

Along the Pyrenees Trail

By L. Peat O'Neil

Potomac Review, Fall/Winter 2001-02

It was September, the time of chestnuts ripening. The lanes were piled with the spiked and studded nuts still in their green outer casings. Where a car had passed, the crushed shell exposed the fat brown nuts. Women with wooden tongs collected the nuts in plastic supermarket sacks. The special baskets they once used now show up mostly as decoration in fancy inns or country restaurants, and the women now wear gloves to protect their hands from the spikes.

Complementing the bright green of ripening chestnuts overhead, trees dropped yellow or brown leaves; underfoot, the crisp feel of autumn met my steps as I set off to walk across France on the Pyrenees Mountain trail that runs from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. Just as back home in the United States, long distance paths in Europe are usually in rural or wooded areas and bear regular markings. But here, hikers sleep in small dormitories, called gites d'étape, that are better equipped than the Spartan shelters on the Appalachian Trail. In France, on the Grande Randonnée (GR) path system, you're never far from a village, so detours for lodging at an inn don't represent a day or more off the trail. The Pyrenees routes are relatively empty, especially after August. Even where there were characters on the French trails, they weren't like the ones I've met on trails in the U.S.: the gear heads, wan through-hikers rationing water, or noisy clusters of Boy Scouts trampling the wild flowers and strewing candy wrappers.

I had other reasons for hiking in France. The food is immeasurably better than in North America and for a woman alone, it's safe.

Count Henry Patrick Russell, the famous Irish-French mountaineer, wrote in his 1873 guidebook *Biarritz and Basque Countries*, "There is nothing in France more beautiful than the Basque

Pyrenees; and the only unpleasant thing to be said against them is the changeableness of the weather, a misfortune common and peculiar to most countries placed between mountains and the sea."

Up in the foothills of the Pyrenees the winters bring snow and ice, and spring is Alpine. But lower down, between the rivers that fan out from the mountains west to the Atlantic and east to the Mediterranean, the cold season rarely brings anything more serious than rain. Spring and fall are glorious while the summer months are hot and dry, perfect for grape production. And walking.

The GR10 runs from Hendaye on the Atlantic, through the Basque homelands, on through the craggy Ariège, around Andorra, across the old Comté de Foix, to Banyuls on the Mediterranean in the heart of Catalonia. In between, the trail rises and falls with the terrain, at a slightly lower altitude than the HRP, the Haute Randonnée Pyrénéenne. At times the GR10 twines with the HRP and weaves in and out of Spain. In places the trail snaked along country lanes or through farms.

Hendaye in Russell's day was a one-hotel village with fewer than 1,000 residents. Today it is a resort and retirement community with an ample tax base to support public facilities like jogging paths, marinas, libraries and parks. My train from Paris arrived in late afternoon; I scooped up sandy water from the Atlantic Ocean, sealed it in an empty film canister, faced east and began walking. Under a darkening Maxfield Parrish blue sky, I hoofed into Biriattou, a tourist getaway spot in the piedmont.

When I headed for dinner at Les Jardins de Bakea, a rather fancy restaurant, the desk clerk stared at my shorts-so I changed into my only other outfit, black Lycra pants and a fleece top with long sleeves. I roasted in the warm dining room with beamed ceilings and elaborate bouquets of dried flowers tucked in the fireplaces; next time, I supposed, I'd have to hike with a dress, something you never need on the Appalachian Trail.

Marching uphill the next day, I heard gunfire in the distance. A hunter appeared with a pheasant slung on his back. The season had started two days ago, he said, but not to worry. "Hunters pay

attention, they don't shoot just anywhere." I tied a bright orange jersey to my pack and a red bandana on my head. Shortly after that, I flushed a female pheasant. The bird darted back into the underbrush and I cackled with delight that the hunter had missed her, though chances were he had bagged her brighter plumed mate.

Though the border between France and Spain, set by the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659, roughly follows the Pyrenees, there are pockets where one nation or the other spills over. Basque country-Euskal Herria, or "land of Euskera speakers"-on the Atlantic is really a separate nation, culturally and politically, though the three provinces in France and four in Spain must still answer to their respective governments, on the Spanish side betimes violently.

A dour looking and suspicious old woman looked me up and down at the Café d'Inzola where I stopped for coffee and some juice on the Spanish Basque side. The daughter served me while Mama prowled the room flashing glares at me and Papa smoked and stared down at the seedy duck pond below the parking area. I was the only patron in the café. On the trail, I'd chatted with several golden age walkers, none of them wearing proper footwear. The women were hopping along in dance sandals trying to avoid puddles; the men wore soft-soled loafers. They were having a splendid time of it.

During the summer of 1843 Victor Hugo lumbered from village to village by mail coach or farm wagon. He wrote in his sketchbooks; pen and ink drawings share pages with notes, pressed flowers and mountain grasses. I share these habits of collection, annotation and sketching. I like to think he paused on his walks to draw the same steeples and stone walls.

Most visitors to La Rhune, a relatively modest Basque peak at 2,953 feet, make the ascent in the little tram built for Victorian-era tourists who flocked to the Pyrenees to enjoy clean mountain air and drink the curative waters. With the advent of tourism, natural features-waterfalls, caves, and mountains-became "attractions." The enormous cave system near Sare, called the grotto of Atchuria, drew the bourgeoisie and royal visitors like Napoleon

III and the Empress Eugenie who toured the caves in 1858.

Russell easily ascended La Rhune, where Wellington defeated the French in October of 1813. "The country," wrote Russell, "is charming, Indian-corn, meadows, and woods alternating with rugged little cliffs, quite yellow with gorse. Two hours ... will take a man to the summit; but a lady takes three."

The morning romp to the summit of La Rhune didn't take this lady anywhere near three hours, less than two in fact. The path was worn bare through the bracken and I'd stop at exposed rocks to survey the vistas shrouded in mist. On the way down to Sare, the tourist train rattled past about a quarter of a mile to my left. A couple of pottocks - small ponies - rested in the shade of a crumbling stone barn, a ruin easily old enough to have sheltered wounded troops two hundred years ago during the Peninsular War.

Between the peaks of Atchuria and Ibontelly, peasants used to hang nets between trees to catch ring doves during their autumn migration across the Pyrenees. In this era of sensitivity to threatened species, I wondered, does this 19th century practice described by Russell and other writers endure?

Russell was right about the weather; more than a few mornings opened with light drizzle that passed into the next valley by midday. After wrestling once with the poncho, which felt like an enshrouding wet shower curtain, I banished it and relied on the Gore-Tex rain jacket, which didn't quite cover my pack or my lower legs, but if the rain was a soaker, I'd probably be cooling my heels indoors anyway. Afternoons usually brought blasting sunshine. Often I'd walk through the midday hours and stop later to eat sandwiches, dry sausage or cheese when I needed a break from the sun.

I lost the track of the GR10 close to the *fronton* in Sare, where a festival was underway. Men done up in white pants with red sashes wandered from bar to bar thumping each other's shoulders, singing and dancing. A group of British bird watchers clumped together in the main hotel, hoping their rooms were still available. Every Basque village revolves around its fronton, the *pelota* (handball) court, also called the *jeu de paume* or the *rebot*, and

sometimes the handball wall backs on the church or town hall. After wandering down a steep winding road I traced and retraced my steps along a stream bank, hunting for the red and white trail markers. A young woman walking along the road told me she was soon to start an au-pair job in San Francisco and pointed out a hidden narrow country lane which would rejoin the path closer to Ainhoa on the border with Spain.

Ainhoa lies east of Sare on the right bank of the Nivelle. About 500 feet above sea level, the town commands a well-cultivated plateau. Russell mentions the Opoka inn and describes the church as “curious.” As night fell and I hadn’t found shelter for the night—every inn including the Opoka (now Oppoca) was booked solid with wealthy merry-making travelers, judging by the parking lots filled with Mercedes and the brisk waiters popping corks in all the hotel dining rooms—I contemplated sleeping in the small walled graveyard surrounding that odd church perched in the center of town. I considered my options at a nearby bar. Soon I confided in Mme. Ezkurra, the proprietor, and she called around, finding a room in a campground-pension near the Spanish frontier, within earshot of the racing torrents, a junction of streams that feed the Nivelle River, background music for a deep sleep. A retired postman holding up one end of the bar volunteered to drive me the three kilometers to the campground, but first, the British woman at the other end insisted, wouldn’t I like to have another beer.

A few days later, in an effort to lighten my load, I sent the sleeping bag and other equipment back to Paris from the post office in Bidarray. Though I rail against gear-heads, I, too, toted an array of gadgets, including a pedometer that I’d used for training all summer, which now didn’t register my steps—probably dislodged by the backpack waist belt. I joked with the clerk about taking too many things, but he kept silent, wrapping the bursting box with string and stamping the bright yellow cardboard all over with purple cancellation marks.

All that cost much of the morning; by the time I started climbing the Col d’Iparla, it was noon. On the low part I was humping

up an established path, but on the rock faces the trail marks vanished. Sheep trails branched off in all directions. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I spied a Pyrenean chamois on the rocky Crêtes d’Iparla, but it could have been a stray goat. I pulled out the map and guidebook and studied my position, then plunged upward, eventually finding the red and white trail markers.

The sky was pellucid, the air mildly perfumed with mint and blackberries. Other hikers, day-trippers without hats or water, passed by, headed to where I’d started. Some of the older couples were panting and red-faced. There was even a shepherd, wearing the traditional dark blue beret and with a sheep dog at his side. Finally, I pitched down my pack and lay on the last grassy plateau in the shade of a massive menhir that leaned on other minibus sized stones. At the summit of Iparla, more than 1,000 meters, which I gained in the heat of the afternoon, I encountered no one, only pairs of little birds. Ahead I saw a cross, made of metal worked into curled hearts at the ends of the cross bar and top. It was planted in cement and a notation embossed in a metal plate told a story: Jean Baptiste, died July 4, 1948 at age 100.

I walked on for several hours; the day started to fade. Egyptian vultures wheeled overhead, booted eagles, too. Talking to myself, I weighed options for the night. I could camp at Col Harietta in a hunter’s *abris* about the size of a dumpster, a fire ring ready with dry wood stacked nearby, but only cheese and fruit for supper and no sleeping bag. I’d be very cold and I really didn’t want to face a mountain morning without hot water or coffee.... That decided it: I hiked down a valley to Urdos, a few miles further.

The summer had left a colorful imprint on these Basque villages. Wildflowers, yellow, pink and purple, still bloomed, blackberries still ripened, though usually turned to seeds and sour. At a farm above Urdos, people harvested corn, trundling tractor loads of husks under cover for winter fodder.

Urdos was hardly more than a hamlet, dominated by a solid stone house with armored tower and fortified entrance. From a distance it was imposing. Up close, the heavy stone walls and slot

windows for archers set very high spoke of adversity under siege and a time when the nearby populace sought refuge with the land-owning gentry. (Another, larger Urdos lies to the east.)

I turned the corner to face the front of the bastide and discovered the emblem of the rural inns. The door to the stone house was open. Calling “*Est ce qu’il y a quelqu’un?*” (Is there someone?) I walked around on the ground floor, looked at a collection of blue and white Delftware and waited. A gnome-like woman shuffled out from a series of dark rooms, her bright black eyes shining under a crest of snow-white hair cut short. She was bent over-osteoporosis had got the best of her bones and I could see a cookie-sized puffy black mole on her arm that begged for a melanoma biopsy. But who was I to point this out?

The woman, Agnes Hargain, was a tough old matriarch, a bit Spanish and Basque and French, too. She sent me to the restaurant down the hill, cautioned that the village would be up all night harvesting under the light of the full moon. The rhythms of country life rule these valleys of the Pyrenees. Tilling and harvesting, putting by and planting a winter crop, each task according to the season. Animals fell under a sequence of raising and slaughtering, husbanding and birthing. Agnes’ grandson Daniel explained that a calf born under the mid-September moon would be on the table in two years. The pheasants and quail scampering through hedgerows would be winter meat before long, roasted with chestnuts here stored in the special baskets.

Now, though, the harvesting work that took a week or more in times past is done overnight. I walked home in the dark from a long meal in the restaurant and stared at the stars. Tractor lights crisscrossed the fields in the distance.

Agnes told me about the Nazi occupation, murmuring in my ear as she walked me through the village chapel adjacent to the family house. A stone marker over the door dated 1666 put the whitewashed stone chapel at the time of peace and prosperity, after the religious freedoms established by Henri IV and centuries before the turmoil of the Spanish succession and the Carlist wars

after Napoleon I.

I took a break, staying on for three days. When I left, Mme. Agnes shed a tear and hugged me, saying, “We’ve grown so accustomed to you!”

St. Etienne de Baïgorry lay a slow hour’s walk downhill from Urdos, so during my stay I visited the town. At Château d’ Etxauz, I crane my neck to view the magnificent vaulted wooden ceiling, hand hewn by master carpenters. During July, there’s a fine music festival, and the day I visited, there just happened to be a free organ concert. In 1999 the town cathedral commissioned one of the few organ makers left in the world, Remy Mahler, to build a new one in the style of the 17th and 18th century organs of Southern Germany.

In Basque country, the family house and land form the center of daily life. The home is passed from mother to daughter; I didn’t find out what happens if there are no daughters. Sons may establish their families in houses on the family land. In church, the women occupy the pews on the main floor in front of the altar and the men file in upstairs through a separate entrance to sit in cramped galleries.

A week after I started the walk, I trudged into St. Jean Pied du Port, the gateway to the Spanish portion of the long, many-tendriled pilgrim trail to honor Saint James. Trails in his name are etched across Europe, many of them funneling from here across the mountains to the ultimate destination in Spain, Santiago de Compostela. The day had been bright and hot; I sniffed the purple grapes ripening in fields owned by the Irouléguy and Brana wineries and planned to sample the wine at dinner.

St. Jean Pied du Port receives a fairly steady parade of northern Europeans following the pilgrimage route by car and tour bus. Backpackers wandered around the town, slumped at café tables and scribbled postcards home to Germany or Ireland. As I settled for a mushroom omelet and a half bottle of Irouléguy at a busy restaurant on the main drag and watched the stream of vehicles, I realized that after only a few hours in a town, I missed the silent isolation of the mountains.

The day I left St. Jean stretched long into the night, complicated by rain, mistaken paths and overshooting in the dark my farmhouse destination at Arhansus. At dusk, Mme. Veronique Etchegoyhen had sent her husband out looking for me on the main road, but I had cut across between fields and missed him. Though the distance was 24 kilometers by the road, I'd guess the path that day meandered at least 28. During the morning in the rain, I'd encountered a Belgian pilgrim, his map encased in plastic hanging around his neck on a cord. Draped in a dark poncho that hooded his tonsured head, and carrying a tall staff, he looked to me like the reincarnation of a perambulating monk. He greeted me enthusiastically in French, "You've been there!" The "there" being Compostela; because I was walking east from St. Jean, his assumption was understandable. This was the first time I was taken for a real pilgrim and I explained my route. He looked a little crestfallen that I wasn't headed to Santiago, like all the other walkers.

Slowly, the weeks passed, one step at a time, foot after foot. A rhythm evolved, coffee and croissants, jam and bread for breakfast. Visit a market for lunch food-ham, quiche, cheese, and fruit. Fill the two water bottles and the storage tank inside the backpack. Adjust my cap and head out. From 10 until 2 or 2:30 I would walk, then take a rest, paint a picture or visit a dark church or cemetery. Occasionally, I'd take off my boots and bathe my feet in a stream. In a month of walking 15 to 25 kilometers a day, I had no blisters, so the double sock system I use proved its efficacy. Continuing on towards nightfall, I'd find lodging, bathe and then enjoy a leisurely dinner while writing in the journal. Early on, I learned to read menus displayed outside of restaurants and search for *menu complet* listings that included a four or six course meal, usually the best buy and the food that the restaurant had prepared for that day.

One day, beaten by the sun, I sat under a wayside cross while a charming young man from Nancy invited me to go along with him to Compostela on the pilgrim route to the southwest. He was the very image of a Canadian doctor I'd loved a quarter century ago. For a few minutes I considered the prospect, but it would have

meant backtracking my route, embarking on a different journey and compromising my independence. I moved on.

At the top of a ridge after Pagolle, an elderly man pointed out all the little places I would be encountering as I descended across the valley, the cornfields, the church, the château, the towns. Conversational diversions like these made the day more interesting; provided tangible increments to measure my journey. This man explained that the local sheep (*brebis*) are a sturdy breed. Other sheep may produce more milk, but these *brebis* are accustomed to the climate and the rough pasturage of the high mountains. Later I watched farmers move 200 or more head of sheep across the highway. The wife held up a stick with a red shirt on it to stop traffic, then dad and a son herded the sheep across, calming them from bolting.

A farm dog followed me from the Etchegoyhen farm where I slept one night, fulfilling for a while a fantasy I'd entertained-dog as walking companion. But the young German shepherd played in puddles, shook its wet fur on me and walked on my map when I rested. In time I found a farmer sheltering under a tree waiting out the rain. He said he'd seen me coming down the mountain road and thought the dog was mine. I explained; he said he'd call the family, ask someone to claim the dog as I walked further along. Soon a car pulled up behind me, and a teenaged boy shoved the dog into the back of the car by the scruff of its neck. Farewell to the only companion of the journey, on which my age seemed to shock some people.

"My god," I could almost hear them say as I marched closer, "she's not a 20-year-old Dutch student." Invariably, though, farmwomen my own age smiled broadly and said they wished they could do something like this, or offered the French equivalent of "You go, girl." Many men, too, were enthusiastic that a middle-aged American would hoof it across France. "*Bon courage*," they would say, raising a hand in salute. People were always kind, filling a water bottle, inviting me in for coffee, offering directions, calling ahead to help me find lodging. I can't recall anyone in France ex-

pressing dismay that my route wasn't safe, or not understanding why I would embark on such a demanding trek.

The spirits of the heroes of the Resistance dogged my mind. So many cold stones marking murder on the edge of town, like the one east of Mauléon, in a wooded area near the town of Houguay: Assassinated by the Germans 14 August 1944. I paused at another marker outlined in flowers near Soeix on the road to Lurbe St. Christian, where there was a wedding dinner in the hotel. I fell asleep to chants and choral response by the wedding dinner guests, followed by a deejay's mix of disco and polka. The manager had given me a room in the back of the hotel, saying, "*Madame la Pèlerin* (Madame the Pilgrim) will be happy as a princess there." I became a pilgrim by default to the locals because I was walking on the pilgrim route to Lestelle-Betteram, Lourdes and beyond.

After ascending to the base of the Vignemale near Cauterets, I walked south from Tarbes towards Bagnères de Bigorre, another one of the mountain towns like Cauterets made famous by Victorian travelers in search of diversion, healing waters and the fresh air cure. All the while, I saw in the distance, gleaming in the sunlight, the snow-capped Pic du Midi de Bigorre, one of the highest in the Pyrenees at 2,872 meters and capped by an astronomical observatory.

Then, in an ordinary stream in the woods a few hours east of Bagnères de Bigorre, I fell. After a month of walking without incident, I slipped on a wet rock in dim light at the end of a strenuous day. The top of my right wrist snapped when I hit the ground, breaking the radius and ulna and displacing the pieces. I had reached out to break the fall, and my wrist wedged against a rock behind me in the streambed. More mad than frightened, I tried to force my flopping hand back into the joint, thinking it was just a bad sprain. Then the swelling and purple pain announced a serious injury. I hiked out of the forest to a village where a farmwoman, Mme. Mounic, wrapped my wrist in ice, fed me and made me rest.

"Where is your cell phone?" she asked, pulling out her own to summon a daughter to drive me to a hospital about an hour

away. She thought it very odd indeed for an American not to have a cell phone.

Luckily the French medical system is the best in the world (according to a survey by the World Health Organization), at least for the average emergency room patient. I was admitted immediately, scheduled for surgery in the morning. Two operations (one to place five supporting nails in the bones and eight weeks later, another operation to remove the nails), two casts, and four months of physical therapy returned my wrist to nearly normal strength.

But the accident had brought the walk to an end. I briefly thought of returning to the trail after the operation to set the bones, and tried hiking in Andorra, where I was recuperating. The heavy cast and sling put me off balance. It would be foolish to trek with only one working arm, so I postponed the conclusion of the cross-France walk. In the meantime, I read what other Pyrenees walkers have written, and think of my return.