

OUTDOOR TRAVEL



FRANCE & SPAIN

Walking from the Pyrenees Mountain to the sea and along the Vermillion Coastal path



My husband and I made our way by car from Barcelona airport to the French Pyrenees. Close to the French border we were travelling along the coast. We were both amazed by the stunning views over the blue Mediterranean Sea with colourful villages dotted along the water. It took us around 3-4 hours to get to Amelie les Bains, to our first hotel during our short stay in the mountains. The lady at reception made sure we had all we needed to settle in. There is nothing better than a hot shower after such a long journey.

Soon we discovered the beautiful landscapes and mountains around us with snow peaks in the distance. It had recently snowed, which is quite unusual for this time of year. Luckily for us the weather had turned, it was warming up and there were only a few clouds in the sky. The vegetation was so green it almost hurt your eyes. This is probably the best time to visit, as everything is so lush and the temperatures are good for walking.

Our hotel was right in the centre of town and we did decide to go for a walk and find ourselves a drink somewhere. Sunday afternoon in a small French village had not much on offer, unless we joined the Sunday afternoon dance sessions at the local, so we went back at our hotel and had a drink there before dinner.

Dinner was superb, with a huge choice of starters all served buffet style. We could see dessert was also buffet style and there were heaps of beautiful sweets on offer. The waiter explained what we could have as mains

and took our orders. We thoroughly enjoyed our meal and the atmosphere in the restaurant. We agreed that this was an excellent choice of hotel. Comfortable and the service from the staff was just outstanding.

After a good night sleep and breakfast, we transferred to *Pla Boula* in the mountains. We made a quick stop at a small village to purchase our lunch – some lovely bread, cheese, fruit and extra water – all very reasonably priced. We still had some other goodies with us, like chocolates and muesli bars.

At the start of the walk I saw the mountain towering in the distance. It looked worse than it was and we climbed steadily from around 900 meters up to around 1300 meters. The panoramic views were just spectacular. The snow-capped mountains behind us and the farm paddocks in the valleys. The colours of spring were just sensational, the differences in the greens in the foliage's and grasses looked like a different shaded patchwork with the highlights of spring flowers dotted around along the paths and paddocks.

It was a bit of a scramble up to the top and we had to watch out for the signage, not to go the wrong way. You've got to be quite alert not to miss the markings. We stopped for a little while to take in the views of the landscapes we were going to leave behind as soon as we were moved on to climb to the top of the mountain. Along the fence into the forests, it felt like we were in a totally different surrounding. We followed the pathway along the ridge towards the top.

We decided to stop for a bite to eat. The sky started to get darker and we thought it was better to have a lunch now, just in case it would rain. How amazing to sit back to take in where we were, eat and rest up for a bit.

The weather did decide to play up and we put the jackets on before heading right to the top. More rock climbing before we finally made it to the 'Pic de La Seignoural' 1315m. The views from the top take you right over from the snow-capped mountains to the azure blue sea. Luckily the skies did open up a little to present us with the beautiful views into the distance. It was quite an achievement to make it to the top, as this walk is quite challenging with the rock passages and pathways.

We were on our way down now and almost lost our way and as the path changed dramatically we realised that could not be right, so read back on our notes. It was very helpful to have these on us together with the highlighted map, otherwise you could get easily lost. The pathways are clearly marked, but there are some changes of markings along the way.

Going down was hard and the rocky pathways didn't make it easier to pick up the pace. We knew that we're getting closer to the towns, as we met some people along the way. We also passed the fortification '*Batterie de St Engracia*', interesting to see how far in the mountains civilisation used to be. We also passed the '*Chapelle de St Engracia*' but couldn't find the energy to go back up the track to see it. We realised by then that the timings on the signage and in our notes were not all that accurate, unless we were extremely slow.

We met our transfer near the thermal baths, where we would be going the next morning to enjoy a spa session. In Ceret we stayed the night in a gorgeous hotel right in the centre of town. Dinner had been organised at a small restaurant just around the corner of the hotel. It was a lovely restaurant, again with great service and the foods delicious. We felt quite spoilt.

Ceret is a gorgeous town and we would love to spend more time there, just to experience it more in depth. We really only got a glimpse. The lady at the hotel was so lovely and took her time to arrange our breakfast in the morning. Another full spread of different kinds of foods, designed to make sure that we would survive the day. We still had sufficient foods with us from the night before for our lunch. We wouldn't go hungry.

We were collected at 9.30am and taken to Amelie to enjoy some of the spa treatments at the thermal baths. After changing into our bathers, we each were escorted to a bathing area with blue light where there was a big spa bath for one located. They prepared the bath and making sure I was comfortable. It was very relaxing I felt my muscles being massaged by the jets of the spa and it was quite warm.

The next session was into a large communal pool where we had to stand in front of the spa jets. I assume that all the water came from the thermal pools. The last session was into the mud baths. Again it was quite warm and the substance made you float. I was glad to get out when the session was finished. Into the showers first then for a refreshing herbal drink.

Our next stop was Collioure for the start of our next walk and next morning the sun was out with mild temperatures. Firstly we explored Collioure, a small, typical French village beside the blue Mediterranean Sea.

It was absolutely stunning and we were reluctant to leave. We walked around the centre of town and found a shop selling home-made nougat.

It was time to start our hike if we were to make it to Banyuls sur Mer that night. We made our way through a park up to a windmill with views back onto Collioure. It was getting hotter and it looked that the sun was going to be with us the whole day. It was going to be a scorcher.

The pathway kept winding up along the hill towards the Forte of St Elme. We enjoyed the views back over the town again before we headed back down towards Port Vendres. It was a short while along the road with grapevines along either side of us before we found our steps down into the village. Again we discovered a gorgeous small town, the harbour was filled on one side with yachts and the other side is a working harbour. We made time for a quick coffee and an ice-cream for Peter before moving on.

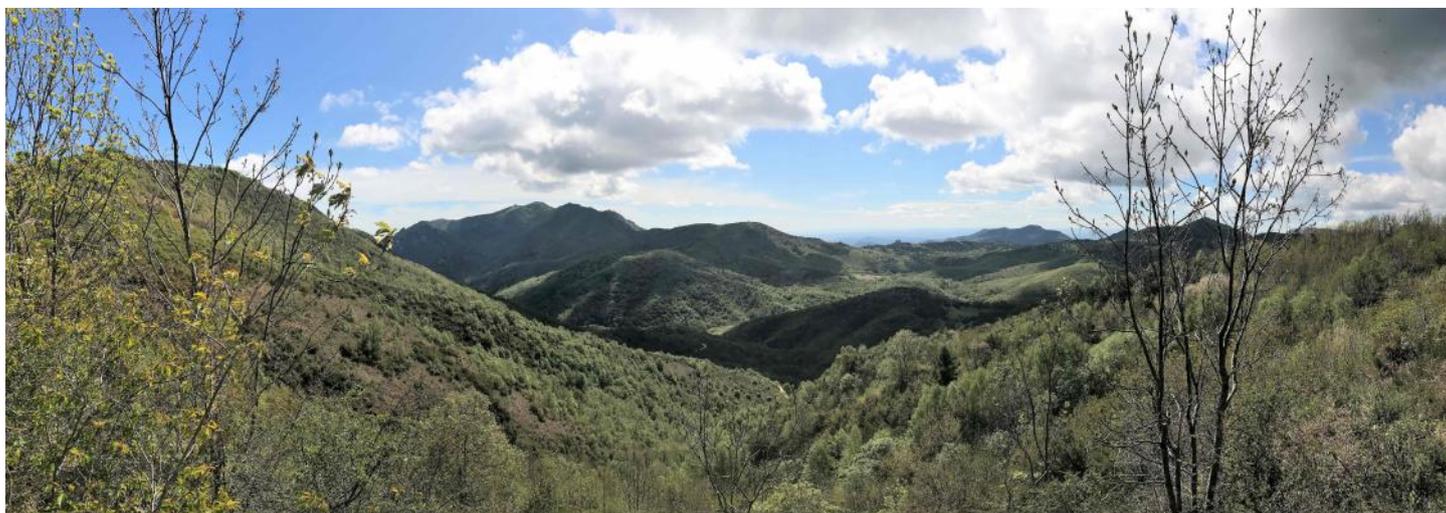
The path followed the coastline and climbed steeply up and down which was at times quite daunting for me. Peter, my 'mountain goat' was really good and assisted me at times when needed.

The scenery was the reward, amazing with the blue water touching the shoreline and the vegetation was lush, full with wild flowers and very colourful scene. The dry rocky pathways did not make the hike easier and some steps were quite high. You can see that this coastal path is well used by many and is showing the signs of it. Having good sturdy walking shoes is a must for these kinds of paths.

Towards the end of the afternoon we saw Banyuls in the distance. This gave me some new energy and when we reached the border of the town we rested in the gardens in the grounds of the old sea defences. It overlooks the sea and has many shady trees ideal for shade on a hot sunny day.

Our hotel was at the far end of town and as we walked we took in the views of another gem along the Mediterranean coast line. Our room was overlooking the town and further onwards over the sea. We felt quite spoilt. What a gorgeous place to be after a long day walking. Dinner was served in the dining room, with again a great spread of foods and outstanding service.

The next morning after a lovely breakfast, we made our way back to Barcelona. Our walking holiday was only a small taster of what is on offer for the keen walkers in this beautiful part of the world, and we thoroughly enjoyed the experience.



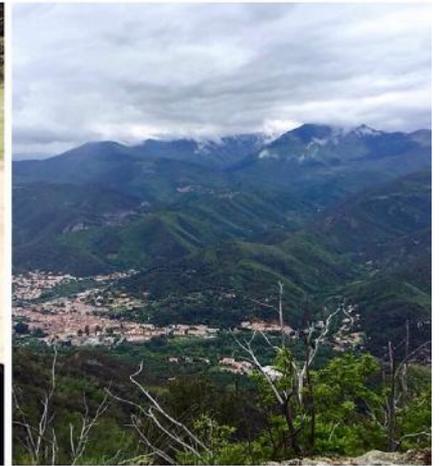
Yvette & Peter walked sections of these two popular week-long self-guided inn-to-inn walks available from Outdoor Travel, in France along the border with Spain:

Pyrenees to Sea from Setcases to Banyuls SELF-GUIDED walk - see: <https://bit.ly/2QaVamA>

Vermillion Coast from Collioure to Cadaques SELF-GUIDED walk - see: <https://bit.ly/2CkNh4j>

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