Pyrenean High Route

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(*Plates* 51–55)

Once upon a time the high-level ski route from Chamonix to Zermatt had a cachet for British ski mountaineers. It was also unfrequented; on a 1964 east-west crossing we met but one other party *en route*. Today this grandest of alpine ski tours has been packaged. At the end of a trail littered with the caravans of guided parties are huts filled to bust serving meals à la carte, table d'hôte or whatever else you fancy.

However, there is another 'Playground of Europe' and all good *Pyrénéeistes* will echo the pronouncement of their precursor, Count Henry Russell: 'The Alps astound, the Pyrenees attract and soften us.' That is as true today as it was a century ago, and, if the Pyrenees are built smaller, their character is better preserved. There is no easily definable watershed, but the French and Spanish versants are wholly different in character. The French Pyrenees, rising abruptly from the Gascon plains, are only accessible via deep gorges or *garves* which lead to high basins surrounded by steep peaks. The Spanish Pyrenees, split by transverse valleys creating isolated montagnard communities, flow southwards in a series of undulating ridges, eventually to merge into the Iberian Plateau. The French slopes are wetter, lusher and heavily wooded. The Spanish, drier and gaunter, embody both the promise of the Mediterranean and the harshness of the meseta. But common to both are the granite pics and crenellated *crêtes*; limestone cirques and vertiginous canyons; torrents and waterfalls and, above all, a multiplicity of lakes both large and small, in this land touched by the wand of enchantment.

I first came to the Pyrenees in the summer of 1974 to climb Perdu, Aneto and Vignemale. I returned a devotee nine months later, in March 1975, as a member of an Eagle Ski Club party, after a break of five years from ski-touring. Ski mountaineering in the Pyrenees was as unfashionable for the British then as it is now. The party's object was to cross the western half of the *Parc National des Pyrénées*. Since the previous October virtually no snow had fallen but, from the day before we arrived, it fell continuously for the next six days. Starting from Lescun, we climbed the Pic 'Anie (2504m), most westerly marker of the main range, in a whiteout. Thereafter, in unremitting bad weather, a route was pushed on compass bearings from Urdos to Gabas via the Ayous and Pombie huts. At Gabas the expedition halted and took stock. Because of avalanche risk the key passage between Gabas and Cauterets was abandoned. And here, with my holiday run out, I had to retire prematurely. Of the Pyrenees in winter I had seen but one summit, the Pic du Midi d'Ossau, emerging momentarily through the cloud. The weather had been dreadful and the skiing unmemorable. Yet a seed had been sown and, with a fringe of curiosity unsatisfied, I determined one day to discover for myself the country

that lay beyond Gabas in that wild knot of granite peaks – Balaitous, Palas and Arriel.

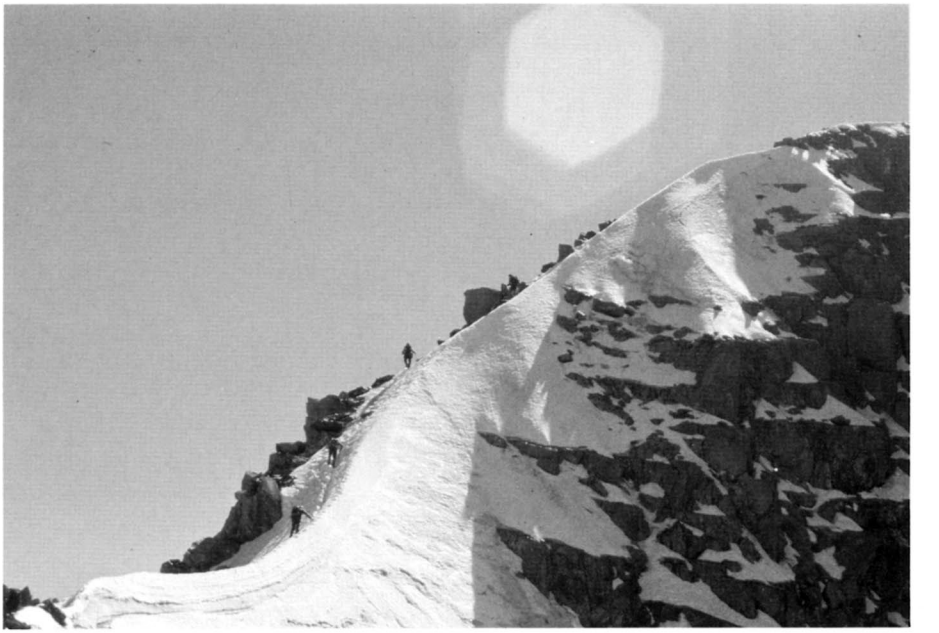
Another three years were to pass before that seed germinated in 1978. From the original kernel of myself and Alan Wedgwood we swelled to four and set off from Pau on 20 March, with the addition of Richard Morgan and Alan's brother Nick. Our plan was first to get the feel of the place by repeating the 1975 section, Urdos to Gabas: thereafter to broach new ground from Gabas to Cauterets. The weather broke after the first day out, but we surprised ourselves by making faster times than had the 1975 guided party and successfully navigated the difficult cols of Ayous and Suzon in blizzard and whiteout. But not without hostage. In descending the Col Suzon, Richard badly injured his back and had to retire home hurt, five days out.

Now reduced to three, we sat out a depressing 36 hours at Gabas awaiting a break in the weather. A local guide, Monsieur Dodu, recommended a stolen march to the Arrémoulit hut and a secret route into Spain. The Arrémoulit, nestling in a cup of the great cirque formed by Palas, Balaitous and the Frondellas, exemplifies reinforced concrete Gothic. Here, demoralized, we spent Easter Sunday comatose and frozen, while outside the storm heaped snow roof-high to block out all light. The arrival of three *Toulousiennes* late that evening dispelled a bad attack of British phlegm. With Gallic *élan* they dispensed beer, claret and *boeuf en daube* to enliven our staple diet of porridge, cake and char.

After another night of storm there dawned a perfect day and with it a change of fortune. From the Col du Palas we swooped down the upper Arriel valley, skimming frozen lakes to plunge ever deeper into Spain. Here was new country dotted with tiny lakes, studded with dwarf pines and surmounted by a galaxy of Puntas and Picos with unpronounceable names. We climbed the Grande Fache (3005m) in the last of the good weather, and that evening were reunited with the *Toulousiennes* at the Wallon hut.

The night's interminable toasts in Ricard accounted for the morning-after pledges, but we still made the Oulettes hut with a blizzard at our heels. Next morning, 30 March, snow was coming over the roof, so we renounced both the Vignemale and a proposed grand slam finish to Gavarnie. A guided party of 24 Swiss had got out early, leaving the hut *guardienne*, her dog, two elderly aides, two Parisian doctors, Jean-Pierre Leire (a montagnard Pau hotelier) and ourselves to make a *Sturm und Drang* escape to Cauterets. Avalanches, mainly heard rather than seen, were fusillading down the Val de Gaube, but we reached the Pont D'Espagne by mid-afternoon at the cost of only one ski pole. That evening, with our party now expanded to 11, we celebrated safe release and *la vie montagne* with a *grande bouffe* in French gastronomic tradition. The Urdos to Cauterets traverse had been accomplished, and in Jean-Pierre we had made a friend who became an automatic selection for the next three tours.

The 1978 tour first sparked in me the concept of a complete Pyrenean ski traverse. Although Pyrenean mountain exploration generally lagged behind the Alps, the first summer traverse of the range was ahead of its time. In 1817, two years after Waterloo, Dr Frederick Parrot linked the Atlantic with the



50. *The snow arête just below the summit of Monte Disgrazia (3678m).* (p 136)



51. *Frontier Ridge from below the Pic d'Arres (1983), Maladeta Massif beyond.* *(p 142)*

Mediterranean in a 53-day crossing. The same year, the remarkable Dr Parrot almost climbed Monte Rosa, and 10 years later he made the first ascent of Mount Ararat. Coast-to-coast foot traverses, whether by the French Low Level GR10 or the High Level *Haute Randonnée Pyrénéenne* in 45 stages, are now well established. But the Pyrenean High Route on ski is a different proposition. The complete ski traverse of the main range from Canigou to Pierre St Martin was first accomplished in 1968, in 35 days, by Charles Laporte. My aim, tentative at first, was to make a west to east traverse, but not until 1981, three years on, did I become aware of Laporte's achievement.

The 1979 tour started from Cauterets where the 1978 tour had ended, establishing a pattern for all subsequent expeditions. We planned to climb the Vignemale *en route* to Gavarnie and then to push eastwards to Gèdre. The party of five comprised Susan Baldock, my cousin Alain Bevan-John, Richard Reynolds and Jean-Pierre Leire who endorsed the plan as *très classique*. We started on 9 April, a month later than the 1975 tour. On a sullen, brooding day, with the contours of the frozen Lac de Gaube barely discernible, we reached the Bayssellance hut after a long hard march. Set high below a col at 2651m the hut had been abandoned to winter, with spindrift enfilading every door and window.

Next day, deteriorating weather precipitated a retreat to the Oulétes hut, 500m lower. Descending from the Hourquette d'Ossoue under the dark cliffs of the Petit Vignemale, occasionally visible through shifting cloud, a thunderous roar from on high confirmed an uneasy feeling. Nothing could be seen but in a moment of frozen time everything heard and felt. Instinctively we ski'd downwards but, scarcely started, a rush of wind and a wall of snow overwhelmed, buried and carried us along in its irrepressible tide. Tossed in a dark void, inexorable forces crescendoed. Yet, as the torrent of snow kept moving, a vestige of hope was preserved, and when it stopped my head had come to the surface. The wet snow had frozen like concrete. Another hour passed before Richard had traced and dug out both Susan and myself. A snow-slide off the seracs of the Petit Vignemale glacier had triggered an enormous avalanche. Its path stretched upwards into the mist; its debris, seared by deep runnels, filled the entire couloir. It stopped at the very floor of the cirque, consolidated in huge mounds. Searching frantically with 'Autophons' we traced Jean-Pierre deeply buried, badly shocked but alive. Eventually Alain's body was located beneath a metre of hard-packed snow; he had been killed almost instantly. We spent a stormy night at the Oulétes hut, shocked and silent, and next day marched out to the Pont d'Espagne. Only one pair of skis was left between us: Susan's had been laminated.

Death offers no easy explanations and in its aftermath one reassesses mountaineering mores. In memory of Alain's brilliant qualities I determined to pursue the traverse, but to try in future to get a better measure of these mountains. To date, three tours totalling 24 days had yielded four with good weather, three with indifferent and the rest thoroughly bad. In summer, at much the same latitude as Rome, the Pyrenees are not serious mountains, and from mid-June to early September conditions are usually settled. But winter tells a different tale and, whereas Alpine weather is continental, Pyrenean is Atlantic.

Glaciation may be sparse, but heavy winter snowfall transforms benign summer peaks and passes into serious obstacles. This and variable temperatures make avalanches the most serious Pyrenean ski-mountaineering hazard, particularly in the steep-sided French valleys amongst which Gaube, Ossoue, Couplan, Moudang and Rioumajou are notorious. In France, local weather advice is usually available in major centres from guides bureaux or the excellent Pyrenean gendarmerie. Nevertheless, forecasts in themselves do not wholly resolve the dilemma that bad weather poses to touring parties with limited time, pre-set holiday dates and itineraries involving complex planning and logistics.

Most parts of the Alps have well-developed hut systems, each within the compass of a day's tour. In the Pyrenees, quantity and quality are infinitely variable and many huts are closed in winter. Overall, the Catalan Alpine Club's are the best huts in the range, with the best French concentration in the Néouvielle Reserve. Some huts have winter quarters (often cramped and primitive); there are also 'granges' (shepherds' summer quarters), 'cabanes' and 'abris' which are sometimes no more than concrete cubes. Few will have cooking facilities or water; many will be partially or totally snow-filled. Self-sufficiency in cooking and bivouac equipment are essential.

The Pyrenees are significantly lower than the Alps, but height is only one measure. Verticality is another, and Pyrenean ski touring is nothing but ups and downs. The axis of the main range follows the frontier, but any number of transverse and lateral ridges form separate massifs of which Maladeta and Posets, the highest and biggest, are both in Spain. In bad weather, retreat down the steep French valleys is invariably exposed to serious avalanche risk. You may escape into Spain, but then the logistics of getting back to the frontier ridge and France can throw a tight schedule.

Although the quality of Pyrenean maps has improved over the past few years, neither France nor Spain concedes to the cartographical needs of the other. Frontier maps tend to cut off just where continuity is crucial, so you may need both the French and Spanish. Most of the range is now covered by the new 50m French IGN *Edition Randonnées Pyrénéennes* series (though in some respects the old 1:50,000 series is clearer). But for touring in the Posets, Maladeta, Ribagorca and Val d'Aran areas, the Spanish Editorial Alpina series is still indispensable.

Essentially, Pyrenean ski touring is mountaineering on ski. The ground is steep, route-finding across remote country is complicated by inaccurate maps and a paucity of good huts means heavy packs. On only 10 days in 63 were we to meet other ski parties; on some tours, never. One lesson, learned the hard way, is never to push routes in bad weather. But these very characteristics and the uncertainty of the outcome lend a special flavour to this splendid range.

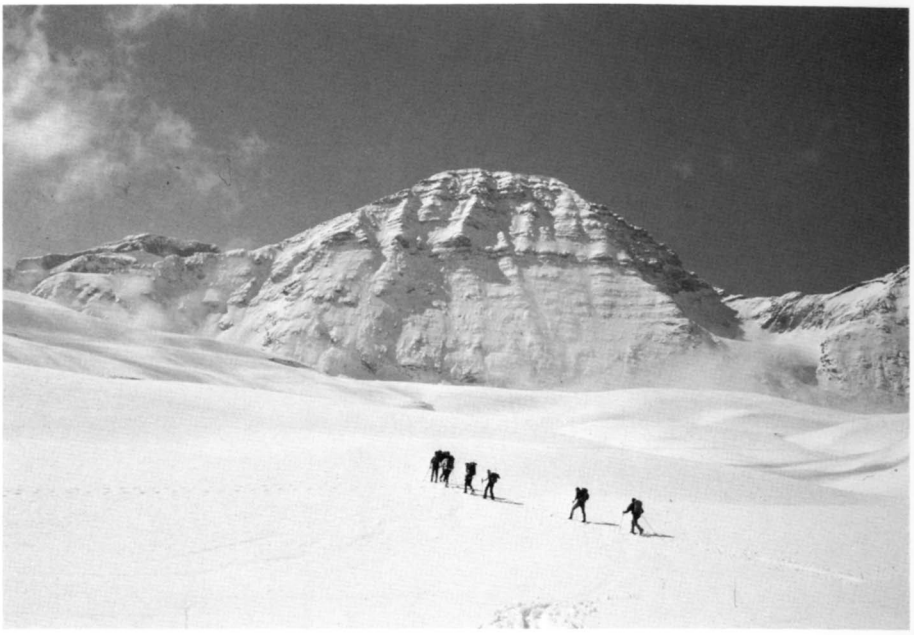
The 1980 and 1981 tours were international. The core of the 1980 team was Alan Wedgwood, Walter Good of the Swiss Avalanche Research Institute, Davos, Jean-Pierre Leire and myself, but at times we went up to seven when Jean-Pierre's family and friends joined in the fun. Our plan was to follow part of the 1979 itinerary as far as Gavarnie; thereafter, to explore the three great limestone cirques of the Pyrenees – Gavarnie, Estaubé and Troumouse – and come out through the Néouvielle Reserve. To better the weather, we left

Cauterets only four days off May Day. In the nine energetic stages that followed we climbed Cambales (2965m), Taillon (3144m) and – almost – Perdu (3355m); descended the mysterious Rio Ara; crossed by the Brèche de Roland into Spain; and were unwittingly introduced to Ski Extreme by Walter when descending Perdu's NE face and the Tuquerouye Couloir. The weather gave some reasonable breaks but finally ran out in the snowy wastes of the Troumouse Cirque. Here, in the cold comfort of a concrete cube that awaits the traveller in the guise of the Cabane Aires, Alan's bivouac was a hammock of skis suspended from the roof. Exit north to Barèges through the Néouvielle was frustrated by avalanche danger, but we had covered over 100km, accomplished our objectives and pushed the route eastwards.

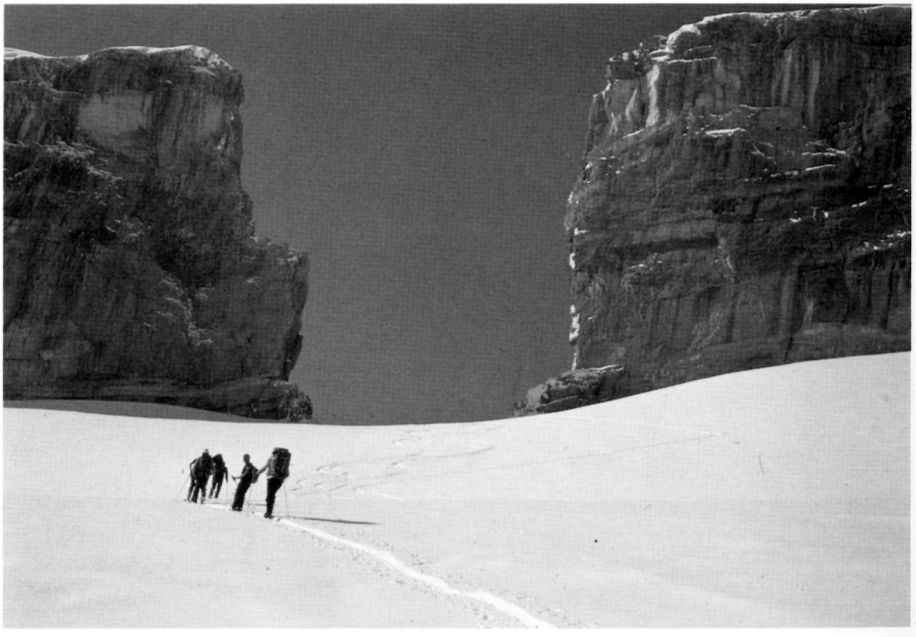
The 1981 tour – last of the international experiments – started with seven but finished with two. Alan and Janet Wedgwood and I represented the British contingent, Colin Chapman the Irish and Jean-Pierre Leire, Jacques and Jean-Claude *La France*. The sports plan Barèges to Luchon was ambitious, but preparations had been painstaking and elaborate. In the preceding months, Jean-Pierre had made four separate food caches along the route, including two by helicopter. The catch was that, before engaging the main range, he insisted that we should see something of his *magnifique* Néouvielle Reserve. Though well north of the watershed, the Néouvielle has much in common with the Catalan Pyrenees. The northern approach up the Glère valley, a typical *garve*, is austere but, once the sharp containing ridges that guard the heartland of the reserve are breached, a classic Pyrenean landscape dotted with solitary dwarf pines unfolds to the foot of shapely granite peaks. But pre-eminently this is a land of lakes: big lakes such as Orédon, Aumar, Aubert, Oule and Cap de Long; little lakes that dance up the valleys in steps. In summer like blue beads in a necklace; in winter merging imperceptibly into the landscape.

We started well enough but, on the second day out – almost within sight of our *abri* on the shores of Lac d'Orédon – I scored an own goal by falling into a hole and coming out with concussion and amnesia. Fabian, the nearest roadhead, was over 10km away down the notorious Couplan Gorge. Jacques and Jean-Claude, both good skiers, made Fabian in three hours. At 1am, 7½ hours later, Captain Fons with eight mountain gendarmes of Section 29 SRS Lannemezan plus doctor arrived, having ascended the Couplan in 2½ hours. With bad weather forecast, a helicopter rescue next day could not be guaranteed and the doctor ordered immediate evacuation by blood wagon. Trussed like a chicken and usually belayed fore, aft and above; at one stage shouldered as on a tightrope by bearers moving gingerly along the bollards that demarcated the outer edge of a snow-bank and the lip of a black void; at other times furrowing through the snow like a bobsleigh, the surrealistic descent to Fabian took 6½ hours. It brought home what it takes to organize a mountain rescue over difficult ground, even with the most professional of rescue teams.

After a reassuring brain scan at Tarbes and three days in Lannemezan Hospital, I contrived an escape on April Fools' Day. Despite indifferent weather the others had already got up the Pics de Néouvielle (3091m) and Campbieil (3051m). But four crucial days had been lost, Jacques had already returned to Toulouse and, with Alan's feet irreparably damaged by new plastic boots



52. *Taillon 1983.* (p 142)



53. *Brèche de Roland 1983.* (p 142)

during the 30-hour rescue epic, the original *équipe* was reduced to three. Now, paradoxically, the weather improved. In the four days that remained, Jean-Pierre, Colin and I completed a circuit of the Néouvielle via the Bastanet and Aygues-Cluses huts, a succession of cols and the Pics Contade (2714m) and Quatre-Termes (2724m). Colin then retired to Waterford and on what sadly turned out to be our last expedition together, Jean-Pierre and I climbed the Turon de Néouville (3035m) from Lienz accompanied throughout by the patron of the Chez Louisette's dog. It had been a tour of the unexpected, embellished with exits and entrances. The original objective might not have been achieved, but there had been incident enough, and in climbing five peaks and traversing a dozen passes we had come to know a delectable corner of the Pyrenees.

In 1982 I reverted to the Alps and a Verbier/Zermatt High Route with Alan and Elsbeth Blackshaw, only to have my Pyrenean prejudices confirmed. The 1983 True Brit party included Alan and Nick Wedgwood, Julian Lush, John Wilkinson and David Williams. We left Gèdre on 7 March just ahead of the spring squalls, bound for Luchon or bust. On the second day out, Campbieil (3051m) fell to us from the south and, in the wake of the matchless Williams, the whole team survived the first British ski descent of the 850m WSW couloir intact to finish a memorable day at St Lary with a tally of 1535m ascent and 1620m descent.

Between the Cirque de Troumouse and the Spanish Ribagorca lies the Sobrare. This is still one of the remotest stretches of the Pyrenees, with an unavoidable four-to-five day passage between St Lary and Benasque. Even in good weather with a flying start from the Bielsa tunnel, the route to the Refuge Trigoniero in Spain, traversing a succession of cols, is tricky. By mid-morning on 10 March, at about the half-way mark, 15cm of new snow had already fallen. At this point, on a delicate passage above the cliffs that overlook the upper Hechempy valley, John Wilkinson dislocated a shoulder and fractured an arm. With such handicaps, the descent of the Hechempy in poor visibility, variable snow and outlandish sacks was serious stuff. Nick and Julian took the last 30m of the exit couloir direct in tandem, with Nick riding Julian's head. Escape to Fabian down the Moudang valley gauntlet, its flanks seared by the debris of avalanches past and present, is best avoided in any conditions. 13 hours after starting we were back in St Lary recasting plans. Unbowed and imperturbable, John returned to England next day. To lighten the gloom and allow the weather to settle, the rest of us took a mid-week break in the Néouvielle. Far from the harsher realities of the main range 25km to the south, we climbed the Portarras (2687m) from the Campana de Cloutou hut in perfect weather, to finish a superb day with a 6½km, 1350m descent to Aulon.

The past 48 hours had left the original schedule in tatters, but by making the Hospice de Rioumajou that same night we were back in contention. The passage Rioumajou-Viadós demands good weather. A steep climb leads to the Port de Madère which offers both a gateway into Spain and one of the grandest views in all the Pyrenees. From here the entire eastern horizon was filled with the lazy mass of Posets (3375m), objective for the next day. But after a dawn start from Viadós, the weather turned so we broke our tryst, humped up the

vertiginous Cinqueta de Añes Cruces and were chased up the gun-barrel gully below the Col Gistaín by storm clouds. Though virtually gutted by arsonists in 1979, what was left of the Estós hut provided sanctuary. Relaxed in the evening sun on a green sward, we peered eastwards beyond a herd of grazing chamois towards the brooding bulk of Maladeta shrouded in cloud.

Heavy snow that night finally put paid to Posets. In a landscape transformed, we slipped down the Estós valley to Benasque to expunge the taste of five days Accelerated Freeze-Dried with a feast laced with olive oil and lubricated with Rioja. Aneto (3404m), the apex of the Pyrenees, was still in our sights until a tentative attempt to reach the Renclusa hut was aborted by a black storm. Driven out of the Esera and Spain by the weather we taxied through the Biella tunnel, lodged in a rude refuge above the Col du Portillon and next morning were over the Col du Barèges in bright sunshine. Aneto, now due south, its flanks glittering with fresh snow, seemed tantalizingly close. Had caution lost the venture? The question which had nagged me ever since leaving Benasque was comprehensively answered even as we pipped the Pic d'Arres (2161m). Lenticular clouds curling sinuously over Aneto were precursors of a mighty front rolling in from the Atlantic that was stretched tight like a black band across the western horizon. The flawless sky and brilliant colours of early morning had already faded to flat monochrome as Aneto vanished into the clouds and we quit that last summit for Luchon in a spiralling snow descent.

1984 was another gap year enforced by my dislocating a shoulder during an east-west Cairngorm traverse. The 1985 team – Patrick Baily, Roger Childs, Rupert Hoare, Julian Lush and David Seddon – introduced new blood, and in Childs we had an expert on Spanish mores and *morales*. Starting from Luchon on 9 March, we planned a tilt at Aneto before pushing on eastwards to Andorra. But the crossing into Spain by any one of three avalanche-prone routes should not be underestimated. Although the weather was unexceptionable, it took two bites to complete this first stage, climbing Montjoie (2164m) twice and Escalette (2466m) *en route*. With a key passage behind and the weather still holding, Aneto was surely in the bag; but nothing is certain in the Pyrenees, and an unremitting 48-hour storm sent us scuttling down to Benasque as food ran out. One venture and two days lost, the next stage was leapfrogged by copying the 1983 taxi trick. By this stratagem we reached an exceptionally well appointed valley hut, the Parador Don Gaspar, Artiges, at the threshold of the Aigües Tortes National Park. This tangled area of rugged granite peaks, delectable lakes and odorous pine forests is peerless even by Pyrenean standards.

The Restanca is of blessed memory for the guardian's ham and eggs. *En route* from here to the Ventosa we were stopped 150m short of Montardo's (2830m) summit when the weather delivered what the forecast had predicted. By a series of frozen lakes dropping in steps past the fabled Aiguilles de Travessani we reached the Ventosa as the evening sun at last burst through retreating clouds that streamed in banners off the Besiberri. Perched on a spur above the Estany Negre, in an ensemble of gnarled pines and granite slabs encircling a lake petrified by winter snows that simulates a Japanese print, few huts can compare with the Ventosa, and no *guardienne* in all the Pyrenees with

Carmen. Carmencita! The Circe of Catalunya; mistress of her refuge; winner at 'Hearts' and next day's leader of a column of medieval mountaineers, struggling in her wake to maintain a semblance of machismo, up the Punta Alta (3014m).

Sadly, all such idylls are ephemeral and, as weekend tourers trickled into the Ventosa, British morale stiffened and with it a genuine attempt was made to regain momentum and reach the Colomers hut. But now the weather led the ball and waist-deep snow, two duckings in the Estany Travessani and a horizontal blizzard precipitated a terminal retreat down the Upper Riu Malo and exit via Boí. The Oread's spell had blunted our spearhead, but made a return to her domain inevitable.

1986 was the year of the Picos de Europa, but in 1987, with David and Anna Williams and Carmen *aficionados* Roger Childs and Julian Lush, I determined that we would crack the crux of the Pyrenean High Route from the Val d'Aran to Andorra by a route wholly in Spain. The upper reaches of the Nyiri, Mollas, Tavascan, Noarre, Lladore and Ferrera valleys in that part of High Catalunya above the Pallars Sobira were for long the most inaccessible in the Pyrenees. Undisturbed even by the early British pioneers Packe, Russell, Spender and Belloc these parts are still little visited, despite the recently constructed line of Catalan Alpine Club huts. From the decline of Rome to the Union of Aragon and Castile, the peoples of these remote valleys had pleaded their own laws. Even today they boast their own customs and retain the Catalan tongue.

It was unthinkable not to revisit the exquisite Aigües Tortes National Park before engaging on this crossing. But Carmen had moved on, and so it was from the Colomers rather than the Ventosa that we climbed the Aiguille de Travessani (2755m) as a curtain raiser. In descent David effortlessly reversed on ski our earlier labours on foot, pre-jumping the col's corniced lip as a final flourish. Next morning we set off from the palatial Amitges hut in steady snow to stop just short of the St Maurici lake as the clouds parted to bare the twin spires of the Encantados – the two shepherds of Espot petrified in limestone for disregarding the church bells' call to prayer. The Encantados, mystical object of Robin Fedden's Pyrenean pilgrimage, we circumnavigated in a long 10½hour day via the steep Monestero Col, descending the Peguera valley to experience, at the Hotel Roya, Espot hospitality three generations removed from Belloc's Pyrenean inns with fleas that tease.

And now for the key passage. From the deserted *contrabandista* village of Alos de Isil in the upper Noguera Palleresa, the route shadows a 55km arc defined by the frontier ridge that pivots on Mt Rouch (2858m), before swinging SE to Coma Pedrosa (2946m). On the four committing stages Alos de Isil–Pujol–Certescan–Val Ferrera–Arinsal, we averaged just under 10 hours per day and, for the last two days, survived on a cheese cube, sliver of salami, rasher of bacon and flapjack. Throughout, Anna soldiered on with a damaged knee soothed by snow compresses.

The initial stage, Alos de Isil to the Pujol hut, is the most serious. A steep climb up the Barranco de Comamala takes in two intermediate cols before reaching the Col de Pilas, 2500m high on the SW ridge of Mt Rouch. After a sharp drop into the Nyiri Valley, a rising traverse across the Sierra Mitjana to

the Col Galena tots up 1450m of ascent. The longest stage, Certescan-Val Ferrera, involved a steep *mauvais pas* above the Lower Etang Romedo, where a 10m free fall into the lake would have been unrescuable; 1½ hours with ski atop sacks like prehistoric insects sporting outsize probosces plunging, rearing, backing and thrusting through dense thickets at the confluence of the Romedo, Broate and Canedo Gorges; a sly snow-slide just below the Col Sellente; and a final stage engulfed by night. On the last day, with a mantle of fresh snow reflecting the fierce southern sun, our dehydrated and distended column inched upwards in long traverses to the frontier col, the Porteille de Baia. The exit couloir, steepening to a rock pitch, justified the rope, but at last we had reached Andorra and, fittingly, at 2790m, the high point of the tour. From this grandstand we could trace our route of the past four days by the frontier ridge that curved in a bow to the cornerstone of Mt Rouch still dominating the western horizon. Our timing was lucky. For once, when it really mattered, we had enjoyed settled conditions. The day after we left the mountains it started snowing for a fortnight.

The Eastern Pyrenees, covering 130km as the lammergeyer flies from Andorra to the Mediterranean, make up a quarter of the entire range. Russell once remarked on their 'oriental grace and languor', but a rustic Catalan put it more prosaically when he told David Williams that anything east of Andorra was a 'cow hill'. Certainly, there are the Pics de Vache, but even these cows have horns, and half a dozen others *en route* nudge the 2800/2900m mark. In truth, these closing stages of the Pyrenean High Route coursing through Andorra, Spain and France should not be underestimated. To ring down the curtain, the last two days aggregate 52km, with each rating a guidebook time of 12 hours. For me, this Catalan country with its alliterative catalogue of unfamiliar names – Carlitte, Carole, Cerdagne, Capcir and Canigou – had the fascination of unfulfilled ambition. In Roger Childs, Rupert Hoare, David Seddon and David Williams we had a team for all seasons.

Statistically, the closer the Mediterranean, the better the weather. As it turned out, the 1988 tour got some of the worst on offer. From the day we landed at Le Havre it scarcely stopped snowing for a week, with high winds persistent throughout. In compensation, the skiing was excellent and never once did we resort to trainers. In theory the first half of the tour, El Serrat to Font-Romeu, promised hostel accommodation; the second, Font-Romeu to Fillols, an element of hairshirtery. The route from El Serrat to Ransol, crossing the treacherous Col de la Mine with thigh-deep snow accumulating stealthily windward, gave a clue to what might later be in store. Next day, in a storm which closed every lift in Soldeu and El Tartar and the road from Andorra to France, we battled along to the Col de Puymorens with the *tramontana* blowing off Carlitte in paroxysms of rage. At 1920m the Col de Puymorens, an historic Pyrenean passage, forms a weathershed between the Atlantic and Mediterranean and has an evil reputation in winter. From here we planned to traverse, or at least circumnavigate, Carlitte (2921m), Charlemagne's namesake. In the event, the only possible outcome of the six-hour epic ascent up the Lanous valley to the Baraque des Ingénieurs – snow-filled but friendly – was to reverse the ground so hardly won the following day and count our blessings to have reached Font-Romeu, weather-battered but otherwise intact.

Seven days into the tour but barely at the half-way mark, we had only four days in hand, with the prospect of serious avalanches after so much bad weather. But when on the morning of 9 March the sun appeared for the first time in a week, flooding the length and breadth of the Cerdagne and etching the myriad villages of this glorious upland valley in unfamiliar clarity, our venture took wings. The next two stages – Err-Nuria-Ull der Terr, traversing Puigmal (2910m) and the Pics de Vache (2826m and 2821m) *en route* – took only 4½ and 5¾ hours respectively. Any avalanche threat was literally blown away by the north wind – our companion for the next three days – which either scattered the snow as chaff or froze it solid. But when David Williams, spearheading the attack with Rupert Hoare, went down to a bug in the grotty winter quarters under the Ull der Terr hut, what odds the morrow's 25km stage? Happily, the extra hours in bed so restored our hero that for most of the next day he was never more than a speck on the sastrugi skyline. These exceptional ski conditions made for a bumpy ride but a fast one. Under a flawless sky we sped eastwards along the snow-spine of the Esquerdes de Rotja, set high above sprawling forested ridges that now fanned out north to France and south to Spain. Only Canigou barred our way.

Progress was such that we arrived at the newly constructed Pla Guillem hut in a mere seven hours, shaving five off guidebook time. But the prospect of spending those five hours gained on digging out of the hut justified a 560m descent for a night of comfort at the idyllic Mariailles hut. A lovely evening with twinkling stars promised fair for tomorrow's traverse of Canigou (2784m). This, the last great mountain of the Pyrenees, long regarded as its apex and sacred to Catalans, is a world unto itself. Like Etna, Vesuvius or the Thessalian Olympus, it springs from the sea and aspires to heaven. It inspires the lives of those who live within its sight as it has the imaginations of generations of artists and writers.

An early start saw us skinning up the awkward path that delicately skirts the sinister avalanche shoot of the Pic de Sept Hommes to gain the great basin of the Cady, and thence to climb steadily upwards to the back of Canigou's rocky southern cirque. That day was unlike any other. The sky was darkest blue, the sun was brilliant and, though unruffled by a breath of wind, the air stayed cool. From the Porteille de Valmanya we cramponned 150m to an airy *brèche* and so on up a narrow snow couloir culminating in an ice-encrusted rock chimney rating PD with ski. At exactly 12.30pm on 12 March 1988 I stood exultant on the summit.

Canigou is visible from Marseilles, and its immense summit panorama is justly famous. To the east, beyond the stark rock precipice of the Crête de Barbet's 350m N face, only a blue-tinged coastal plain lay between us and the Mediterranean. To the west, the Pyrenees stretched away in an endless succession of white waves. That was now a theatre of the past. Nine separate winter tours, 63 individual stages, 20 peaks and over 70 cols were gone as yesterday. Driving back to Font-Romeu as dusk was becoming night, we stopped for a final look back to the snow-pink beacon of Canigou's summit fading in the last of the sun's afterglow. Inevitably Count Russell has the last word, for he it was who said that 'it is to the Pyrenees that the smiles of the artists and the heart of the poet will always turn'.



54. En route *to Pujol hut, 1987.* (p 142)



55. *Canigou N ridge, 1988.* (p 142)

Summary

There is no one way to traverse the Pyrenees on ski, but the most direct west-east traverse from Mendive to Fillols in 34 stages with variants is well described in the Ollivier-Peres CAF guide *La Haute Route d'Hiver des Pyrénées*. For further variants and general touring the FFM's *Pyrénées Itineraires Skieurs* in four volumes (ed: Ollivier) and various Catalan Alpine Club publications complete the picture. In retrospect, an east-west traverse might give better snow for skiing. The ideal would be a continuous traverse but, fitness and logistics apart, few amateurs could find time for such a project. My compromise was to do it by stages. Part of the 1978 tour was a repeat; 1979 was abortive and others (1980, 1981, 1985 and 1987) involved significant variations through the Three Cirques, Néouvielle and Aigües Tortes. In other respects, the Ollivier–Peres line was generally followed. For the record, our stages measured by entry and exit points and intermediate huts or other accommodation en route were as follows:

1975 (9/16 March)
Pau: Urdos: Ayous: Pombie: Gabas: Cauterets.

1978 (17 March to 1 April)
Pau: Larry: Ayous: Pombie: Gabas: Arrémoulit: Penelara: Wallon: Oulétes: Cauterets.

1979 (8/13 April)
Cauterets: Bayssellance: Oulétes: Cauterets.

1980 (26 April to 6 May)
Cauterets: Wallon: Gavarnie: Sarradets: Gaulis: Estaube: Des Aires (Troumouse): Gèdre.

1981 (27 March to 8 April)
Barèges: Glère: Orédon: St Lary: Bastanet: Aigues Cluses: Lienz: Barèges.

1983 (6/18 March)
Gèdre: Le Sausset: St Lary: Campana de Cloutou: Rioumajou: Viadós: Estós: Benasque: Portillon: Luchon.

1985 (7/19 March)
Luchon: Poulane: Renclusa: Benasque: Artiés: Restanca: Ventosa: Boí.

1987 (18/29 March)
Salardu (Val d'Aran): Colomers: Amitges: Espot: Can Trues (Isil O Gil): Pujol: Certescan: Val Ferrera: Arinsal (Andorra).

1988 (3/13 March)
Font-Romeu: El Tartar: Col de Puymorens: Baraque des Ingénieurs (Lanous): Font-Romeu: Nuria: Ull der Terr: Marialles: Fillols.

Although one tends to remember the bad weather in the Pyrenees, over an aggregate period of 67 days only 36% were really bad, 43% good and the remaining 21% indifferent. On balance, the middle weeks of March probably

give the best conditions. At the end of the day, everything depends on one's companions. Of 20 friends who took part in the eight tours I organized, those who made the most frequent appearances were Alan Wedgwood, anchorman of the early expeditions, David Williams, the complete ski mountaineer, Julian Lush and Roger Childs – these and all the others the best of *compagneros*.