

## TRAVEL

**The mountains between France and Spain are a paradise for lovers of the great outdoors**

# Natural splendour in the Pyrénées



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**T**HERE are many good reasons for visiting the town of Cauterets in south-western France. One of the best them for me is that they produce some of the most succulent sweets I have ever tasted. Only one remains from my trip there a month ago, and I am saving it up as a treat for when this article is written.

Less trivial reasons for a visit to this mountain village in the Pyrénées include skiing in winter, mountain hiking in summer, and soaking in natural hot springs at any time of the year.

But the spirit of my inner child was seduced by the sweetshop Aux Délices opposite the town hall, where the hard fruity sweets called Berlingots de Cauterets are made every day from sugar, water, and fruit extracts ranging from lemon to aniseed.

They were first produced here in the 19th century as a way of counteracting the sulphurous taste of the spa water. Doctors who prescribed the spa cure to their well-heeled patients added the berlingots to the script.

They must have done something

to the water in the couple of hundred years since the spa opened, because I smelt no sulphur while stretching out in an ultra-modern pool where sensors detect your body and switch on powerful jets of water. Like a huge Jacuzzi, only better, and the water from the springs is so hot it must be cooled before being released into the various pools.

It was a pleasant end to an afternoon spent wandering around the spectacular Pont d'Espagne, once a bridge on the trade route to Spain, now a platform for selfies taken against the backdrop of torrents cascading from the mountains.

We didn't have time to visit the mirror-like Lac de Gaube, an hour and a half on foot or 15 minutes by chairlift, but next time it will be on the itinerary, if only to gape at the Vignemale, the highest mountain in the chain at 3,298 metres (10,820 feet).

The Pyrénées are serious mountains, as I discovered the following day at the Pic du Midi.

Cauterets is a small but charming town, with a large number of hotel rooms since its heyday as the premier spa in France, and we spent a pleasant night in the Lion d'Or hotel, a traditional family-run establishment where rustic furnishings and antiques are complemented by discreet modern amenities.

Here in this part of the Hautes

Pyrénées department there is hardly any such thing as a straight road. As anyone who has watched the Tour de France knows, hairpin bends succeed one another in loop after loop as the roads climb and descend from one valley to another.

Our group was ferried in a minibus driven by the ever-obliging André, who was anxious for us to see the wildlife as much as the scenery. Enormous birds of prey, eagles and vultures, circled lazily on the updraughts but we missed seeing the furry little marmots which André assured us were plentiful.

The stand-out sight (and site) in the Pyrénées is the Cirque de Gavarnie, which has been attracting visitors since the 19th century. The great novelist Victor Hugo described it as "the most mysterious building of the most mysterious architect; this natural colosseum" and who am I to try to surpass his words.

I can say that on our visit on a sunny Sunday morning the still snow-capped peaks surrounding this natural amphitheatre were at their most splendid, and we even saw, at a safe distance, a minor avalanche as melting snow crashed down one steep slope.

Gavarnie is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and a popular day-trip from Lourdes. If you'd like an easy hike into a valley that looks like something out of *Heidi* or *The*

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*Sound of Music*, this is ideal. You can even ride on a donkey, or a horse, and listen out for the bells that sound as the cows graze the meadows.

The road from Gavarnie to the Pic du Midi passes over the Col du Tourmalet, 2,115 metres (6,939 feet) and famous from the Tour de France, where a stage ended this year. Ascending in the comfort of the air-conditioned minibus, I wondered how on earth I managed to cycle up it 11 years ago. As from every high point in this region, the views are spectacular, and all the sweeter for those who make it under their own steam ...

On the four kilometre sweep down from the Tourmalet, we arrive in the ski resort of La Mongie, from where the cable car

carries us up, up and away to the Pic du Midi.

There is no road up to this jagged spike of limestone. It has functioned as an observatory and communications centre since 1870 and visitors can use telescopes by day and night to observe celestial bodies. The daytime spectacle is the sun, and the heavily filtered lens allows you to see the solar flares that erupt from its surface.

You can enjoy a gourmet lunch there in 2877, the highest restaurant in France, at a surprisingly modest cost. (The Pic du Midi is 2,877 metres [9,439 feet] above sea level.) I had local specialities including squid stuffed with pork from the black pigs of the Pyrénées, with the chance between courses to stroll out on to





the terrace and enjoy the amazing sensation of looking down on the snow-clad peaks that an hour before had towered above us.

As well as being a visitor attraction, this is still a research facility, and an interpretive centre gives a good sense of the valuable work that is done here in several areas, including astrophysics, atmospheric research and high-altitude medicine.

And it is high altitude. I got a little too enthusiastic climbing various stairs and roaming around the terrace, and felt a reel in my head that I put down to being in the lower troposphere. The two glasses of white wine with lunch had nothing to do with it, of course.

The cable car to the summit costs €45 return and on a clear day I cannot imagine a more memorable experience. Even on a cloudy day the peak can often be higher than the fog, and you can venture out on the newly-built walkway that projects 12 metres above the sea of cloud, and imagine yourself like Jack in *Titanic*, King of the World.

Having come down to earth, if you fancy another spa experience there is a really luxurious one at the Balnéa Thermes in Loudenvielle. By the way, these spas are all superbly kept public facilities. Just as in a swimming pool, you pay per session.

A few kilometres further on is the lovely village of St Lary, which despite its status as a noted ski

resort has conserved its old-world character in its cut-stone buildings and slated roofs. The Mercure Sensoria hotel there is only a few minutes' walk from the square.

As any visitor to France has seen, every village has its own war memorial, engraved with the names of those who died. Most of them perished in the great bloodbath of World War I, and the names of those lost in later conflicts are on side panels.

They vary in style and materials used, but the memorial in St Lary is unique in my experience in that the statue of the WWI *poilu* (private soldier) is painted. His blue coat and red trousers with black cross-belt and boots, his black moustache and pensive gaze, make him seem more human than the monumental figures carved in stone or cast in bronze on more conventional lines.

That is what I remember most vividly at St Lary, although a delicious meal based on local produce at Restaurant Lagrange comes a close second.

The drive back to the airport took just over an hour and we were in plenty of time to catch the Ryanair flight to Dublin.

Whether you'd like to combine your pilgrimage to Lourdes with an immersion in the sublime environment of the Pyrénées, or *vice versa*, this extraordinary region is more accessible than you might imagine.



THE Pont d'Espagne in the mist above the mountain torrent.



TWO steel cables support the cable car as it approaches the Pic du Midi.



IN MEMORIAM: The painted poilu of St Lary.