

The French Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly to Lourdes and then drive to Gedre
- Day 2/7** Walking excursions in the Parc National des Pyrenees
- Day 8** Return London

Departs

September

Focus

Birds, mammals, walking and natural history.

Grading

Day walks only. Grade B.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA20) or brochure

Highlights:

- The perfect mountain holiday for the all-round naturalist
- Birds, butterflies & alpine flowers galore
- Spectacular Pyrenean scenery & delicious picnics in flower-filled meadows
- Look out for Marmots & Chamois
- Golden Eagles, Lammergeiers & Griffon Vultures
- Wallcreeper, Snow Finch, Alpine Accentor & Black Woodpecker
- A wealth of butterfly species (50+), including Pyrenean specialities
- Friendly family-run hotel serving traditional French fare



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Throughout this holiday we will be based at the same hotel in the quiet village of Gèdre, some six kilometres north of the popular road head village of Gavarnie, in the heart of the Parc National des Pyrenees. Villages in the high Pyrenees can seem rather grey and drab, but the scenery around them is, in stark contrast, quite stunning - especially, of course, when the sun is out. We will use our hotel as a base from which to explore the trails of the national park, and to enjoy the exceptional variety of birds, plants and butterflies of the region. The outlined programme below must be used only as a rough guide, as so much will depend on the weather, and how we feel each day - there is such a choice of things to do in this area, and having two vehicles will further extend our options.

Day 1

Gedre

We depart from London Stansted on a Ryanair flight to Lourdes at the foot of the Pyrenees and much closer to our base than the alternative airport of Toulouse. Having arrived in France we transfer to our privately hired minibuses for the drive to Gèdre, ascending rapidly on winding roads only during the last 45 minutes or so of the journey. It will be well worth keeping your eyes open during the final stages of this journey, as Wallcreepers (one of the species of birds that we will be trying hardest to see on this holiday) have bred close to the road in recent years.

On arrival in Gèdre we will settle in to our hotel, with a short evening stroll before dinner if time allows.

Day 2

Gedre

Not far above Gèdre is the Barrage des Gloriettes. The body of water behind the dam is surrounded by delightful meadows of flowers that attract a good variety of alpine butterflies. Leaving our minibuses beneath the dam we will spend the day walking in the Estaube Valley, perhaps getting as far as the spectacular Cirque d'Estaube, where we may take our picnic lunch, before we have to return down the valley in the afternoon. This valley offers a good introduction to the natural history of the region, and amongst other things we can expect to see our first groups of soaring Griffon Vultures: one of the ornithological highlights of the Pyrenees. Today's walk is up to 10 kms.

Day 3

Gedre

This morning we will drive to Gavarnie, escaping from the tourist bustle of this busy road head by completing a circular route to the south of, and high above the village. This is a delightful circuit, much of it through a most attractive, and vertiginous deciduous forest. The forest plants are interesting, and on the open slopes we should find a good display of flowering *Rhododendron ferrugineum*. The variety of butterflies on this walk is quite excellent, and the birdwatching is also good. Firecrests, Coal Tits, Serins, Citril Finches and, with



Lammergeier

luck, Bonelli's Warblers may all be found in this forest, whilst overhead, Choughs, Alpine Choughs, Griffon Vultures, Lammergeiers, Golden Eagles and other birds of prey may all be seen. Wheatears, Ring Ouzels and Water Pipits are amongst the birds of the high open slopes. The mountain views on this walk, particularly towards the spectacular Cirque de Gavarnie, are wonderful - providing, of course, that the weather is clear! The circuit is approximately 6-7 kms, but quite steep!

Day 4

Gedre

If the weather is clear, we will make an early start for the Port de Gavarnie, at 2,270 metres, one of the highest points we can drive to by road, and magnificently situated right on the high spine of the Pyrenees. From this airy point we can look down precipitous slopes into the much drier landscape of Spain's Odessa National Park. If it is quiet, Chamois can be seen from this spot, feeding on the high surrounding slopes. A much rarer mammal, the Ibex, is also reputedly seen here occasionally. A short walk towards the snowy slopes of the Brèche de Roland, perhaps the most spectacular of all Pyrenean passes, will give us a good chance of seeing Snowfinches, and perhaps even an Alpine Accentor. After a picnic lunch on the high slopes we will descend to the Ossoue Valley for a leisurely afternoon exploring the flower-filled riverside meadows, St. Savin Wood, and keeping a good lookout above for the birds of prey that haunt this valley, in particular Lammergeier and Peregrine falcon. 5-6 kms.



Pyrenean Chamois

Day 5

Gedre

Today we will drive to Pont d'Espagne, keeping an eye open in the extensive forest of the Val de Jeret for the large but elusive Black Woodpecker. Leaving our buses at the bridge, we will spend all day walking in the Gaube Valley. For the first two kilometres or so we will be walking through mature conifer forest for the first time, and will hope to see a slightly different range of birds and plants. Above the forest and the large Lac de Gaube we ascend gently into a high and beautiful valley where we spend the afternoon. Up to 12 kms.

Day 6

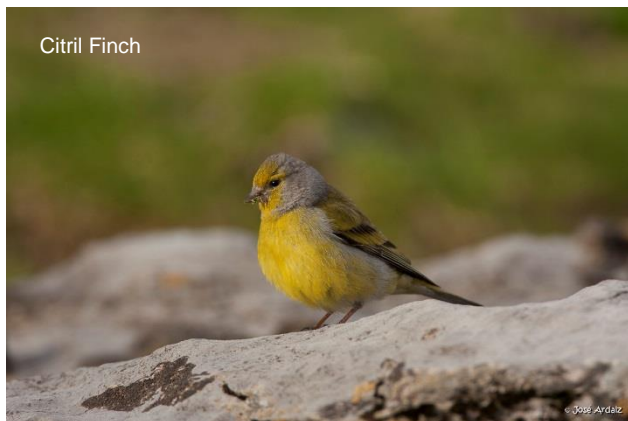
Gedre

The Cirque de Troumouse is a peaceful place in comparison with the popular Cirque de Gavarnie, yet it is just as beautiful, and being fairly undisturbed it is a haven for wildlife. Mammals in particular may be seen

here, especially marmots and chamois; an interesting array of alpine plants should also be on display, both in the bogs beneath the Cirque and in the boulders at the foot of its high cliffs. The more energetic might also like to tackle the walk back down into the Heas Valley: a steep descent is involved but it is a most scenic walk, with plenty to interest the naturalist along the way. Up to 10 kms.

Day 7

Gedre



A full day walking in the Ossoue Valley which is perhaps one of the best areas for both birds and plants. Griffon Vultures, Lammergeiers, Golden Eagles and other birds of prey may all be seen overhead; Ring Ouzels, Wheatears, Dippers, Black Redstarts, Rock Buntings, Serins and Citril Finches are abundant in the meadows and along the streams, flowers and butterflies abound. Up to 10 kms.

Day 8

Gedre

Depending on flight times, we may have time for a final early morning walk before we must reluctantly leave the mountains and drive back to Lourdes for our return flight to London.

Tour grading

On this holiday we will be based at one hotel throughout. We will explore the mountains of this spectacular region, and enjoy their natural history, by means of day walks of between six and twelve kilometres in length. Our pace will be gentle, and we will frequently be merely pottering as we take a closer look at the plants, butterflies and birds. We will probably have the support of two minibuses to allow maximum flexibility, and provide options to each day's programme.

Weather

We have chosen to operate this tour in September, which is a great month for walking, weather and all-round natural history, but without the profusion of spring flowers that we see earlier in the year. As we will be high in the mountains throughout this holiday you must be prepared for the very variable weather associated with all mountain ranges, and particularly the western Pyrenees. Whilst we can expect some clear, sunny and hot (c 75°F) weather, we should also expect some wet, cloudy and cold weather; the changes can be dramatic, so bring a good range of clothing!

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.