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Pyrenees 3000

(Plates 47, 48)

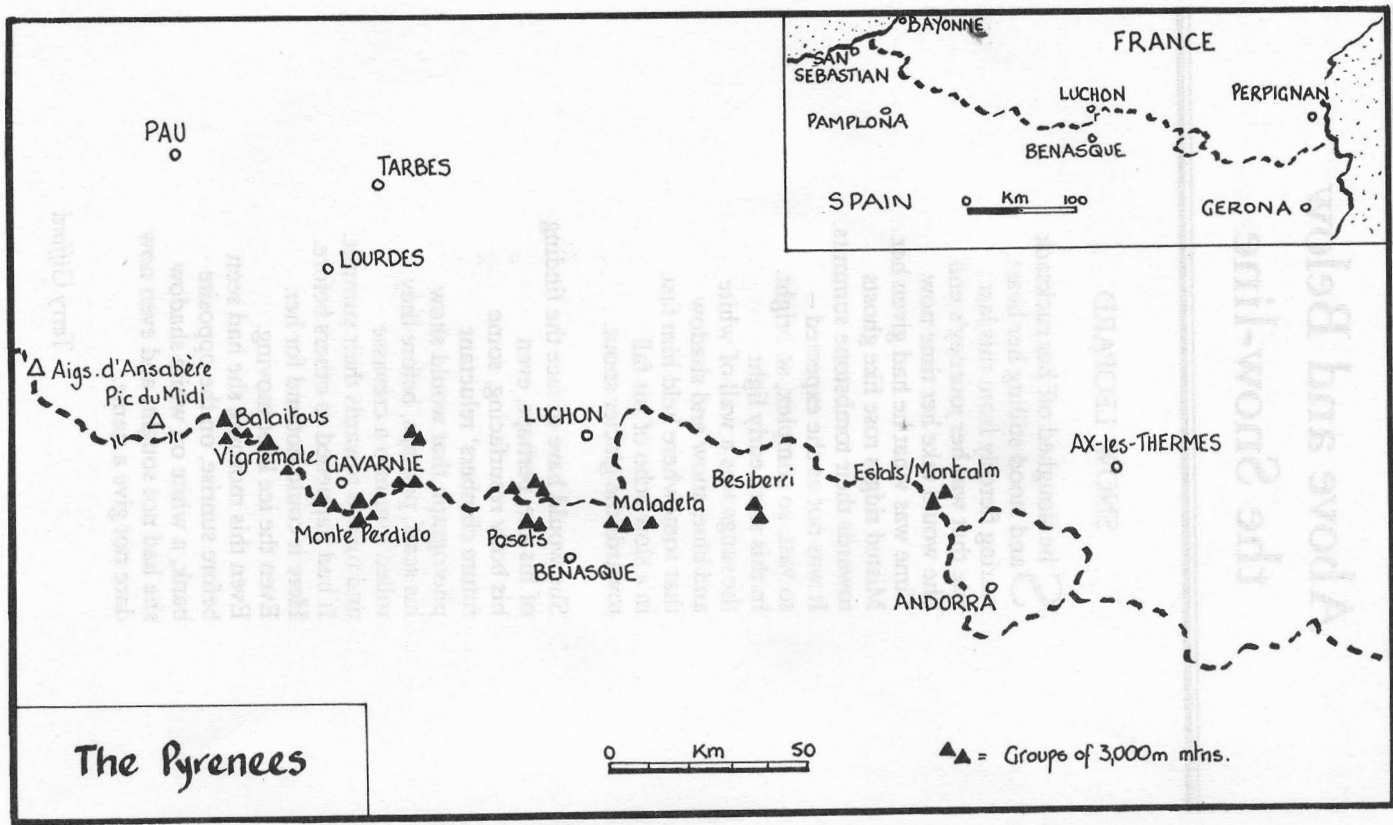
In an age when the ultimate challenge for mountaineering list-tickers is the ascent of all fourteen 8000m giants of the Himalaya; when there are the continental Seven Summits as a secondary objective, and all the 4000m Alpine peaks have been climbed in a single season, the 3000m summits of the Pyrenees may seem rather tame by comparison.

Thank heaven for that!

Here are mountains and wild romantic landscapes of another order; peaks to enjoy for themselves, not to be assessed as collectable items like postage stamps or matchbox labels. The Pyrenees escape such attention because their mountains, ridges, aiguilles and faces remain largely unsung by activists beyond southern France and northern Spain; there are no reputations to be won or lost, and you can spend a whole summer of intense activity there and return home to be greeted by the bewildered indifference of one's peers. Mountaineering beyond the spotlight. Long may it last. Since there is nothing to suggest that increased height guarantees either routes of advanced difficulty or grace of form in mountain structure, in the Pyrenees as elsewhere some of the hardest climbs and most elegant outlines are to be found on peaks of modest growth; for example, the limestone aiguilles of Ansabère in the Cirque de Lescun at less than 2400m, or on the fine, shapely Pic du Midi d'Ossau at just 2885m – a true rock-climber's playground, if ever there was one.

The Pyrenees have little permanent snow and their glaciers are fast shrinking away. Few ice routes last much beyond Easter. But where snow and ice do remain as more than a daub of white in a shadowed gully, the mountains respond with a smile that attracts far-off.

The highest of all is Pico d'Aneto (Néthou to the French) at 3404m, the culminating point of the Maladeta massif just south of the frontier ridge, and separated from it by the flower-rich moat of the Esera valley in the central part of the range. From its summit a vast panorama is revealed. To the north, beyond the frontier crest, French foothills are awash with forest green. Out to the south successive sierras fade into the haze that hinders lowland Spain, while to east and west a jumble of peaks rise from barely-hinted valleys. Shapely peaks appear, like the double-pronged Forcanada, and large, sprawling blocks such as that of the Posets massif across the Esera to the west, where the range's second highest summit (Punta de Llardana) rises to 3375m. Defining peaks and summits is no easy matter, and the criteria for establishing a 3000m mountain is open to debate which goes beyond simple altitude measurement. In 1935 a list of just 41 summits



# The Pyrenees

0 Km 50

▲ = Groups of 3,000m mtns.

was published in the journal of the *Unio Excursionista de Catalonia*. In 1968 that number was increased to 57; in 1977 it was 97, then 122! The Spaniards were particularly adept at finding 'new' tops for the list, and one could be forgiven for thinking that some major upheaval was going on in the Pyrenees as by leaps and bounds the total rose to 161, then fell to 153, then dropped further to 150.

In 1990 a new inventory was agreed by activists from both sides of the frontier, giving a total of no less than 278 tops. So, according to definition (and for the time being), the range boasts 129 principal peaks of 3000m or more, plus 67 secondary summits and 82 ridge projections. The majority will be found west of the Esera where they crowd along or near the frontier ridge, which mostly forms the watershed. There are exceptions to the rule, and some are so isolated from the main crest as to demand extensive forays from it. Most are ranged among massifs of considerable charm in which days of activity and scenic splendour underline the very essence of *Pyrenéisme*. But are they mountains to collect? Or mountains to admire? To my mind they are part of an overall landscape, and sometimes it's enough just to be there, moving aimlessly among and over them. But then, I never was strong on ambition.

Beginning in the west, the first to reach the 3000m mark is the Balaitous, a sturdy massif of grey granite bristling with ridges above small napkin glaciers. Found to the east of Pic du Midi d'Ossau, its southern flanks plunge to a barren Spanish valley via the Picos de Frondella, whose ridge is punctuated by a trio of listed summits. At 3144m the main peak of Balaitous was first climbed in 1825 by the military surveyors Peytier and Hossard, but details of their route were lost for decades, and even Charles Packe, that most thorough of all the early pioneers, did not know it had been climbed until, almost forty years later, he reached the summit and found a cairn already there.

South-south-east of Balaitous a clutch of summits top the magical 3000m mark. First the Picos de las Argulas with three peaks (Argulas, Algas and Garmo Negro), and the neighbouring Picos del Infernio (or Pics d'Enfer), lording it over a wild and stony region littered with tarns. These are all well within Spanish territory and accessible either by serpentine roads built to service hydro schemes above the Valle de Tena, or by long approach marches from the Marcadau valley in France. If one approaches from France, Cauterets is the nearest centre, but that is still a good two days' walk away. The best bet is to drive to Pont d'Espagne, then hike through the Marcadau valley and cross either Col de la Fache or the Port du Marcadau to gain this wilderness.

Col de la Fache is an easy saddle on the N ridge of the Grande Fache (3005m), surely one of the most accessible of all 3000m summits, being won by little more than a rough walk from the col. On 5 August each year a pilgrimage is held there in honour of all those who have died in the mountains. Though Grande Fache itself holds no great challenge, the country it surveys is second to none, the Marcadau especially forming a luxury of soft pasture, stony hidden corries and lots of twinkling tarns.

Seen peering over Col d'Arratille SE of the Marcadau's Refuge Wallon, the Clot de la Hount face of the Vignemale betrays none of the splendour of that mountain's great N face which soars out of the glacial plain of Oulettes de Gaube. Highest of all frontier peaks at 3298m, the Vignemale spawns the longest Pyrenean glacier which flows down its eastern flank and provides the most natural route of ascent, while rock-climbers have 800m or more of slab wall to play upon, or the classic Couloir de Gaube which gives out onto the glacier just below the summit.

Pique Longue is the crowning point, but there are other summits too: Pic du Clot de la Hount (3289m), Pointe Chausenque (3204m), Piton Carré (3197m) and the Petit Vignemale at 3032m, the latter reached by a short stroll from the Hourquette d'Ossoue which forms a convenient link between the Oulettes de Gaube and Bayscellance huts.

Continuing along the frontier ridge south-eastward, the neighbouring Pic de Cerbillona and Pic Central rise either side of Col Lady Lyster – named after Miss Anne Lister from Halifax who made the first tourist ascent of the Vignemale in 1838. Then come several 3000m ridge projections before rising to Pic de Montferrat (3219m), Grand Pic de Tapou (3150m) and Pic du Milieu (3130m) overlooking the deserted Ara valley which contains all the warm mystery of Spain.

The lower reaches of the Ara are accessible by vehicle – as long as you have no regard for your car's suspension. Napoleon had plans to force a road across the Port de Gavarnie (Port de Boucharo) and down through the Ara to gain access to the Ebro Basin, but his road-building plans here came to nought. However, a road exists today from Gavarnie on the French side to the col, where trippers and climbers leave their cars for a short walk round to the Refuge de la Brèche (Refuge des Sarradets). From here no less than a dozen 3000m summits may be tackled.

Most of these form the rim of the fabled Cirque de Gavarnie, from the easternmost Pic de Gabiétous (3031m) to the Grand Astazou (3071m) – a fabulous horseshoe that rises in several tiers, like a sliced simnel cake, out of the valley of the Gave de Pau. Climbers of modest ability can play daring games along the crest, left foot in France, right boot in Spain, leaving the cascade-dashed walls to those with greater ambition. In winter these walls come into their own as ice climbs of fluctuating appeal.

Pic du Marboré is the highest on the rim at 3248m, while running away from it to the south-east are the visually uninspiring Las Tres Sorores: Cylindre du Marboré, Monte Perdido (Mont Perdu) and Sum de Ramond. Of these Perdido (3355m) holds the most interest, not just because it is the third highest Pyrenean summit, but because of the beautiful ice-hung NE face tackled from the Balcon de Pineta overlooking the Pineta valley. The south-western side of Perdido blocks the head of the Arazas, the enchanting Ordesa canyon, while the last of the 3000m peaks here, Punta de las Olas, peers down on the deep and narrow slice of the Anisclo canyon – worth a day or two of anyone's time to explore.

The frontier crest moves on roughly eastwards from the Cirque de Gavarnie to form the Cirque de Estaubé, with peaks of 2800m plus, then,

beginning at the modest Pic de Bouneu, a great ridge system sweeps round as the Cirque de Troumouse. This amphitheatre contains several tops over 3000m, the highest being Pic de la Munia at 3133m. Iizard and marmot are kings here, while lammergeier cast dark cross-like shadows as they sail the thermals overhead.

This is very much 'cirque' country, for the south-eastern side of Pic de la Munia falls into the Cirque de Barrosa, while nearby Pic de Troumouse forms the lynchpin of both the Troumouse cirque and that of the Cirque de Barroude, the latter with a noteworthy wall rising from a teardrop of a lake accessible by a longish walk from Aragnouet in the Vallée d'Aure.

North of Barroude, and remote from the frontier ridge, the Réserve Naturelle de Néouvielle forms an adjunct to the Parc National des Pyrénées Occidentales. Although the hydro engineers have done more than their fair share of taming the Néouvielle region, it remains a superb area for trekking. There are numerous cols to cross, some wild and stony, others green and welcoming, that link tarn-bright valleys where a few huts provide an alternative to overnight camping.

As for mountains, the Néouvielle is not short of 'big' peaks, with thirteen claiming 3000m. Pic Long (3192m) is the highest, with a 600m N face rising from a small lake. Turon de Néouvielle was the first Pyrenean 3000er to be climbed (1787); Pic de Néouvielle was claimed in 1847 by De Chausenque, while Pic de Campbieil (3173m), neighbouring Pic Long to the south-east, demands little more than a long walk and scramble to reach the summit.

Trekkers tackling the classic Pyrenean High Route follow the frontier ridge eastwards from Barroude for two days before the next confrontation with a 3000m mountain. Along the way there are few nearby peaks, if any, that display charisma. That is not to suggest that the landscape is dull or uninteresting. The truth is, a vast sea of peaklets fills every horizon, while the valleys themselves tease with twists of silver and the only sounds that come drifting on a summer breeze are the occasional clatter of stones bouncing through a gully, and the far-off boom of a cascade. The world is just as nature intended.

The Vallé de Rioumajou has an appeal of remoteness. At its head a tight curve of ridges holds Spain at bay, but due east of the renovated Hospice de Rioumajou, Pic de Batoua (3034m) marks a resumption of lofty peaks, although offering little of note for the climber. The frontier ridge continues north-eastward to Pic de Guerreys, where the main crest and political boundary part company. The crest continues to the north where Pic de Lustou adds one more 3000m to the list, while the frontier dips south-eastward to Port de la Pez, then rises to another group of 3000m summits.

From each of these, as from the ridge itself, views south are dominated by the extensive block of the Posets massif, a great fortress of stone and scree, with dying glaciers dashed up high and jewel-like tarns cradled in the outstretched arms of this Pyrenean viceroy. Nine 'peaks' of the Posets massif are 3000ers, but for climbing interest attention is focused elsewhere. There are some charming glens fenced in by sturdy little spires. There are



47. North Face of the Vignemale, 3298m, seen from above the Refuge des Oulettes. (*Kev Reynolds*) (p139)



48. The Besiberri peaks, seen to the west of Port de Colomers. (*Kev Reynolds*) (p139)

long arêtes to follow. There are secluded, sun-washed plateaux where streams meander out of late-spring snows, and high passes to draw the inquisitive wanderer.

Halkett, Redonnet and Pierre Barrau gained the 3375m summit of Posets in August 1856. Packe (AC Secretary 1870-71) was also attracted to the region and made a new route of his own by way of the then-formidable Glacier de Posets that today has almost completely disappeared. Packe's route is now taken as the *voie normale*, but the Ollivier guide details more than twenty ascent routes to the main peak, none of which is particularly difficult. Summit views are extensive and reckoned by many to be the best in all the Pyrenees, while the Estos valley that curves below the northern flanks of the massif, is one of the loveliest of all.

A long, steep haul up the northern hillside above the Estos hut leads to the Port d'Oo by which France is gained. From the Port the contrasting nature of the two sides of the Pyrenees is openly revealed; small glaciers on the French slopes, barren scree and dry rock on the Spanish. Gazing into France from the ridge, one is taken by an array of upthrusting peaks of considerable appeal: Pic des Gourgs Blanc nearby, Pic Gourdon and Spijoles, Pic Belloc, Grand Quayrat, Pic Lézat, Crabioules and Perdiguère. Deep below, in natural stony wells, turquoise lakes hold ice-floes often into September. This is a region worth spending time in, with climbs of quality in a magical setting. As for 3000m summits, there are no less than twenty principal peaks, and another 20 secondary summits to play upon.

The best approach to the Clarabide-Perdiguère massif is from Luchon via Lac d'Oo. Both the GR10 and a *variante* of the Pyrenean High Route make use of Refuge d'Espingo, so solitude is not to be expected there. A better bet is to take a small tent and find a secluded corner with a clear stream running and climbs almost from the doorway.

Luchon is accessible by train from Paris, making it a convenient point from which to strike south for the Maladeta massif, crossing the frontier ridge either at Col de la Glère, Port de Venasque or (a longer route) Port de la Picade. From either of these passes the Maladeta looks impressive: a huge block of mountain on the far side of the Esera valley with two shrinking glaciers draped against its north-facing slopes. Dividing the two glaciers is the long arête of the Cresta de los Portillones. Below the Cresta on its western side is the barn-like Renclusa hut, while Pico de Aneto rises high above its glacier on the eastern side. First climbed in 1842 by the Russian, Platon de Tchihatcheff, with Albert de Francqueville and the guides Argarot, Redonnet and Ursule, the standard route across the Portillone and Aneto glacier from the Renclusa hut takes about five hours.

But there's much more to the Maladeta than Aneto's crown. The western Maladeta ridge provides an enjoyable scramble over lots of minor summits and gendarmes, all at 3200m or more; there's the Tempestades crest stretching SE of Aneto, and the lovely firm granite of the Cresta de Salenques rising from the Col de Salenques to Pico Margalida. There are seventeen 3000ers and plenty of secondary peaks, and a long day's sport to be had in combining the great ridge systems of the whole massif in an

outing that will have you gasping for liquid by the time you finish. South of Maladeta, and separated from it by the Vallhiverna, stands another 3000er, Pico de Vallibierna (3067m).

Above the Port de la Picada the frontier swings north, and only resumes its eastward trend along the northern wall of the Vall d'Aran, that Pyrenean anomaly being geographically French, but politically Spanish.

South of Vall d'Aran, and bordered on the west by the valley of the Rio Noguera Ribagorzana, is a wonderland of small granite peaks and an amazing collection of tarns. Some of these drain north to the Vall d'Aran; others feed streams that wash southward to the Noguera de Tor and Caldas de Bohi. At the head of romantic valley systems sheep graze in the shadow of dozens of attractive peaks. Hillwalkers with an eye for the country can dream up circuits of some of these peaks, with remote cols that overlook a true mountain wilderness, while there's enough rock sport to keep a climber happy through many a long summer's day.

Forming a lofty spine between the Noguera Ribagorzana and Noguera de Tor, the Besiberri massif seduces with lengthy ridge traverses, during which one can knit a choice selection of summits that look off to the Maladeta in one direction, and east towards the Encantados – Robin Fedden's *Enchanted Mountains*. The Besiberri claims five 3000ers, with a sixth rising east of the Cavallers dam (Punta Alta, 3014m).

It's a long trek east from the Besiberri massif to find the last of the 3000m peaks in the Pyrenees. It's a trek that goes out to the Vall d'Aran, then tackles several high passes round Mont Roig, crosses some challenging wild country, visits more tarns and, at last, cuts along the Vall Ferrera to the slopes of Pica d'Estats (3143m), the most cluttered summit of all, across which the Franco-Spanish border hiccups its silent way.

Estats is linked with Pic de Sottlo (3075m), which is also on the frontier ridge, and by a spur to Pic de Montcalm (3077m) towering over the forested tangle of valleys of Ariège. On the summit of Montcalm stands a large cairn, erected back in 1827 by Coroboef and Testu who first stood there and tried to unravel the geography of this delightful, yet still largely unworked range.

The Estats–Montcalm massif attracts more by its altitude than by any great mountaineering challenge or charisma. There are no rock climbs to speak of. The main summits are all accessible from Refugi de Vall Ferrera without much difficulty, while an opportunity to create some airy ridge-walks provides the proper focus for one's energies. However, the tangled, seemingly remote mountain landscape spread below and all around gives an impression of solitude.

Off to the east a corrugation of peak and ridge marks the rim of Andorra. Beyond that, various massifs hold their own individual appeal, rising and falling towards the Mediterranean. They may not claim any more 3000ers, but those who love mountains for what they are, and not what reputation has given them, who care more for time spent among them than as part of a 'ticking' campaign, will be well content. For every day spent among the hills is a day worth living.