

# France & Spain

## The Freedom Trail



Activity: Trek    Grade:     Duration: 7 days



This beautiful and demanding trek in the Pyrenees follows the Freedom Trail, or 'Chemin de la Liberté', one of the toughest WW2 escape routes from Nazi-occupied France into Spain. Local people risked their lives to help the thousands of allied servicemen and Jewish refugees fleeing to safety, and we pass plaques and memorials dedicated to their bravery.

The trek is arduous and steep, taking us through spectacular scenery on remote trails, reaching approx 2500m before we descend into Spain. Whenever the going gets tough, we have only to think of those who undertook the same paths in fear of their lives to find the determination to continue.

This is an incredible trek with a poignant undertone – a personal challenge which commemorates the bravery of others.



### Detailed Itinerary

#### Day 1: Fly London to Toulouse

We fly to Toulouse and transfer to St Giron, where you are free to explore this lovely small town in the Ariège. Time permitting, we recommend you visit the town's excellent *Chemin de la Liberté* museum, which brings vividly to life some of the stories connected with our route. Night hotel.

*(Lunch not included)*

#### Day 2: St Giron – Aunac

We have a fairly leisurely start today, with some time to explore St Giron if you wish. Look out for the bridge over the River Salat; escapees reportedly jumped from the train here when the guard blew his whistle, and it's where many would have met their first *passeur*, the local guide who would take them over his section of the network. We drive out of town to the start of our trek, taking a scenic road that winds through the valleys. Our trailhead leaves the road and takes us through woodland on a good path. This is only a half-day walk to save our energy for the strenuous days ahead, but it's not an easy stroll! We don't reach any high elevations, but there are plenty of steep gradients as we head deeper into the mountains – there's very little flat on





## Trekking Information

Our treks are graded from 1 (Moderate) to 5 (Extreme). This trek is Grade 4. Walking terrain is varied, with paths through valleys, forest, and mountain pastures. There are steep rocky ascents and descents. There is likely to be some walking over snow and boulders, and it can be very exposed. The highest altitude reached is 2522m. On the last day there is a short steep section with a cable to assist you – most people have very little difficulty with this, but guides will carry equipment to clip you onto it should you feel you need extra security.

The last two days are particularly demanding, and you will need to have trained hard or be a regular, fit walker of long distances and tough terrain to complete this challenge; you should also be used to carrying a substantial weight as we will be carrying our own packs much of the time.

This is a very remote area with no road access after the second day of trekking, so trekkers continuing past this point must be fully prepared and determined. We strongly recommend you have ample experience of mountain walking in the UK/overseas before taking part.

## Detailed Itinerary (cont)

today's terrain. The path climbs steeply up again towards the end, taking us to Aunac, where there's a memorial to the Évadés de France (escapees of France). Night refuge / camp (760m).

### Trek approx 4 hours

#### Day 3: Aunac – Subera Hut

After a hearty breakfast with wonderful views, we head off through forest on another long day of trekking. Our path takes us steeply up to the Col de le Core (1395m) – this is a fairly demanding ascent but the views around us are spectacular as we gain height. We pause here and admire the mountain scenery, taking a moment to pay our respects at the col's memorial to passeurs. We also meet our vehicles and collect our kit for tonight, which we must carry to the hut as there's no access by vehicle. From now on we'll be carrying our own gear, though we travel lighter after tonight's camp. The hardest part of today's trek is behind us, and we contour around the mountain-side, getting a glimpse for the first time of the terrain that awaits us. It should take us 2-3 hours to reach Subera Hut, set in pasture meadows at the foot of towering mountain cliffs. There are often cows grazing here, and we can hear the welcoming sound of their cow-bells from quite a distance. Night camp (1449m).

### Trek approx 6 - 7 hours

#### Day 4: Subera Hut – Estagnous Refuge

A challenging day lies ahead of us today, as our trek takes us into serious mountain terrain. We are headed for the Col de Craberous (2382m), but first pass the crash site of a British Halifax bomber. 80km off its intended route, it sadly crashed on a training flight in July 1945, killing all seven on board. Wreckage is left untouched out of respect, and a plaque commemorates the crew. We continue to climb and descend, usually steeply, and enjoy a relatively level walk alongside a beautiful mountain lake. We're likely to see wild horses in this area. As we near the snow-line, the scenery becomes more impressive; craggy peaks and towering cliffs, with patches of snow between the jagged rocks. It's spectacular, but not a hospitable landscape, especially in bad weather; it's hard to imagine how those escaping France would have felt, making this journey in the dark and in fear of betrayal and capture. After our last steep climb, we descend over boulder-strewn slopes to our refuge. Night refuge (2245m).

### Trek approx 8-9 hours

**FITNESS WARNING: DESIGNED TO BE CHALLENGING!**

This trek is designed to be challenging for those of good health and fitness, and is achievable for most people provided they train well in advance. We will supply you with a thorough training guide when you have registered. Training for the challenge is all part of the preparation and requires commitment! Without it, you will find the trek less enjoyable – and we want you to have the time of your life!







## What's Included

The tour cost includes flights and transport, accommodation, all camping equipment (except sleeping bag and sleeping mat), all meals except four as specified in the itinerary, and any sites visited as part of the itinerary. Any airline fuel supplement is also included in the tour cost.

Experienced Discover Adventure leaders and doctor (depending on final group size) are also included, along with a local support crew of mountain guides and drivers.

It does not include personal travel insurance, meals as specified, tip for local crew or entry to any optional sites you may wish to visit. We strongly recommend you carry a credit card in case of personal emergency.

## Weather

Temperatures can vary widely, though generally it should be warm and sunny; rain is always a possibility and it may be blustery. Cold winds are common when high up on the mountains.

## Passport & Vaccinations

A ten-year passport is essential, valid for the duration of your stay. You must have had a Tetanus injection in the last ten years, and we highly recommend protection against Polio.

## Detailed Itinerary (cont)

### Day 5: Estagnous – Spanish border – Ax les Thermes

We set off from our hospitable refuge, and trek downhill to the lovely Lac Rond (1929m), stretching out any aching muscles in anticipation of the next challenge. Lac Long lies only about half an hour away, but is 200m above us, and the path to it is extremely steep; in places there's a fixed cable to assist us. Once at Lac Long (2125m) the border at the Col de la Clauère is almost within sight. Our path crosses a deep gully, usually filled with snow, which provides an arduous slog to the top (2522m), where we gaze into Spain. It's hard to imagine how the escapees from France would have felt at this moment, having survived the mountain crossing. We are likely to feel a mix of relief and elation, as all that remains of our very challenging trek now is a relatively gentle descent over grassy slopes to the end of the trailhead above the village of Estერი de Aneu. We get into our waiting transport and drive back to France and the lovely spa town of Ax les Thermes.

**Trek approx. 6 hours; drive approx. 3 hours**

### Day 6: Free day Ax les Thermes

Today is free to relax! Ax les Thermes is a lovely old spa town, and a spa is the perfect way to treat yourself after the rigours of the past few days! The sulphurous hot springs have been used since Roman times. There are also many cafés to visit, and plenty to see if you feel like a gentle wander around town. We meet again in the evening for a slap-up dinner to celebrate our huge achievements.

### Day 7: Depart Toulouse

We are free until it's time to transfer to Toulouse Airport for our flight home.

*(Lunch not included)*

**Discover Adventure reserves the right to change the route or itinerary for safety reasons should local conditions dictate.**

Copyright Discover Adventure 2013 / Updated 2015



## Accommodation & Food

Accommodation is in a mix of family-run hotels, mountain refuges, and camping; tents and hotel rooms are usually twin-share. Mountain huts are wonderful considering their remote location; rooms are dorm-style. Camping facilities are fairly basic, but with incredible views!

All food is included except four meals as specified. We have generous packed lunches when trekking, and wonderful three-course dinners in the refuge! Please let us know any dietary requirements in advance.

