



42 *The Pyrenees from Tarbes. Photo: C. A. Russell*

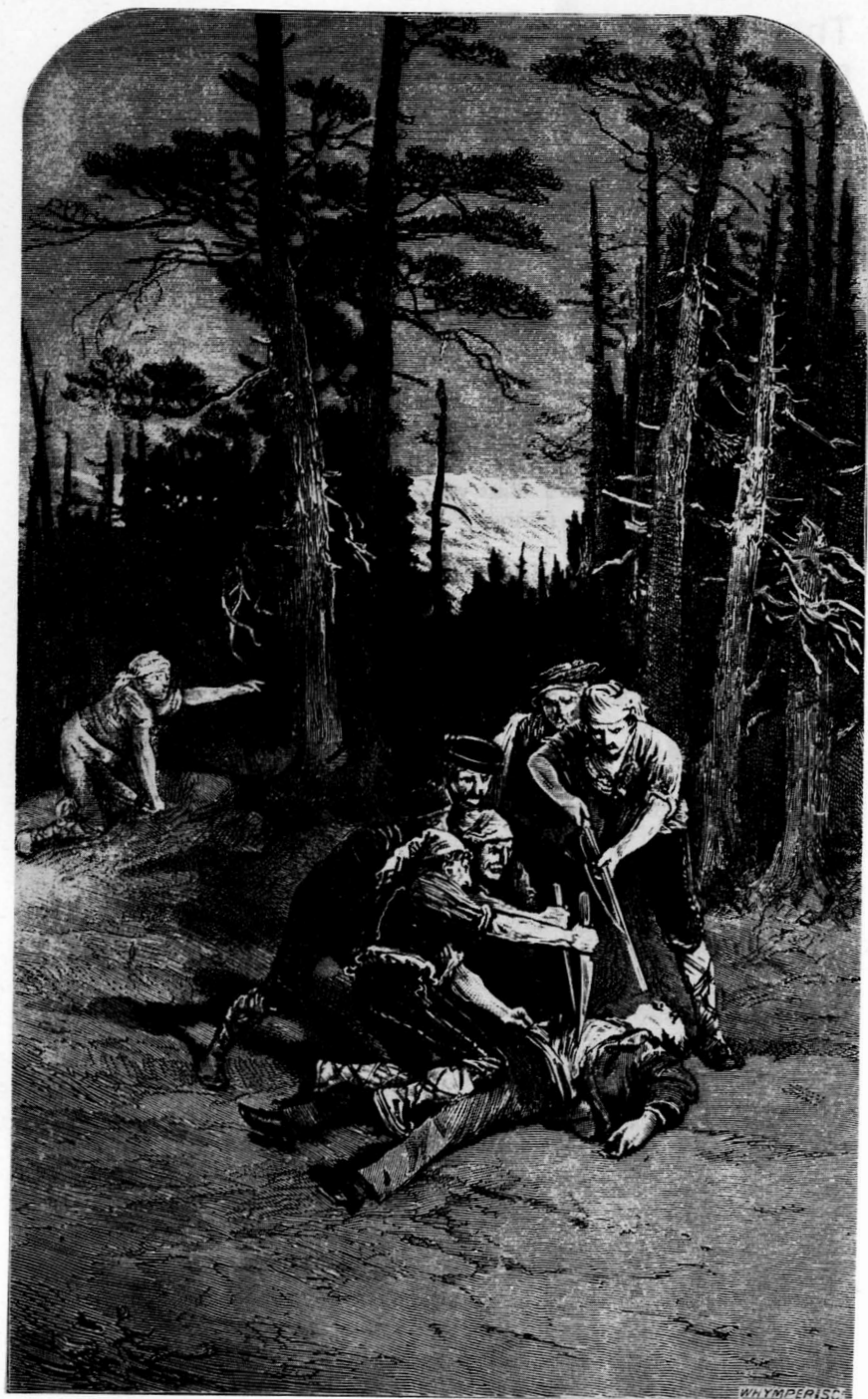
The National Park of the Western Pyrenees

J. M. Russell

Forming the steep N edge of a chain which is essentially Spanish, the French Pyrenees are guarded by an unusually narrow band of foothills. Westwards from the Pic Du Midi de Bigorre, their formidable outpost visible from afar, they rise abruptly from a surprisingly level plain; on a clear day the frontier peaks—Vignemale, Balaïtous, Pic du Midi d'Ossau—can be seen from Tarbes or Pau 30 miles away. No town in Europe is flatter than Tarbes, and there is something almost magical about the long line of mountains along the S horizon, closing off France like a white wall in winter, rippling away into the cotton clouds and Spain in summer.

Five miles W of Tarbes, a stone table beside the road to Pau indicates all the landmarks of a splendid panorama. What can be seen from this viewpoint is no more than a fifth of the total length of the chain, which stretches for nearly 300 miles from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, and a much smaller part of the entire range, most of which lies in Spain; but it contains some of the highest and most distinctive mountains in the French Pyrenees, a wealth of wild birds and animals—including some 30 bears—and for 9 months of the year is completely uninhabited above 1400 m. These are perhaps some of the reasons why part of this region now enjoys official protection as a National Park.

The Parc National des Pyrénées Occidentales was created in 1967, by an Act of the French Parliament, to preserve the character and wild life of an area of great natural beauty, to provide facilities for ramblers while discouraging commercial and industrial activities, and to aid the rural population of the region immediately N of the Parc, the peripheral zone or 'Préparc', where the development of tourism is officially encouraged and supervised by an advisory body. The Park itself, which covers an area of about 180 square miles, situated between 1100 m and 3300 m in height, is essentially a narrow strip, nowhere wider than 8 miles, lying along the Franco-Spanish border for 60 miles. Only 2 roads cross this section of the frontier: the first at the Col du Somport, the traditional high pass over the W Pyrenees, and the second at the Col du Pourtalet, which at 1800 m is blocked for 7 or 8 months of the year. The next road that crosses the frontier is above Luchon, 80 miles further E, although a toll road from Gavarnie to the nearest frontier col, the Col de Boucharo at 2300 m, was recently opened (despite the principles underlying the National Park) as part of a projected link between Gavarnie and the Ordesa National Park in Spain. However, in the absence of a road on the Spanish side, the French section is at present rather an expensive dead end. For the climber or skier, there exist several high cols—called 'Ports' in the Pyrenees—which can be crossed without difficulty, and one spectacular gap in the Gavarnie cirque at 2800 m—the Brèche de Roland, hewn out, according



43 The dangers of Pyrenean travel a century ago. Reproduced from AJ 5

to the legend, by Charlemagne's valiant warrior in a desperate attempt to fight off the Saracens. Elsewhere the frontier chain is consistently high, and crossing into Spain remains an adventure.

Apart from several small dams and one works *téléphérique* built by the French Electricity Board, the only mechanical constructions in the National Park are a tiny ski run and a chair lift through the trees above the Pont d'Espagne at the end of the road above Cauterets. But there are far more huts here than in most parts of the Pyrenees. In addition to 9 refuges belonging to the CAF and two privately owned huts, the Park authorities have already built 5 handsome chalet-refuges which are guarded in the summer. Primarily, though not solely, intended for high-level walkers, 3 of these are situated on the Sentier de Grande Randonnée No 10. When completed, this long distance footpath will run from end to end of the lower Pyrenees; the substantial section which traverses the National Park is now well marked and would make a fine route for a hiking holiday.

Possibly because of the steepness of the slopes, the frontier mountains have not been equipped for mass ski-ing and they are free of the attendant commercialism. It is now the policy of the Park authorities to ensure that cable railways, ski-lifts and hotels are restricted to the area N of the Park. They are likely to achieve their aim, partly because the tourist industry is officially encouraged in the peripheral zone, and partly because ski-ing is still mainly a week-end pastime in this part of the Pyrenees, and the existing ski-runs near the Park—above Gavarnie, Cauterets and Gabas—are under no great pressure to expand.

These 3 centres reflect the modest scale of tourism in the Pyrenees. The largest, Cauterets, although a spa of long standing and now also a ski resort in winter, is not much larger than Argentière. As the traditional starting point for the Vignemale, it has a tiny Guides' Bureau where the guides are very helpful. The other 2 centres are no more than hamlets, although 150 years of tourism have brought a number of restaurants and bars and a lot of mules to Gavarnie. The French Military Police, most of whom are guides and expert skiers, have installed a mountain rescue post there. Two big shaggy Pyrenean dogs are the most conspicuous residents of Gabas, the last hamlet on the road to the Pourtalet Pass. Gabas has a beautiful old chapel, a smart hotel for skiers and a rather decrepit establishment that defies classification and serves good local food by a log fire. A chalet just outside Gabas offers cheap accommodation to climbers.

In winter and spring nothing lies beyond these villages except snow and an unbelievable silence. The occasional tracks of a cross-country skier are the only signs of human presence, and the mountains and valleys seem as remote as Greenland, although the plain is only 20 miles to the N.

The National Park includes 7 principal summits or massifs. From W to E these are: Pic du Midi d'Ossau (2885 m), Balaitous (3146 m), Vignemale (3298 m),

PYRENEES NATIONAL PARK

the Gavarnie cirque with its 2 most distinctive summits, the Taillon (3146 m) and the Pic du Marboré (3248 m), the neighbouring Troumouse cirque culminating in the Pic de la Munia (3133 m), and, jutting N into France, the Pic Long (3192 m) and Pic de Néouvielle (3091 m). The whole area lies in the 'axial zone' of the Pyrenees, the term used by geologists to describe the granite core of the chain, believed to date from the Primary Age. Ossau, Balaïtous, Pic Long and Néouvielle are all granite mountains, and the rock on the Néouvielle in particular is of excellent quality for climbing. Elsewhere limestone is the predominant rock; seen from above, the limestone amphitheatre behind Gavarnie is revealed as the N face of the arid Spanish plateau, and the Pic du Marboré as the N end of the limestone chain running down from Mont Perdu. The whole structure visibly belongs to the Spanish land mass, lending support to the view, held by some, that the Pyrenees were pushed up when the Iberian peninsula, moving NE, collided with the European continent.

The Pyrenees now have no more than 10 or 12 square miles of glaciers, but the National Park claims the largest one, the Glacier d'Ossoue on the E flank of the Vignemale. The SE and NE ridges of the Balaïtous are divided by the Glacier de Las Néous which provides one of the finest descents on skis anywhere in the Pyrenees. Snow lingers later here than in most parts of the range, and snowshoes were necessary for an ascent of the Balaïtous from the N on 31 May 1973.

With the melting of the snows the Pyrenees lose something of their beauty. By the middle of June, the National Park emerges as a wild and rugged area of bare rock and scree, softened only by the pines and birches in the valleys. Down in the plain the vegetation is luxurious, thunderstorms are more frequent, and the mountains are often hidden behind haze or cloud. From the summits, the ridges to the N rise out of the mist hanging over the valleys and the plain, while the parched expanses of the Spanish sierra roll interminably away in the S sun.

With the exception of the Vignemale and the Mont Perdu chain, which offer mixed climbs of an Alpine character throughout the summer, climbing in the W Pyrenees is mainly on rock (and scree!) after the end of June. The climber has a choice of 3 types of ascents: easy 'voies normales' on all the major peaks, requiring little more than a head for heights; ridge climbs of some difficulty and length (PD to D) exacting a degree of experience and speed (traverse of the Petit and Grand Pics d'Ossau, SE ridge of Palas, all ridges on the Balaïtous, Arête de Gaube on the Vignemale, Arête des Trois Conseillers—SW ridge—on the Pic de Néouvielle); and severe faces (TD/ED) demanding at least the use of pitons: Pic, Tour and Casque du Marboré from Gavarnie, N face of the Vignemale, NW face of the Petit Pic d'Ossau and the dramatic limestone needles of Ansabère just beyond the W limit of the National Park.

For the rock climber, the Pic du Midi d'Ossau is a gem of a mountain. The most spectacular peak in the French Pyrenees, rearing up 600 m from a high plateau, its isolation makes it a splendid viewpoint (on very clear days the Atlantic Ocean at Biarritz can be seen from the summit). It is also a very

convenient mountain. From a small car park below the road $\frac{1}{2}$ mile before the Pourtalet Pass, a wide path leads in $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours to the Pombie hut above a small lake reflecting the SE face of the peak. The hut is one of the best in the Pyrenees, with comfortable dormitories, a kitchen for those with their own provisions, and a lot of good photographs taken by the guardian. All routes can be done from the hut. The normal route, a 3-4 hour scramble up the NE shoulder, has an exhilarating airy finish on firm rock which makes it an ideal beginner's climb; it also provides a safe descent after more adventurous attempts. A very good expedition of average difficulty is the traverse of the Petit Pic and the Grand Pic, the 2 distinct summits of the mountain separated by the deep brèche known as La Fourche. The traverse usually begins on the SW ridge of the Petit Pic, includes an abseil on the descent to the brèche, and finishes down the normal route. The massive steep S and SE faces, which rise up directly behind the hut, offer more than a dozen exposed climbs on firm rock varying in standard from PD to D Sup. These are very popular with the Spaniards, who often outnumber the French. The only race outnumbering the Spaniards are the izards, the chamois of the Pyrenees. Now that they are protected from hunters these graceful animals, the symbol of the National Park, leap around the Pic du Midi d'Ossau in complete freedom.

With the Pombie hut, the most frequented refuge in the National Park is the Refuge des Sarradets above Gavarnie, usually known as the Brèche de Roland hut. At 2575 m on a snow-field, its situation is more typical of the Alps than the Pyrenees, and so is the 4 hours approach from the village (since the new road was opened, another much shorter path has been forged from the Col de Boucharo). The Brèche, an enormous open door into Spain, can be reached in half an hour from the hut. The scenery on the Spanish side is desert-like; the stony wastes slide away into the black depths of a canyon. From the Brèche, 2 paths creep along the base of the Spanish side of the cliffs forming the top of the Gavarnie cirque. One to the left (E) leads to the easy SW face of the Casque du Marboré or, for fast parties, to the summit of the Pic du Marboré or the fine N or W ridges of Mont Perdu, the peak which fascinated the pioneers of Pyrenean climbing by its remoteness and height—at 3355 m, only Aneto and Posets are higher. To the right (W) of the Brèche a path leads in 2 hours to the summit of the Taillon (3146 m). Although no more than a high level walk, this outing is thoroughly recommended, because the scenery is so grand and the unimpeded view from the summit is one of the best in the Pyrenees.

Looking W from the Taillon, the enormous bulk of the Vignemale with its glacier dominates the landscape. Despite the distance, the normal route up the glacier is often approached from Gavarnie, via the long and entirely uninhabited Vallée d'Ossoue. A tough vehicle can be driven over the last 3 miles of stony track to a small dam at the head of the valley; from there a well-marked path rises steeply under the glacier to one of the Pyrenees' less up-to-date huts, the Refuge de Bayssellance (the stairs to the bunks are vertical). The hut is high, however, and has a good view over the Gavarnie peaks. From a signpost on the path below the hut, an indistinct track contours over tire-some moraine to the true right bank of the glacier. Access is by a steep ramp

which, when icy, requires crampons. The central section is heavily crevassed, although in summer there is usually a good path. The upper section of the glacier is a big snow bowl which leads pleasantly to the easy rocks and scree of the final pyramid, the Pique Longue, or its neighbour, the Clot de la Hount, a few metres lower. When the rocks are dry, the crest can be followed right round the top of the glacier, an easy but airy traverse giving extensive views over France and Spain. Count Henry Russell, the Whymper of the Pyrenees, was passionately attached to the Vignemale, which he leased for 99 years, and he had a number of caves hollowed out in the rocks above the glacier, from which he could admire the sunset at ease. His caves are still there, providing shelter in bad weather, which is frequent on this mountain.



44 Vignemale Arête de Gaube. This and next photo: J. M. Russell

From the Pont d'Espagne above Cauterets, a pretty but steep path through the trees can be avoided by taking a chairlift to the Gaube valley and its lake, frozen in winter. A pleasant path leads along the floor of the valley to a modern stone hut, the Refuge des Oulettes de Gaube, facing the N wall of the Vignemale. All routes on this impressive face, which was not climbed until 1933, are serious undertakings, requiring great competence on rock, and good weather. However, 2 classic routes of lesser difficulty (AD), but both very fine in their different ways, provide access to the summit from the N. On the immediate left of the face, the Couloir de Gaube runs up to the main glacier 200 m below the summit, between the Pique Longue and its nearest satellite, a large rock buttress known as the Piton Carré. The slope is more than 50° in the upper section, and the ascent of the couloir, 600 m high, constitutes a snow and ice climb of some consequence.

The second route, much neglected because of its length, consists in climbing to the Col des Oulettes (2600 m), SW of the hut, and then working left along a rather indistinct crest to join the fine NW ridge, the Arête de Gaube, which overhangs a section of the N face before rising steeply in slabs (III) to the summit of the Pique Longue. Although long (6-7 hours), it is comparatively safe, easy to follow, and offers magnificent views from the Col onwards. The ordinary route provides an easy way down to the Baysseallance hut, which is only 1½ hours from the Oulettes hut in descent, so the round trip is possible in a day.

The Néouvielle massif, the most inaccessible in the Park, can also be approached from the main valley of the Gave de Pau. The Park authorities recently renovated the Refuge Packe, a little-visited hut on the W side of the chain (the Pic de Néouvielle is the farthest N of a chain of 3000 m peaks which includes the Pic Long, the highest Pyrenean summit lying entirely in France), but it is more usual to approach Néouvielle from the N, via Barèges and the privately owned Hôtel de la Glère. This large hut has a very hospitable guardian who even made a fire for us when we arrived well after dark one evening, is open at Easter, and lies some way NW of the Brèche de Chaussenque, a deep cleft in the spiky N ridge which must be crossed to reach an easier flank on the far side running up to the summit. On the E side of the massif, one of the highest and steepest roads in the Pyrenees leads to a group of 4 lakes at over 2000 m; there are no huts, and most climbers camp near one of the lakes. Paths lead off towards the S ridges on Néouvielle and Pic Long, but they are not always obvious, and a detailed map and clear weather are essential in this complex terrain.

Between the Vignemale and the Pic du Midi d'Ossau, the Balaïtous reigns supreme over the wildest and most remote area of the National Park. Massive ramparts defend its summit on all sides, and the longest of its ridges, the Crête de Costérillou, rises for a mile from 2800 m to 3100 m, so that the long profile of the mountain can be seen from Tarbes, 30 miles away.

Of the 3 'normal routes' on the Balaïtous, the most interesting is via the Las Néous glacier, between the NE and SE (Costérillou) ridges. The starting-point

for this climb is the end of the road in the Vallée d'Arrens, where the authorities have built a chalet housing a collection of stuffed animals and birds from the Park, minerals and some fine photographs of the Balaïtous. The road is kept clear of snow from Easter onwards. The original Balaïtous hut—officially called Refuge Ledormeur, after the author of the first comprehensive Pyrenean guidebook—can be reached in $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours, but this fine example of a vintage Pyrenean refuge (6 bunks and a grate) is best visited briefly on the way down. The more recent Refuge de Larribet, in a surprisingly desolate situation 3 hours from the end of the road, is a beautifully kept little hut equipped, even in winter, with butane gas. At Easter when the hut is almost buried under snow, the long pull up to the Col de Pabat on the NE ridge takes 3–4 hours (with snowshoes). From the col a descending traverse to the right over steep slopes leads to the glacier, under the awesome walls of the SE ridge, haunted by vultures and aggressive mountain crows. Inexorably the glacier steepens and narrows to the foot of the summit cliffs 150 m high (the bergschrund is often impassable in August). Crampons may be necessary for the steep couloir which runs out on to a beautiful little ridge 5 minutes from the summit. A slab barring the middle of the couloir is a major obstacle, and in spring the climb is Alpine in character. In perfect snow conditions, an even steeper couloir further left, at the junction of the SE ridge and the summit cliffs, offers direct access to the final snow dome.

The Balaïtous can be climbed from Arrens, from Gabas (via the Arrémoulit hut) or from Spain, but the finest expedition is the traverse of the NW and SE ridges (arête nord-occidentale and Crête de Costérillou). The traverse invariably starts from the Larribet hut. The main feature of the steep NW ridge, which runs into the face directly below the summit, is a granite needle known as the Aiguille Lamathe; this includes a slabby pitch of IV and warrants the grading D. When there is a view from the summit (the Balaïtous attracts cloud) it is magnificent, especially W over the Pic du Midi d'Ossau; the immensity of the chain is surprising. Descending the SE ridge takes 3–4 hours (the nearest hut in France or Spain is another 2 hours away), and if the Devil's Ridge—a line of high rock pinnacles extending the Crête de Costérillou to the S—is included, a bivouac is normally necessary and a good abseil rope essential. With or without the Devil's Ridge, this traverse ranks among the most serious undertakings in the W Pyrenees.

These are only the routes that I was able to explore or study closely. There are many others to choose from—in the Troumouse cirque, on the Pic Long or Palas, for example. There is a choice of season as well. People say that the best weather comes in the autumn, which was true in 1972; the whole range was clear day after day until the end of October and at sunset every peak would be silhouetted against an orange sky. From March to May the mountains are so beautiful that it is worth the effort to explore them under snow. With snowshoes and a pair of ski sticks, penguin-style, it is possible to reach huts and summits without being a skier. Most of the huts are at least partially open and some are even guarded at Easter and Whitsun.

Bus services operate between the plain and the villages in the valleys but they



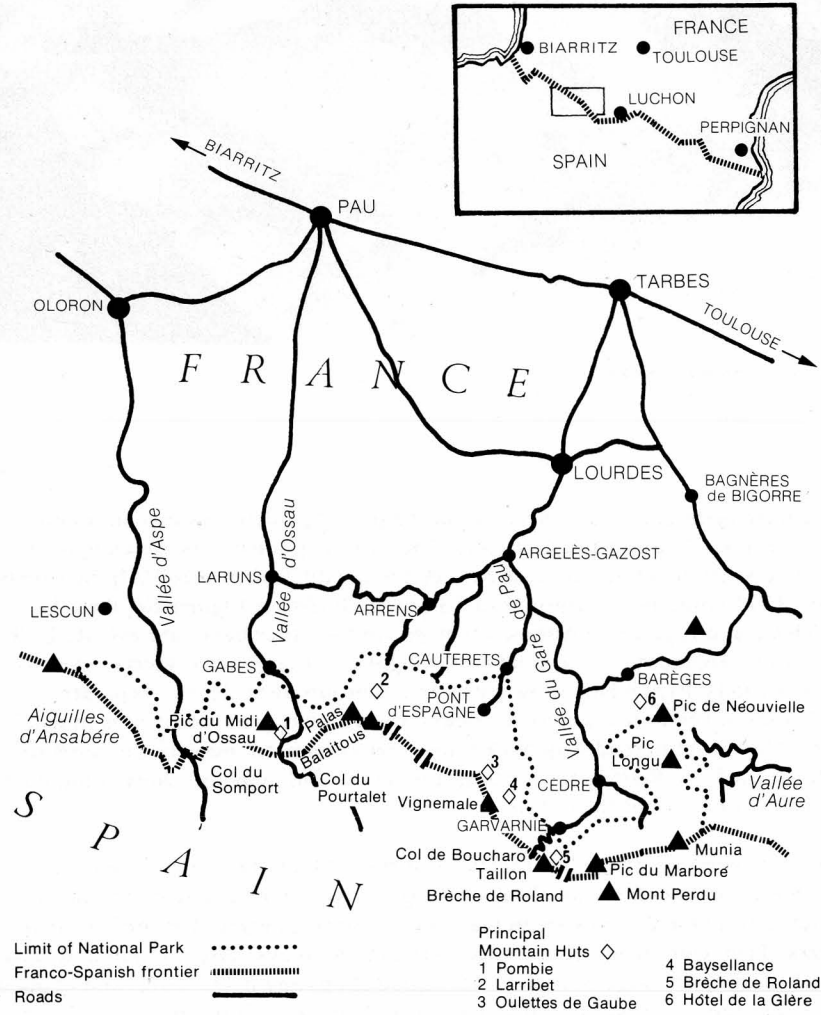
45 *View from Balaitous*

are infrequent and a car is very useful. Maps and guidebooks can be found in Pau, Tarbes, Lourdes and Cauterets. The French guide books are expensive and very detailed but only really necessary for difficult routes ('Alpine Climbing' 1971 contains descriptions of 13 severe climbs on Vignemale, Petit Pic d'Ossau and Aiguilles d'Ansabère); maps, on the other hand, are essential. The Institut Géographique National has brought out 4 large-scale sheets covering the National Park which show paths and contours very clearly. Separate editions of these sheets exist for skiers, showing the principal routes in winter. The Michelin road map No 85 now uses colours to indicate the relief of the chain from Biarritz to Luchon; this very useful map also shows mountain huts, footpaths and the GR10.

Weekly meetings of the local sections of the CAF are held in both Pau and Tarbes; their members are always willing to give any help and information they can. These 2 towns are in many ways the best centres for the National Park. They command the entrance to the main valleys—Aspe, Ossau and Gave de Pau; they are large enough to have good shops and lively cafés; and in good weather they have wonderful views of the mountains. It is a pleasure to come down to the plain after an expedition and relax over a glass while the long line of peaks in the S sharpens against the evening sky.

Although it would be a mistake to underestimate these mountains—they are after all the second largest chain in W Europe—climbing in the Pyrenees is less tense and dramatic than in the Alps. There is usually no need to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning or worry about hidden crevasses or fragile cornices.

The National Park of the Western Pyrenees



The appeal of the Pyrenees lies not so much in the difficulty of the climbs they offer as in their wildness—there is still a feeling of exploring mysterious unknown country. If the National Park achieves its aim, it will preserve this wild beauty, and the Pyrenees will retain their special charm.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Transport: SNCF main-line stations at Tarbes, Lourdes, Pau; 4 trains daily direct to and from Paris.

Airport Tarbes-Ossun-Lourdes; 1 daily flight to and from Paris, charter flights from England and Ireland in the summer.

Bus twice a day from Lourdes to Gavarnie; daily service train and bus between Pau and Laruns.

National Park: Administrative seat, 43 rue Larrey, 65000 Tarbes.

Comité National des Sentiers de Grande Randonnée, 92 rue de Clignancourt, 75883 Paris.

CAF: Section Tarbes, 6 rue Eugène Ténor, 65000 Tarbes (weekly meetings on Fridays 6.30–8.0pm).

Section Pau, 5 rue R. Fournets, 64000 Pau.

N.B. To join CAF Section Tarbes costs much less than joining CAF Paris–Chamonix and members receive the “Revue Pyrénéenne” every 3 months.

Bookshops: Librairie Parisienne, 14 rue St-Louis, Pau.

Librairie Lalonguère, avenue du Maréchal Foch, Tarbes.

Guide Books: (in French, ed. R. Ollivier, approx. £3.50 per volume)

Pyrénées Occidentales, Vol. 1: Aspe et Ossau (Pic du Midi d'Ossau).

Pyrénées Occidentales, Vol. 2: De la vallée d'Ossau au val d'Azun (Balaïtous).

Pyrénées Centrales, Vol. 1. Cauterets–Vignemale–Gavarnie–Canons espagnols.

Pyrénées Centrales, Vol. 2: Bigorre–Arbizon–Néouvielle–Troumouse.

Itinéraires skieurs dans les Hautes Pyrénées (by Fillol & Favre, approx. £1, very useful for hut approaches and normal routes).

Maps: Parc National des Pyrénées, 4 sheets 1/25000, approx. £1 per sheet, (sheets 2 and 3 cover 3/4 of the National Park—Institut Géographique National).

1. Aspe and Ossau

2. Balaïtous

3. Gavarnie

4. Néouvielle.

Michelin Road Map No 85, Biarritz–Luchon (at 20p, very good value).

Camping: Forbidden in the National Park but possible in Ossoue valley. Camp sites outside Lourdes and Argelès-Gazost, elsewhere by private arrangement.

Huts: (a) CAF has 6 guarded huts, 1 unguarded hut, 2 bivouac huts; reciprocal rights granted, 6F per night, hut provisions are dear.

(b) Touring Club de France owns Refuge Wallon (guarded) and Refuge Russell (unguarded)—10–12F per night.

(c) National Park owns 5 modern huts, all guarded from 1 July to 15 September, rates unknown.

(d) Hôtel de la Glère, privately-owned, guarded, 10F per night.