



High above Refuge des Besines

- **Walks in the heart of one of the least explored areas of the Pyrenees**
- **Mountain refuge accommodation in stunning locations**
- **Peak bagging from the refuges carrying only day gear**
- **Exciting and varied terrain: mountain lakes, boulder fields, scree slopes**
- **Experienced IML English guide who lives locally**
- **Friendly accommodation with good food throughout**

The Eastern Pyrenees

Illogically less known than the western end of this beautiful mountain range, the eastern Pyrenees offer 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, and this trip, using mountain refuge accommodation allows you to access the heart of the region.

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, ridges, mountain lakes and forests. In summer, there are breeding pairs of golden eagles and lammergeirs, and the skies are dotted with griffon and egyptian vultures. During the walks you are also likely to see our local chamoix, the izzard, as well as marmots.

The trip

This week of walking offers the best of both worlds: we head off the beaten track into the centre of the mountain range, staying in catered mountain refuges. From the hut bases we climb nearby peaks: (Coma d'Or (2868m), Puig Pedros (2842) and Pic de Rhule (2783m).

In suitable weather conditions the trip includes 6 days of guided walks, with a rest morning on DAY 4 (optional guided ridge walk available). Daily distances covered will be approximately 9-11 km with ascents of between 800 and 1400m.

How much will I have to carry?

On 3½ days you will need to carry overnight gear: a sheet inner, a lightweight change of clothes, basic toilet kit, and lunch, as well as your normal outdoor gear. A 40 litre rucksack/pack should be ample. At other times we walk from the refuges, carrying only what we need for the day.

Clothing and equipment

There will be an opportunity to restock your gear half way through the trip with clean clothes from your main luggage so there is no need to carry much on this trip. You will need a good comfortable pair of walking boots and general walking kit. A full kit list will be sent with your booking confirmation.

Climate

The proximity of the Eastern Pyrenees to the Mediterranean gives us a warm and stable climate with perfect walking temperatures. Whilst rain can obviously not be ruled out, it is normally short lived. In the height of summer, afternoon storms can develop which may affect decision making about our route on a day to day basis.

Accommodation

We use a range of accommodation throughout the trip, allowing us to make the most of the mountains. On the first and last nights we stay in a charming family run hotel with its own restaurant 5 minutes walk from the centre of Ax les Thermes, a spa resort nestled in the Ax valley.

We spend 2 nights at the Refuge de Besines, a modern refuge with hot showers, indoor toilets, and dormitory accommodation.

Our next base is the friendly, family run Gite d'Etape (guesthouse/hostel) in L'Hospitale, which will welcome us on the evening of DAY 4 with a good meal and comfortable dormitories. Here we will meet up with our luggage again and pick up clean clothes and lunches for the second half of our week.

The final refuge is the Refuge de Rhule, at approx 2100m, with dormitories sleeping 8 and with indoor toilets.



Approaching the Refuge de Rhule

There are hot showers available in both mountain refuges but there is a small charge for their use (cold showers are free).

We return to our hotel in Ax les Thermes for the final night.

Meals

All meals (breakfast, packed lunch and dinner) are included in the price of the trip. The evening meals will be of a good standard specifically catering for the needs of walkers. The cuisine tends to be typical of the local region with both a mountain and Catalan influence. You will be given a

'goody bag' of suitable food and snacks to supplement the breakfasts and comprehensive packed lunches. This will be restocked half way through the trip in L'Hospitale. Wine and coffee are not included in the trip price but are available every night. Vegetarians are welcome and will be catered for, although the choice of vegetarian dishes in the refuges will be fairly limited (normally omelettes!).

Maps

All of our trek is covered by the IGN 1:25000 map 2249OT Bourg-Madame (Col de Puymorens, Pic Carlit)

Transport

Transfers to and from Merens, the start of our walk, are by train or local bus. Our main gear will be transported by minibus to the halfway point in the trip.



James, our IML guide

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

The itinerary below is a guideline and may need to be altered in certain weather conditions. It would be possible to spend a month exploring the area without retracing our steps, so there are plenty of walking options regardless of conditions! 'B,L,D', Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, refers to meals included in the trip cost.

DAY 1 Meet in Toulouse for a group transfer to the spa resort of Ax les Thermes, which nestles at a height of 720m in the Ax valley. (Alternatively catch a train and join the trip in Ax les Thermes). We enjoy an excellent evening meal at our hotel. (D)

DAY 2 Following a briefing, and plenty of time for organising your gear for the first half of the holiday, we will transfer by train or bus approx 25mins to Merens (1100m), the start of our walk. From here we follow the GR10 up the Rau de Nabre, towards the Porteille des Besines (2333m). The variety of scenery is sunning us we climb up from the lush forests into the Alpine meadows carpeted with an array of flowers. En route we pass some thermal pools, however the glistening waters of Lake Estagnas are more likely to lure you in for a swim. From the col we drop down to the Refuge des Besines (2104m), our home for the next two nights, through a wetland area where carnivorous plants and orchids grow. Today we cover approximately 9kms and 1250m of ascent, walking for approximately 6 hours including breaks. (B,L,D)

DAY 3 Leaving most of our kit at the refuge, we head off to summit the rugged peaks that dominate the view from the refuge. Our main aim is Comme d'Or (2868m) however if the weather conditions are favourable then we will also take in the bouldery peak of Puig Pedros (2842m). Both peaks offer breathtaking views into the true Pyrenean wilderness and sightings of Izzard (the Pyrenean Chamois) are fairly common. After the peaks we scramble around the cirque before dropping down to the Lake of Moulstut for a refreshing swim. We are out for about 9 hours today but will not be walking continuously. (B,L,D)

DAY 4 In the morning there is a choice – take in the mountain views and soak up some sun in the region of the refuge – (prolific wild flowers in spring/early summer) or for those with a good head for heights there is the option of a guided scramble to the summit of Pic D'Auriol, (2695m).

In the afternoon we all descend the Valley des Besines to L'Hospitalet (1430m) and to the Gite d'Etape where you are reunited with your main luggage and the opportunity to pick up clean clothes and buy any bits and pieces you need from the local shops. If you do a full day today, we will be out for about 9 hours, but if you rest in the morning, then you will be walking approx 3 hours in the afternoon. (B,L,D)



Pic D'Auriol scramble

DAY 5: We head off on perhaps the most challenging day of our trek which takes us up to tonight's accommodation at the Refuge de Rhule (2180m). Our route links 9 lakes and crosses over the border into Andorra via the Col d'Albe (2538m), then back into France over the Col de Juclar (2490m). The mountains are rugged, wild, and luxuriously empty

of walkers! Today we cover 13kms and 1435m of ascent. Today's walk is approximately 9 hours including breaks. (B,L,D)

DAY 6: From the refuge, the Pic de Rhule (2783m) towers above us, looking inaccessible and formidable. However, carrying just our day sacks, with some basic scrambling and some local knowledge, we will be able to climb it with the reward of incredible panoramic views from the summit. In the afternoon you are free to explore the vicinity of the refuge or come on a guided walk to the Etangs (mountain lakes) de Fontargenta which are well worth the excursion. If you do a full day today, we will be out for about 9 hours, but if you rest in the afternoon, then you will be walking approx 4 hours in the morning. (B,L,D)

DAY 7 This morning we pack up and head down to Merens using the famous GR10 route which traverses some fantastic boulder fields on its descent. En route we take in the Pyramide de L'Herbes (2439m) and the pretty and refreshing Etang du Cont. Our basic route is 11kms with 440m of ascent. From Merens we transfer back to the Hotel Terminus in Ax les Thermes by mid afternoon, so you will have time to enjoy the thermal foot bath or pamper yourself with a massage. Walking today will be for a maximum of 7 hours including breaks (B,L,D)



Descending through the village of Merens

DAY 8 A free morning in Ax before our group transfer to Toulouse for the flight home or extend your stay with a few days in this historic town. (B)

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