



Freedom Trail Trek **FRANCE & SPAIN**

 **Activity:** Trek **Grade:** 4 Intense **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 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. 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.

“*The trip was amazing, its the first time I personally have ever undertaken such a trek and I have truly found my adventurous gene!! I can’t wait for the next challenge. - Julie*”

CHALLENGE GRADING

Our trips are graded from Challenging (Grade 1) to Extreme (Grade 5).

This trek is graded Intense (4). Main challenges lie in the rough mountainous terrain, which is steep and exposed at times, and carrying our own packs for much of the second half of the route

Many factors influence the Challenge Grading, such as terrain, distances, climate, altitude, living conditions, etc. The grade reflects the overall trip; some sections will feel more challenging than others. Unusual weather conditions also have a significant impact, and not all people are tested by the same aspects.

Our grading levels are intended as a guide, but span a broad spectrum; trips within the same grade will still vary in the level of challenge provided.

DETAILED ITINERARY

Day 1: Toulouse – St Girons

We transfer from Toulouse to St Girons, where (if there is time) you are free to explore this lovely small town in the Ariège. 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. 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.**

Day 2: St Girons – Aunac

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 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

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 Esterri 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 dinner to celebrate our huge achievements. (Lunch not included)

Day 7: End of service

Depending on whether the arranged time is suitable, the option to join the main group airport transfer to Toulouse is available.

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

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