

Spain: Alto Aragon

Tour code: JAR

Revised: Nov 05

This tour is a good choice for a summer hike in a fascinating mountain region that is far from crowded and well off the beaten track. The route is truly spectacular, taking in some of the finest landscapes in Spain on the fringes of the National Park of Ordesa and Monte Perdido. You cross two passes of over 2000m, which are normally free of snow by mid-June. On the way are forests, plateaus, terraced hillsides, charming villages, deep canyons and broad valleys. There is plenty of historical interest, notably the well-preserved mediaeval town of Ainsa.

Travel Information

Arrival: Afternoon/early evening of day 1

First hotel: At Bielsa, 13 km/8 miles south of the Tunnel de Bielsa (French/Spanish frontier).

Travel: The fastest route from Britain, and that used for our UK-based full-package customers, is by air to Toulouse. Daily direct flights on British Airways from London Gatwick; flight time 2 hours. Or fly via Paris from most regional airports in the U.K. then train or fly to Toulouse. Or take the car by ferry or tunnel Dover-Calais then drive via Paris, Toulouse, and the Bielsa Tunnel.

Most convenient airport: Toulouse. Then airport bus to Toulouse Matabiau rail station (30min) and train to Lannemezan (1 hr 15 mins) then connecting rail bus to St Lary (55 mins). Through ticketing Toulouse to St Lary. In 2005 departures from Toulouse for St Lary were at 10.07 and 14.03. A later departure from Toulouse at 17.13, arriving St Lary at 19.34 (Sundays 20.06), would mean arrival at Bielsa at around 21.00 (Sundays 21.30); it may still be possible to obtain an evening meal in Bielsa at this time. Check train times before booking this tour or travelling. This can be done on the Internet on www.sncf.com.

Trains from Paris: It is possible to travel by early morning train from Paris to Lannemezan, changing trains at Tarbes or Toulouse, in some cases also at Bordeaux. In summer 2005 one could depart Paris on Mondays to Saturdays at 07.25 (TGV, change trains at Tarbes) arrive Lannemezan 15.06. At Lannemezan change onto SNCF bus to St Lary. Note that as this bus route is run by SNCF the bus timetable is available on the SNCF web site.

Arrival via Spain: Bielsa is 300km/180 miles from the international airport at Barcelona and 230km/150 miles from the smaller airport at Zaragoza. Public transport links are currently slow and inconvenient.

End of Tour: Tour ends at Bielsa after breakfast on day 8. Private road transfer via tunnel to St Lary, then rail bus to Lannemezan and train to Toulouse. Through ticketing St Lary to Toulouse. In summer 2005 arrival time from St Lary at Toulouse Matabiau was 09.57 (not Sundays except in July and August; on other Sundays arrival Toulouse at 10.37) in both cases necessitating departure from Bielsa at 05.30, and 12.20 (daily; dep. Bielsa approx. 08.00). Check times before booking this tour or travelling. Times can be checked for your day of travel on the Internet on www.sncf.com

Season: Mid-June to end September. The accommodation can be heavily booked in August, so if you want to travel at that time then better book early!

Level of Difficulty

Grade: Challenging.

Fitness: This challenging walk is designed to appeal to the fit and experienced walker/hiker. The first walking day is strenuous so you do need to be in good shape before you start the tour. You should be competent at map reading and compass work. Because of the remote and rugged terrain this self-guided tour is not available to singles.

Day stages: 10km to 25km (6-15 miles) per day with average altitude gains of 800m, but over 1000m on some days. Walking 5 to 8 hrs a day. The 4th walking day (from Nerin to Ainsa) can be shortened by using a car transfer (included in tour price) at the start of the day.

Waymarks: The trails are generally well waymarked. But they can be spaced and hard to find on some sections. You do need to be able to cope with rough trails that are in places somewhat overgrown with vegetation and with mountain streams, which may be swollen after heavy rain. The maps are not as accurate as British maps of a similar scale (1:40,000 and 1:50,000).

Accommodation & Meals

Accommodation is in small hotels & guesthouses. Six evening meals, breakfasts and four packed picnic lunches are included in the tour price. In Ainsa only, you will stay on a room only basis.

- ❑ **Nights 1 & 7:** Our 3* hotel in Bielsa is renowned for the quality of its service. English is spoken at the hotel, which is located close to the central square. The town has a choice of bars and restaurants, as well as several supermarkets, a pharmacy, and a tourist information office.
- ❑ **Nights 2 & 3:** These nights are spent at a small family-run guesthouse and restaurant on the banks of the river Cinca at Hospital de Tella. There is a terrace and a bar with a vaulted ceiling. There are 4 twin-bedded rooms with en suite facilities and 2 rooms without private facilities. There is no other bar, restaurant or shop nearby.
- ❑ **Night 4:** In the small and very pretty village of Nerin our 2* hotel has got comfortable rooms with en-suite bathroom. There is a bar, and the restaurant serves good food. There is no shop or other facilities in this remote village.

❑ **Night 5:** In Ainsa we stay next door to the church in the historic square of the town. The old building has been recently converted to a guesthouse. There are two double-bedded rooms and six twin-bedded, all modern, well kept and with en-suite facilities. Breakfast in Ainsa is not included unfortunately. If the guesthouse is fully booked a nearby 1* hotel also provides good service.

❑ **Night 6:** In Lafortunada we use a 1* hotel with its own restaurant. The rooms have en-suite facilities. There are several bars, shops and a medical centre in this village.

Outline Itinerary

❑ **Day 1:** Arrival at first hotel in Bielsa. Depending on your time of arrival there should be an opportunity to explore the town. To explore the beautiful Valle de Pineta, which extends to the foot of Monte Perdido you need an extra day in Bielsa.

❑ **Day 2:** Bielsa (1050m) to Hospital (this is a place-name, not an institution!). 16.5km/10 miles. Ascent 1100m, descent 1400m. Features of the day include fine views of the Valley of Pineta, forest tracks, open Alpine meadows, a mountain pass at 2060m, the village of Tella (famous for its witches) and an ancient dolmen (neolithic burial chamber). The day ends with a descent into the Cinca valley.

❑ **Day 3:** Hospital to Escuin, return to Hospital. 9.5km / 6 miles. Ascent 650m, descent 100m. The route follows the river Yaga, passing through the abandoned village of Estamilla and into a very rich natural habitat with a wide variety of vegetation. Castillo Mayor commands the view to the south, while Monte Perdido and the Tres Marias are a short distance to the north. You will be collected at Escuin at about 17:00 and returned to Hospital.

❑ **Day 4:** Bestue to Nerin. 13km/7 miles; ascent 800m, descent 800m. A car transfer at start of day to Bestue - included in tour price - 14 km / 9 miles: ascent 800m, descent 800m. The longer option is a hard day, crossing the Collada de Raton (1684m) before descending to Bestue (1220m). You

then cross the fantastic gorge of Anisclo before climbing again to Nerin (1281m).

❑ **Day 5:** Nerin to Ainsa. From Nerin to Buerba (8km/5miles) we recommend a car transfer included in tour price) Buerba to Ainsa (on foot): 22 km/13 miles; ascent 400m, descent 950m. Buerba has an interesting church. You cross a remote mountain region and descend to Boltania (643m), which has a ruined castle. There are alternative paths along the valley for the last 8km to Ainsa (589m).

❑ **Day 6:** Ainsa to Lafortunada. 23 km/14 miles; ascent 600m, descent 600m. A day following the Cinca valley, passing through several villages and along forested slopes above the river. The towering walls of Pena Montanesa provide an impressive backdrop.

❑ **Day 7:** Road transfer from Lafortunada to Plan (1120m), then walk over the mountains to Bielsa while the baggage continues by road. You cross a pass at 2100m and explore wild forests and hidden valleys, with magnificent views of the distant peaks.

❑ **Day 8:** Morning departure from Bielsa.

Baggage Transfers

Your baggage (20kg per person) is transferred for you when you move to a new accommodation. However there is normally no baggage transfer service to or from Nerin (night 4); baggage will be transferred direct from Hospital de Tella to Ainsa and you will need therefore to carry overnight gear on days 4 and 5. Customers wishing to spend an extra night in Nerin should enquire about the possibility of baggage transfers to and from Nerin; there would be an extra charge for this service.

Extra Nights

These can be booked anywhere along the route. We suggest Ainsa, for a rest day in a small historic town, or Bielsa, from which there are interesting day walks along the Valle de Pineta. If you are spending an extra night in one of the smaller centres such as Nerin you will need to order and pay for your own packed lunch for the extra day on arrival.