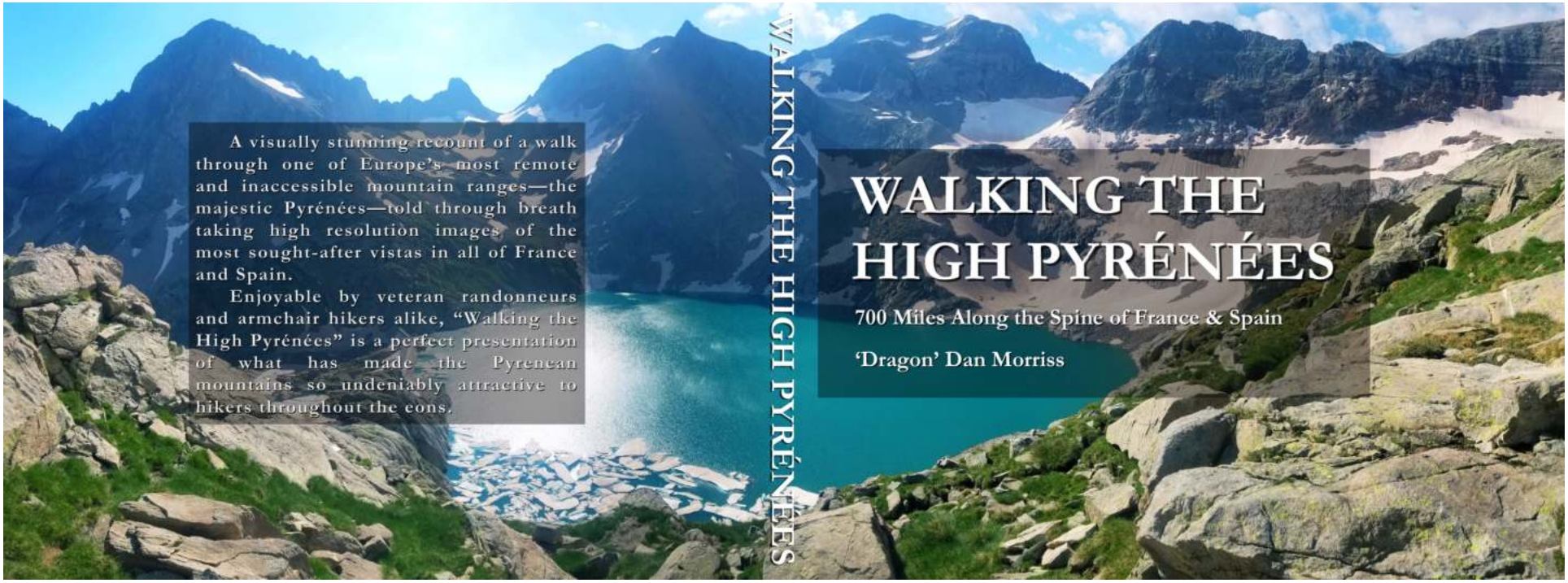
A visually stunning recount of a walk through one of Europe's most remote and inaccessible mountain ranges—the majestic Pyrénées—told through breath taking high resolution images of the most sought-after vistas in all of France and Spain.
Enjoyable by veteran randonneurs and armchair hikers alike, "Walking the High Pyrénées" is a perfect presentation of what has made the Pyrenean mountains so undeniably attractive to hikers throughout the eons.
WALKING THE HIGH PYRÉNÉES
WALKING THE HIGH PYRÉNÉES
700 Miles Along the Spine of France & Spain
'Dragon' Dan Morriss

Published in the United States by Dan Morriss, Birmingham, AL.

Manufactured in the United States of America, with photos taken exclusively by the author during a 700 mile thru-hike of the
Haute Randonnée Pyrénéene, the highest walking route through the Pyrénées range, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

Part adapted from the traillogues posted on http://mnent.us

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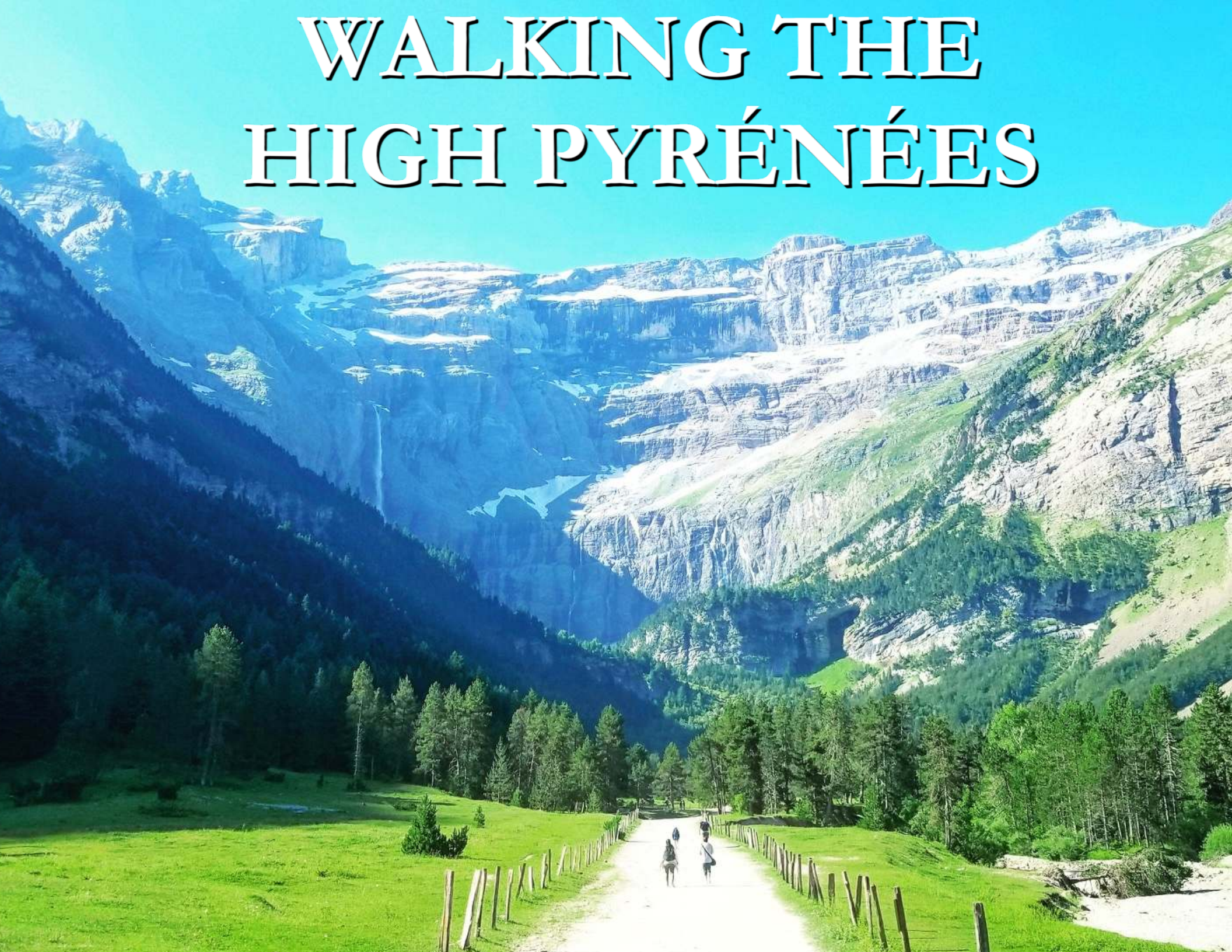
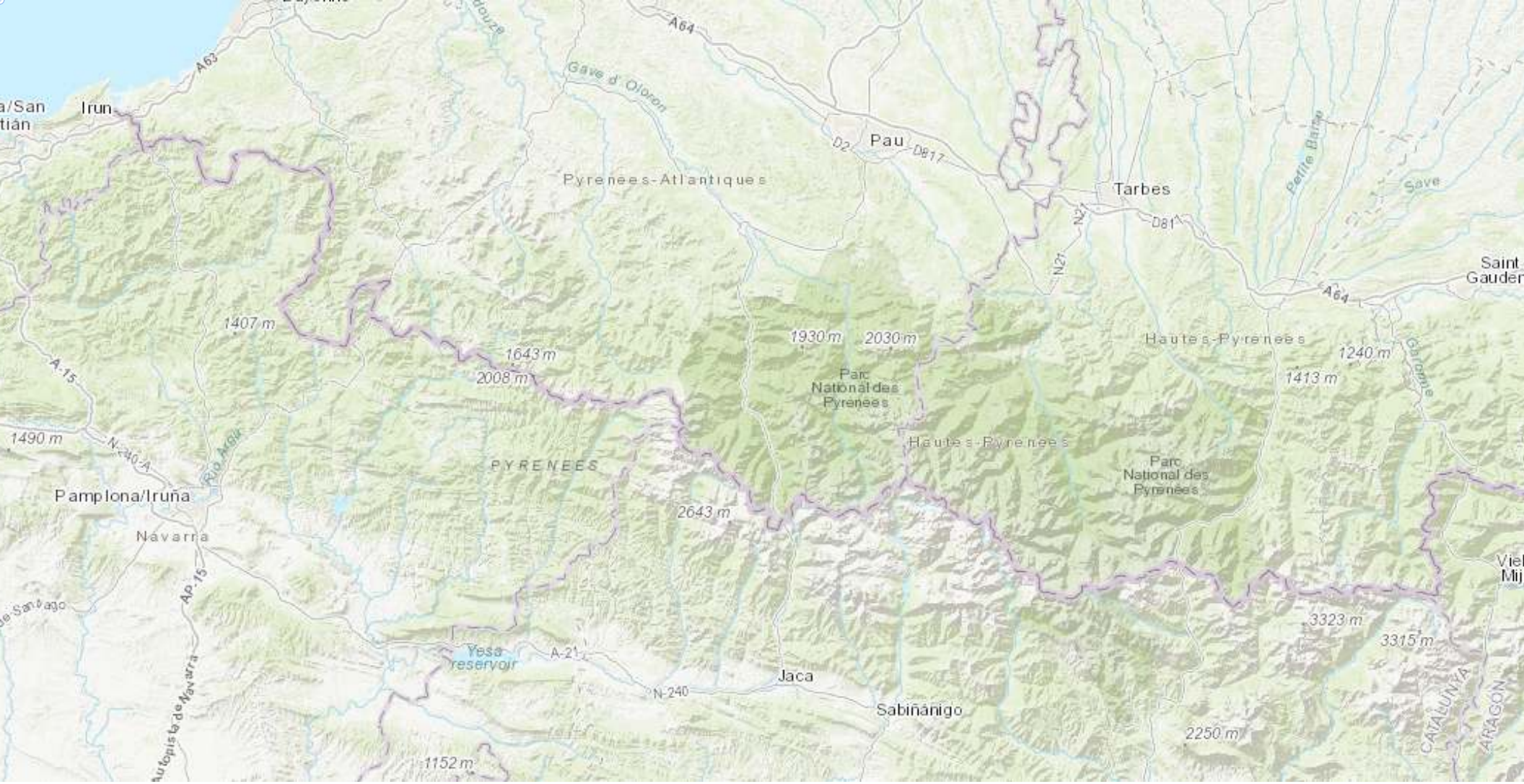
To all the friends and family
who have supported and encouraged
living a life of adventure.

WALKING THE HIGH PYRÉNÉES





▲ A topographic map of the Pyrénéan Range. The HRP roughly follows the purple line separating France and Spain

The Haute Randonnée Pyrénéenne or "High Route of the Pyrénées" is a 900-kilometer high-level alpine traverse from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean sea that takes walkers as close to the crest of the frontier ridge as possible, walking the border that separates France and Spain. The route features 55,000 meters of ascent or between 1 to 2,000 meters of climb and descent every day of hiking. It generally follows a middle ground between the GR10 and GR11 trails, which are France & Spain specific Pyrénéan grande randonnées, or "great walks." The HRP has many variants, some suitable only for mountaineers, and some for bad-weather detours, although on a good day, the official route can generally be walked by any fit and experienced backpacker who enjoys a physically demanding challenge.

Along the way, hikers will discover the wonders of this high alpine utopia, which has captured the adoration of so many people all over the world. The thrill of explosive thunderstorms; the charm of remote European villages; the legendary culture of French and Spanish cuisine; the romance of the high country, the kindness and hospitality of the locals, the brutality of extreme weather, and the inexplicable

euphoria of a final descent from 4,000 feet overlooking the Mediterranean Sea will all leave the HRP hiker with an unforgettable set of impressions and memories that will spark joy and nostalgia for a lifetime.

This book is designed to bring all of these elements together into a format that can be enjoyed from the comforts of home, without the commitment of a 45-day devotion to the trail and its hardships. Whether you're a veteran **HRP randonnéur** and want to review all the trail's magic, or you just want to teleport yourself for a moment to a far-off & fantastical land, **Hiking the High Pyrénées** was designed to bring a walk in this most impressive and inaccessible cathedral of nature down to Earth, for the marvel and enjoyment of all.

▼ The beach at Hendaye on the Atlantique, the Northern terminus of the HRP

▶ The view from a standard Basque-country residence

I. HENDAYE

The Pyrénées are world-renowned for picturesque moments like these. The ephemeral morning mist of the lower Basque region creates an air of fantasy, romance, and an overwhelming sense of wellbeing. Don't be fooled, though: this place is as dangerous, temperamental and prone to lightning fast changes of environmental conditions as any other high mountain range. With majestic clouds also comes rain, hail, snow, high winds and thunder, which can take even the most experienced mountaineer by surprise. It's important to "prepare for the worst and hope for the best" during any foray into alpine wilderness, and adventurers should not set out without the bare minimum of equipment, including: a 60L backpack, shelter, sleeping bag and pad, cookware with a small canister stove, 1.5L water bottles with filter, 1kg of food per day of expedition, a GPS device/smart phone for Nav, Camera, & Comms (author prefers the Gaia GPS app with "Outdoors" open-source topo map downloaded for offline use), an emergency satellite beacon (a smart investment for lone wolves, since much of this region is very remote and without cell service), rain poncho or jacket & pack cover, perhaps a reflective

▼ Morning magic on the climb up La Rhune, the first of many peaks on the HRP

umbrella for picnics rain or shine, a few carabineers, a clothes bag with two pairs of clothes, some waterproof storage bags, toiletries, a small first aid and gear repair bag (sewing kit, superglue, patch kit, dearly beloved duct tape), an electronics bag with a headlamp and a 10,000mAh battery pack, plus any cables and convertors needed. In the author's case, all of this weighed about 8.5kg, base. As far as clothing goes, there are many options to suit the most practical or fashionable of walkers, but the author usually wore a wide-brim hat with wind-strap, a long sleeved pocketed fishing shirt, convertible hiking pants with zip pockets, wool socks, and a good pair of hiking boots. Tennis shoes and trail runners are not up to task of hiking the rugged terrain of the Pyrénées and are not recommended.

The final preparations of a thru-hike are mental: are you ready to hike 20km through the most rugged mountains of France and Spain, taking on an average 1,300 meters (4,200 feet) of ascent every day? If so, there's nothing left to do but start walking. And if not, don't worry. This book will take you to the greatest treasures of the Pyrénées, without having to give up your favorite armchair.

▼ The mist rises to reveal checker-boards of pleasant farm country and lush forests

▲ If you should have doubts about which way to go, a good rule of thumb is to pick out the highest mountain and then start walking towards it

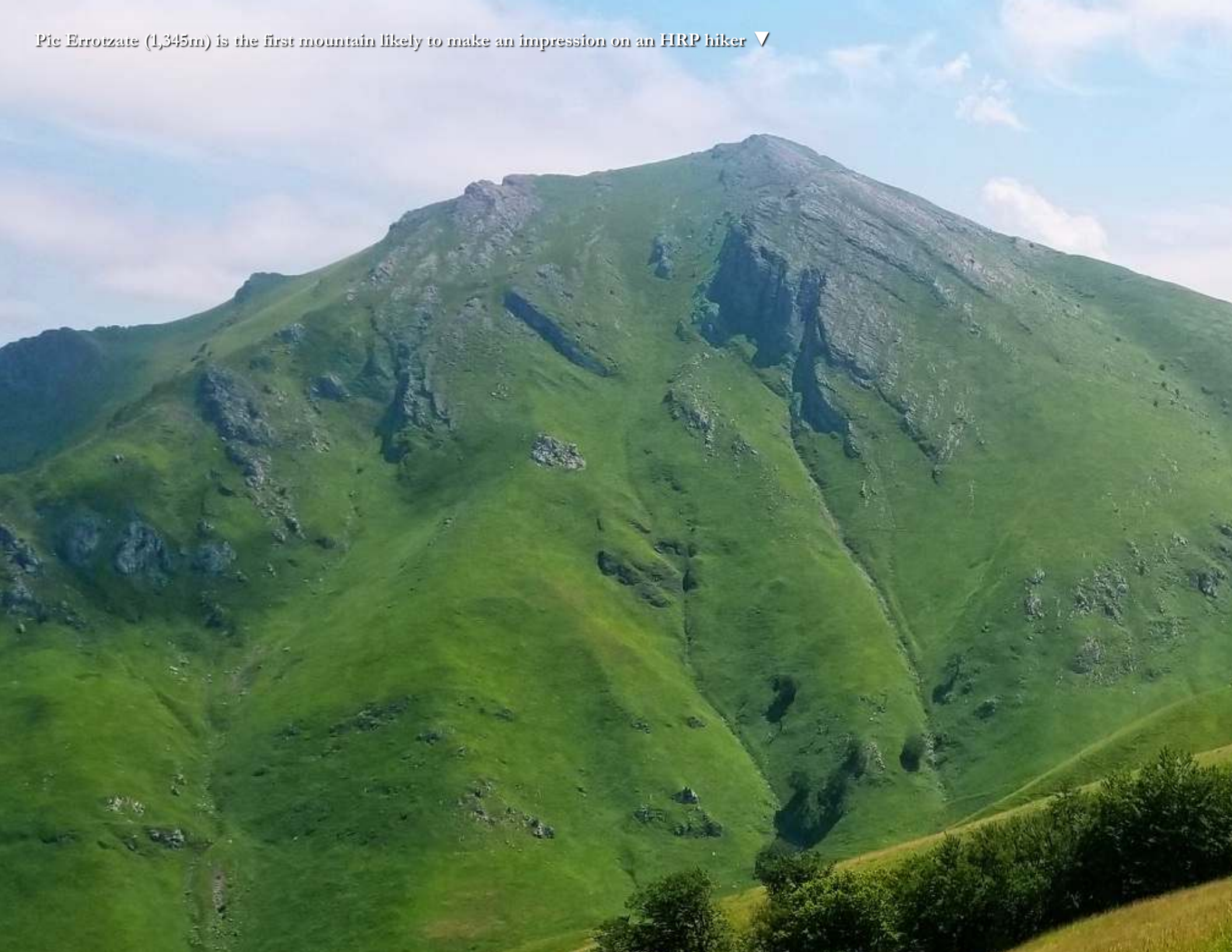
Much trip planning can be done on the fly, if travelers are willing to be flexible. Questions of "where should we stay?" and more importantly, "where should we eat?" will find frequent answering calls from the many **auberges**, traveler's inns, restaurants, and refuges, located in quaint villages that seem to have weathered centuries in their idyllic valley meadows, visible from every mountain pass along the way.

Don't fret if you aren't bilingual, as European school systems teach English as a second language by default. Although, learning a handful of words and making an attempt to speak French or Spanish will go a long way with the locals—you are a foreigner in their country after all.

Finally, the age old question: "How are we going to afford this?" Without factoring in plane and train tickets, the cost of lodging and food along the way can range between $20-50USD/day. The author averaged $30/day, staying half in hostels and half freedom-camping, or **bivouacking**, in the wild, typically cooking meals on trail by buying a few days of food at local supermarkets, with a stop into a trailside restaurant for a big meal and a cold beer every couple of days.

▲ The sun sets neatly between the hills above the small village of Aldudes

Perhaps one of the most frequent questions for thru-hikers to hear is, "What do you eat on trail?" to which the hiker often replies, "Whatever I want!" It helps to separate meals into petit dejeuner (breakfast), dejeuner (lunch), and diner (dinner), in 2-gal plastic bags. Try to stave off breakfast until knocking out the first 5km in the morning. This meal usually includes a hot coffee or tea, instant oatmeal or fresh pastries, and various snack foods (cereal or granola) per your liking. A small container of almond milk and some chocolate covered espresso bits can be a nice treat. For lunch, the snacking continues—granola bars, sliced meats and cheeses with a baguette, chocolate bars, candies, peanut butter & honey tortillas, all kinds of nuts and dried fruits (pineapples and mangos, or maybe freeze dried banana or apple slices). For dinner, think, "When in France." Start with a good soup base (instant noodles) and a sports drink mix to replenish electrolytes. Then, an appetizer of can chicken or tuna with garlic crackers, possibly a hummus dip or fresh cheese. Finally, the coup de gras—a rice or pasta side entrée with dried vegetables, and a dark chocolate caramel bar for dessert. Do carry out a comfort food for every section.



Pic Errotzate (1,345m) is the first mountain likely to make an impression on an HRP hiker ▼

▲ The furthest mountain in the distance is Pic d'Orhy (2,017m)

▲ Verdant meadows and abundant wildflowers bask in the morning light

Packing Light: It's a good idea in any backpacking endeavor to pack in a light, balanced, and efficient way. This can be done by first placing tent and sleeping gear at the bottom of the backpack. It won't be needed until the end of the day. On top of that, you can place a 2-gallon bag of all dinner foods and a 2-gallon bag of all snack/breakfast foods. Then, three, quart-sized bags, one for toiletries, one for gear repair & first-aid, and one for electronics. Finally, the clothes bag can be compressed on top before closing the interior of the bag. Store some items on the outside of the pack for quick and easy access, including a 1-gallon bag with a day's worth of snacks, cookware and stove, water bottles and filter, rain gear, and headlamp.

Every detail of European homes are artfully designed and maintained in immaculate condition. A farm cottage mirrors the Pic d'Orhy (2,017m) ▲

Walkers of the haute route will quickly notice how seamlessly every European village integrates with its surroundings. The inclusion of local materials for construction, the sheer longevity of the places, and an age-old reliance on the landscape for the survival of these remote communities has resulted in a setting where both the man-made and the natural each enhance the beauty of the other. Roads flow like rivers through the hills, towns seem highly coordinated, well-engineered, and synchronous in their execution, unlike some English countries where identically dull asphalt grids of square cookie-cutter houses permeate every city. Europe has always been renowned for its mastery of design.

▲ Millions of lucky sheep and livestock call the Pyrénées their home. Their oversized bells can be heard at all times, day and night

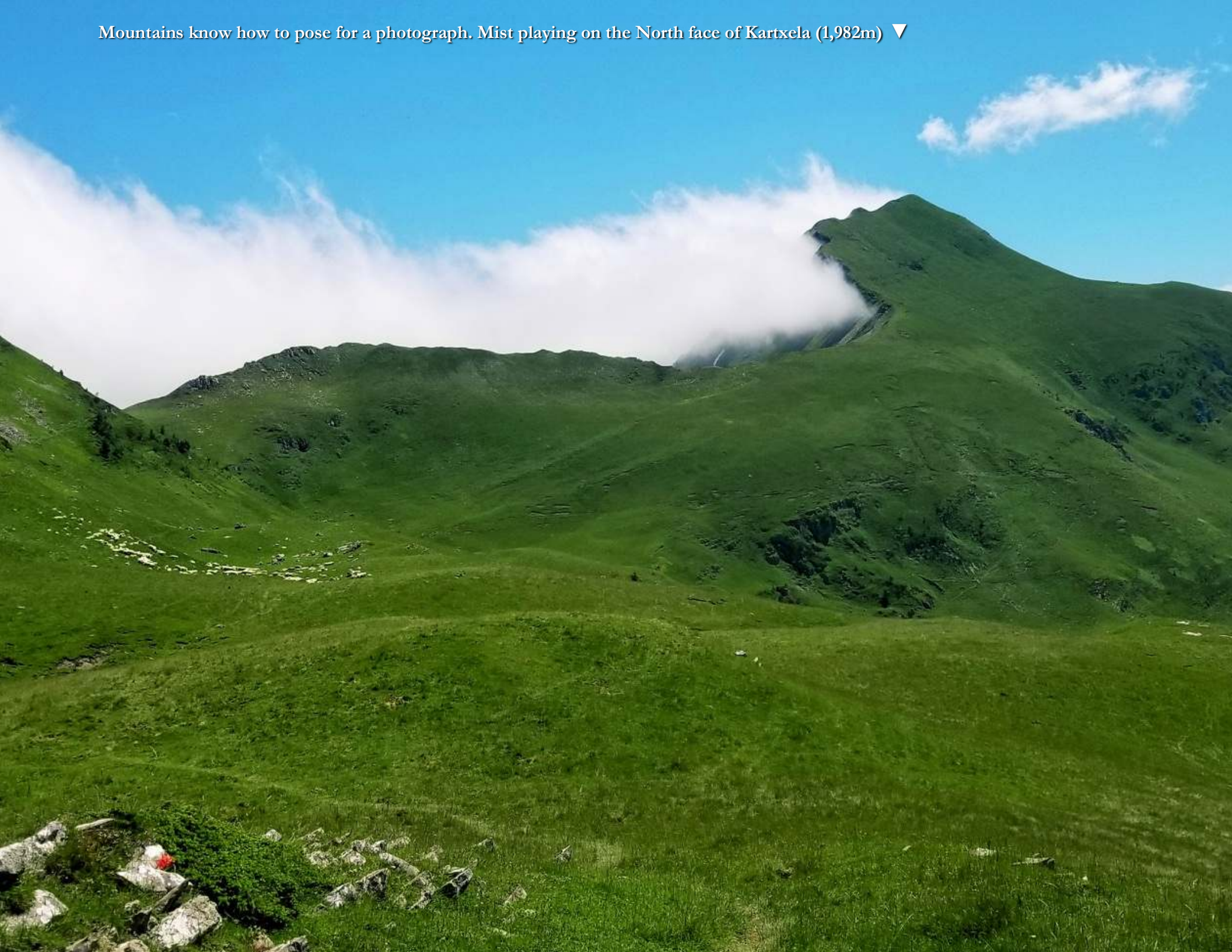
Dragon would never forget his first experience with a high-alpine refuge. That morning brought with it a cold drenching rain, and a fog that stole all the views away. He stopped to make coffee under his tiny shade umbrella, being in the wilderness with no better shelter from the sky water. After crossing a few small hills, the trail led to the Col de Bagargui, the gateway to the Pic d'Orhy. It made no sense to attempt the formidable Pic d'Orhy with an ocean of clouds covering everything in sight, so he sought lodging at the col for the night. After a bit of wandering around, and a beer and some "alimentations" at the

▲ A traverse of the Pic d'Orhy requires an adrenalizing stroll along the knife's edge of the Pyrénéan frontier ridge

local tavern, he walked down to a visitor's center where it was said one could book a bed at the local refuge. 20 euros later, and Dragon had a key to his own private room with two beds, as well as private showers and one of the most chic kitchen and living spaces he had seen yet. The rest of the cold, wet day was spent drying clothes by the fire, many cups of hot soup and tea, sharing bread with strangers over dinner, and a wonderful evening full of clouds dancing on the horizon, as well as a brief glimpse of Orhy, the target for tomorrow morning. This refuge culture & hospitality would stick with him for the rest of his life.

From the summit of Orhy, walkers can make out the path to the village of Lescun, some 45km ahead ▲

▲ The line between Sky and Earth become vague at such great heights (6,560 ft)



Mountains know how to pose for a photograph. Mist playing on the North face of Kartxela (1,982m) ▼

▲ The fog clears on the other side of Kartxela, revealing a valley strewn with flowers, forests, and intimidating mountains

Maneuvering the fog around Kartxela, Dragon happened upon three female hikers going the opposite direction. "ça va?" one asked. "Yeah," he responded, having literally no idea what those words meant. It was the awkward moments like these that pushed Dragon to learn French after the hike.

Later, as the fog was clearing, Dragon happened upon a group of younger Spanish scouts, who had just finished a climb up the foggy peak. As he passed, one of them saw the letters on his pack and yelled out "USA, USA!" Who knew our country had fans in Spain?

As many reasons as there are to walk the Pyrénées, there are also many reasons not to, or at least to skip the first week in the less exciting lowlands.

Even on the easy days, it's some of the most strenuous hiking on Earth. There is next to no trail at times, requiring bushwhacks through waist-high grass potentially infested with ticks carrying debilitating Lyme's Disease. At times, the trail is a tiny, overgrown strip of dirt on the edge of a 45° semi-cliff, going up at about a 30% grade. It's dirty. There are cattle and livestock and their byproducts everywhere, and one can almost never escape the tyranny of the ever-ringing bells around their necks. Then, the overpopulation of livestock leads to plague-level hordes of biting insects, mosquitos, and horse flies. There are long stretches of road walking. And the heat—there's a reason the Spanish take Siesta from noon to three every day. It'd be well and good if every single shade tree hadn't been clear cut to make way for cattle grazing. Also, the heat and weather generation in the mountains creates gnarly winds and thunderstorms, with huge lightning strikes and day-long deluges. Weather can turn from sun to storm in 15 minutes flat. Then, the rain brings mud, which makes every trail more fun.

When planning a thru-hike, one must make the decision to beat all these elements and more, becoming a stronger person because of the strife. It's an essential part of any pilgrimage, to place oneself at the mercy of the elements and the fates. After overcoming all of these trials and arriving at the best parts (the haute Pyrénées), the sights will feel that much more extraordinary, and one will have truly earned every view s/he enjoys.

▼ Cows and trees dot the vibrant green grasslands

▲ The bizarre, lunar landscape in the limestone canyons shooting off from the Pic d'Anie

Looking out towards Lescun from the Col d'Anie. A fine spot for a romantic sunset dinner ▲

▲ The mountains near the Pic d'Anie give off the same vibes that one feels seeing Yosemite National Park for the first time

If you should ever have a major life decision that you need to make, one of the best ways to sift through information is to spend a few hours hiking, due to the clarity of thought that it evokes. A fusion of the relaxing sounds of nature, the wind in the trees, the babbling brook, and the heightened blood flow to all parts of the body (particularly the head) seems to make clear thinking come about effortlessly. One can arrive at some of the best ideas during a walk in the woods.

Not only will it fire up every part of the brain that controls motion, but it will also trigger creativity and pattern recognition while gazing at the geometric tendencies of plants and the rational branching of tree limbs. Even if one only has time for a short walk around the neighborhood, it's important to escape the four oppressive white walls and surround oneself with the phenomena of the natural world, which the eyes and the mind are so much better equipped to understand.

Atypical Night Out—The evening alpenglow washes over a landscape for a few unforgettable moments, draining up to the tops of the mountains and out onto the horizon. Birds flutter hurriedly around the sky, searching for their final dinner morsels prior to the last call for flies.

Amidst the silence, a tiny stove roars to life, providing warm comforts to a stranger, unknown by the local wildlife. The moment that the mountain shadows cover his luxurious dinner table (a flat rock), the air grows frigid, and the intense afternoon heat of a demanding 40 kilometer day of hiking above the tree-line, which felt oppressive just an hour ago, now seems greatly welcome and missed.

The events of the past 12 hours replay through his head: the rising of the sun through the mist surrounding the frontier ridge; the precarious promenade to the precipice of Pic d'Orhy, winding along the crested mountains; a dream like lunch in flower laden meadows before navigating the dense fog of Pic Kartxela; the long descent to the abandoned Refuge Belagua; and the final stretch, without water, in the evening sun, through the limestone canyons of Pic d'Anie, arriving finally at the first water source in 15km, a small tarn of snowmelt, a magnificent puddle that allowed the hiker to lay down his bedroll just above the Source de Marmitou, a confluence of hundreds of small glacial springs, satisfactorily gazing over the downhill cruise to Lescun the following morning.

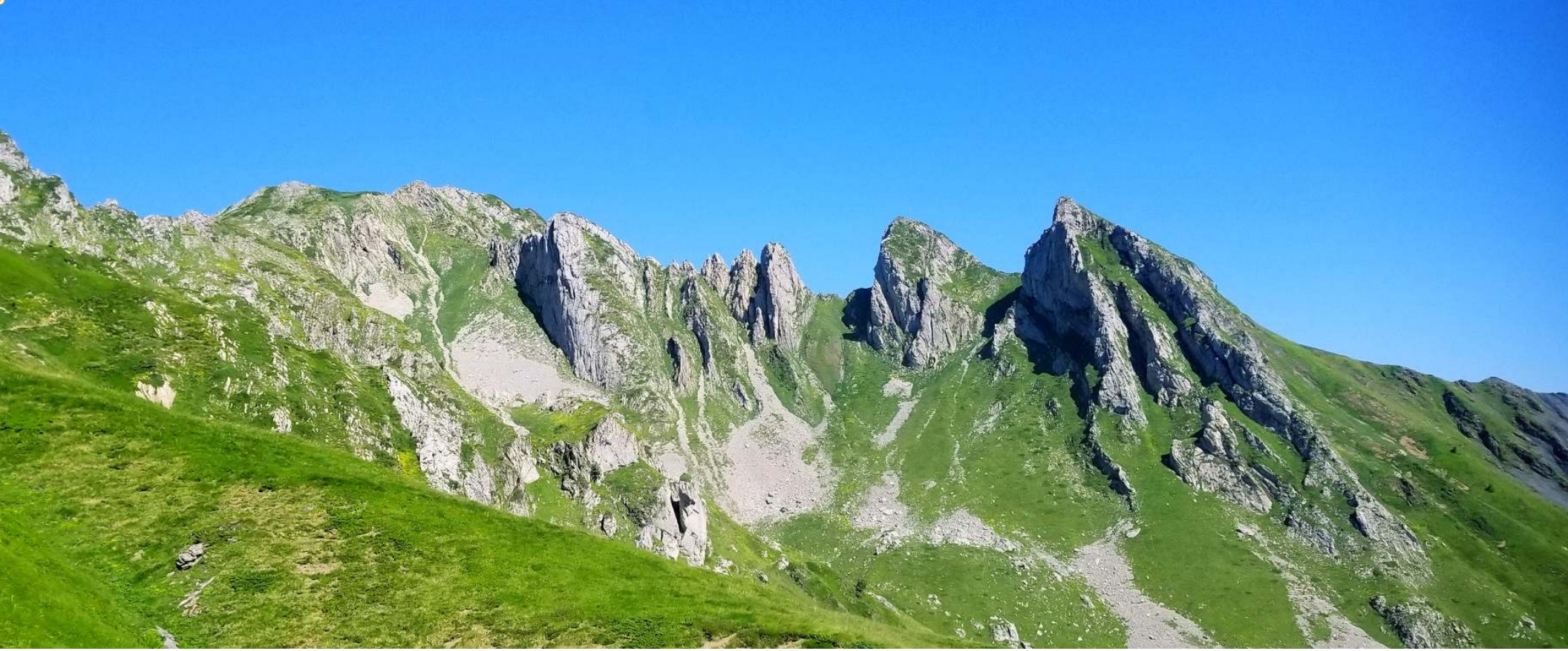
Sleep was the only natural respite following a demanding day and a fulfilling dinner. It takes no effort at all to fall into dreams, as one is already halfway there just by being in the Pyrénées. The failing light of our host star is replaced by that of billions of others' home stars overhead, swirling around at millions of miles per hour and yet somehow remaining perfectly still.

Perhaps the hardest decision of the day is finding the best place to pitch the tent, but the onset of nightfall will make the right place out of wherever you land ▶

▲ The Pyrénées are distinguished by the stark white rock formations and the deep green grass, a sign of the heavy rains that fall here

Navigation: In order to stay alive in the wilderness, its important to know your location, your destination, and the tribulations that lay between the two. A good NAV system should be an extension of the adventurer's natural sense of direction. Dragon relied solely upon the GAIA GPS app on a smart-phone with offline-mode downloaded open-hiking "Outdoors" topographic maps of the regions that the trail goes through. He carried a secondary tablet with the same maps downloaded in case of primary phone failure. It's important to have a track and waypoint file (.gpx or .kml) of the route you plan to take—you can draw one yourself with the trail-snap tool in Gaia, but its best to use tracks that were recorded by someone whose boots were actually on the ground. Lines on a map do not always exist in reality, but are good guidelines possible routes. The Outdoors map does a great job of including alternate trails recorded by all kinds of hikers. A resolution of "15" is the perfect cross of sfile-size and rich map information. With Gaia, you can navigate anywhere on Earth.

II. LESCUN



▲ The spines of an ancient dragon, slumbering for eons under the earth and rock

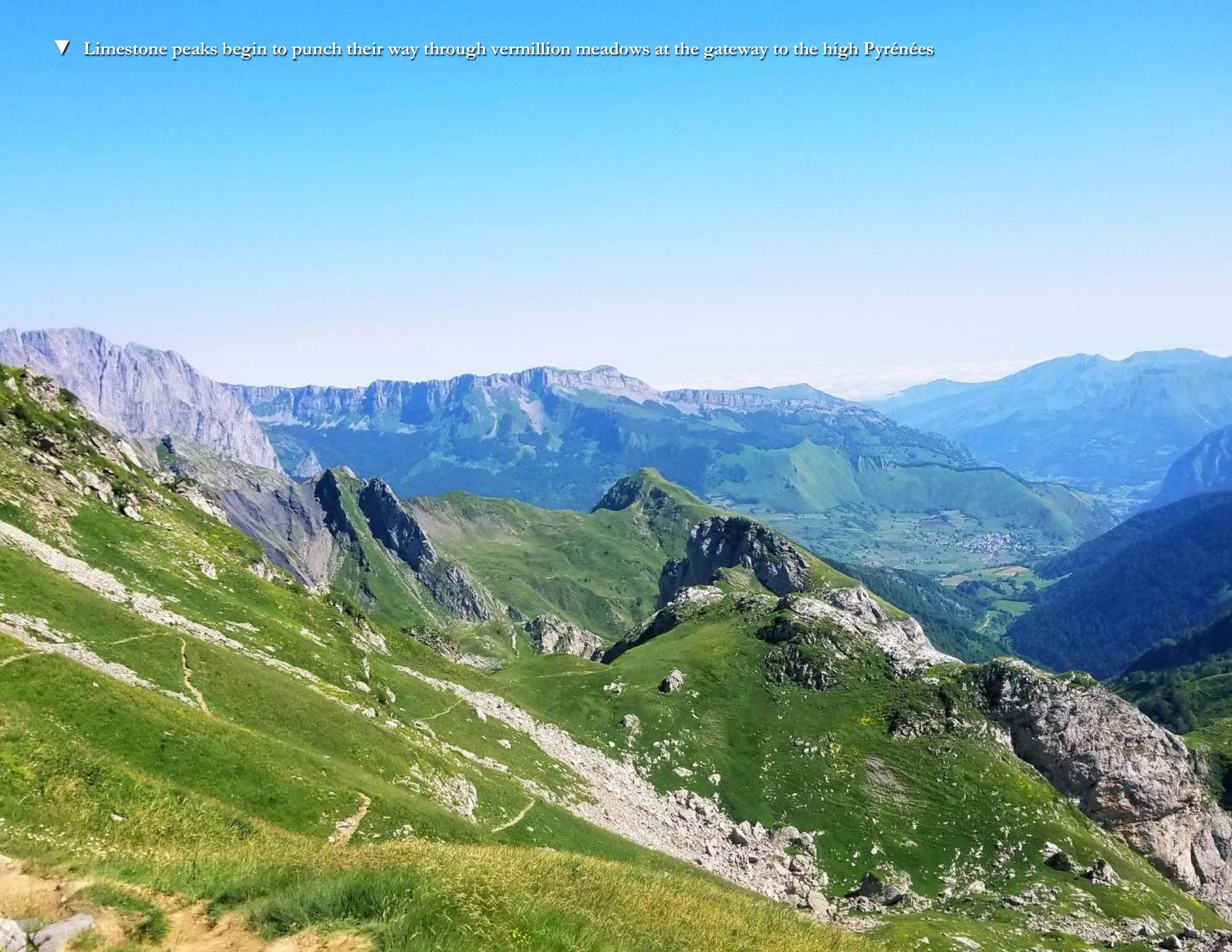
◀ The view off of the grassy front patio of the Gite d'Etape at Lescun.

When Dragon finally rolled into the little town of Lescun, he was thrilled to run into a fellow hiker he had met earlier in Aldudes named Robert Broos, along with his parents who had come out from Belgium to support his hike. They all had a lovely lunch of the plat du jour, sharing trail stories and such. When the bill finally came, Rob's parents paid it with the condition that Dragon watch out for him along the way. Thru-hikers always have each others' backs in any case.

With that done, it was time to seek some lodging and to take care of the resupply to Gavarnie about 5 days ahead. Some other HRP hikers from the Netherlands had been talking about a small Gite down the hill they had heard about, so Dragon went to investigate. He found the place, a quaint two story stone building with the most incredible view of the mountain valley below. The sign on the door said to inquire at the bar just up the street, so back he went, and met a young girl working at the counter of the empty bar, who made a call to the owner of the Gite d'Etape before leading Dragon back down to its patio. An older woman swiftly arrived and showed Dragon and another hiker from Germany a lovely two-bedroom suite with a bath for rent, 50 euros a night with breakfast in the morning. The German guy worked at a shower-head manufacturer and was ecstatic about the graces of the shower.

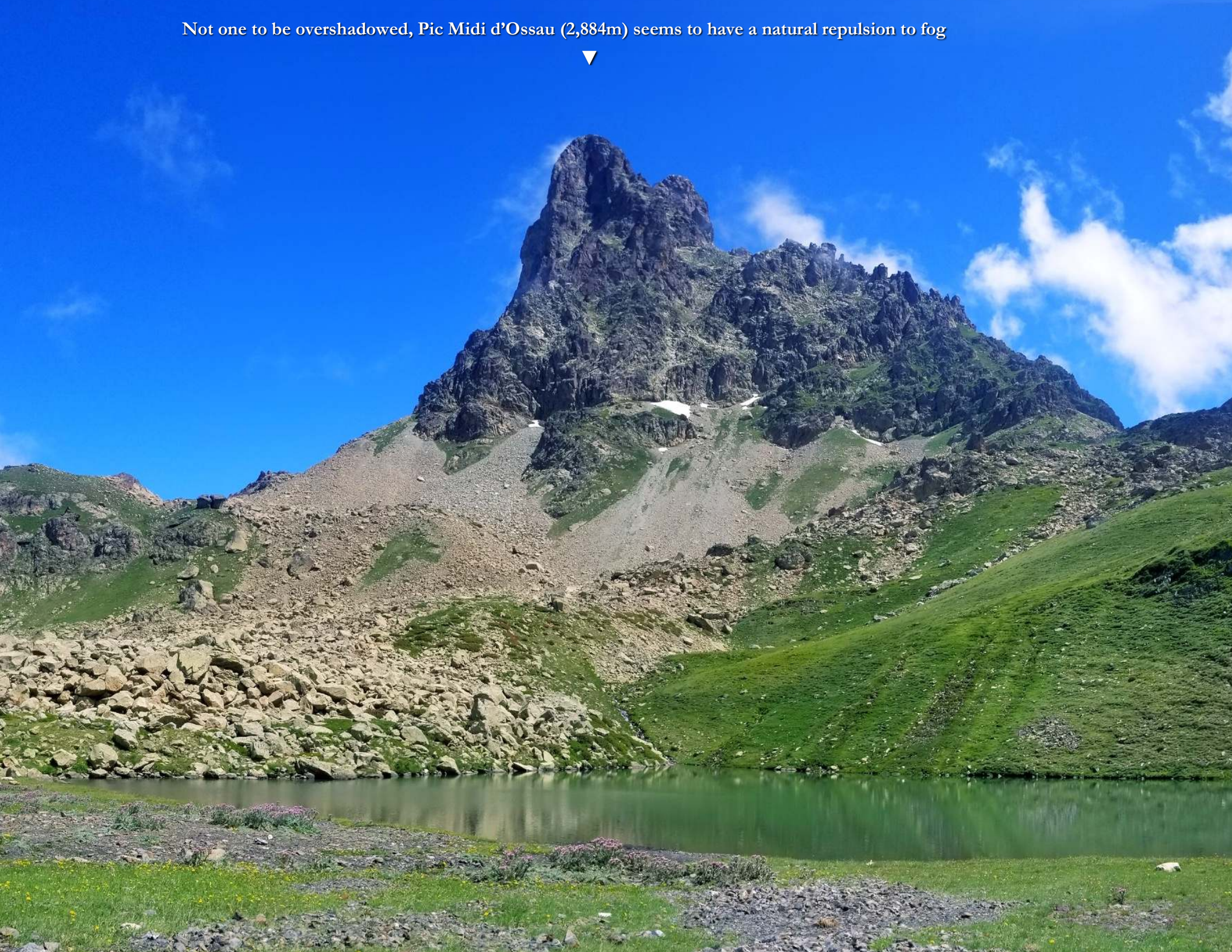
Later, a short stop by the local market to stock up on 5kg of food, as well as some beer and treats to celebrate a section well done. Around evening, Dragon went back to the bar for one of the most fulfilling and masterful dinner experiences of his life. The same girl from before brought out dish after dish of French faire with a pint of beer. The evening glow over the town was serene.

Pastures and farms give way to vast peaks of green once hikers pass the village of Lescun ▲



▼ Limestone peaks begin to punch their way through vermillion meadows at the gateway to the high Pyrénées

The extraordinary spire of Pic Midi d'Ossau shows its face through a hole punched in the atmosphere ▲



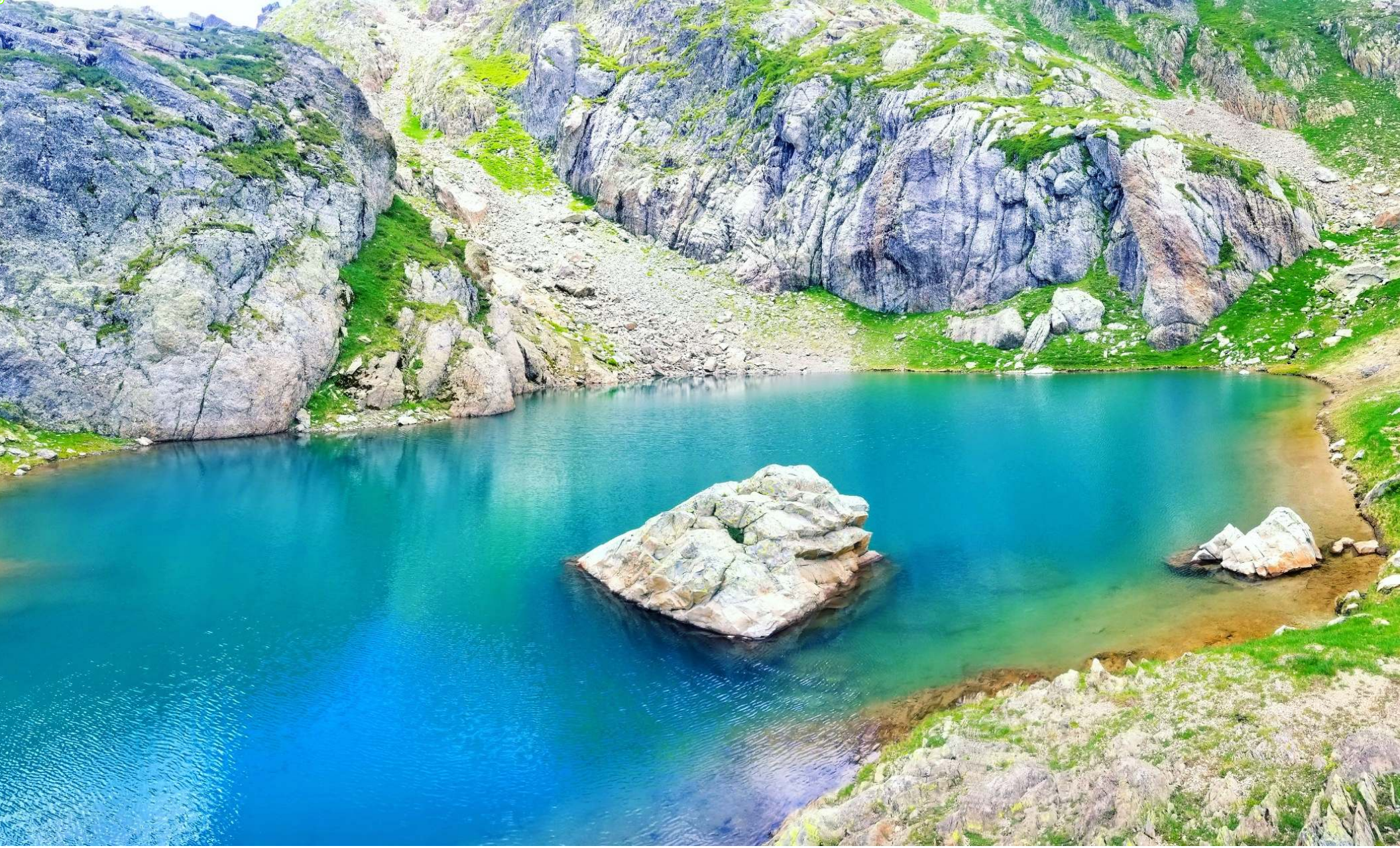
Not one to be overshadowed, Pic Midi d'Ossau (2,884m) seems to have a natural repulsion to fog

▼

▲ Remote aquamarine lakes cried out by dying glaciers are the blood diamonds strewn throughout the Pyrénées

▲ A sea of fog evaporated from the grass and streams reaches as high up the valleys as it can, before the wind disperses it to oblivion

Save the Best, Skip the Rest: For every wonderful photo one can find in this book, there were ten mediocre shots that didn't make the cut. Lighting over-exposure, poor composition, weather conditions, improper angling of the sun on the subject, blurry smudges on the lens, SD Card file corruption, and plain boring imagery are just a few of the mortal enemies in contention with a backpacker wanting to capture the farthest untamed reaches of Spain and France. All images in this book were taken with a Samsung Galaxy S8 smartphone, the same one used for navigation, communication, and everything else. All photo editing was done through the advanced photo editor, and sometimes post-edited via Instagram's editor program.



▲ This unnamed lake below Pic Peyreget has some of the purest glacial water available anywhere on Earth

Clean Water: It's effortless to find good drinking water in the high Pyrénées. A water filter is hardly necessary except for the farm-country lowlands during the first and last 5 days of the trail. Every few miles will lead to another gorgeous oasis of glacier run-off, like the nameless lake above. There's virtually no vector for contamination in these lakes, except for vast herds of sheep who like to climb to the highest parts of mountains for security. The author does recommend filtering water in any case, for although the risk is low, a water-borne illness can take a walker off trail for a hellish, wretched week at minimum, and could result in death if contracted in the high mountains, days of walking from any sign of civilization.

Music of the Spheres: It's amazing how quickly the population centers disperse, how swiftly you find yourself in the mountains, without a sign of civilization to comfort you, aside from a small cabin far in the distance or the sound of a motor down in the valley.

Soon even these sparse artifacts will fade away, and we will be left with nothing but pure nature, concentrated, distilled to its most fundamental form. While we often think of nature as the life that surrounds us, all the types of plants and animals in the world around us, these are a very small part of nature. Nature often means life, but if you love nature, you must also love death, and all the non-living things that allow for life to come about.

After all, the Earth is mostly "inorganic" material. The clouds in the sky and the rocks shifting under our feet are not alive in the traditional sense, but they make up the vast majority of the nature that we experience.

The water vapors that form hurricanes are not alive, but the hurricane, in our eyes, is a living thing (perhaps why we give them names?) in that it is born, collects resources for its survival, reaches a peak, begins to decay, and eventually dies, dispersing its vital essence to nourish future hurricanes (and other lifeforms, plants and fungi and animals).

Such is the galaxy of which we are part, the stars above us and the molten rock beneath us. These are not living things, but they are alive in this sense, and all life (that we know of) depends on them

Pic Midi d'Ossau pierces a sea of fog. The sky is always blue above the clouds. ▶

for survival. And who can say they do not rely on the earth and the rain to live?

Every living thing is made up of nonliving parts. The stellar ash from 5 generations of exploded stars runs through my veins. Is it alive? I know I am, and so it must be, to some extent. The hydrogen and oxygen that spent billions of years doing, well, not much, floating in the cosmic abyss, now creates the beautiful waterfalls and oceans that host and replenish all earthly life. Dragon dreams of accomplishing something even a billionth as grand as that in all his life.

The music of life must be universal. Our planet's story of life may be unique, found nowhere else on a billion, billion worlds, and every species born here should be celebrated and treasured. However, the elements and components that comprise life and the laws that allow for it are ubiquitous. We now have catalogs of hundreds of earth-like planets. Each of them could host a history as rich

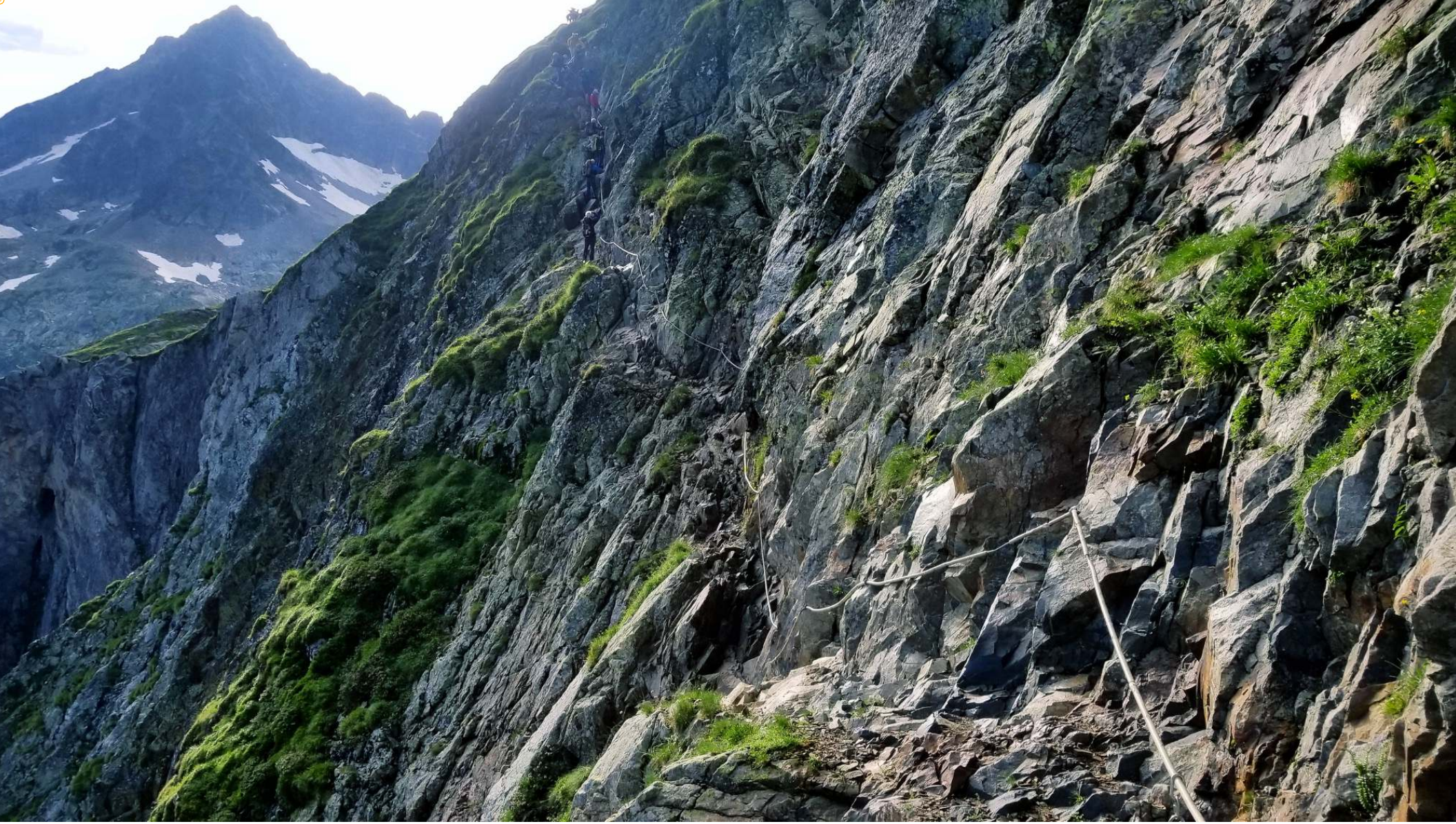
▼ The difference between fog-blindness and a majestic fog-laden valley overlook is often only a matter of climbing a few hundred feet of elevation.

and fascinating as life's tenure on our own sphere.

What does it all mean? That's for you to discover. These are the thoughts that stream through Dragon's mind after a full day on the trail, the terminus of 10 hours of hard hiking.

On arrival at the snowy cornice at the head of Lac d'Arrious, Dragon meets another HRP thru-hiker from Germany named Sylvia. They camped together at the Lac d'Arrious, in preparation to get up and over two high cols tomorrow that may present some challenges with ice, snow, cliffs, and scree. He would likely never see Sylvia again, but any encounter with another soul on the same journey is a moment to be cherished. Dragon sat high on a rock above his camp to take it all in. The rest of the evening, the sea of mist meandered up all the surrounding valleys. The next day, it dissipated in the morning sun, and the views for miles around were crystal clear. A perfect day for HRP hiking.

▼ A towering peak overlooking Lac d'Arrious. Sharp mountains like these are common in places that previously hosted enormous glaciers.



▲ Many of the views throughout this book require an extraordinary effort to attain. Pictured here is one such moment from the Passage d'Orteig, a traverse along the steep north face of the Pic du lac d'Arrious. The people in the background laughed at Dragon calling it a "piece of cake"

"It cannot be done." As Dragon was surveying the route ahead and checking maps outside the Refuge Arremoulit, the refuge owner saw him. "Bonjour!" he said, in a very welcoming way. "Bonjour," Dragon replied. He asked a question in French, but Dragon had to use the trusty "Je ne sais pas Francais" response. "I am headed for Col du Palas."

That's when the owner's face changed. It went from welcoming and happy, to shocked and fearful for this stranger's life. "It cannot be done." He said. My english, not very good. Come," he said with a gesture.

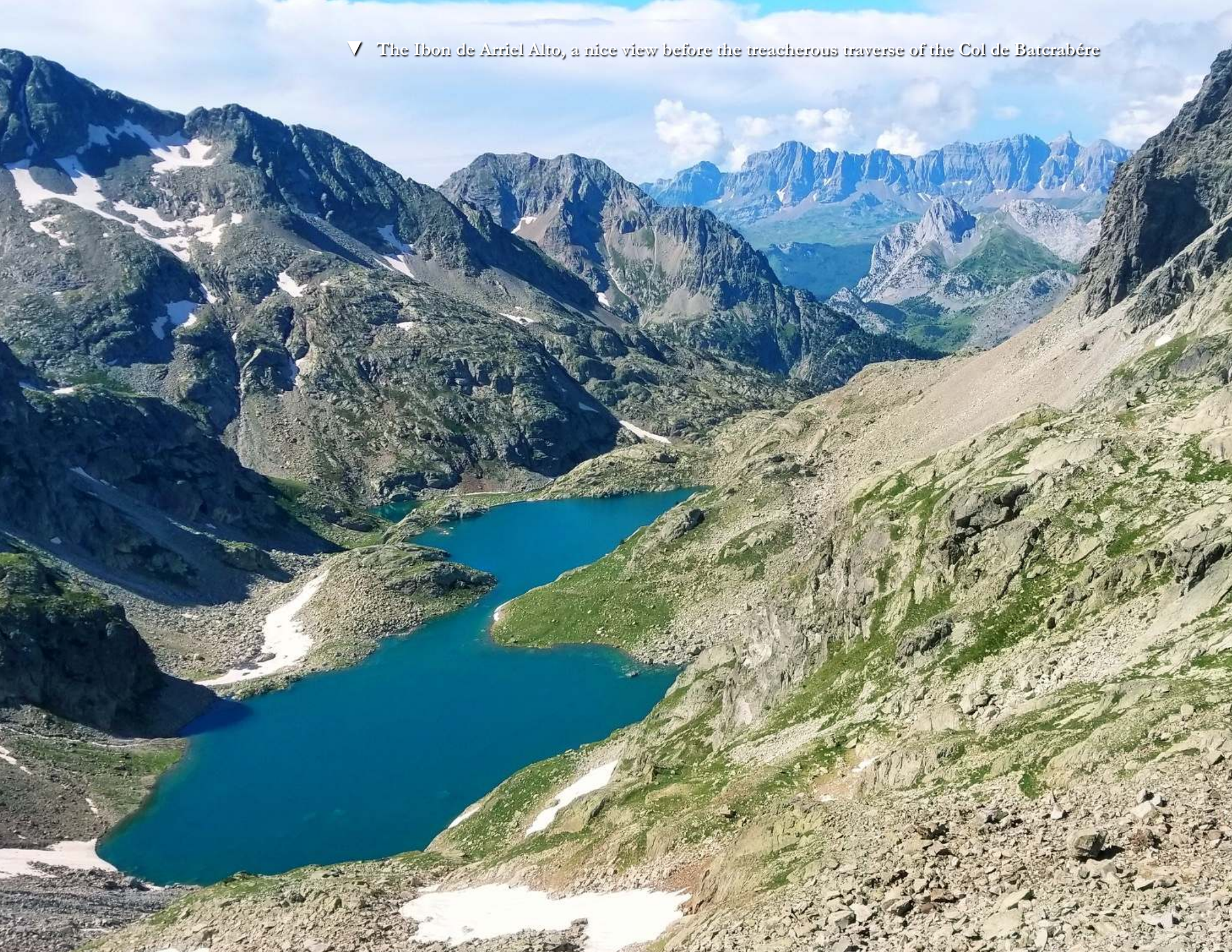
He led over to a younger blonde girl about Dragon's age, who knew good English. He was jealous right away that she got to work in such an outstanding place.

"You are doing Col du Palas? It cannot be done. It is impossible. With

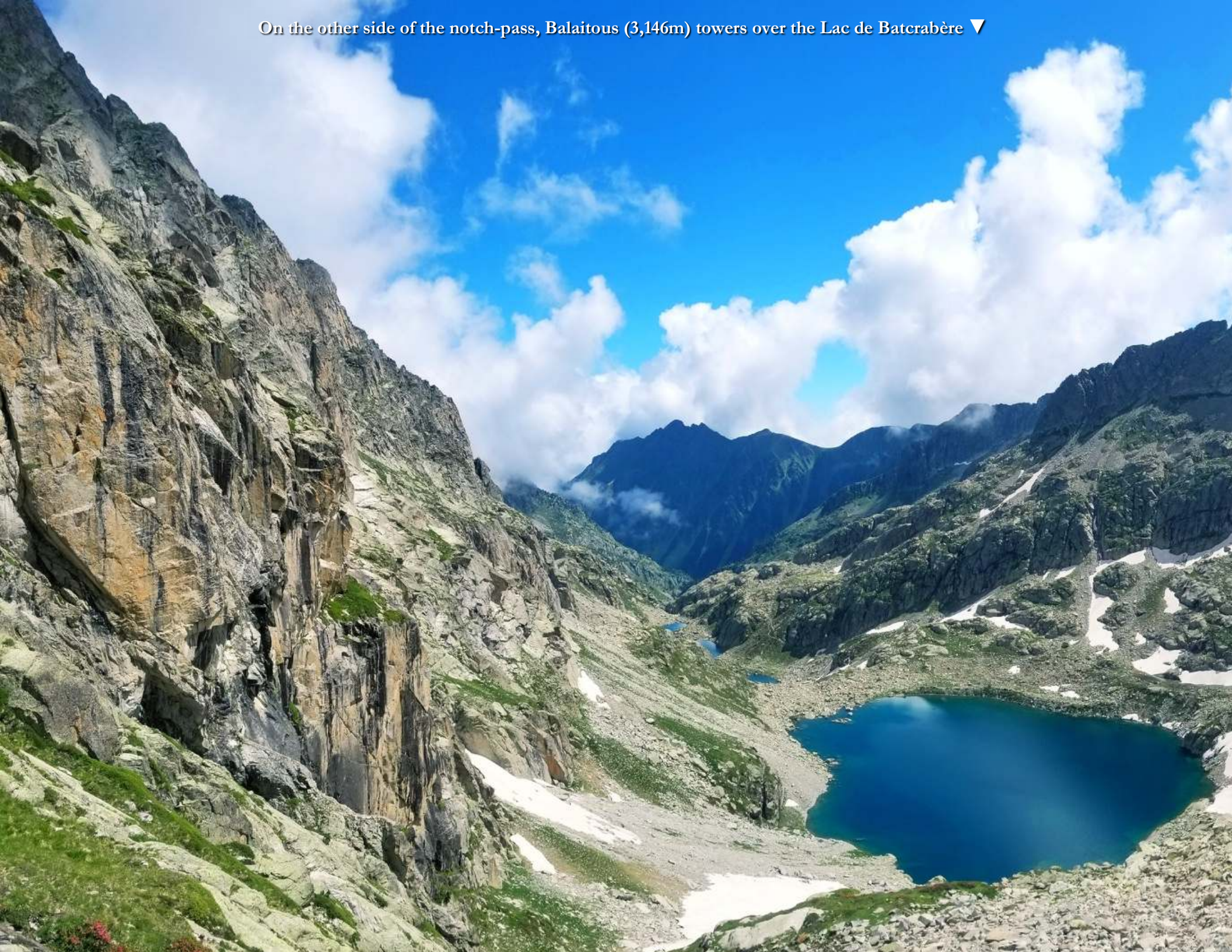
crampons and ice axe, maybe." She described an alternate route that is much less dangerous (which Dragon knew about, but never one to be discouraged from a way just because of difficulty or danger, he was pretty set on the harder official HRP route). "Is there any way to avoid the hard parts of Col du Palas?" he asked. She said, "No. It is fine up to Col du Palas, but then, it is very steep, and there is heavy snow pack below the second pass after that, then the Port de Lavadan is a V-shaped notch that you have to climb up and over, and then the other side is steep snow as well. Also, there is a crevasse (called a Rimaye) between the snow and the rock, perhaps 30 meters deep. We cannot recommend people to do this route because of these dangers, and we do not want to hear in the news tonight that a man fell in the hole." Dragon laughed at the last part. "Thank you for the information," he said, and they parted ways. Dragon knew which way he was going!

Walkers who opt for the more challenging routes are often rewarded with more rare and fantastic views ▼

▲ The view from the refuge of the Lacs de Arrémoulit



▼ The Ibon de Arriel Alto, a nice view before the treacherous traverse of the Col de Batcrabére

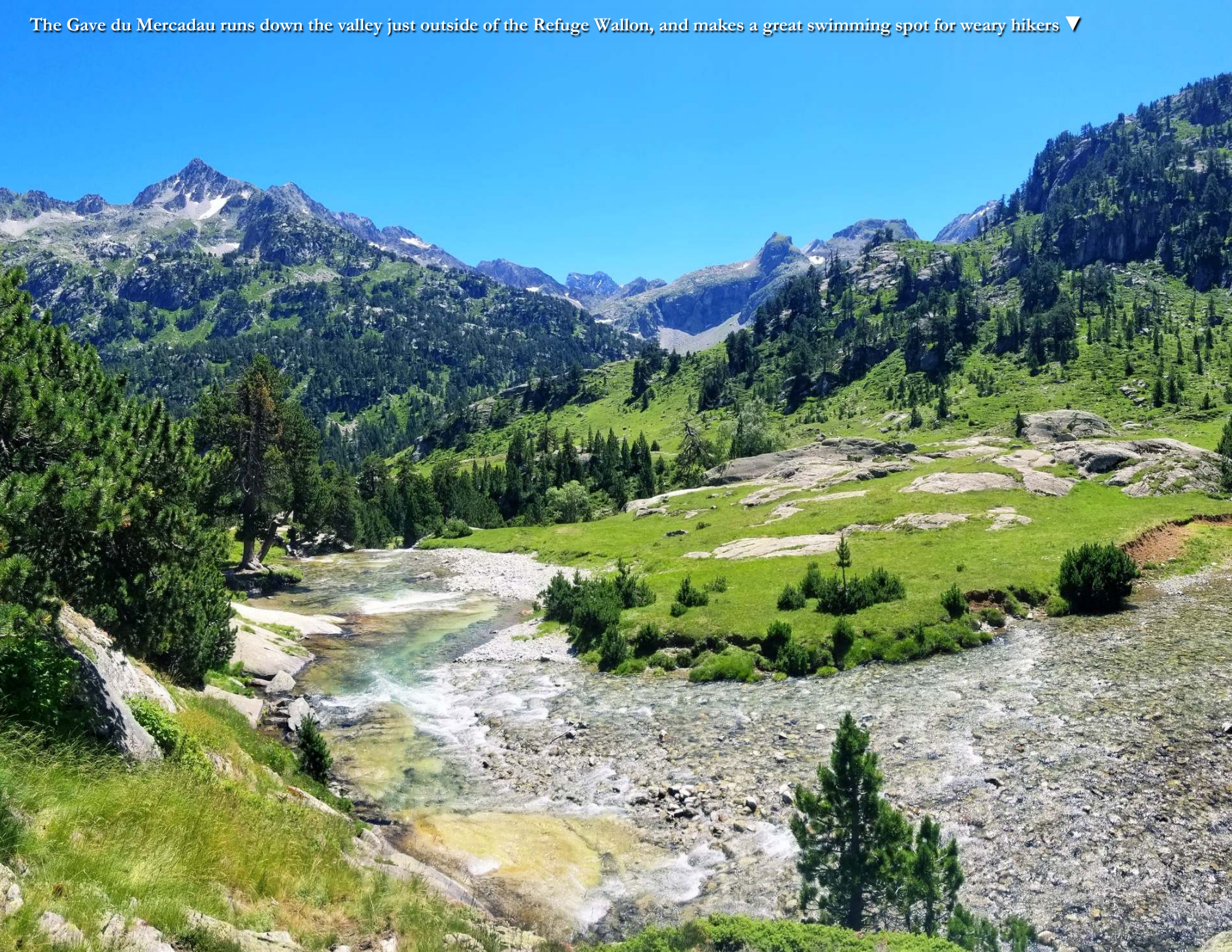


On the other side of the notch-pass, Balaitous (3,146m) towers over the Lac de Batcrabère ▼

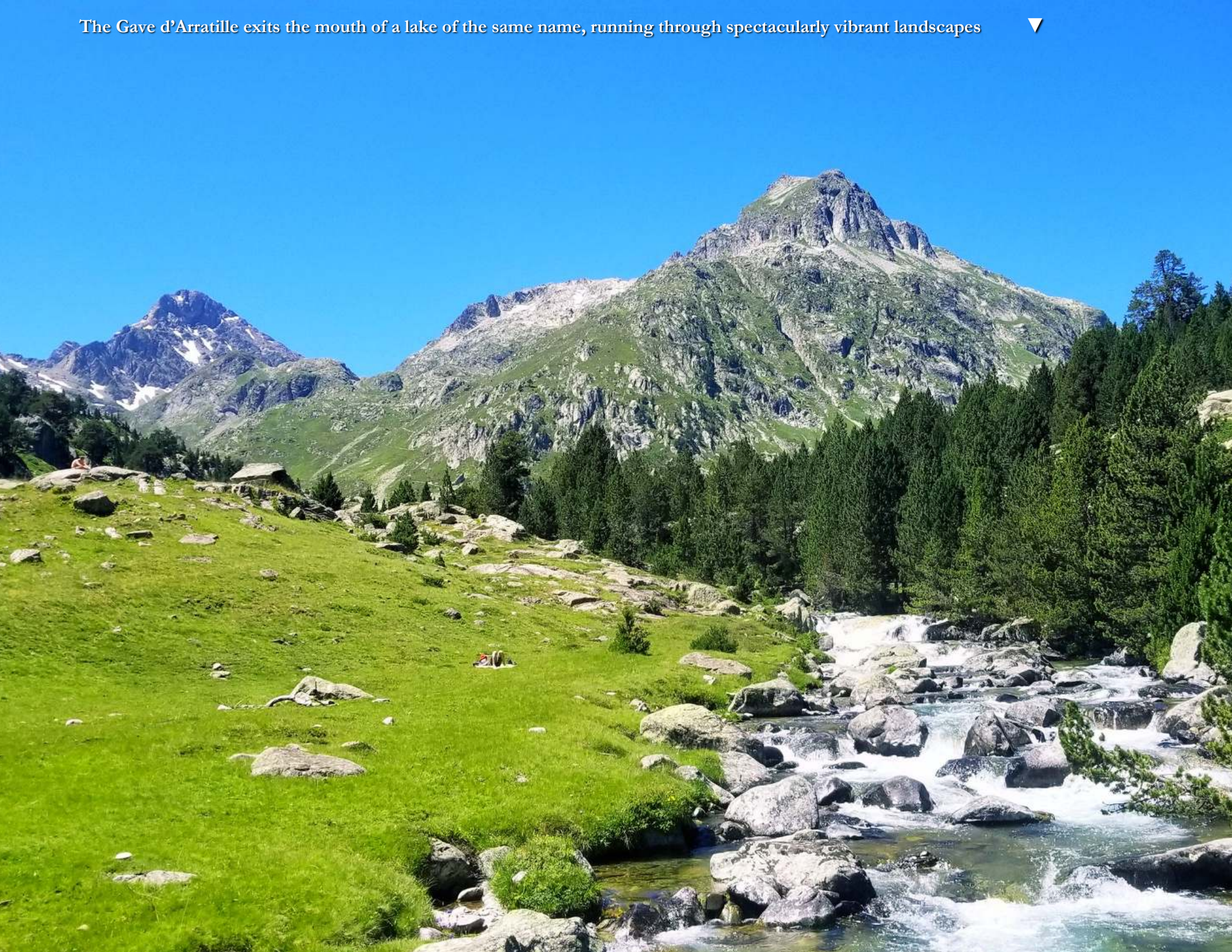
But Wait, There's More! — The day after the dangerous crossing of the Passage d'Orteig, the Col de Palas, and the Col de Batcrabére, Dragon was rewarded with some of the most spectacular scenery that the Pyrénées has to offer. First, climbing an ice sheet up and over the Col de Cambalès, and down past multiple glacial lacs to the Lac de Cambalès. After a brief snack-break, he went on into the valley of the refuge Wallon, a densely forested region of pines and cedars. With the refuge marking the low point, it was then time to climb up to the Lac d'Arratille, the perfect place for a break and a brisk, frigid swim, and then beyond to the upper Lac du Col d'Arratille. From the col, the magnificent West face of Vignemale was the commanding feature of the landscape. A short level circuit around a mountain of scree led to the final col of the day beneath the Pic des Oulettes. From there, a descent down a snowy gulley put Dragon out on a bluff overlooking the valley of the Oulettes and the North face of Vignemale, with hundreds of tents dotting the grassy flats below, in front of the Refuge d'Oulettes. The area was remarkable for its natural beauty, and has clearly earned its title among tourists as "The Yosemite of the Pyrénées."

The Lac du Cambalès shines a sapphire blue in the midday sun, first of many spectacles on day 14 ▶

The valley of the refuge Wallon, with Vignemale in the distance ▼



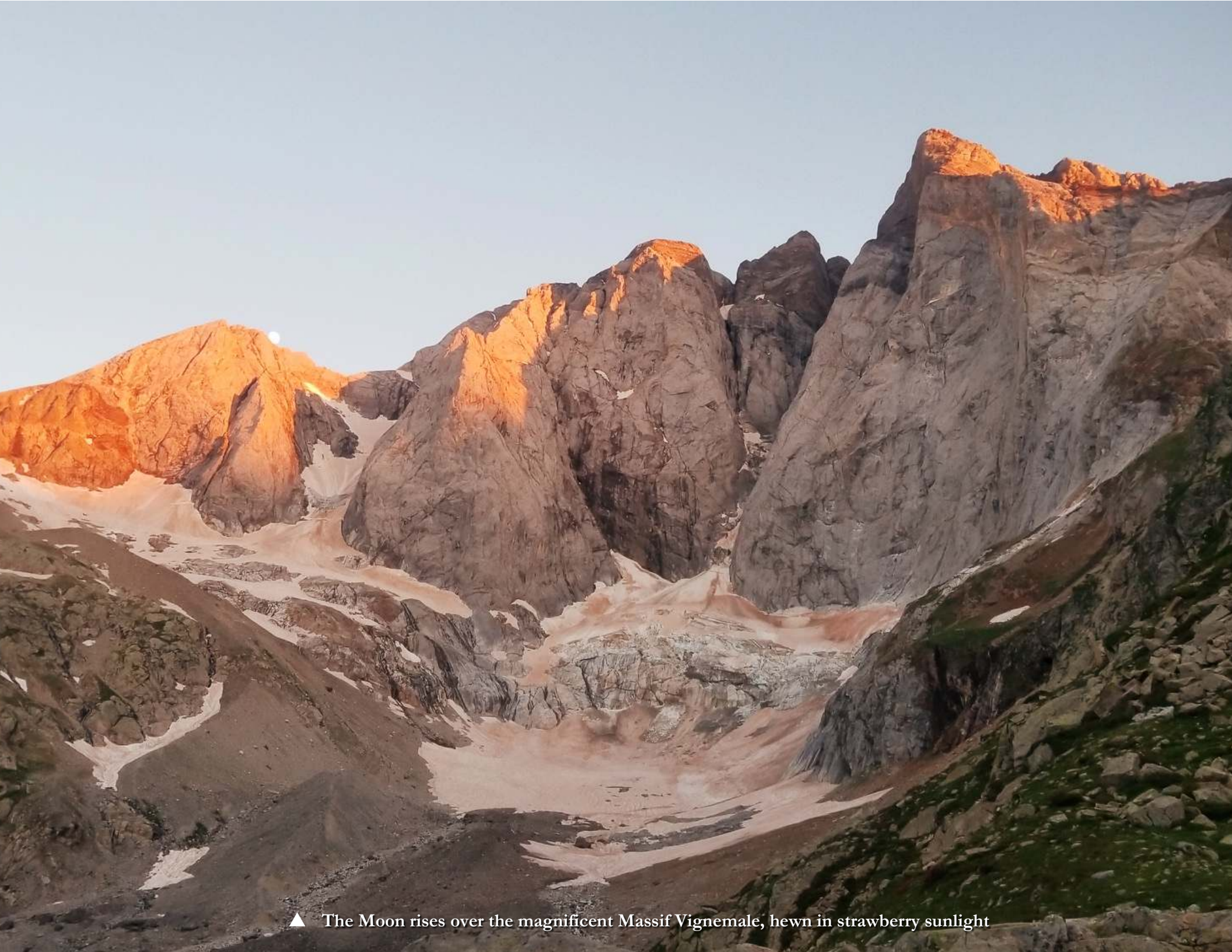
The Gave du Mercadau runs down the valley just outside of the Refuge Wallon, and makes a great swimming spot for weary hikers ▼



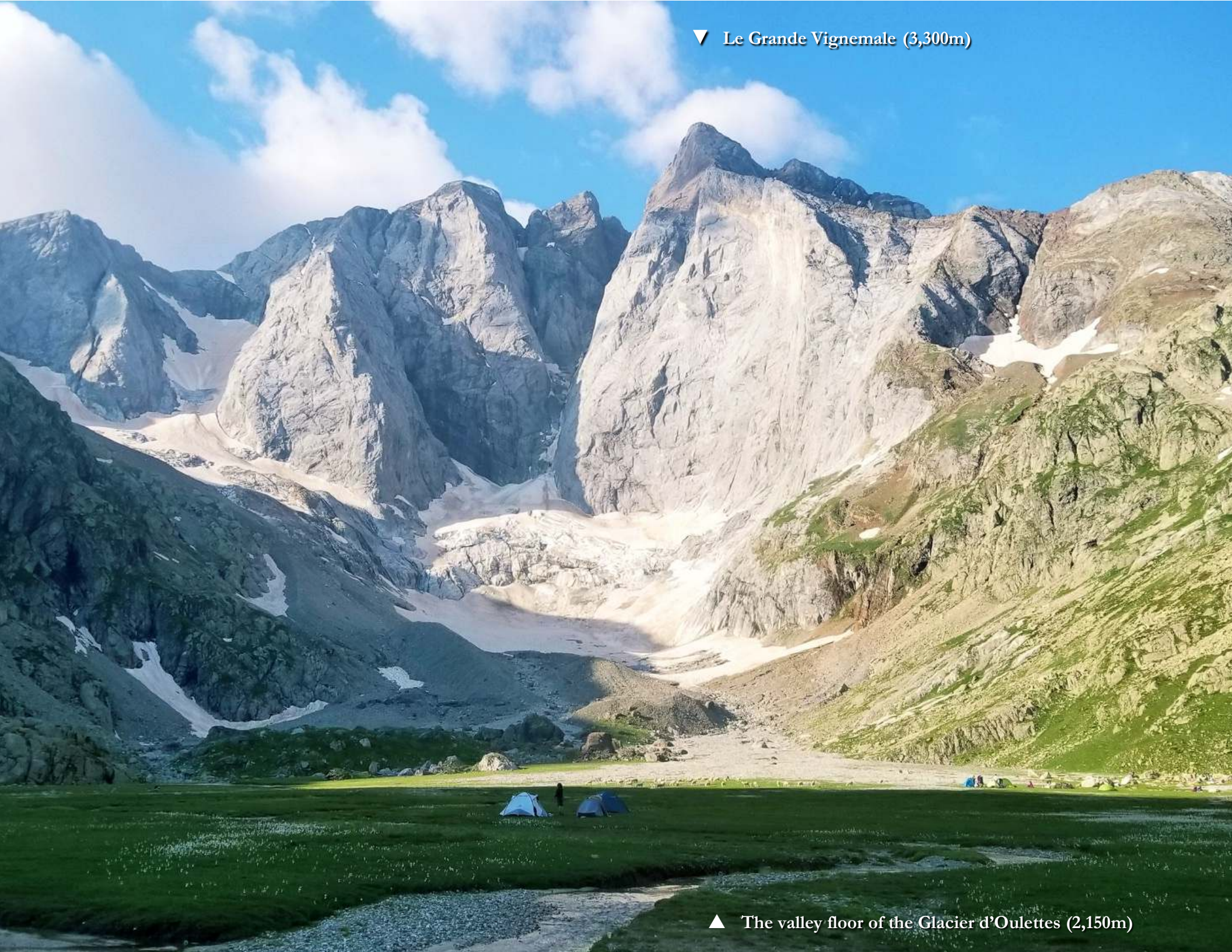
The Gave d'Arratille exits the mouth of a lake of the same name, running through spectacularly vibrant landscapes

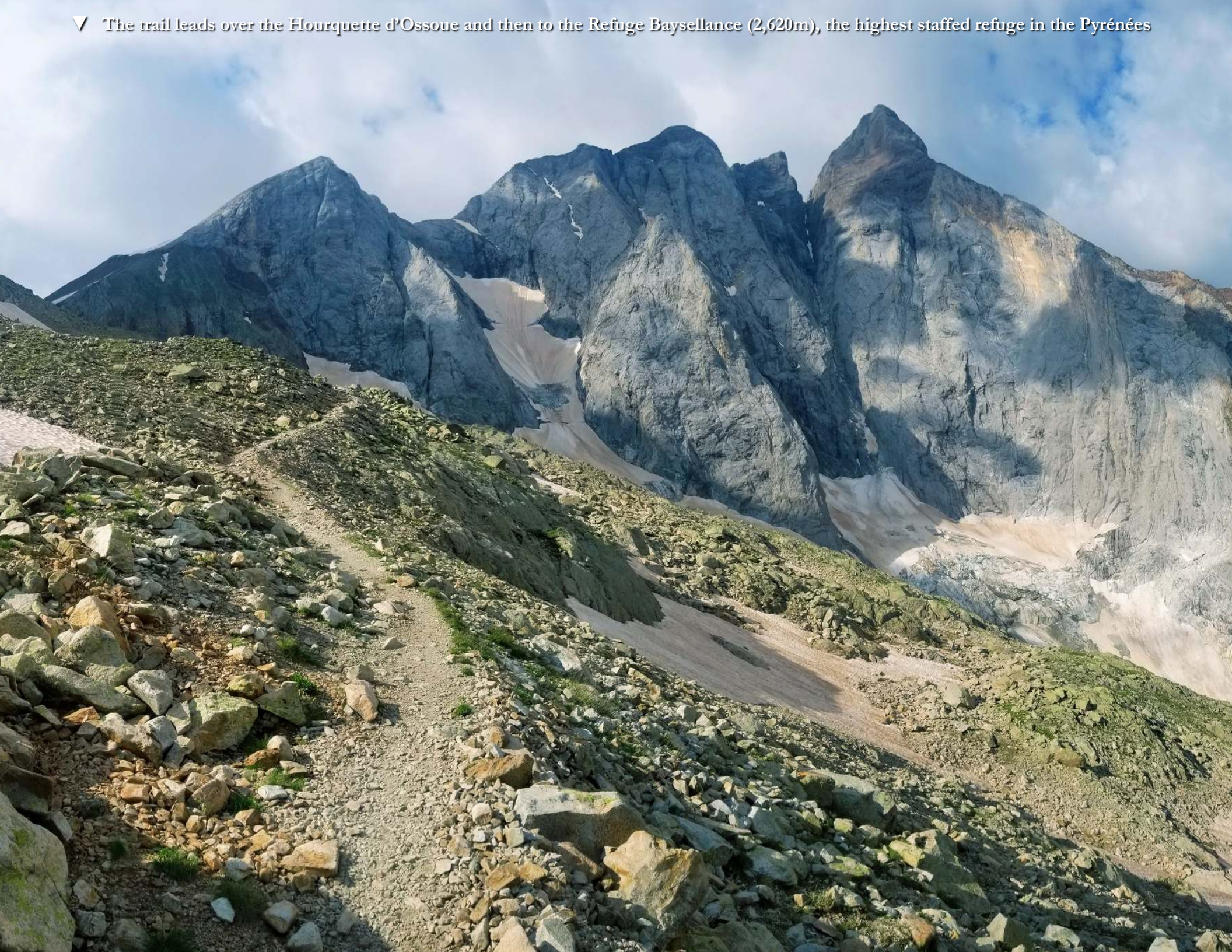
The Lac d'Arratille, one of the most attractive teal lakes in all the Pyrénées ▲

▼ There's rarely a dull landscape along the haute route

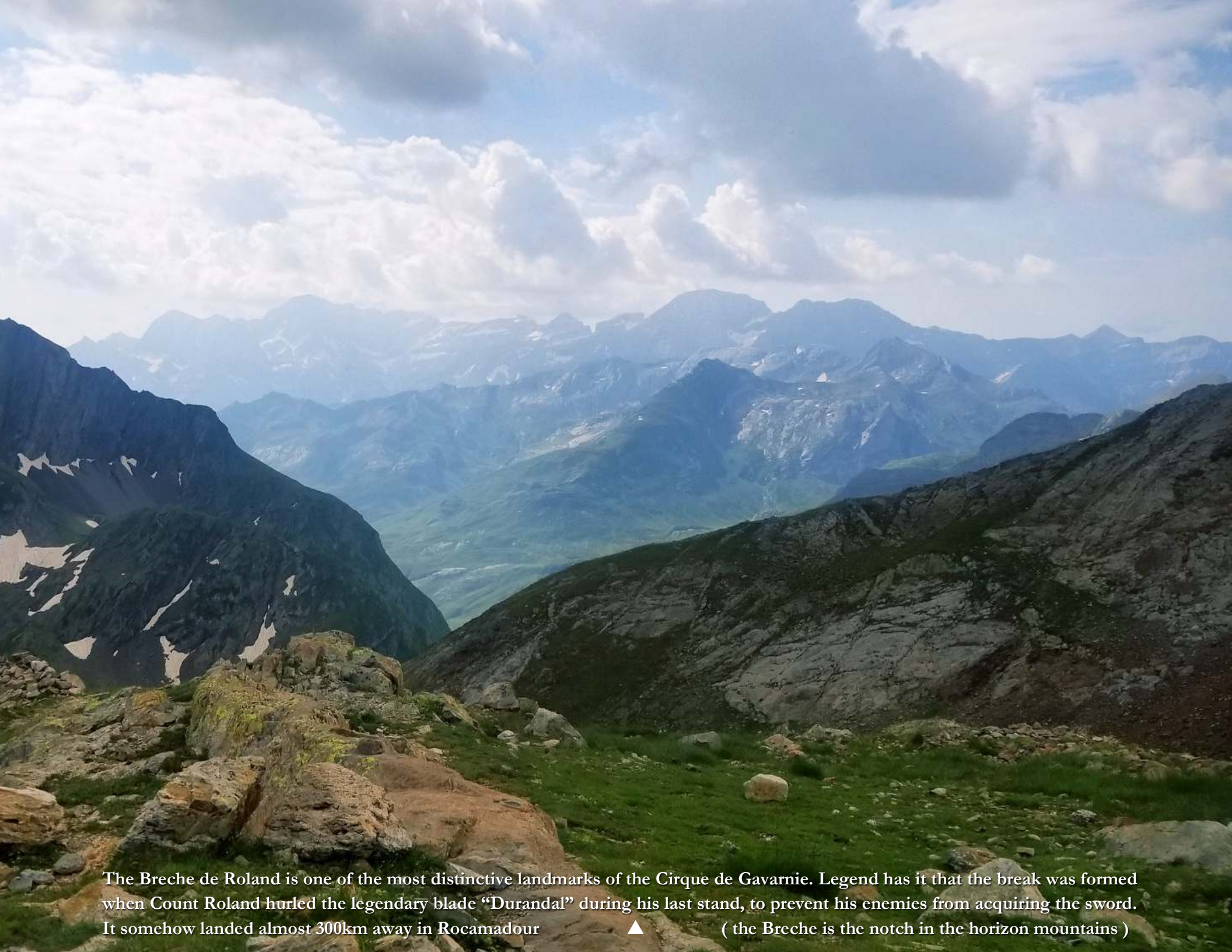


▲ The Moon rises over the magnificent Massif Vignemale, hewn in strawberry sunlight


▼ Le Grande Vignemale (3,300m)
▲ The valley floor of the Glacier d'Oulettes (2,150m)



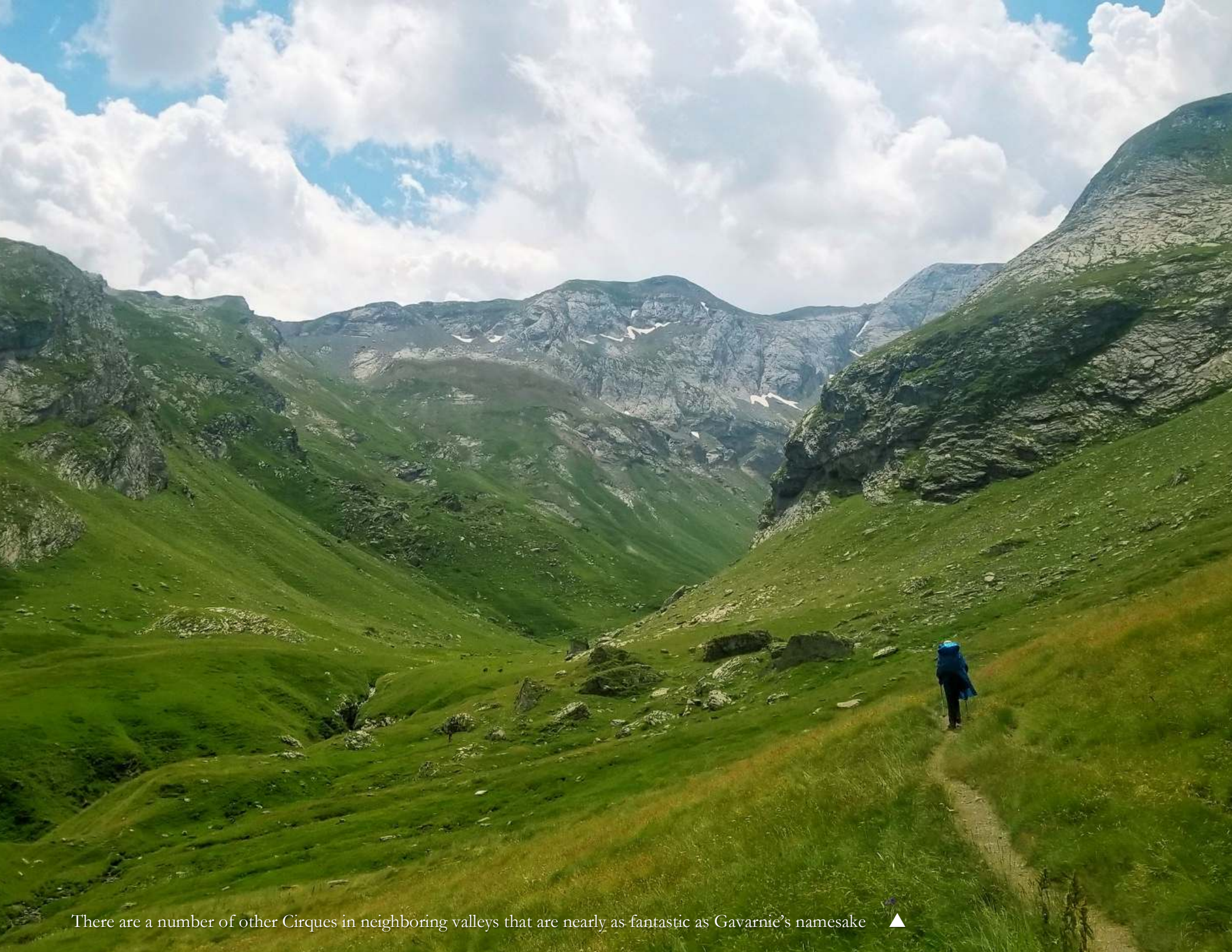
▼ The trail leads over the Hourquette d'Ossoue and then to the Refuge Baysellance (2,620m), the highest staffed refuge in the Pyrénées



The Breche de Roland is one of the most distinctive landmarks of the Cirque de Gavarnie. Legend has it that the break was formed when Count Roland hurled the legendary blade "Durandal" during his last stand, to prevent his enemies from acquiring the sword. It somehow landed almost 300km away in Rocamadour ▲ (the Breche is the notch in the horizon mountains)

The glacial valley leading from Refuge Baysellance to Gavarnie is an impressive feat of nature ▼

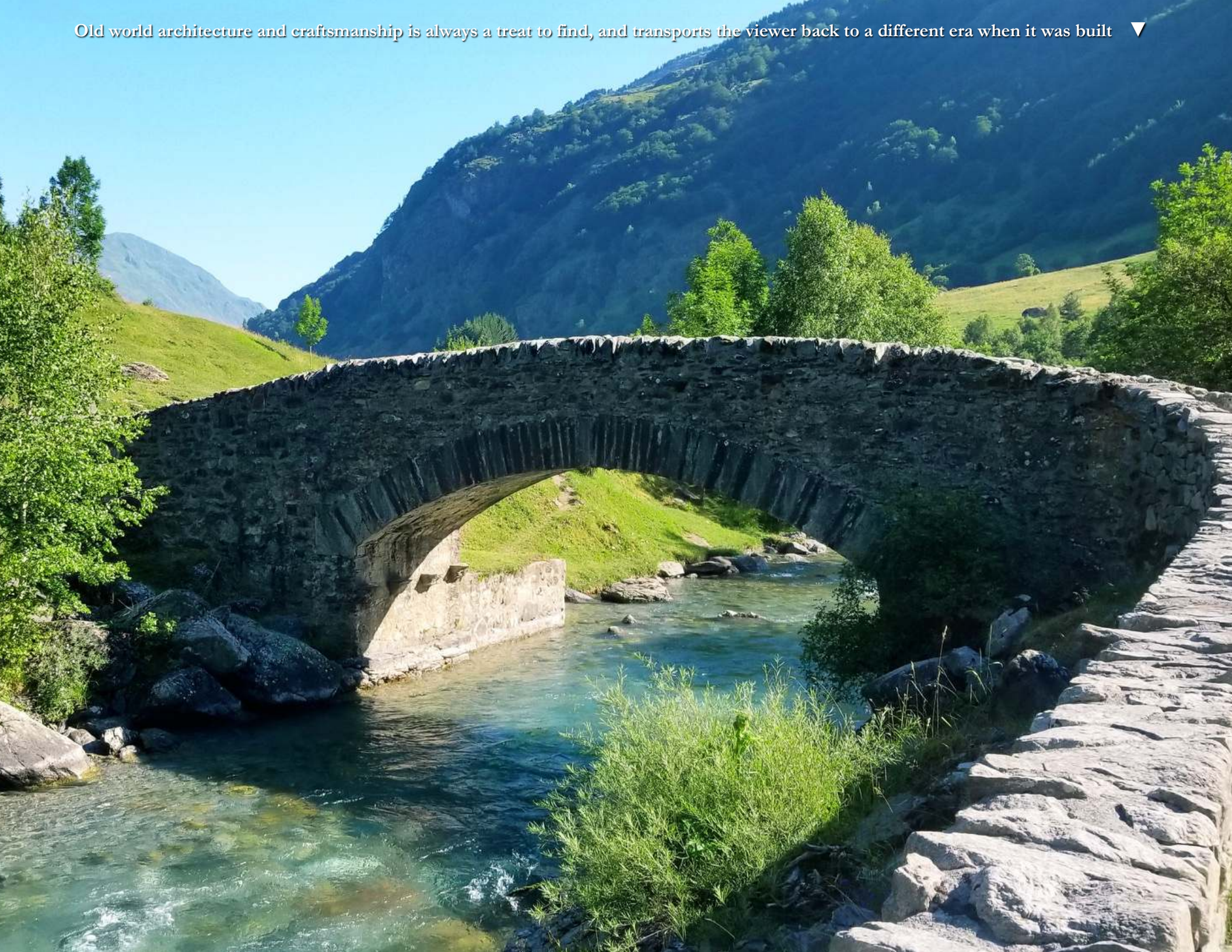
▲ One often witnesses the entire spectrum of human emotions on hikers' faces along difficult trails like these



There are a number of other Cirques in neighboring valleys that are nearly as fantastic as Gavarnie's namesake ▲

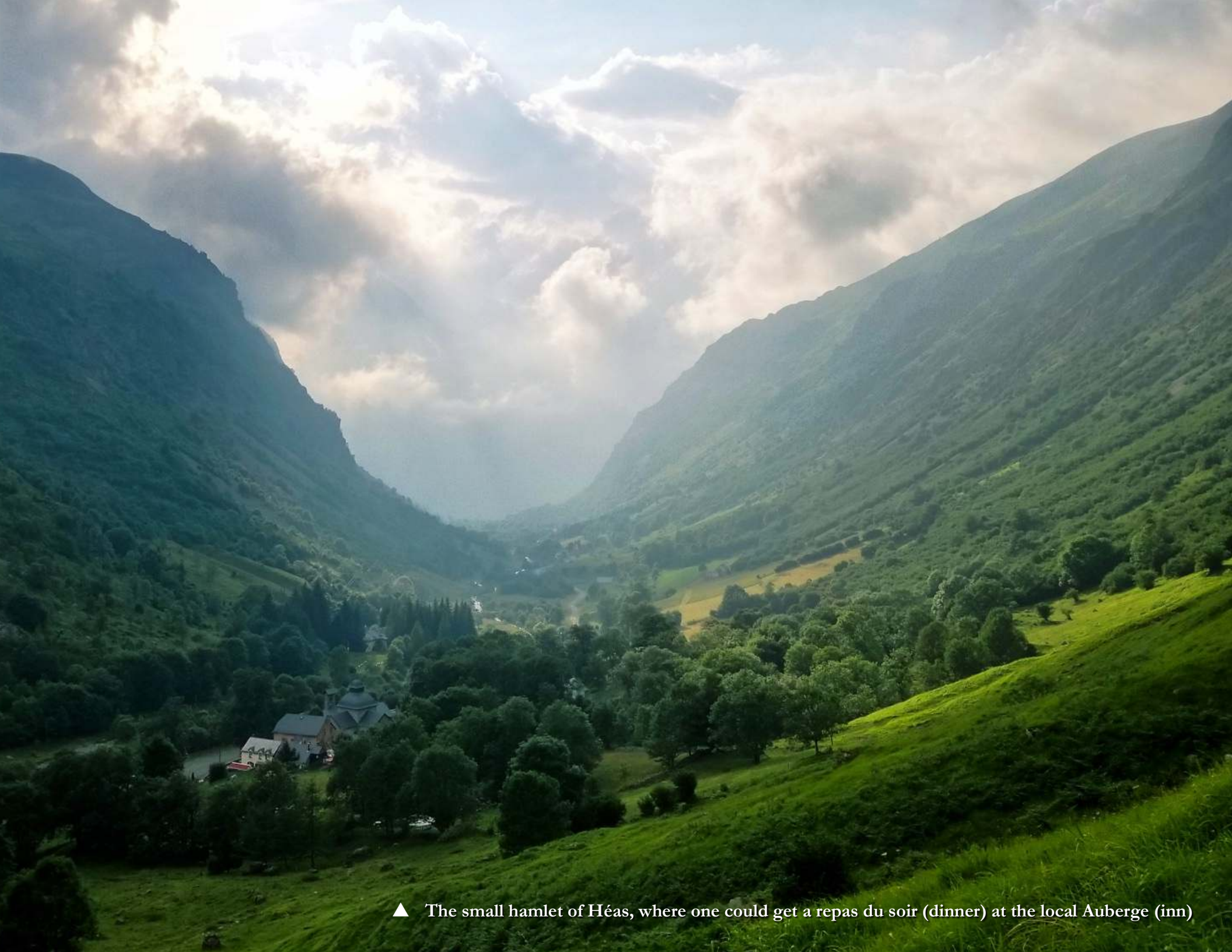
III. GAVARNIE

The Cirque de Gavarnie is one of the Pyrénées' greatest marvels, embodying all their most magical features ▲

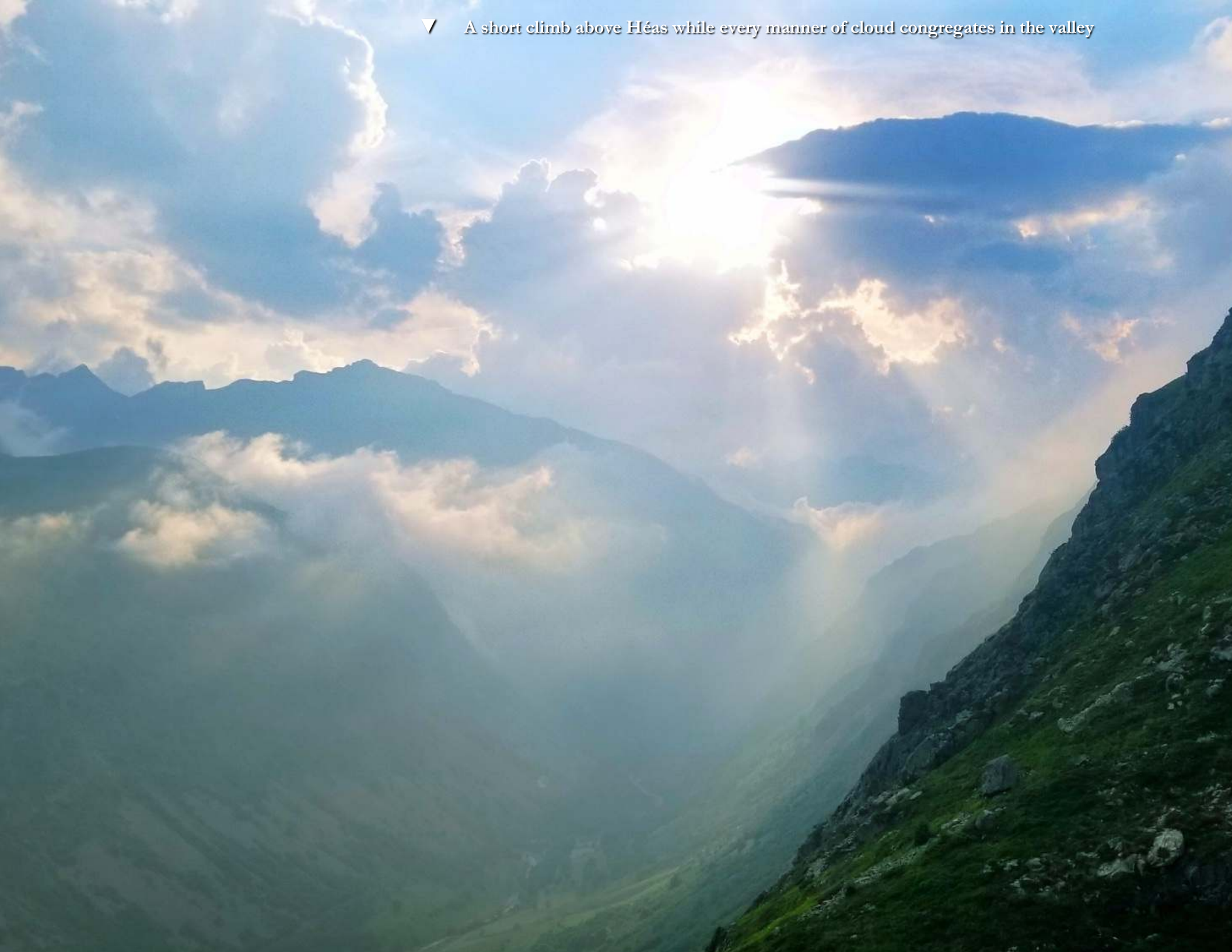


Old world architecture and craftsmanship is always a treat to find, and transports the viewer back to a different era when it was built ▼

The Refuge d'Espuguettes makes an ideal place to escape the crowds while still enjoying the Cirque ▲

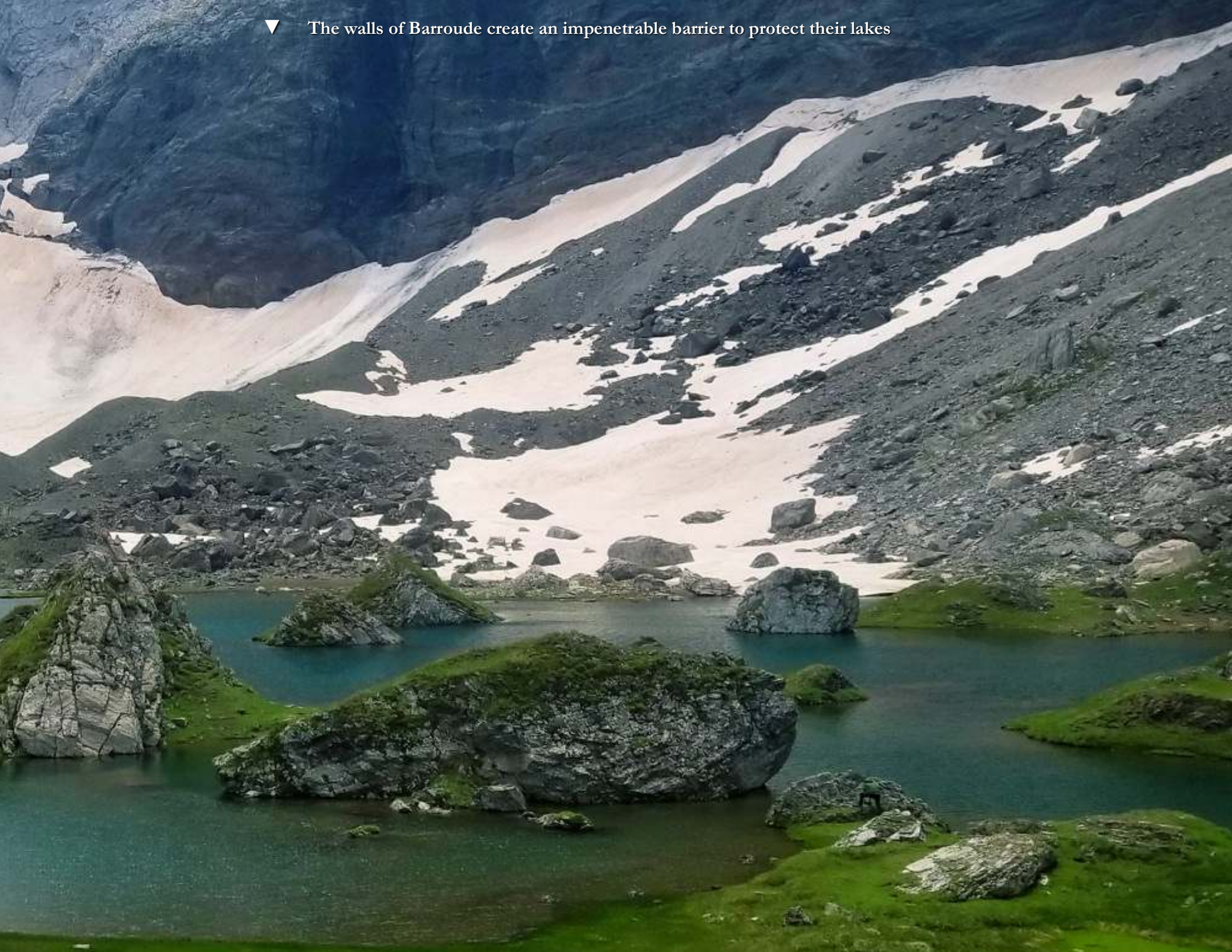


▲ The small hamlet of Héas, where one could get a repas du soir (dinner) at the local Auberge (inn)



A short climb above Héas while every manner of cloud congregates in the valley

▼ The greatest moments and the most colossal mountains are often found along the wild country of the frontier ridge



▼ The walls of Barroude create an impenetrable barrier to protect their lakes

▲ The lakes of Barroude are another of the Pyrénées' greatest marvels

▲ Some swear they can see the face of a great ape in the waterfall-strewn cliffs of Barroude

IV. PARZÁN

▲ The first of many barrages on the Barranco Ordiceto on the HRP/GR11 leading east from Parzán

Dragon dropped his pack in the bushes off of the main highway leading down to the small Spanish town of Parzán. He was normally hesitant to leave it alone for even a few moments, but there was no point in taking it for the out-and-back resupply down to the supermarkets below. He emptied his clothes bag and would use it to carry up his groceries before returning to the HRP. The landscape was dramatic and larger-than-life, and the road walk was a welcome opportunity to make a good pace for once, compared to the slow-going rock-wary pathways through the high mountains.

As he reached the town, Dragon first obtained a liter of chocolate milk, and drank the whole thing before leaving the store. He also supplemented his food stash to carry him for the next 5 days through the highest reaches of the Pyrénées. Finally, he found a great burger joint to do a little bit of electro-physio re-charging before the walk back up the highway.

With Parzán far below and behind him, Dragon took to a long and winding dirt road which led up a valley for a few hours, finally coming back to the crest of the Pyrénées at a pass with stunning views of the terrain to come. With the sun falling rapidly, he made camp in a rounded grassy meadow with a panoramic view off its Eastern rim. In the morning, a stroll through old-growth cedar and pines gave Dragon the same impressions that he got in the Sierras and the Rockies, and for a while, he felt right at home in the wonderfully fragrant forests.

At the bottom of this valley, the trail merged with a road and followed a stream back up towards its source. A few kilometers later, Dragon found himself at the site of "Camping El Forcallo," a rustic campground with food and electricity that felt, strangely, enormously civilized to Dragon, who was nearing three weeks since starting the trail from the now paradaisical Hendaye on the Atlantic.

▼ The remnants of the quaint, abandoned village of Viadós, watched over by the gargantuan "Peak of the Posets"

The owners of the camp were nice enough to allow Dragon to charge his batteries up while enjoying a plate of sausage and eggs with a fine espresso on the front veranda of the camp restaurant overlooking the river valley below. With his stomach and electron-banks full, he knew he was ready for whatever the hardest days of the Pyrénées could throw at him. If only he had known, their capacity for majesty, for brutality!

As soon as he broke through the tree-line, the Pyrénées made their true nature crystal clear. The mountains rose up in impenetrable fortress walls, thousands of meters high. The traverse led some 4,000 feet up a narrow valley with waterfalls and boulders abound. The trail's near-disappearance reflected the notion that few people ever venture here. At the end of the day, Dragon reached the crest again, and, watching the sunset play on the face of the Posets, he descended into the fog and the Valley of the Aygues-tortes.

▼ A community of purple irises paint the gateway valley leading to the three hardest days of the HRP

▲ The balcon trail cuts to the left from the mouth of the Lac de Pouchergues

Perhaps the hardest day of the HRP was the traverse across the Glacier of the Gorges Blanc. While only 14km, it presented some of the most challenging terrain of the trail, and some of the most picturesque moments as well. Granted, the two days following were none the easier. From his camp in the valley of the Aygues-Tortes, Dragon set off down trail, winding down the gorge, through grasslands, across streams, and on to a beautiful shepherd's hut, a prime stopping spot for coffee.

From there, a short climb up to a dammed lake and the launch onto the first hurdle of the day: a euphoric balcony trail cut by an old power company in the 1950s, right into the side of a mountain, to provide a level mine-cart track between two of their power-generating dams. The installation had since been retired, but the trail was still pristine, one of the most level and nicely graded strips of walkway that could be found in the Pyrénées.

▲ The balcon trail is levelly cut into the side of the mountain below the Crest of Quartau

The views down the valleys, surrounded by insurmountable and inaccessible glacial mountain peaks, with a sheer drop from the edge of the balcon to the bottom of the valley below, set the atmosphere of the day. Danger and death were lurking around every corner. Never one to tempt fate, Dragon moved quickly along the most precarious ledges of the cliff-trail and onto a more secure shelf above some nice soft grass.

He eventually came up to the heart of the power station, right on the precipice separating the two valleys, complete with huge pipes to divert water from the two lakes and old mine tracks used to transport materials. Like most post-war 1950s projects, it was quite impressive in scale and quality. Below, the Refuge de Soula could be seen at the confluence of the streams, which ran on farther down the valley than could be seen from this height.

Continuing on along the balcony trail, Dragon crossed a few precarious

metal bridges built to cross great gashes in the mountain side, where rocks that used to be the trail had fallen away. Then, he came to an old mining office building that barred the way forwards, with cliffs on both sides. Luckily, the door was unlocked, and he was able to pass through unhindered.

Below, the trail from the refuge zig-zagged its way up to where Dragon now stood. There were a few old mining implements scattered about, and a door to the interior of the dam behind him. The trail led nonchalantly up a grassy staircase, which then went over a pass to the Lac de Caillaouas, a beautiful lake, albeit artificial, with a dilapidated concrete structure where the barrage master must have lived so many years ago. Dragon took it as the ideal spot to have lunch, and sought shade behind a wall next to the front door frame, where someone had constructed simple benches and a fire ring for camping (although there wasn't a tree for many

▼ Can't imagine a more picturesque place for a hydro-power plant

miles around). There would be no more civilized place than this concrete husk for many miles, as the trail now led higher and higher, through some of the most dangerous and remote reaches of the entire Pyrénées range. Midway through the day, Dragon began the first of the three hardest traverses of the entire high route.

From the mouth of the lake, Dragon climbed steeply up around the rim of its valley, crossing its headwaters a few times in a narrow ravine. Rocky scree quickly replaced the lush green grass as the dominant terrain. After another hour, Dragon reached the Lac des Isclots, or Lake of Tiny Islands. Now, the Col du Gorges-Blanc was clearly visible ahead, the titanic size of its glacial peaks hard to miss, even though they were some kilometers away up the valley. Past the Isclots, the landscape became ever more anxiety provoking; the valley walls grew steeper, massive mounds of rocky moraine at their base. Patches of snow punctuated endless

▼ The Refuge de Soula sits in the valley below. Every step in the opposite direction leads further from any vestige of civilization

▲ The remains of a residence by the outlet of Lac Caillaous. The col of the Gorges-Blanc sits at the head of the valley in the distance

boulder fields shed off by the cirque of mountains. The trail faded away into oblivion, and it was clear that few, if any, hikers ever ventured this deep into the heart of the Pyrénées. Now standing at the blue-white waters of Lac Milieu, Dragon filled up with fresh water before walking forward into the chaotic alpine wasteland ahead. A brief, flat boulder field rammed into a nearly vertical wall of gravelly scree, the kind that sends rocks cascading far down below with each step. Dragon half wished he was going their way, down and away from this crazy place, but he knew in his heart that his trail led onwards and upwards through the storm. From the top of that slope, Dragon finally came face to face with the kingpin of this traverse: the Glacier of the Gorges-Blanc. A vast sheet of white stretched out as far as he could see, to a final point on the ridge up ahead, the col he needed to pass. The view was as breathtaking as it was terrifying. An ominous dark cloud hung over just beyond

the ridge in the next valley, which apparently hosted the perfect micro-climate for producing monstrous super-cell storms. The glacier was a minefield of things that could kill you: hidden lakes under thin veils of ice; deep rimaye crevasses between the glacier and the rocks; and a storm that looked like it was plotting the apocalypse.

Dragon knew he had to be acutely aware and beyond cautious. A mistake here and now could end this adventure a lot faster than he wanted. He proceeded slowly up the glacial snowfield, making sure that every step was securely planted into the slippery surface of the snow. After nearly an hour of this exhausting exercise, Dragon finally stood on the col, at the highest point of the day. What was in front of him did not bring any solace. The landscape before him was a cataclysm of a precipitous icy bowl with some chaotic granite fields lovingly mixed in, and multiple freezing white lakes down below,

The Pic de Cortalets, Lac de Caillaouas, and the valley of the Refuge de Soula ▼

with the aptly named "Lac Glacé" much further, before a cliff leading down into an imperceptible valley. Ahead laid another short climb over a ridge that led to the Lac and Refuge Portillon. While it was a bit much to take in, Dragon knew he could not linger here at 3 kilometers above sea level, as the sun was rapidly approaching the horizon and the dark clouds overhead looked like they could burst at any moment. It was the time of day that he really wished for a nice cold beer and the warmth of a wood-fired stove. He knew this was available at the Refuge Portillon, but he had unknowingly underestimated the difficulty of the obstacles separating here from there.

Dragon scrambled down a steep wall of boulders, hoping none of them would fall on his head, before reaching an icy half-pipe that he tried his best to slide across on his boots, before giving up and glissading the rest of the way. On the other side was a long, undulating boulder field

▼ Lac des Isclots, on the way to the Col du Gorges-Blanc

that led all the way up to the next ridge. After copious amounts of boulder hopping and an unhealthy reliance on his own luck, Dragon climbed all the way up to the last high ridge of the day. From there, the view spread out over a cirque surrounding the Lac Portillon, while the orange and red rays of sunset punched through the clouds and laid upon the peaks at the head of the lake. Dragon deeply wished he had more time to soak all of this in, but the light was quickly failing as evening rolled on, and this was not the kind of place he wanted to be stuck in the dark.

From the ridge, he glissaded a ways down a snowfield to a rocky outcropping, and then boulder hopped as far as he could until again coming to a snowy channel crossing the way. After another five repetitions of this terrain switching, Dragon came to an impossible funnel of icy death that plummeted a sheer 500 meters down into the icebergs of the Lac Portillon. That was the end of the line for

▼ Lac Milieu, after climbing up snowfields and a huge 60° slope of scree

Dragon. There was no way to cross this barrier safely, and having spent 12 hours on intensely demanding terrain, he simply ran out of energy. He knew he would have to make camp here, on the side of this mountain. Although there was no flat space in sight, Dragon was able to pitch his tent precariously in a small divot of grass, and finally got to cook the dinner he should have eaten three hours earlier as the ambivalent sunlight disappeared from sight and the landscape plunged into the sea of night.

Dragon, like many hikers before him no doubt, had vastly underestimated the challenges of this first high-level day of the HRP. It's easy to romanticize the Pyrénées, but any of a number of conditions outside of his control could have caused Dragon to turn back, or worse yet, to have become stranded with an injury in this land of desolation and lifelessness, where radio waves cannot reach, where help may never come. Let

▼ Safety is never certain up at 3,000m. In the home of glaciers, storms appear in the blink of an eye. Avalanches and rock-falls are a constant threat

this be a warning to all who venture forth into these deserts of comfort, these voids of safety. Here you shall find the essence of adventure that you seek. Walking the razors edge between death and glory, facing innumerable demons and deathtraps, and returning from the valley of darkness alive. Finding a source of strength and drive and determination as failsafe and as sure as the great glacial springs of the Pyrénées, which will nourish your ambitions 'til the end of days.

Dragon knew these days would not be easy. With one of the hardest days of the HRP behind him, he would not make the same mistakes twice.

After a brief day of respite at the Refuge Portillon, he would cross the Col de Litérole, the highest mountain pass of the entire high route, then pass through the valley of the Aneto, the Pyrénées' highest peak at 3,404 meters, before finally arriving at the Col Mullieres, renowned for its sheer snowy walls and deep chasms.

▼ The final ascent to the climax of the Col du Gorges-Blanc

Change of Plans — That day, Dragon had given everything he had to the trail, if one can even call a line on a map across blood-thirsty glaciers and endlessly shifting scree-fields a "trail." He was still fighting the terrain as a horizontal ray of sunset pierced a veil of clouds and slowly scraped the last of the daylight off of the mountains around the Lac Portillon. He knew at that moment that he had to call it and throw down his bedroll where he stood. Before him laid a vertical chute of ice, 100 feet across at an angle of 60° and becoming steeper as it plunged down into a lake of icebergs a few hundred meters below. It was clearly not possible to glissade here.

That night was one of the coldest of the entire trail, and Dragon's makeshift bivouac on an uneven ledge surrounded by steep cliffs and ice didn't bring him much assurance that the wind wouldn't simply blow his tent into the lake below in the middle of the night. The moon rose above the peaks around 11PM and lit up the entire scene with an eerie white light.

The trail didn't want Dragon to leave without experiencing the equal brutality and beauty that it could offer in one of its most legendary and ethereal cathedrals.

The magnificent Lac and Refuge of the Portillon Glacier the following morning ▶


Pic Aneto, highest mountain of the Pyrénées at 3,404 meters

The morning after a zero-day at the wonderfully situated Refuge Portillon, Dragon set out to climb the second of the three great challenges of the HRP, the Col de Litérole, a massive undertaking with a 500 meter climb to the highest pass of the high route at over 3,000 meters of elevation, with half of the climb buried under a permanent layer of glacial snow. Knowing the challenges that laid ahead, he got an early start after a 6am wake and breakfast at the refuge. Oh how Dragon regretted not buying crampons back in Gavarnie when he had the chance! When he came to the massive ice floe, he had no choice but to firmly plant each and every step into the snow and test it for sure footing. After an hour or so performing a kilometer of this exercise, he felt the glow of the Eastern sunlight on his face and looked out over the next leg of his journey—oh what a view it was. From the Col Litérole, there was a series of pure icy bowls leading down to some white glacial

▼ A valley leading away from the chaotic granite wilderness, and into the Parc National de Posets-Maladeta

lakes, with steep precipices all around. He could make out some footsteps of other hikers leading around the bowl, who no doubt had shoe-spikes and ice axes. After a brief breather at the rocky crest, he climbed onto the hard snow sheet and began the arduous task of kicking steps downwards along the steepest front of the bowl, which turned out to be a good deal more challenging than kicking steps in the upwards direction, on account of gravity wanting to pull all his weight onto the lower, unplanted foot, where slippage was much more likely. Finally, exhausted, Dragon had a novel idea—he had found a large rock that had fallen off of the sheer cliff above, and made a nice track to where it had finally braked due to its friction. Dragon decided to use this phenomenon to his advantage, and sat right behind the rock and gave it a little push. Down it went for a few meters, and then came again to a stop. Dragon glissaded down behind it, and repeated the process. Before he knew

▼ A drastically refreshing landscape after the glaciers and scree of the last few days

it, he was safely down on the flats of the valley floor thanks to that nice big rock. He gave it a pat and carried on up over the next snowy ridge, the Portal de Remune, offering spectacular views of the highest peak in all the Pyrénées, the Aneto. What an honor it was to behold such an elegant, mountainous sculpture of nature's hands.

Dragon descended along a snowy mountainside and reached a portion of the HRP considered as a "Chaotic granite wilderness," meaning boulders of every size haphazardly strewn in piles everywhere, with little rock cairns one's only guarantee of correct heading and relative safety from taking a fall on an unstable boulder. He finally reached a glacial stream, sourced from the snowy precipices he had just walked off of, where the going got a good deal less rough, and the boulder-hopping gradually gave way to lush, verdant meadows and forested alpine landscapes. Dragon had come, at last, to the Parc National de Posets-Maladeta.

▼ In the valley of Aneto, the snowy cliffs of the HRP can be seen far behind

▲ The Maladeta Massif, the Plain d'Aigualluts, and a river that mysteriously vanishes into a cave and reappears across the border mountains in France

This valley quickly became the most civilized area Dragon had seen since Gavarnie, more than a week ago! Once he descended the valley and came to the park highway that led into the further reaches of the preserve, he found a large lodge and restaurant in the flattest epicenter of the valley, and made a point to get in contact with his friends in Vielha, to let them know he would arrive at the highway the next day at 2PM sharp (he hoped), just in case he couldn't secure cell coverage between now and then. Then, he rolled on a little ways and made lunch under the shade of a tree by a brook, submerged in some of the best scenery the Pyrénées has to offer. A gentle stroll led further into the wilder reaches of the Parc, and the sheer insanity of the morning's icy traverse already seemed a distant memory. Dragon was greatly enjoying the increased company of other hikers to share this incredible landscape, as it's not a place that one could ever fully take in alone.

Beyond the Plain d'Aiguillat, Dragon did not see another soul for the rest of the evening, having ventured too far from the road for anyone but a thru-hiker to reach. He made camp on a small peninsula jutting into a clear mirror lake, with a spectacular sunset view and colossal limestone cliffs all around.

The next morning, the only thing separating Dragon from his CDT hiker-friends and all-you-can-eat trail magic was the Col Mullieres, the third of the great challenges of the HRP. Another 500 meters of climbing through a barren lunar landscape would see him up to the crest of the Pyrénées at the pass, a jagged, treacherous wall of dark volcanic rock, with an enormous snow patch covering the steepest, most precarious face of the other side. Naturally, that happened to be the only safe way down for someone without snow gear. The route led right across the top of the snow-field abutting the rock face, with a drop of a few hundred meters

▼ A rosy sunset over dinner at a mirror lake bivouac

into a boulder field in the event of a slide. A couple of hikers were gearing up and slowly making the traverse with micro-spikes and ice axes, a good 100 meter crossing of the snow shelf. If they fell, they had the ability to self-arrest and stop themselves. Dragon, on the other hand, without those tools, would slide until the snow leveled out (best case) or until he hit a boulder going faster than he'd like (worse case).

At first, he attempted crossing the snowfield on the rock face, which almost immediately became a lot deeper than he was comfortable with. If he fell in there, he may never get out. It was going to be difficult to go back to the entrance of the chasm, so Dragon kicked steps into the snowy side and climbed his way up and over the top, where a Spanish hiker and his dog looked at him quizzically. At least someone was getting some humor out of Dragon's near death experience. Once they passed his perch, Dragon climbed up on

▼ Climbing up the lunar landscape to Col Mullieres, the third of the three hardest moments of the HRP

▲ The Col de Mullieres represents the final obstacle of the three hardest days of the high Pyrénées. Dragon came very close to falling into a deep Rimaye, a crevasse between the ice and rock, while trying to skirt around the right-hand snowfield. Crampons are needed for this stretch of the HRP.

▼ After successfully traversing the snow, there was a long, winding descent to the grassy valley below, where Dragon was expecting to meet friends from the Continental Divide Trail. They had agreed to host him at their home in the town of Bagneres-de-Luchon for a few days of trail magic and R&R.

the edge of the snowfield, and, with one arm crooked over the side and a pole in the other, he rode the edge of the snowfield like a monorail, before coming to a gentler slope where he slid down the foot track all the way to solid ground. Dragon had a renewed love of life and a healthy dose of adrenaline after all that.

Beyond the Col Mullieres, the views cascaded down the mountain, waterfalls and lakes and peaks abound.

Dragon had agreed to meet his friends at an old refuge on the highway, where people used to stay the night prior to making the crossing of the high border mountain pass into the village of Vielha, before they built a tunnel for the same passage.

Once through the snow and scree fields, the walk down to the highway was a cruise on nicely graded dirt trail cut right along the left side of the valley, and as he got lower and lower, the wildflowers and trees got bigger more abundant.

▼ A chain of the sapphire Lacs de Mullieres

Finally, Dragon met his friends, Paul & Chantal. They sped off at what seemed like the speed of light to Dragon, who had been making no more than a steady 3 miles per hour for the last 25 days. Upon arrival at their home, Dragon was overwhelmed by the magnitude of their view. Paul pointed out the various mountains on the horizon, the Maladeta massif, which Dragon had been swallowed up in (and almost devoured by) just yesterday. They promptly prepared a meal of fresh local sausage, eggs, and fruit, and then showed him to their guest bedroom where he could rest and recover the next few days. Dragon relished in the WiFi, having not had any cell service since Gavarnie more than 7 days ago, not to mention the list of repairs and maintenance on gear that had been piling up for weeks—clean water filter and stove, sew up pants, repair backpack frame, do laundry, oil boots, wash, hang gear in the sun, and of course eat as much as possible.

▼ A closer look at the gems of the Pyrénées, the Lacs des Mullieres

The second zero day, they woke up early and drove to the Saturday market in the town centre. It was loaded with fresh local meats, cheeses, vegetables, and much more from hundreds of different vendors. It was fun experiencing true French cuisine and culture with Paul and Chantal, as Dragon has not had much exposure to it, what with not knowing the language and being in the wild, having to eat a lot of lightweight processed foods most of the time. They really went above and beyond with their hospitality and trail magic, and Dragon was grateful they extended this kindness to him. He certainly needed all this good food and rest after almost four weeks on trail. Later, they went to the supermarket and he bought 6 days of food to carry for the next section. There's a whole lot of nothing for the next 6 days walk to the tiny village of El Serrat. Nothing but mountains, lakes, meadows, forests, animals, and an abundance of blue sky and sunshine. Sounds terrible, right?

The lakes act as a capacitor for glacial water, keeping a steady flow gushing through the waterfalls below ▲

Finally, Dragon knew it was time to return to the task at hand. He and Paul and Chantal drove back up the highway to where they first met, and said their goodbyes. The two of them were taking the opportunity of coming out this way to hike the trail up to the Lacs and Col de Mullieres; it is after all a beautiful, special place for them as residents and advocators of the Pyrénées.

Dragon set out for the 1,000 meter climb of the day with six days of food on his back:

— A huge breakfast bag with all kinds of packaged French pastries and two different forms of coffee (instant and loose grounds with filters)

— A snack bag of equal size with peanuts, almond and hazelnut chocolate bars, two packs of chorizo, 36 granola bars, ten snickers, some peanut M&Ms, and

— A dinner bag with six tins of tuna, tubes of mayo and tomato sauce, six packs of ramen, a bag of instant noodles, six

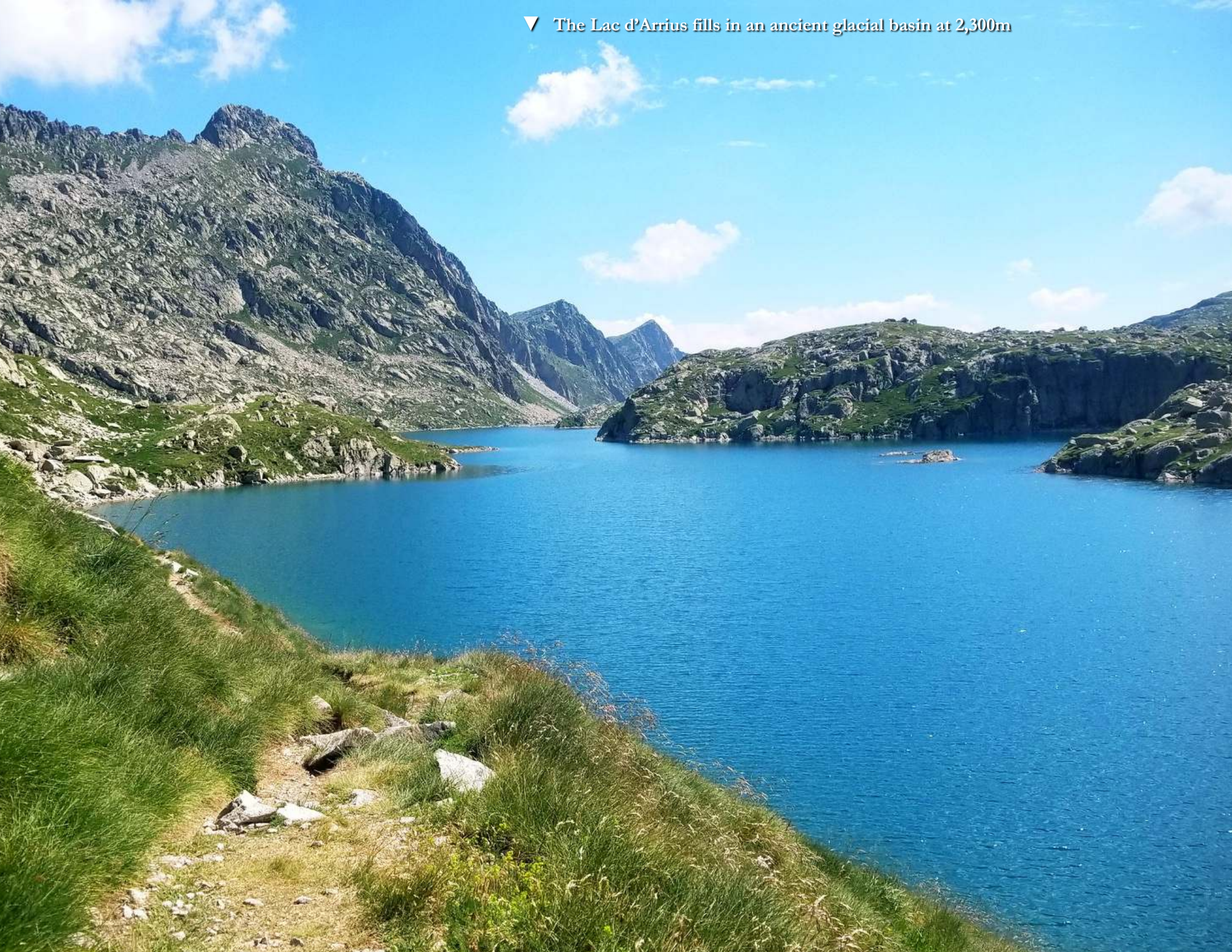
different instant soups, and some camomile tea to round it all out in the evening. Plus, Paul was nice enough to provide a medium gas canister for when the other one ran out. Between the two, Dragon should be set on fuel all the way to the Mediterranean.

Now, all that adds up to quite a bit of weight, but Dragon was feeling great after all the wonderful food and drink with his friends. He flew up the trail which wound its way up to Lac d'Arrius, where he stopped for lunch with some other hikers who were drying their tents on the nearby lakes.

The rest of the day had all the magic, wonder, and marvels that Dragon had come to expect from the Pyrénées. Sheared, glacial peaks, crystal clear aquamarine lakes, lush green grass and wildflowers filling in the spaces between large boulders of granite and limestone, the trail painted onto the landscape as it seems it was meant to be.

▼ One could spend a lifetime admiring views like these


V. VIELHA

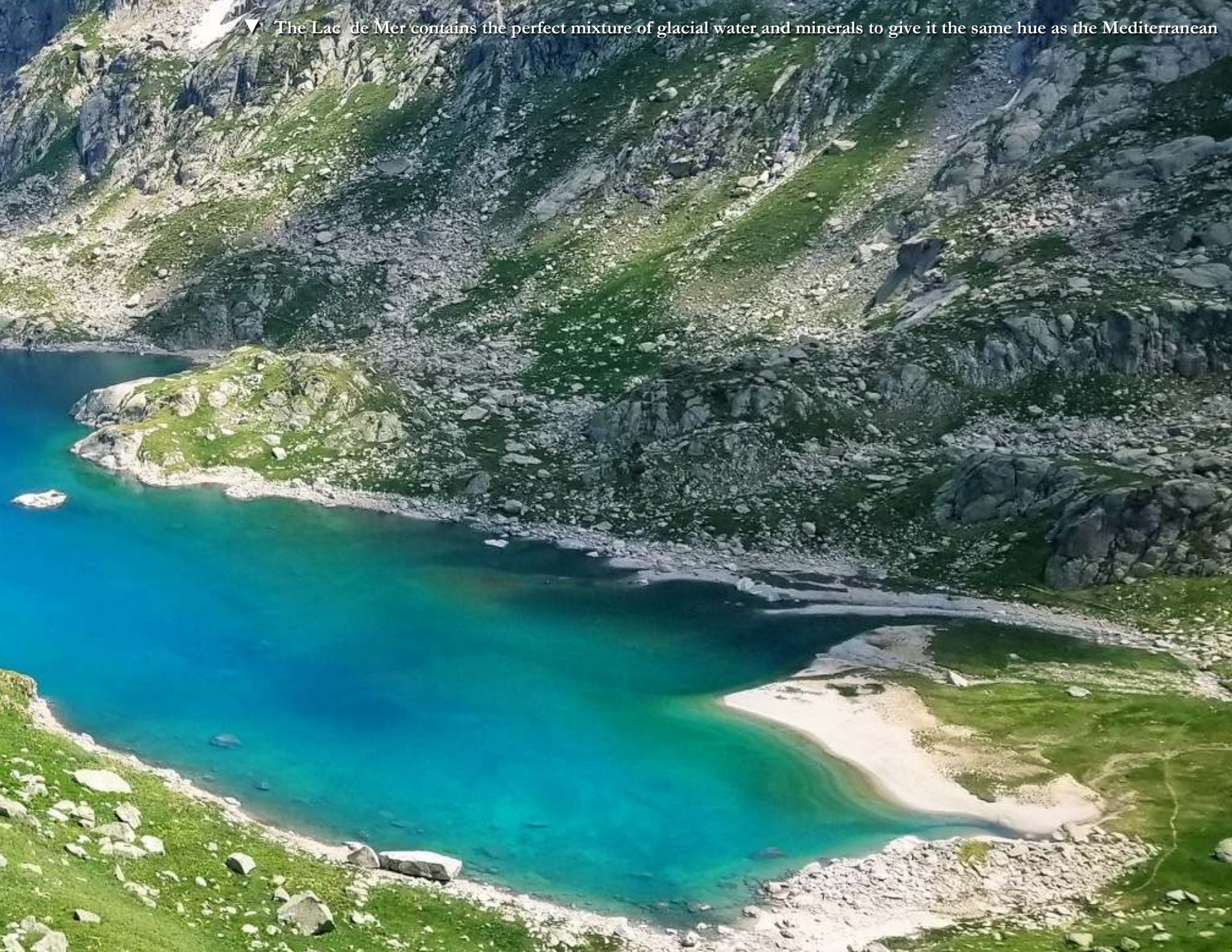


▼ The Lac d'Arrius fills in an ancient glacial basin at 2,300m

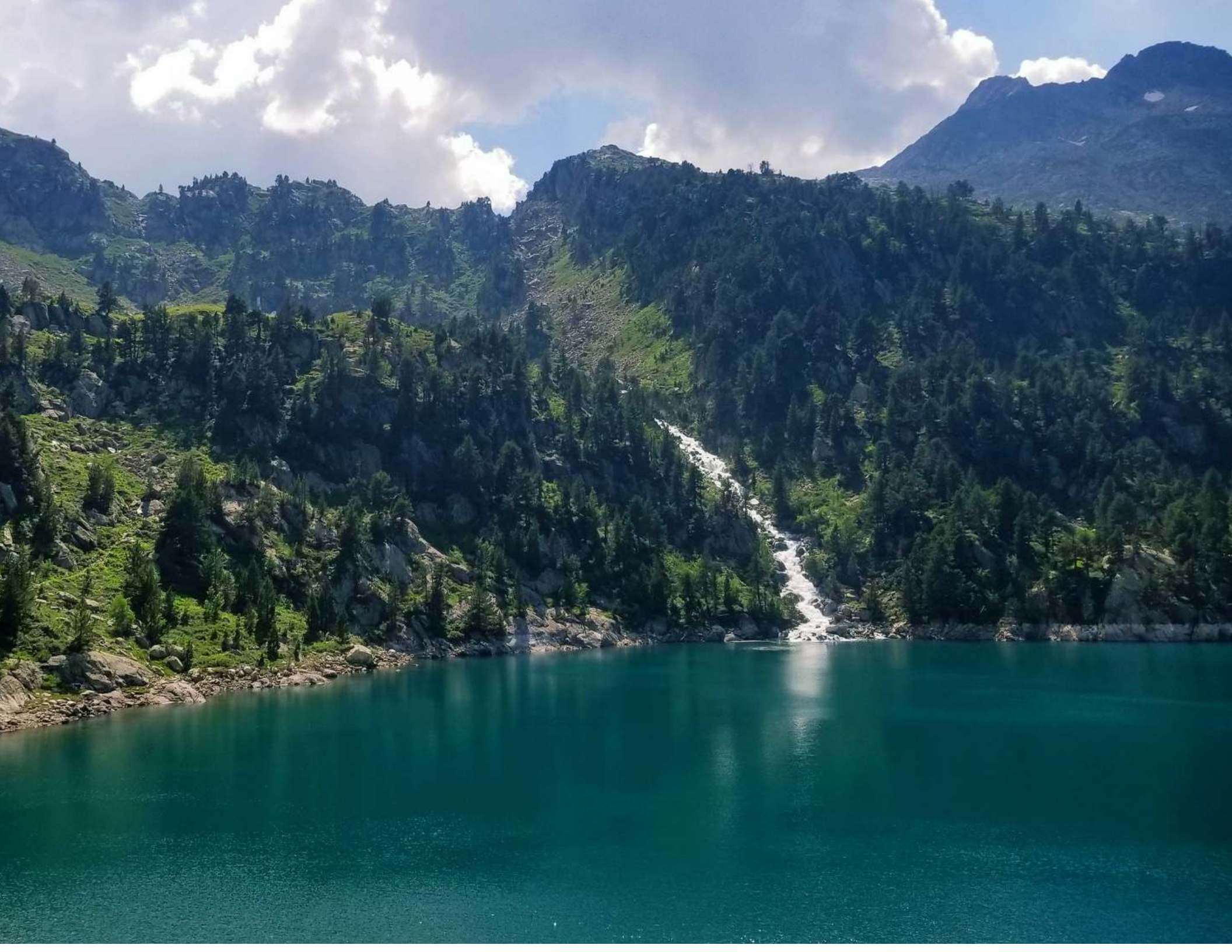
▲ The second of countless alpine lakes of the day

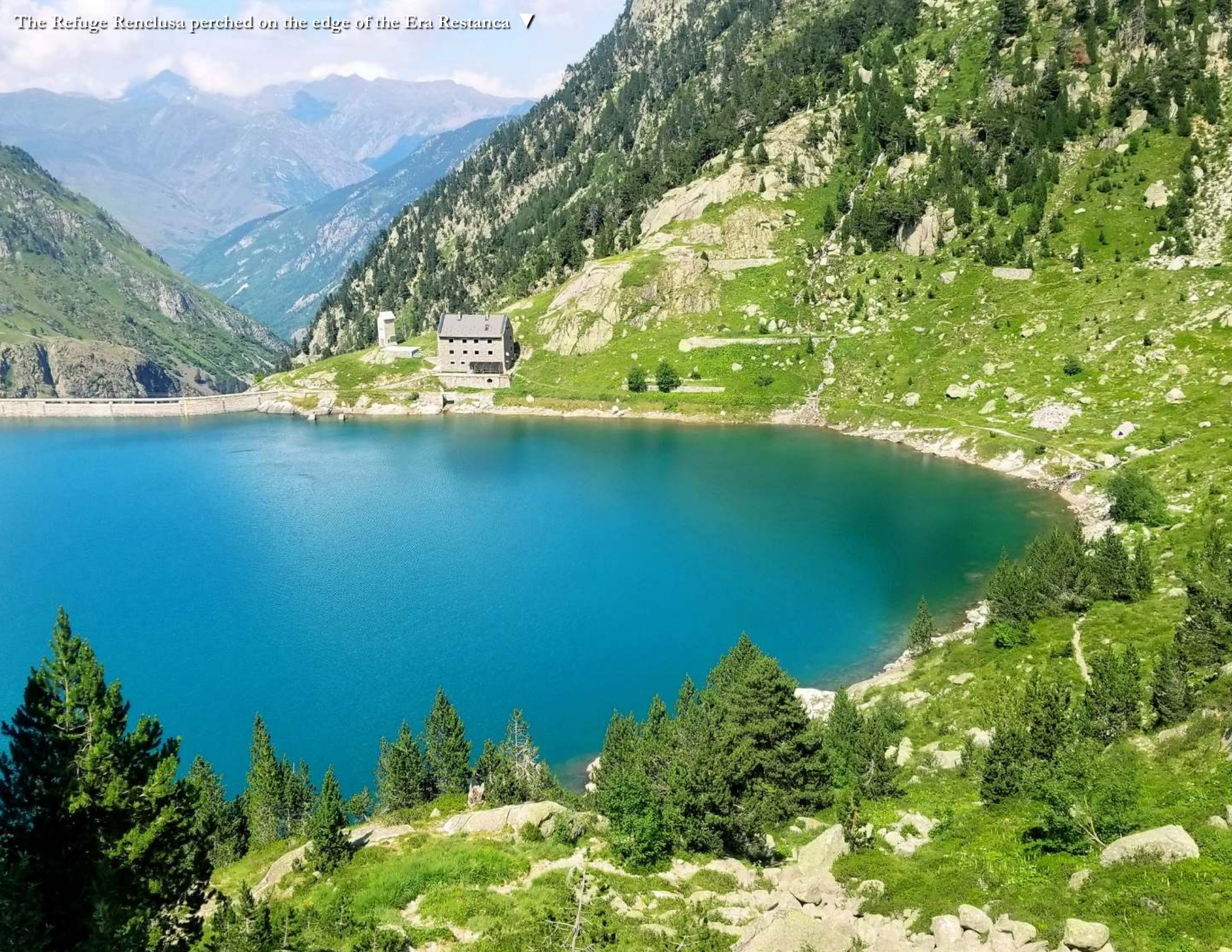
After lunch, Dragon climbed up and over a col, immediately arriving at a breathtaking overlook of the Lake of the Sea. While Dragon longed to stare at it until the world ended, it was getting hot, being midday, so he climbed down to the beachy keen shores of the most beautiful lake he had ever seen and took a dip in the crystal clear waters to cool off.

Beyond the Lac de Mer laid the Refuge Renclusa, situated on another stunning lake with many waterfalls in a lush valley, formerly a glacial basin. Many hikers were hanging around, swimming, taking pictures, and soaking up the sun. Dragon, on the other hand, had to keep moving, with many miles to go before the Mediterranean. Up he climbed, past the Estany Deth Cap Deth Port (a lake) and over the pass named the Col de Crestada, officially entering Parc Nacional d'Aigüestortes. Dragon hiked on, grabbed some water to prepare dinner, and pitched camp just above a small tarn at 2,700m.



▼ The Lac de Mer contains the perfect mixture of glacial water and minerals to give it the same hue as the Mediterranean




The Refuge Renclusa perched on the edge of the Era Restanca

▼ The unreal blue waters of the lake Era Restanca

▲ Hail pellets coat everything in sight after a fifteen minute super-cell storm rolls up the divide. A vibrant orange and pink sunset follows shortly after.

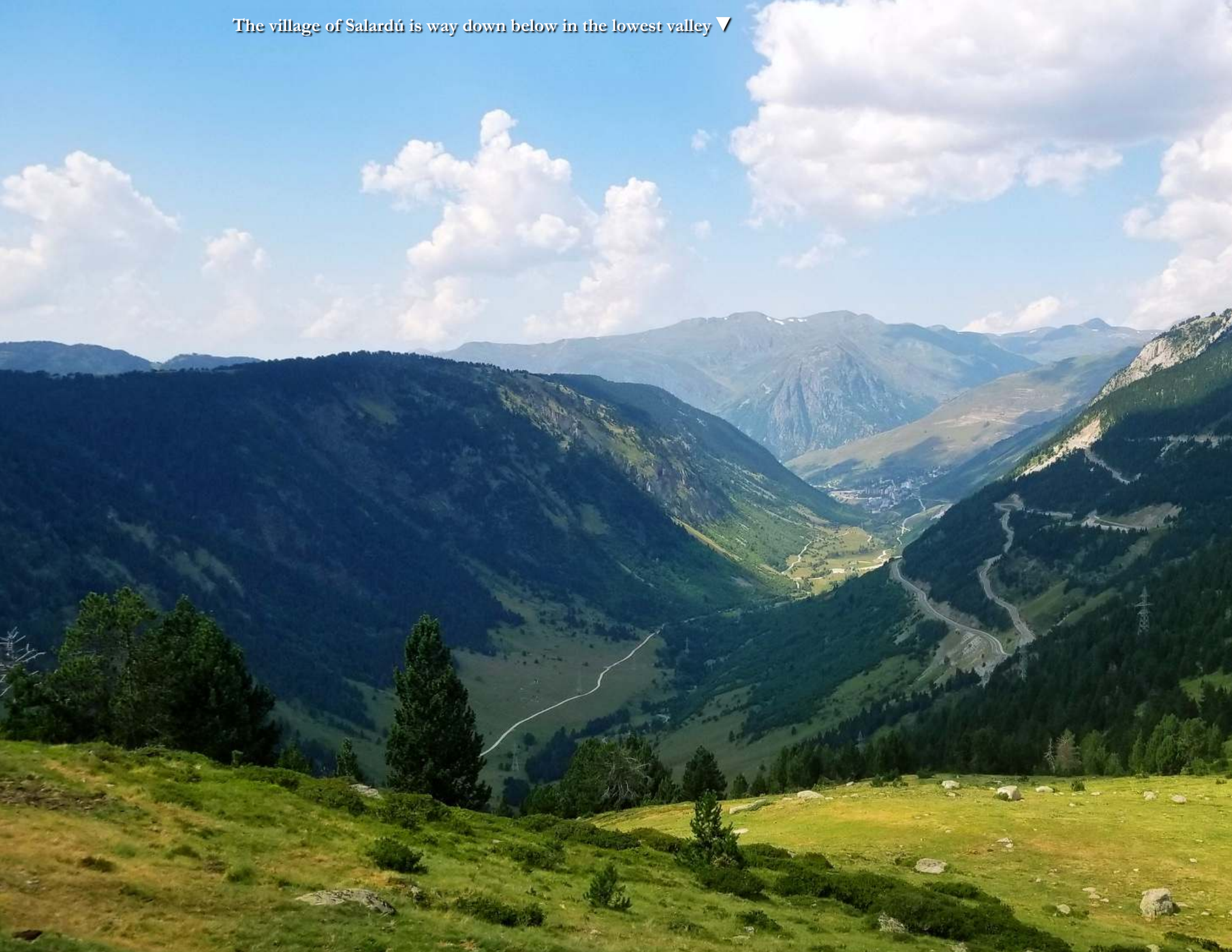
Dragon knew something was amiss. There was something in the air. A massive, dark cloud was climbing up the valley, getting closer by the second. Granted, the crest of the high Pyrénées was not the *best* spot to wait out a super-cell thunderstorm, but this was no time to be indecisive. Dragon pitched his tent a little ways down from the ridge next to a small tarn of snow-melt. The first flash hit a couple of kilometers away, on one of the high peaks in the background. Then, the pounding hail started drumming all over the rain-fly of the tent. The second, third, and fourth strikes accompanied the cacophony, each one sounding off a second nearer between flash and boom. Then there was a brief lull, and finally, KRACC-KABOOM!!! A synchronized shot of deafening plasma light and sound exploded just a hundred meters away on the frontier ridge. Within a few minutes, all was silent again, and the sun came out of the clouds and played among the aftermath, casting a mango-orange glow across the entire scene. A few terrified cows could be heard down below.

Dragon's first day back in the high Pyrénées had everything he had come to expect from them: massive ups and downs, heart-striking lakes, a well-situated refuge, the clanging of cowbells and a terrifying super-storm to top it all off. The following day showed more pleasant weather, and Dragon made the decision to stick to the official HRP and cut off the descent to the resupply town of Salardú. In doing so, he could stretch his 6 days of food and make it all the way to Pas de la Casa, the border city on the Eastern end of the small mountain country of Andorra. Had he gone to Salardú, he would have spent two days of food just to get there and back out, which seemed a waste when he would much prefer to spend that time along the high Pyrénées, away from all the noisy cars, crying children, tourist hotspots, and "no camping" signs. Given the choice of frolicking about the scenery of the below image, and walking on the hot asphalt in a suburb, which would you have chosen?

▼ The Lac de Clòto de Baish is overwatched by the Tuc Gran de Sendrosa (2,703m)

VI. SALARDÚ

(Or Not)


The village of Salardú is way down below in the lowest valley ▼

Dragon decided to stay up high on the official HRP route. Dropping down to 1,200 meters elevation didn't sound very appealing at the time, and in any case, his pack certainly felt heavy enough as it was. So back up it was! The next pass was at 2,600 meters, and had another incredibly beautiful valley and lakes on the other side.

Dragon always loved the moments at the end of the climb, just before reaching the pass and seeing what laid ahead, on its other side, despite that it was almost always guaranteed to be another gorgeous valley. The mystery was always there, though: how would it look? What features would make it beautiful? Would it have things Dragon had never seen before? Perhaps one of the most magnetic draws of the thru-hike is the notion of breaking the mundane, the routine, the terrible thought of living in one little box in one tiny corner of the world for 40 years of one's life in hopes that some day, we'll get to see the rest of it.

▼ The shepherd sitting at this pass with his big dogs told Dragon, "The old goat knows to ride the level ridge rather than to drop and climb back up"

▲ The Estany Pudo, with an evening rainstorm quickly approaching to rehydrate the area

With the renewed excitement of spending another week in the wild, Dragon flew down the trail, bushwhacked down a grassy mountain to cut off a long circuitous route of trail, and then reached the road to Salardu. He gave it a wave, and immediately rejoined the trail which wove up a forested hillside to an abandoned ski area. He crossed the highway here and climbed up a trail on the other side, where he met with four very excited Pyrénéesian sheep-pups who nearly jumped Dragon (on the default premise that he wanted to eat their sheep). He met the shepherd soon after, and once the two of them made gestures of friendship, the dogs settled down and resumed their usual duty, happy that they didn't have to fight and could return to playing in the grass. The shepherd spoke three languages fluently, and Dragon wondered why someone with such skills would end up being a shepherd out in the wayside, remote from any human contact. Then again, if Dragon could make a living hanging out in the high Pyrénées, he would jump at the chance.

He walked on along a ridge trail over another pass, and made camp just below at the Upper Lake of Garrabea, as the evening rain was making its first pass. Later, Dragon got out and enjoyed the glow of sunset at a rocky outcropping above the main lake below, before turning

in for the night.

The next day was wild. The guidebook underestimates it by calling it "a walk without compromise." After packing up, Dragon made his way down to the large lake below. There was a semblance of a trail and some cairns here and there, so he wasn't too worried.

Then, halfway past the lake, the trail vanished. The way it does. Dragon was left in front of a huge wall of boulders that needed ascending. This would become a trend in today's walk.

After making it to the top of the boulder hill, he was faced with another huge valley between himself and the pass he was headed towards, with no trail in sight. He descended steeply on boulders and slippery brush, eventually making his way to a small stream. Then, another wall of boulders! Yay! Dragon climbed up and over the second boulder hill, and was finally able to hone in on the mountain pass ahead.

The rain was moving in fast. It was time to make camp. ▼

This time, the ascent was through a big grassy meadow, with few boulders in sight. He was happy to finally make it out of that rough patch, and so stopped by a little spring to make a morning coffee.

The coffee was just what he needed to make it over the third wall of boulders and up a steep grassy slope. Finally, he made it to the pass! Down below could be seen the two Lacs de Airoto, and the orange-roofed Refuge Gracia Airoto. He made his way down on a small, overgrown divet in the Earth, and then the trail dead-ended at a giant boulder field. Dragon wanted to have a talk with whoever put all these boulders here. In any case, he boulder-hopped his way up to the Lac d'Airoto and took a break at the refuge there. Another couple hundred meters of climbing, and Dragon stood at the pass between the lakes he had just passed, and the long, 1,000 meter descent to Alos d'Isil. The afternoon was coming on, and it was getting hot already.

▼ The Estany de Garrabea is a welcome sight after a short burst of rain

After the idyllic, paradaisical lakes and peaks in the days circumventing the resupply town of Salardú on the high route, the grueling descent to Alos d'Isil couldn't possibly be anything other than a massive let-down, mentally and aesthetically. It was more of a drag than anything Dragon had faced so far.

It started on a hot, humid day in August, at a pass far above the Estany d'Airoto, and wound down a trail that eventually led to an old dirt road. Dragon probably should've kept to that road, but the lines on his map led him off on a spur track that eventually ended at an old farmhouse, before disappearing into waist high grass down a steep ravine. He tried his best to find something to go by, a divet in the grass, some sign of a track, but there was virtually nothing for the next kilometer. On he went, bushwhacking down a 50% graded slope, through various shrubs, bushes and grass, following the curves of the valley. At last, he thought he

▼ The Lake of Garrabea takes on a whole new look in the morning light

had come back to the trail. There was the signature red-and-white stripes of the GR trail blaze telling him to turn right. As if the route wanted to add insult to injury, this "trail" led down off of a perfectly good single lane track, meandered through dense thistle groves, and then climbed *back up* to the nice track Dragon was just on. He could see the tree with the marking saying to turn onto this trail from where he stood, 100 meters distant. He failed to make sense of this diversion, but in any case picked up the single lane for a ways, before coming to another maze of social trails leading off in every direction, with beautiful brick walls lining some of them. He thought for sure that these would lead him down onto the streets of the hamlet of Alos, but the way seemed to lazily wander without purpose up and down the French countryside. Finally, Dragon gave up on all of these paths and cut a straight line through the grass towards the villa that he could now make out at the base of the

▼ The orange-roofed refuge Gracia Airoto can be seen just above the Lac d'Airoto

▲ A closer look at the Lac d'Airoto

valley. After losing quite a bit of time to thickets of nettles and spikey grasses, and climbing too many barbed wire fences for one day, Dragon finally came to a cliff that stood about 50 meters above the road. He knew he would have to scramble down it to continue, and by the time he had reached the bottom, he had quite a few scrapes and bruises. Since he had opted for shorts because of the heat, he had spikey grass seeds all over his wooly socks. He plopped down next to the road at a little grassy pull-off, and spent the next half hour pulling burrs out of his socks and shoes before finally refueling with snacks and water after that thoroughly exhausting come-down. Dragon half wished he could've enjoyed the beautiful scenery more, but supposed it was necessary to have some low points in order to balance all of the incredible scenery that he had witnessed in the last few days. Those forlorned grassy fields had worn him out more than he thought possible.

Then, the trail branched off and crossed the river. Dragon filled up on water, and began to hear thunder in the distance. It was about 3PM now. He followed the road up past a couple of farm houses, but didn't want to get too close to them for fear of rabid sheepdogs. He took a trail up into the woods, which quickly ended at a stream. After a brief consult with the map, it seemed the best route was to hike straight up a grassy mountainside about a kilometer to his left.

The thunder came back, closer this time. The rain began pattering down. Dragon found a nice tree to shelter under, cover himself in the poncho, and had a bite to eat. Bushwhacking up a steep slope of slippery wet grass and prickly plants in the middle of a thunderstorm wasn't exactly one of Dragon's favorite pastimes, so he spent a good half hour waiting there, regaining all the energy he had expensed throughout this long and trying day. Finally, the rain slowed down enough for

▼ Looking back at the Estany d'Airoto from the high pass before the descent to Alos

VII. ALOS D'ISIL

him to continue the climb. This time, the trail doesn't disappear, but leads to a beautifully carved valley with waterfalls and grassy meadows.

There are cows everywhere. Dragon is in the Parc Nacional d'Alt Pyrénées, and cannot fathom why they allow cows here. They totally ravage and destroy all the local fauna, leaving behind nothing but sharp prickly grass and thistles. It's truly a sad thing to witness. These places are so beautiful, but they are ruined by the livestock industry. Don't get Dragon started on the tyranny of the cow bells. You cannot escape them. Their ringing is everywhere. Anyways, he keeps climbing up the valley and reaches the source of a small waterfall, and there is a very pretty little lake up there. He considered camping there, but there was a big group of ding dang cows approaching. He decided to make dinner and carry on, since the rain had slowed. He kept following the trail up and up, and came to

▼ A handful of the many Estanies of the Gallina in the valley of Mont Roig

a chaotic scree and boulder field, which had to be crossed to reach the high pass (2,500m) leading to the next valley. It was getting darker now, being almost 8PM. Dragon made it to the pass just as the rain began to start sprinkling again. To his left, there is a sparse path cut into a steep ridge leading to a couple of lakes up the valley. To his right, he saw a large rainstorm quickly making its way towards him. There was no time to linger—Dragon took off down the ridge and hopped a few boulder fields to arrive at the relative safety of the lakes. He quickly pitched his tent in the rain, and was glad to have a dry, safe place to weather the storm.

It sounded like a storm that would last a while, with a steady drumming of rain on the roof. There was a lone, impressive boom of thunder that resonated throughout the entire mountain range around 10PM. Then, the rain slowed to a drizzle. Finally, all was calm. Silence. Dragon was worn out—what a long day!

▼ The Estany de la Llavera sits on a shelf overlooking a vast and formidable forest valley

HRP hikers can briefly rejoin their civility and live a lavish life with all the luxurious amenities inside a typical Mountaineering Refuge ▼


USA

▲ Refuges are frequently built in the most stunning settings, below famous peaks and along major trailways, nestled deep in the alpine wilderness

Refuge Life — Along the HRP, walkers will encounter a huge variety of French Alpine Club refuges, some equipped to aid hundreds of hikers and climbers a day, offering home-cooked meals, hot showers, and a wood fireplace by which to wait out the blizzards and thunderstorms of the high mountains; and some, like the Refugi de Mont Roig imaged above, offering the bare necessities in an 8'x16' bomb shelter—9 bunks, mattresses, a table and stools, and a shelter solid enough to wait out a Cat 5 hurricane. Refuges also tend to be the epicenter of the social experience along these trails—everyone shares a table for dinner and tells stories of their day, of their grand adventures, of how terrible the weather is and how glad they are for a roof and a hot meal. Nowhere else in the wild mountain country of the Pyrénées will one meet such fascinating hikers paired with

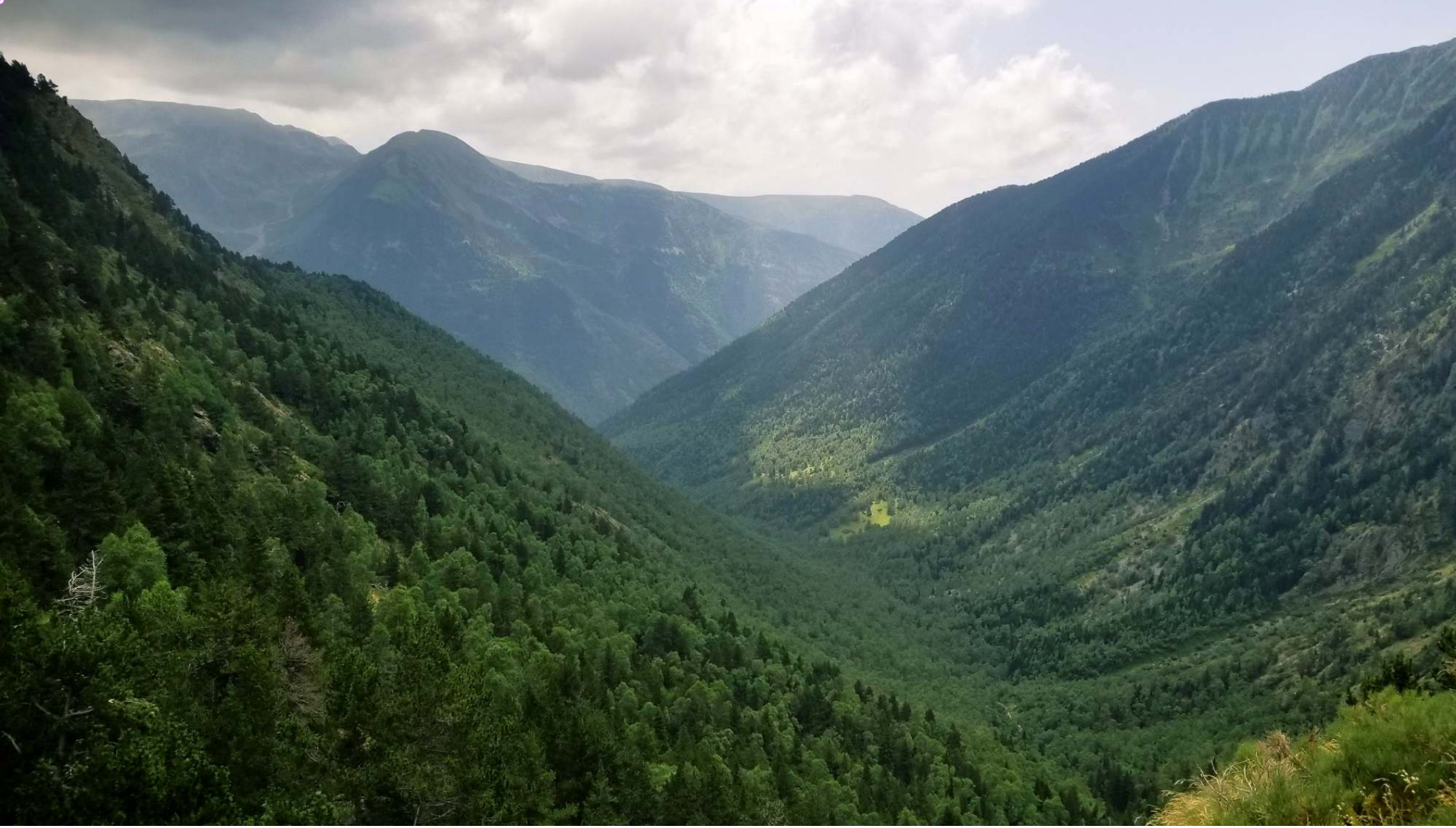
The Refugi de Mont Roig has a panoramic view of the Estany de la Gallina (behind) and the Estany de la Llavera (left) ▲

such legendary hospitality. These elegantly designed structures each have their own personality, and the atmosphere inside is often determined by the abilities and personalities of the refuge-keepers. Like most cases on trail, friends are made very easily, and one can meet hikers from all around the world at these hot spots, who made the climb up to bag a summit, or merely see one of the "magic" 3,000m+ peaks of the Pyrénées. Maybe they're a local who climbs to refuges on the weekends. In any case, people are naturally in a fantastic mood over dinner and even if you don't know the language, you're bound to learn a few things about your fellow guests. Without a doubt, walkers will spend a few stormy afternoons in the comfort of a refuge. Whether you're all alone, or sharing dinner with forty other hikers, it's always a memorable experience.

From the refuge of Mont Roig, Dragon set off down a cascade of forested valleys, with glacial peaks peeking out in every direction. After a few kilometers he arrived at the small hamlet of Noarre, with no more than a few charming stone houses and some farmland where a few fortunate families call home. This was the low point of the day, and the trail continued on up the next valley and past an array of scenic waterfalls and overlooks.

At a certain point, the actions of hiking the trail boil down to a routine. Buy enough food. Hike over a mountain. Camp. Eat. Sleep. Every day becomes a checklist of things that must get done for survival and progression along the route. What was a new and fascinating land at the start, has become the norm of life, the status quo. But to be doing literally anything else seems a waste of time that could be spent better communing with the mountains, untangling the mysteries of the cosmos, becoming a part of the complex

▼ The valley of the small hamlet of Noarre

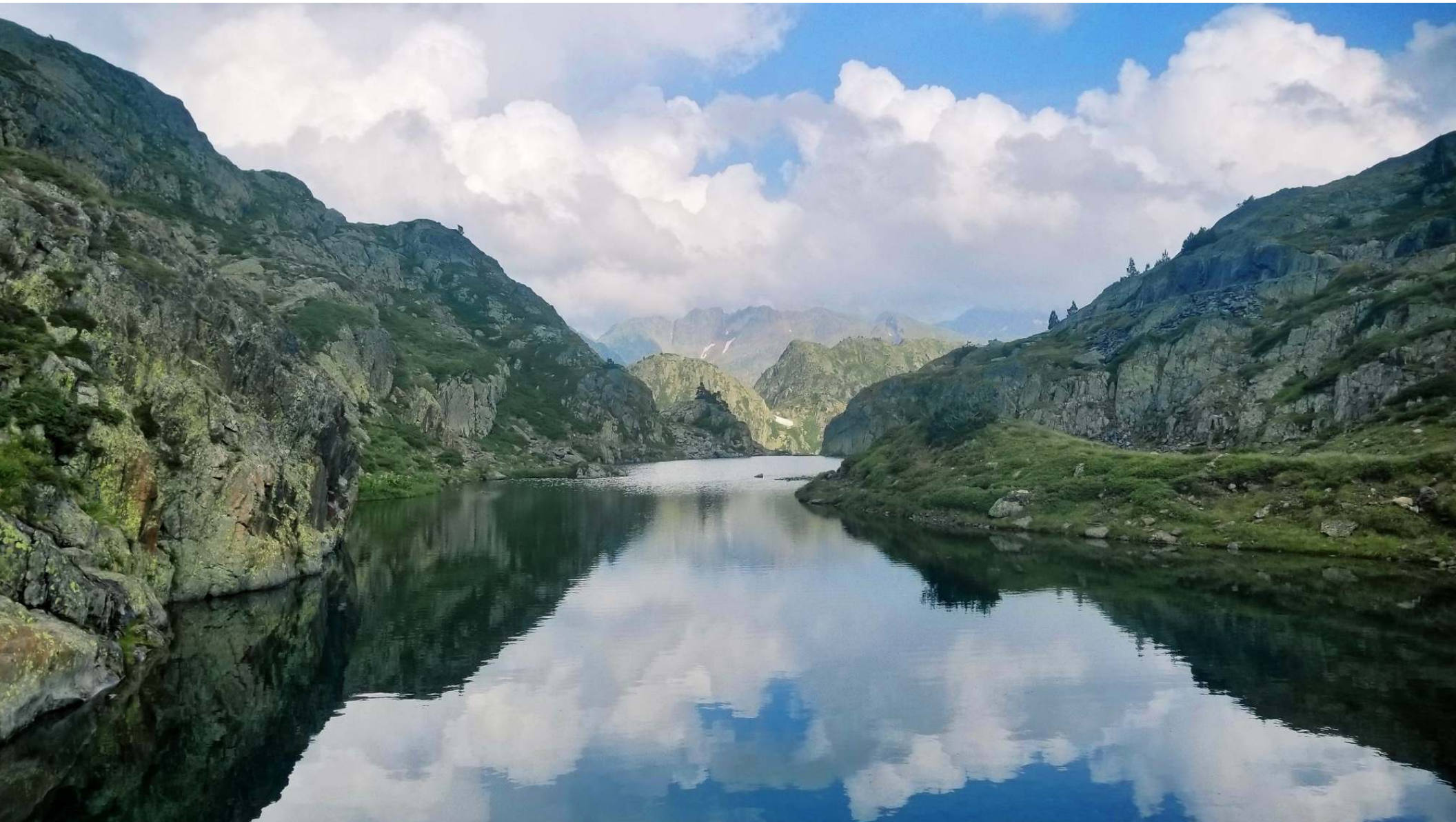


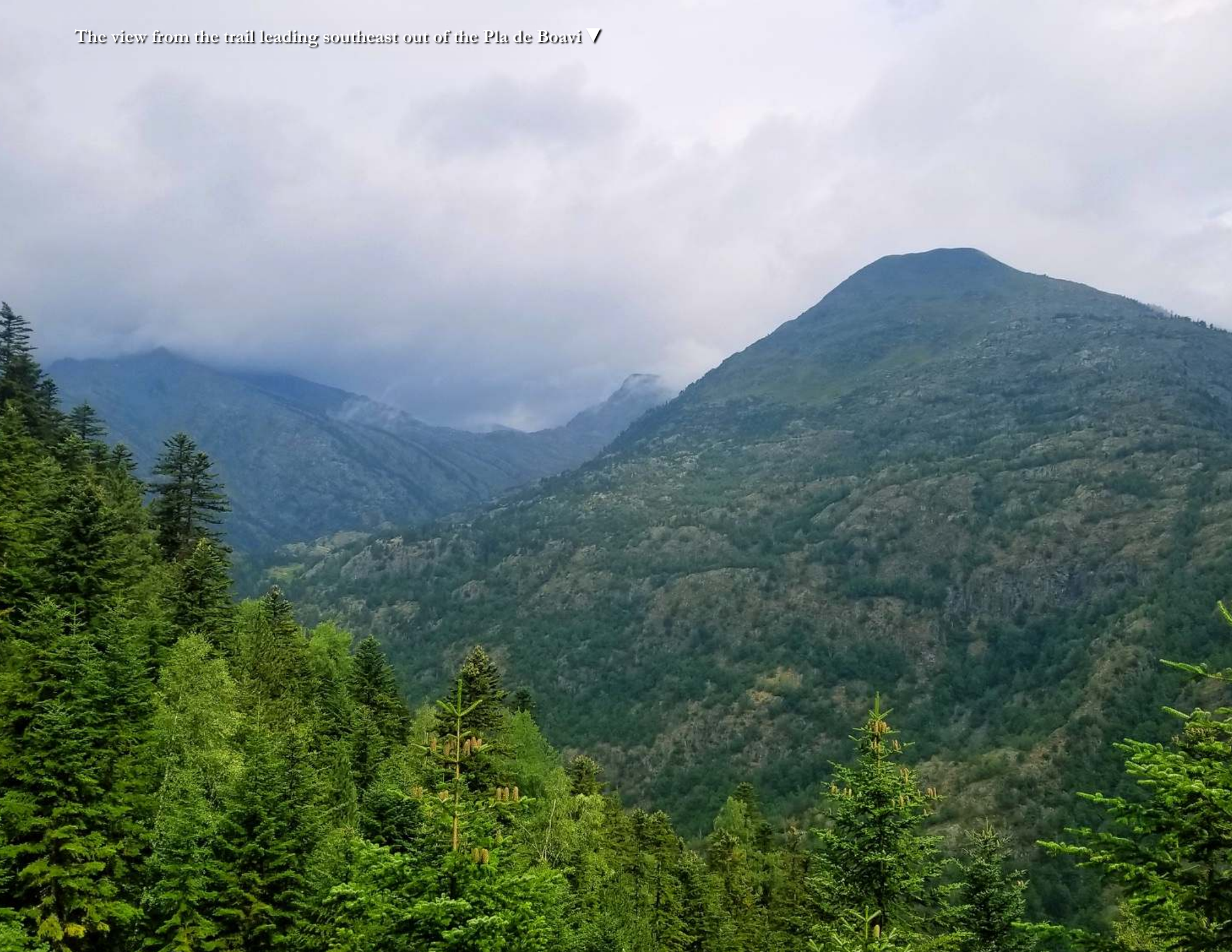
▲ The sun pierces through the clouds in a remote Pyrénéan vale

network of interrelationships that make up the biospheres of Earth, containing creatures and wonders the likes of which could not be found on a billion trillion other worlds. The people of France and Spain (and many others) lovingly dedicate lands like these, that evoke the spirituality in us all, as national parks and forests, to be kept in perpetuity for the enjoyment and benefit of all people, both present and future. Again, the words come to mind. "The trail unites us." Nothing could so inextricably link people living hundreds of years apart as the trails that we have shared. To have a shared experience, true solidarity with all the people who stood where you stand and shared in the awe of such oases of heaven. To see the places so frequently fought over in human history, through countless wars, now completely overgrown with old-growth trees, provides an entirely different mindset, the thought that there is a way to live ones life so that no harm ever comes to these places.

Dragon had climbed over a high pass below the Pic de Certescan and then down past a lake and refuge of the same name. He stopped for dinner at a river delta where a small rainstorm caught up with him. Then, around a lake and down, down, down 1,300 meters to the Pla de Boavi. 100 meters above the bottom of the valley, the skies opened up and a torrential rainfall began. Dragon covered up and picked up a dirt road that led along the valley floor. A few kilometers later, and it was growing darker, the rain had yet to let up. A large foggy field opened up in front of him, and Dragon was a little concerned about crossing such a wide-open space in the midst of such a powerful storm. He kept walking, and just as he reached the middle of the field, BOOMMM! A flash of lightning struck just a few hundred meters over Dragon's head. He picked up the pace, and crossed a rapid, flooded river on a wooden bridge. In no shape for another climb, he made camp on the other side.

▼ The outlet of the Lake de Certescan flows down towards the Plain de Boavi.





The view from the trail leading southeast out of the Pla de Boavi ▼

Dragon knew he had to make a good amount of mileage today to reach El Serrat in Andorra the next day. He climbed a thousand meters up and over the Col de Sellente, had lunch at the orange Refuge Baborte, walked down to the Pla de Boet, and then climbed over another high mountain pass that led back into France. He camped by a high lake named the Etang de la Soucarrane at 2,300m. The next day, and the sixth day since leaving Paul and Chantal, Dragon climbed around a grassy valley and over a high col, then descended on very easy terrain to a small ski resort area. He had officially entered the country of Andorra! It didn't look all that different from anywhere else out here. He carried on down the valley on great trail, and eventually came to the small village of El Serrat. He booked a much needed night of rest and relaxation at the Hotel Bringue. The pension there included a full dinner and breakfast at the nicest place Dragon had stayed in a long time.

▼ The Lac Baborte just below a well positioned mountaineer's refuge.

▲ The Ruisseau de Soulcem winds down the valley just prior to the HRP's passage into the small mountainous country of Andorra

VIII. EL SERRAT

▲ The HRP stays true to its name, constantly seeking out the highest navigable route along the crest of the Pyrénées

Fully rested, recovered, and calorie loaded, Dragon took off for the last two day stretch to Pas de la Casa, the ski-resort gateway city from France to Andorra. He got an early start, and made 15 kilometers over a mountain pass before stopping for lunch. He was seeing many hikers who were out walking, a few of them even being GR-11 or HRP hikers from various European countries. From the second high pass of the day, the trail descended down to the Estany de Sorda, which was jam-packed with hikers who made the climb up to witness its incredibly blue-green waters. Dragon took a brief short-cut which maintained elevation along a ridgeline before dropping down to a valley and rejoining the high route at the small hamlet of the Pont de la Baladosa, where people were gathering at the local bar-restaurant for some live music. Dragon wished he could join them, but Pas de la Casa was calling, and he knew it would have all the food and amenities that he needed.

The trail was paved for a ways, before it split off and climbed up another mountainside. There were many hikers at first, and then slowly, they all disappeared, such that when Dragon reached the uniquely photogenic meadow in the basin up above, he saw not another soul. He stopped here to make dinner, and thought about camping, but decided to knock out another leg of the climb with the energy he got after dinner. Finally, another 200 meters up, he found himself at a pristine alpine lake with a view down onto the meadow that he had just had dinner at. It was the ideal place to enjoy the golden hours of the day, as the sunlight modulated its colors and played amongst the rocks and grass.

The next day had exactly what Dragon had come to expect from hiking the Continental Divide Trail: a nicely maintained trail, riding the highest ridge in the Pyrénées for many hours, with panoramic views in every direction,

▼ A bivouac besides the crystal-clear aquamarine hues of The Estany de Baix de Siscaró

changing with every step. This continued right up until the descent to Pas de la Casa, a formidable city which Dragon could make out from a few hundred meters above its streets. On the way down, he stopped at a store to grab some snacks for the road walk into town, and also got some entertainment from a drift race-course, where people could take their cars and practice drifting around corners and such. There were some really good drifters there, but it was almost more entertaining to watch the people who weren't so good, who would hit the barriers and spin out of control when they tried to drift.

Finally, Dragon made it into the city of Pas de la Casa, after a little bushwhack down a grassy mountainside to cut off some of the switchbacks of the highway. It was slightly overwhelming being in a city of this size with so many people and such commotion, after the absolute peace and quiet of the mountains for the last 8 days. Nevertheless, Dragon

▼ The Valley of the Riu Siscaró

▲ The Estany de Baix de Siscaró

found a room at the Hotel Casado, and after freshening up a bit, he went off to see what was happening in the city. There seemed to be an extravaganza of people from every nation coming here to buy goods from an Andorran city, whether for novelty or the tax-benefits, Dragon didn't know. He first went to get a burger, before spending the rest of the afternoon sorting out his resupply, and perusing the outfitters' shops for gear that he didn't know he needed (though all he really needed was a new pair of socks).

With all of that out of the way, Dragon got a great night of sleep, and a delicious breakfast in the morning, and he knew it was time to set off towards Peak Carlit, the next great challenge of the HRP, and the beginning of his final week in the high Pyrénées. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing he was nearing the end of this mystic mountain range, but he was also enthralled with the thought of going all the way and finishing this thru-hike.

IX. PAS DE LA CASA

Dragon set off from Pas de la Casa fully stocked up and ready to see what this final leg of the high Pyrénées had to offer. The trail out of town was cut into lush, grassy mountainsides, and there was nary a soul to be seen, aside from some horses and the cars far down below.

A few hours later and he was at the base of a high valley leading off before him. It looked so majestic, with a pack of horses grazing right before him. Halfway up the valley, Dragon checked the map, and found that he had picked the wrong valley to walk up! But all was good—there were many ways to walk the high route, and he found a route across a pass at the top that would take him back to the official trail, and throw in a few extra lakes and some ridge walking.

Once he crossed the pass at 2,600m and rejoined the trail, it wound down a good ways towards a large dam on the Lac de Lanoux. There was a large sign on a gate leading across the dam, written

▼ The path leading East from Pas de la Casa, far above the highway

▲ A cirque of mountains just outside the city

all in French, which Dragon could not read, so he opened the gate and walked right across the concrete wall and through another gate on the other side. This saved him a good 100 meters of descent and ascent if he had crossed below at the outlet of the dam. He later translated the sign on the gate, which read: "Access Prohibited—trail walkers use the trail below the mouth of the dam."

Oh well, ask for forgiveness rather than permission, right? From the other side of the lake, the trail began its climb up towards the Pic Carlit, a domineering mountain at 2,921 meters, towering over everything else in the landscape. Dragon passed through grassy meadows and around steep granite cliffs, and finally arrived at a small lake, directly facing the impressive west face of Carlit. There was an obvious storm brewing on the south side of the mountain, and it appeared that the peak tore the sky into two, as the storm broke right in line with the middle

of the mountain peak, with clear blue skies on the north side.

Given the conditions, Dragon decided it best to camp there and make the summit first thing in the morning, since monsoon thunderstorms were common around this time in the afternoon. He pitched camp right next to the lake, and enjoyed a coffee while catching up on various chores, followed shortly after by dinner.

The next day, he started up the peak before the sun came up. The climb was steep, with every step kicking loose rocks that would keep cascading down and out of sight. The path zigzagged up a concave scree field, going up at about the maximum incline that Dragon's Achilles tendons could take. A couple of hikers and their dog came running down from the top past him. The trail became more of a rock climb than a trail for a ways, before leveling out near the top. At last, the trail arrived between two large spires of rock.

▼ The fog rests on the valley floor, making the views from the HRP that much more spectacular

▲ The valley of the Rec d'en Garcia leading up to the Estany de Coma d'Or

Dragon dropped his pack there and made the short traverse up to the true summit of Pic Carlit, where the entire world opened up around him. He could see the entire way he had walked from Pas de la Casa behind him, and the whole of the HRP for the next 30 miles laid before him. There was a sea of fog in the lowlands, with Pyrénéan peaks poking through here and there. The sun was glistening on the blanket of white, while the nearest landscape was wide open and filled to the brim with lakes, as if they were jewels strung around the mountain's neck. A line of people could be seen walking up from the Refuge of Carlit down below, about a 4-hour traverse for the average hiker. Dragon shared the peak with ten other early risers, who were all gaping at the impressive flowering of Nature opened up before them. At last, another group of hikers arrive, and Dragon took the opportunity to escape back to his gear, and get a head start down Carlit's east face.

Photography—There are many elements that go into taking the perfect picture. Making sure to contain the interesting elements of the landscape according to the rule of thirds is important. Dragon shoots in 16x9 as that is what they use in movies. A clean lens is a must. Lighting is perhaps the most important ingredient to the photo cake. A few hours difference in the position of the sun can make the landscape that was just majestic and dramatic turn flat and uninteresting. When choosing photos to publish, some of them just stand out better than the rest—those are the ones that made it into this book, and onto Instagram (@fletcherdmorriss). There were thousands of photos to sort through, but many of them were obviously not up to the standards for publishing: the clouds were overexposed and washed out, they came out blurry, the lens was dirty, the landscape was not as interesting. Still, it's a good practice to shoot first and edit later.

▼ The valley of the Riu de Cortal Rosso

When struck with an amazing landscape, Dragon takes a ton of pictures of it, not sure which may turn out to be the ideal one. Panoramic photos have become more widely available with the rise of cell phone cameras, and they can allow even more of the scene to be conveyed to the viewer, offering a wide-angle shot that reduces the limitations of having a small pin-point aperture on a phone. All the photos in this book were taken on the Samsung Galaxy S8 on the stock camera app with HDR active. To think of all the devices one would've used to have had to carry to get the same utility as the modern smartphone makes Dragon's back hurt.

Photographs have power. They can inspire. They can evoke the entire range of human emotions. They can take you back to the most beautiful moments of your life, to reimagine the extraordinary stories that you lived. The art of storytelling has always been embedded in humankind for our survival, to warn of dangers and to advise

▼ The backyard of Pic Carlit

▲ A small lake just below the massive Pic Carlit (2,921m) makes an ideal basecamp for an early morning ascent of the giant

on where to find food to survive through the winter. To transfer human culture down through the generations. While the mediums have changed from the days of getting all of our news while sitting around the dying embers of the campfire, the purpose of storytelling remains the same. It exists to improve the lives of those who come next. It links the ideas of the great inventors, scientists, writers and explorers who lived a thousand years ago with those of us alive in the modern day. It embeds our societies' laws, our oddities and mannerisms, our hopes and dreams and fears into us all. The rise of mass media allows us to tell stories on an industrial scale, and we have never had more choice in which stories we have available to listen to.

In some ways, the art of storytelling is our own appeal to eternal life. To keep telling someone's story means that they are still alive, long after death. Their influence has not waned entirely from the Earth, what so many fear upon confronting death. They continue to teach, to inspire new adventures, to have a tangible effect on the world. Dragon himself has always decided to hike the trails he has done based solely on other

people's photographs and the stories they tell of the trails they did. And in that way, he has become a part of that machine that keeps on pushing more people to take on grand adventures in their lifetime. Dragon always felt that if he could inspire but one person to hike a trail he hiked because of the pictures he put out into the world, then he would have done a great service to the hiking community and to Nature writ large. For why do any of us come out here, but simply to commune with Nature, which we have all sprung from, and which we will all return? Which we attempt to hide from, to flee from and to try to conquer by building smooth white walls around ourselves, to keep nature out and ourselves boxed in. We can all benefit from seeing the workings of the divine hand of Nature, and if you cannot make the trip to see these wonders yourself, Dragon hopes this book will serve that purpose just as well. Still, he hopes you will go climb a mountain on his behalf.

▼ The HRP hiker can beat the constant crowds making the pilgrimage up the Pic Carlit with an early morning rise up its steeper, less frequented face

▲ The trail leading up to Pic Carlit is a hotspot for tourism in the area

On the way down from Carlit's summit, Dragon passed hundreds of hikers on their way up, many of them looking quite exhausted—the climb up this face from the refuge was a lot longer, after all. From the summit, there were a few places where the trail was less than visible, and Dragon got off track and ended up doing some mild rock climbing above some very steep, rocky cliffs. He rejoined the trail on a ridge off to the right, which quickly led down towards the many lakes below. There were the Lakes de Sobirans, de Vallell, de Llong, de Llat, de Comassa, de Sec, de Negre, del Viver, and finally the massive Lac de Bouillouses at the bottom. The trail led across a dam at its head, and Dragon was feeling suffocated from all the people, as this was the trailhead which also featured a huge lodge and restaurants and all the like. Buses were flying to and fro, bringing in still more tourists to the area. Who can blame them, it was an incredibly beautiful string of lakes with a peak on top.

▲ The Lacs du Carlit make for one of the most picturesque parts of the Pyrénées, with over fifty lakes scattered throughout the forested hills

Dragon quickly passed the trailhead and walked down the road a ways, before coming to another trailhead which led onto a bonus trail with four more lakes named de Recó, de Llong, de Negre, and the Lac of the Pradella. Finally, the GR and HRP trails joined with a dirt road down to the Bolquère ski area.

A trip to the supermarket at the base of the ski runs was the first order of business, as Dragon needed supplies for the next three days through the region of the Pic du Canigou, another famous pilgrimage destination, and the last real mountain standing between him and the Mediterranean. With all his food sorted out, and a healthy amount of junk food in tow, Dragon climbed down to a beautiful forested park surrounding the Lac de Ticou, the perfect spot for a picnic. Then, down through lower Bolquère, onto the small hamlet of Eyne, and into the forested Vallon d'Eyne, where he found a gorgeous campsite in a flowery meadow.

X. BOLQUÈRE

The next morning began one of the most spectacular ridge walks of the HRP, with at least ten different peaks linked together by a few short passes. The first was the climb to the Pic d'Eyne at 2,789 meters, followed by a second gentle climb to the Pic de les Nou Fonts (2,861m). There was great trail despite that the terrain was mostly boulders and gravel. The views in every direction were sweeping and expansive. After a few snacks, there was a brief descent and a third climb to the Pic de Noucreus (2,800m), then the Pic de la Fossa del Gegant (2,807m), and finally the Pic Inferior de la Vaca (2,826m). Dragon was cruising! The trail was perfectly graded and fell effortlessly before his boots. From this vantage point, he had a choice to make. He could follow the easy official trail down into a valley and towards the Valter2000 ski area, or he could cut his own trail along the vicious looking Pic dels Gorgs (2,791m), Pic de l'Infern (2,869m), Pic de

▼ The early morning sun makes a natural wake-up call

▲ The Pic d'Infern (2,869m) punctuates one of the most technical forays of the HRP along an unmarked frontier ridge-route

Freser (2,834m), and finally, the Piolets de Bastiments (2,880m). This alternate route was rocky, strenuous, ridiculous, and without any trail or waypoints other than to stick to the sharp, knife's edge ridge line connecting the peaks. With all this in mind, Dragon flew off towards these inaccessible, impossible looking peaks. He was having too much fun ridge walking to stop now, and he figured it would be an insult to the spirit of the high route not to at least attempt to take the highest possible route along the crested backbone of the French-Spanish border.

The first obstacle was the jagged ridgeline leading up the Pic de l'Infern that is apparent in the foreground of the picture above. There were a few places where the use of hands to hold onto rocks was needed. Having made it to the Infern, he now descended to a pass made entirely of small boulders, and would have to progress by boulder hopping for the rest of the traverse. After a few hours of

The Piolet de Bastiments (2,880m) is another notable destination for religious pilgrimage walkers, though most take the easy way up ▲

boulder hops, he finally stood at the top of the Pic de Bastiments, where there was a monument with two bronze ice axes right at the summit. He sat here for a while to catch his breath before climbing down to a pass and heading towards a refuge and the Valter2000 ski area. He had thought about continuing on the high route and circumventing the ski area, but water was scarce at the ridge and he had long since run out. He quickly found some in the valley below, and was glad he took the lower route down to Vallter, as they had a restaurant with tons of snacks, drinks, and delicious food for sale there, things that Dragon had been craving all day while wearing out his calorie count.

From the ski area, there was a short climb back up to the ridgeline, which had now turned into sweeping fields of verdant meadows with massive, low clouds quickly hurrying across. It made for quite a scene. It was approaching the evening, and Dragon soon found a pristine spring to get

water for dinner, before camping just below the source.

Just like that, Dragon realized that he had only one day left in the high Pyrénées. The next day would take him over the legendary Pic du Canigou, the final summit above 2,000 meters, before sending him plummeting down to sea level. He was planning to soak up every second of the high route that he had left. The day began as a continuation of the grassy ridge walk on the approach to Canigou, furnishing panoramic views into France and Spain. There were a few sheep who were lucky enough to live in such a dreamscape. At one point, Dragon ran out of water and was unable to find any springs up on the ridge, so he headed for a valley he saw on his map. When he arrived, he found that this creek bed was dry as well. He dropped his pack there, and went down the creek nearly 200 meters before he finally found a gushing spring pouring out into the valley.

▼ The famous Pic du Canigou (2,784m) the last highest mountain of the HRP, furnishes an unbelievable view of the Mediterranean Sea

With his hydration replenished, he set out for Pic Canigou, although he was planning to take an alternate route off trail, and straight up the border mountains around the famous peak. There was no trail here, but the grassy-rocky mountainside was easy enough to scale. From the top of the Pic des Sept Hommes (2,651m), he could make out clearly the path forward. He proceeded with his own take on the high route, which was now almost exclusively large boulders, and summited the Puig Roja (2,724m) and the Pic de Bassibès (2,637m). He wanted to attempt to completely circumnavigate the Pic du Canigou by hiking towards the Puig del Roc Negre (2,714m), but the traverse to get there was simply too treacherous, even for Dragon. It would have taken a true rock climber to climb this face, and besides, Dragon was again short on water. He decided it best to descend down to the Gorgs du Cady, in the valley just south of the magnificent Canigou Massif.

▼ Walkers of the High Route must come to terms with the finality of their journey as they begin the last few days to the trail's Eastern Terminus

▲ HRP hikers will find it challenging to ever forget the dream-like landscapes of the Pyrénées

Dragon rehydrated at the Lacs du Cady, and basked in the beauty of Canigou towering before him. He took a short walk to a grassy valley, and was glad to be done with all of the aimless boulder hopping of the last few hours. He rejoined with the official HRP, and began the switchbacks leading up the south face of Canigou.

When he was within a couple hundred meters of the summit, a large cloud rolled through, and Dragon figured it would be safer to take an alternate route that led over the Pic Bas del Canigou, instead of attemping the main summit, especially considering that he would not have a great view from the peak due to the low lying clouds. Dragon disappeared into the myst at he ascended the Cresta de Barbet, and then enjoyed a long cruise down to the trail named the "Tour del Canigo." He decided to take this trail, which ran parallel but higher than the HRP trail, as he did not want to miss a single view on his final day in the high Pyrénées.

▼ A pristine emerald lake in the Gorg du Cady

▲ Canigou is one of the most frequented climbing destinations in the Pyrénées due to its historical significance as a place that evokes spirituality

Within moments of stepping on the Tour del Canigou, the skies cleared up, and Dragon saw the object of all of his trials and hardships of the last month and a half of strenuous walking—the Mediterranean Sea. There it was, nearly 40 kilometers and 8,000 feet below where he now stood, on the side of the Canigou. There was the town of Perpignan, its fields stretching out before him unto the glistening sea. There were the mountains and the trail ahead that separated him from where he had longed to be. He felt a renewed sense of accomplishment, of wellbeing, and a second wind of determination to finish the HRP. He flew down the trail along the ridgeline, and as the sun was approaching the horizon, he came to a freshwater spring with a flat area nearby, with one of the most memorable and astounding views of the entire HRP. He felt honored to be pitching his tent there, with the object of all his strife stretching out before him into the sunset.

▲ Hikers of these high peaks must always be aware of powerful monsoon storms, which can precipitate in mere minutes

Dragon felt half-relief and half-despair at his first sight of the Mediterranean sea. On one hand, this was where he had wanted to be since the very beginning of planning for this thru-hike. On the other hand, he was nearing the end of the trail and would have to make some major decisions in the coming days, about where he would go next, about how to interact with people after being in the wilderness for over a month, about how to best allocate his time to accomplish the other goals of his travels and his life.

Luckily, he would have plenty of time to work out all of these details, and he also felt confident that if his decision-making ability had gotten him through the roughest mountains in France and the U.S., it would get him through whatever lays ahead on his metaphysical trail, too. The sun was setting on this final chapter, but there were still more books of un-had adventures and un-made friends and unknown challenges and unseen beauty

▼ Getting Sentimental: On the other side of Pic Canigou, the Mediterranean sea shows itself, the ultimate end-goal of 45 days of hiking

▲ The rising sun shines on the Mediterranean coast, three days walk away. All of the greatest challenges of the Pyrénées lay behind

that still had yet to come in the days ahead. Had Dragon've had to figure this all out at this moment, his head would likely have exploded—lucky for him, he could take life one step at a time, continually working out the best way to attack the current terrain and the trials that lay directly before him, trusting that he could overcome future obstacles in the same way.

With these thoughts in mind, he set off down the mountain in the early morning sunrise over the city of Perpignan below. He would descend over 1,500 meters today to near sea level, the lowest he had been since the first week of the HRP through the Basque country on the Atlantique. For the first stretch, he wound down off of the Canigou massif and to a pass overlooking a low, fog-laden vale. He rode a ridge for as long as he could to stay above it, but finally came to the shores of the white sea, where he had no choice but to submerge down below the mist. He walked down onto an old dirt forest road,

passing other travelers enjoying their luxurious caravans and motor-bikes. The sweeping, unreal views out over Perpignan and the Mediterranean continued for most of the day, but the monsoons appeared in the high mountains behind Dragon around the afternoon. He was glad that he had gotten a good window to make his escape from the haute Pyrénées when the weather was still agreeable. From the ridgeline road, he could see massive, dark thunderheads and vicious lightning strikes on the peaks to the West, precisely where he had woken up just a few hours ago.

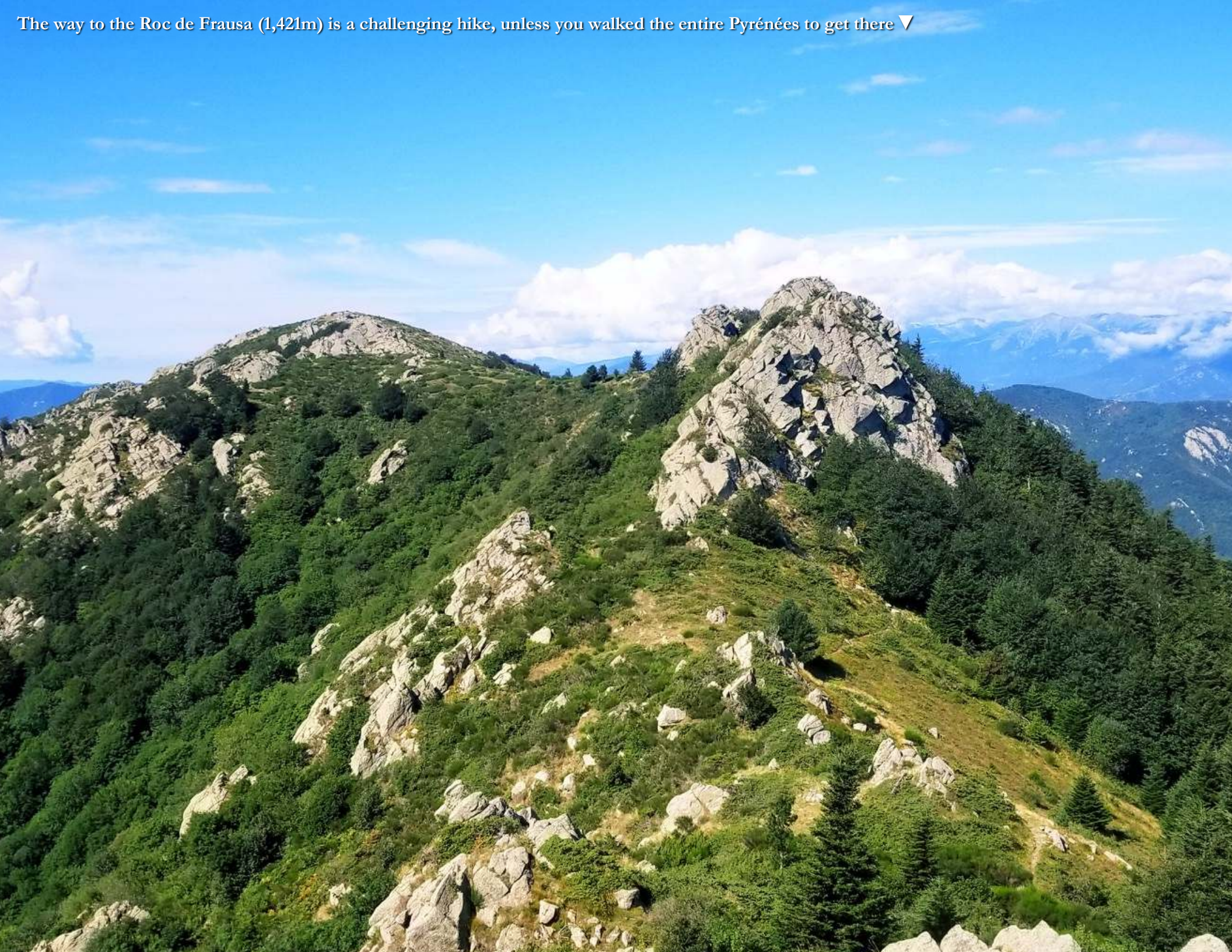
The rain finally reached him as he was starting the final few kilometers into the picturesque town of Amelie-les-bains, and he managed to find shelter at a restaurant to grab some late lunch, while also stopping by the tourist center for some free WiFi time. Lastly, he dropped by the local market and picked up treats for the last few days to the sea, including beer and sausage to cook up a big dinner.

▼ Morning mist frolics in the basins on the descent to Amelie-les-Bains

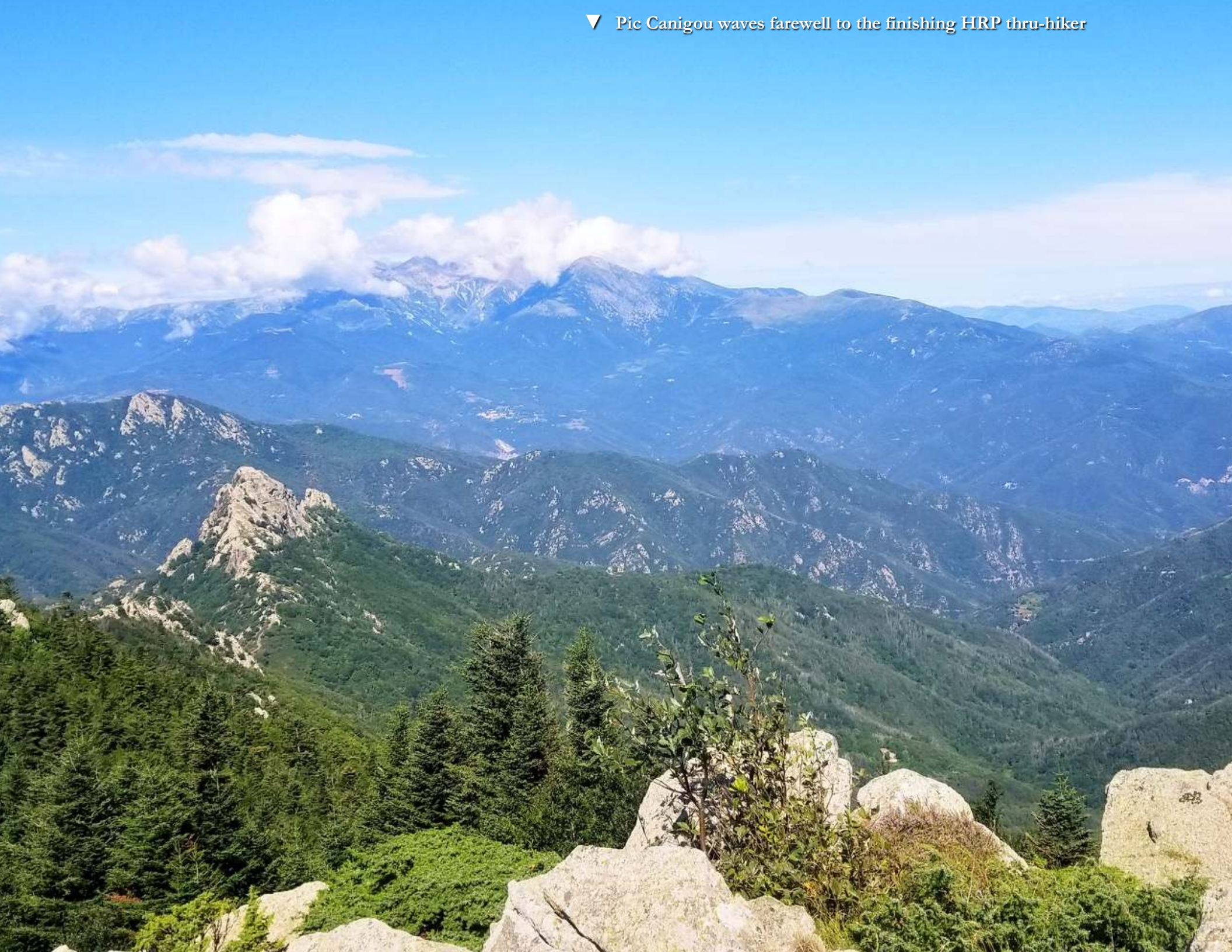
XI. AMELIE LES BAINS

The final days to the Mediterranean seem to speed by in a big hurry, partially due to the ease of the trail and mild scenery compared to the best of Haute Route. From Amelie-les-bains, there is a 1,000 meter climb to the Rock de France, with sweeping panoramic views of the Canigou massif behind and the sea ahead. From there, there's a parched forest road-walk through the arid Mediterranean country, with little water to be had—planning ahead where the next water lay is vital to staving off dehydration in this region. The road leads down to the hectic, chaotic border town of Le Perthus, where citizens of both France and Spain flock to in massive numbers to find deals on each-others' signature products (especially Spanish meats and French wines). It feels like a noisy, awful place compared to the absolute purity of the high Pyrénées, and Dragon spends just enough time there to grab some beers and ice-cream before walking on to his last HRP trailhead.

▼ The HRP again returns to the trees, a welcome source of shade to fend off the broiling midsummer heat near the Mediterranean



The way to the Roc de Frausa (1,421m) is a challenging hike, unless you walked the entire Pyrénées to get there ▼



▼ Pic Canigou waves farewell to the finishing HRP thru-hiker

▲ The final stretch of the HRP rides a ridge 4,000 feet above the Mediterranean Sea

The trail swaps between asphalt and foot tracks as it cuts up the last mountain ridge separating Dragon from his Pyrénéan absolution. Along the way, there are multiple mountain springs that have been improved by concrete structures with artfully designed sculptures and religious artifacts inside, many of them dating to over 200 years ago. As the sun plummets to the horizon, Dragon passes an ancient cathedral most of the way up the mountain, with some of the most spectacular scenery off of its front yard. He stocks up on holy water at the spring there, and makes the final push to the top of this ridge, where the sun finally touches the mountains to the West and the wind is howling through the trees, with more force than many of the high mountain winds of days past. Dragon forgoes his rain-fly, knowing that the arid landscape of the Mediterranean wasn't going to quench its thirst anytime soon. He quickly prepared dinner and had some drinks while soaking

in the final luminescence of our host star, and then passed out despite the anticipation of the impending ultimation of his quest the next day. The wind howled and blew his tent around all night, but it was a welcome counterbalance to the intense Mediterranean heat. Tomorrow: 25km to Banyuls-sur-Mer. Dragon decides to save a beer for when he's soaking his feet in the sea.

He woke at the first sign of sunlight the next morning, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, with an unrelenting optimism and an unstoppable drive to put an end to this journey through the high Pyrénées. The landscape for the final 25 kilometers could not have been more extraordinary. 1,400 meters above the Mediterranean sea, the trail rides a grassy ridgeline with the perfect amount of wind and sun to make hiking comfortable, and some of the most memorable, sweeping views of the entire high route. Dragon would have sworn he were in a dream. The mountains rose up all around him in applause, the sea spread out before him like a vast blue runway. The trail rolled below his boots and before he

▼ The sunset on the final day of the HRP will be one to remember

knew it, he was standing at the highest point before the sea, with a 4,000 foot descent over a few kilometers his last hurdle before the beach. He met a few hikers going the opposite direction, just beginning the HRP or GR10 trails, struggling in the heat. He assured them that it got cooler at the top and everything would be worthwhile. The lower he got, the more real was the knowledge that it was all over. All the majesty of the Pyrénées, the kindness of strangers, the reunions of friends, every boulder hopping and ice chute and glissade and glacier crossing had brought him to this point. It's difficult not to become overwhelmed by the sea of feelings that engulfs the mind in these last moments leading up to the trail's completion. A pure joy recalling "what was," a nagging anxiety of "what now?" A dumbfounded disbelief that any of it even happened, for how could anything of such magic be real? It is difficult, even now, having just done it, for Dragon's mind to

▼ The view from the final high point, before a 4,000ft descent to the Sea

▲ The end of the HRP. 41 days, 700 miles, 155,000 feet of ascent. Thousands of photos. At least a million footsteps. $1,500 spent on food and lodging. Over a dozen glacial remains seen.

wrap itself around the magnitude of the adventure that he has just awoken from.

The heat thickens with each step downwards, and after following a sandy trail through desert-like scrub brush, Dragon finally looks out over the town of Banyuls-sur-Mer from a perch just a kilometer away. He can practically make out the whole way leading to that perfect pebble beach, where all the pain and hardship and sweat and blood of the trail will be washed away, and Dragon will be cast anew. Now, stepping onto the pavement of the city, which feels strangely alien after the many weeks of mountains, Dragon makes a streamline to the golden shores ahead. The buildings flash by at light speed, and nothing matters but to

have his feet in that water, across that imaginary finish line that he has been building up since he first heard about the Pyrénées almost two years prior on the Continental Divide Trail. Finally, he arrives at the shores. No amount of thought or words could relay the sensation of being there in that moment. He kicked off his boots and waded in up to his waist, and every care dissolved into the eternal aether with which he was now a part.

Epilogue:
The Haute Randonnee Pyrénéene

Dragon took two zero days in Banyuls-sur-mer staying at the lovely Hotel Canal Banyuls, before hopping a train to Geneva, from where he will begin walking the GR5, the Grand Traverse of the Alps. It's widely considered one of the most gorgeous and enjoyable trails in the world, for both wilderness-loving backpackers, and hikers that enjoy the comforts of towns and refuges every day or so.

▼ The French Mediterranean town of Banyuls-sur-mer, the Eastern terminus of the HRP and the GR10.

XII. BANYULS SUR MER

A victorious HRP thru-hiker celebrates the completion of a 45 day test of mental and physical endurance with a well-deserved beer ▲

Some say it is bested only by a trail through the mountains of Nepal in the Himalayas. Others say it may be beaten by the GR20 along the spine of the isle of Corsica. Maybe one day, we will know first hand, for sure, which is the greatest hiking trail. It's doubtfully possible to tell, to gauge these mountains versus those.

All mountains, all adventures, all long walks, are surely beautiful things in their own rights, and we will always be biased towards the trails we have hiked. But here, tonight, as Dragon lays on the shore of the Mediterranean, on a pebble beach straight out of a postcard, surrounded by dance music and French girls, his mind wanders back to the high route of the Pyrénées, the HRP trail, the grand adventure that just consumed 6 weeks of his short life.

The HRP is exceptionally strenuous. The 155,000 feet of ascent (and 155,000 feet of descent, although he'd love to not have to come down) over the

course of 550 miles makes for a tough, constant gradient, every day of the trail. On average, this averaged to 4,200 feet of climbing and 4,200 feet of descending each day. Similar to a daily climb to the peak of Half Dome from Yosemite Valley, although the climb is spread across 12-16 miles.

There are a handful of flat trails along balconies or valley floors or ridge routes, but generally half of the trail is going up a mountain, and the other half is going down the other side. Steeply. On scree slopes. On boulder fields. On zig zag trails, or just straight up and down the thing. However, it was mostly the difficult and scenic alternate routes on the challenging traverses that were more inclined to be trail-less and uncomfortably steep on the uphills. Most of the "official" trail is in fact, a trail, and a damn fine one at that. One of the best, most fun times Dragon has ever had walking in the mountains.

Compared to the Continental Divide Trail, it is about 1/6 the distance but 1/3 the elevation change, which you could take as meaning it is about twice as steep per mile as the CDT. The CDT has a lot of long flat stretches through deserts, ridges, and plains though, so that may not be the best comparison.

The HRP is not for everyone. Dragon loved it, but he is someone who notoriously goes on "hell-hikes." He loves the uphill, the challenge, and the risk associated with hiking such strenuous and lesser-traveled paths. He thrives in the remoteness, being alone and maybe not seeing another soul for days. He feels at home there. Others may not agree.

The views on the HRP are magnificent. Dragon can think of few other places where one could see as many glacial valleys and clear aquamarine lakes and sculpted, sheared rock faces, and romantic, magic 3,000m peaks, in as many miles.

The people all along the HRP, at every village, were phenomenally friendly and helpful. Dragon was reserved and afraid to interact with people at the start, as someone who does not speak the language of the land. But his reservations were a hindrance to his enjoyment of the culture, the cuisine, and hospitality of the locals. If one doesn't at least *try* to make a connection, s/he will never gain an experience or see anything new, or maybe meet someone that helps expand one's comfort zone, leading to new and more fulfilling experiences.

People at the hotels, markets, in town, and everyone along the way, were especially nice. They didn't care that Dragon didn't speak French. Or fluent Spanish. They were happy to work with him and try to understand what he needed. He always smiled and laughed when attempting to speak their language, especially after seeing their faces made at the attempt. He tried his best to find the humor in every situation, trying to speak a language he knows very little about. Many were excited to test their (fluent) English, although they would always say their English is not good after speaking the language perfectly! People will reciprocate the attitude they are approached with, so kindness towards others will universally receive kindness in return.

Dragon can't recommend this trail enough– if it sounds like something you would enjoy, he'd happily provide whatever resources are at his disposal to help you on your way. He recorded high resolution .gpx tracks with some waypoints for camps, resupply, and water sources near the hot lowlands around the start and fin. Dragon wanted to contribute something to the HRP beta, and that will probably be the best bet. Be warned, Dragon's track does take quite a few of the harder alternate routes, along the Frontier Ridge, not all of which are on trail, a few of which are not even mentioned in any guidebook.

Anyways, it grows late and the stars are shimmering overhead now. This is the final account of the high adventure on the HRP. The concluding words of finality.

This trail weaves together all the best parts of French and Spanish culture. The superb food, the quaint villages, the friendly people, and the scenic nature of the Pyrénées range make it one of the greatest hiking trails on Earth. The feeling of hiking down unto the Mediterranean, the ultimate object of your wanderings, could be described as magnifique.

So don your boots, grab your pack, and get to walking. There's a whole world of wonder out there waiting for you. You have only to take a short walk to go and find it.

- "Dragon" Dan Morriss

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go out to everyone who made this adventure as full of wonder as it was. Thank you to Paul and Cheri, who initially sold me on the high route of the Pyrénées while we were hiking the rough country of the Continental Divide Trail along the crest of the Rockies in Montana in 2016, and who were kind enough to take me in and share their home with me twenty five days in to this trying journey, at the halfway point of the walk. Thanks to all of my family and friends for encouraging and supporting this lifestyle of adventure, as I try to figure out how to support myself without giving it up. Thank you to all of the restaurants and supermarkets along the route, I would have surely starved without you! Thanks to the hostels and refuges for offering a weary traveler some respite from the harsh montane conditions in the land of many glaciers. Thank you to Ton Joosten for the incredible guidebook, I studied it religiously to know what to watch out for every day. Thank you to Erin "Wired" Saver for creating your blog and providing me with a firsthand account of all the challenges and marvels that the Pyrénées have to offer, your story really pushed me over the threshold of taking on the HRP and the GR5 and convinced me that I could do it (and thanks for all the beta!). Thank you to the little girl that offered me water the evening after climbing the Pass of Errotzate, you helped me to have a lovely dinner in a beautiful place without having to be stressed about finding and filtering water that night. Thank you to Robin for sharing some of this incredible journey through the High Pyrénées. Thank you to every mountain and lake that showed its face to me, you reminded me how beautiful the world can be and kicked my butt into shape for the next adventures. Until next time!