favoured winter retreat for a heard of muflon (large horned sheep) and their tracks criss-cross the area making them easy to find. Hotel (B,L,D)

DAY 5 Free day – today's challenge is to decide what to do as there is a huge choice of activity from downhill skiing, cross country skiing and dog sledding to a cultural day in Ax, or a relaxing session at the spa with a massage. The evening is free for you to choose one of Ax's many restaurants. Hotel (B)

DAY 6 Plateau de Beille (1800 – 2000m). Renowned as the best cross country skiing area in the Pyrenees, the Plateau de Beille is also a fantastic area to explore on snowshoes. It is a high altitude plateau with stunning panoramic views of the Andorran/French border mountains in almost every direction. Don't be fooled by the name however - for a plateau the route still 'undulates' quite a lot, winding beautifully through the mountain side forests and over rounded peaks. The pine forests are some of the highest in Europe and the contorted trees are home to the capercaille. Hotel (B,L,D)

DAY 7 The ridges of Chioula (1400 to 1900m). The aim of this walk is the idyllically located Refuge de Chioula where we will be given a warm welcome with a log fire and a mug of vin chaud! Our route takes us through forests of towering beech trees and out onto the high pastures giving us views of all the other areas explored during the

week. After a final memorable descent on snowshoes we will have an opportunity to show the local kids a thing or two on the purpose built toboggan run! Hotel (B,L,D)

DAY 8 A relaxing morning in Ax before our group transfer to Toulouse. (B)



Lunch stop in winter sun

JT/PA/ML 1/12