



CATALONIA DREAMING

Last fall, a BACKPACKER team traveled to northeast Spain to explore one of Europe's undiscovered adventure centers: Catalonia. We planned a route to hopscotch through the best of the peaks and foothills on a seven-day trek that crossed mountain passes, ancient villages, and pastoral countryside. Everyone came away with a favorite story to tell.

By the Editors



Refugi d'Amitges brings old-world charm (and comfort) to Aiguestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park.





IN THE ZONE
Explore the alpine for endless vistas, mountains galore, and a touch of class. *By Stasia Stockwell*

WE STEP OUT of our shuttle van and onto the sloping streets of Boi—a tiny mountain village a few hours north of Barcelona. The skies are blue overhead, the temperature is comfortably warm, and we've got 7.8 miles and 3,000 feet of elevation gain between us and our camp for the night: a stone refuge tucked in some of Spain's most scenic mountains in Aiguestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park.

The late-fall daylight is burning, so we lace our boots at a trailhead inside the park and begin our trek through the craggy peaks, rolling hills, and open pastures of Catalonia. Our local guide maintains a sunset-beating pace as we climb from a subalpine forest to an exposed saddle above a treeline. At the top, we gaze over a small, crystal blue alpine lake, the maroons and golds of fall's fading foliage, and sweeping views of Les Encantats: twin peaks that jut up from the valley floor, making a gunsight-perfect notch that's blushed with the season's first snow.

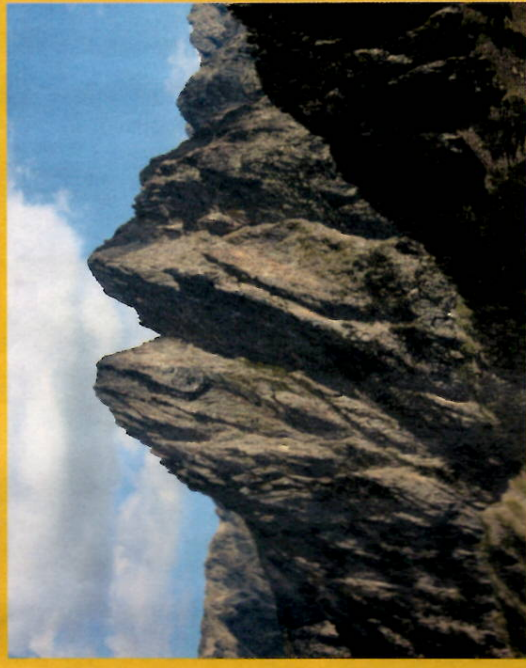
I'm seeing possible tent sites everywhere, but wild camping is prohibited here—and everywhere in Spain—so we press on. Daylight softens into dusk, and we arrive at our stone mountain refuge at headlamp hour. We're tired but not too tired to indulge in a bottle of Spanish red wine and a three-course meal prepared by the refuge host.

As I sip the last of my dessert liqueur and massage my quads, I think to myself that by swapping a nylon shelter for a stone one, the Catalonians got something very right.

For a grand tour of Aiguestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park, link together nine mountain refuges for the 35-mile Carros de Foc (carrosdefoc.com/en).

Guide Says

THE MOUNTAIN SPIRITS were angry that day, or so the legend goes, our guide Jordy tells us. Two men from the Pyrenean town of Espot decided to skip the annual September pilgrimage to the hermitage of Saint Maurici so they could go hunting at the base of the largest mountain around. Soon fog rolled in, then a deafening crack of thunder. When the fog cleared, that largest mountain had been split in two—the Encantats—and the hunters stood between them as pillars of stone, an eternal reminder of what happens when people lose their way.



**INDOOR/
OUTDOOR HIKING**
Trek through villages that still have one foot in the past. *By Dennis Lewon*

THE CHURCH WAS LOCKED. No surprise, really. It was late afternoon in a small village that has only a handful of full-time residents and no full-time clergy. Still, I was disappointed. Not because of any sudden need to pray. I was simply struck by the elegance of the stone construction, the classic bell tower, and the way the building sat both in the middle of Llagunes and on the edge, overlooking the green folds of the Siarb Valley. Even with no one around, the centuries-old church was clearly the heart of the village, which has no stores, no restaurants, no cafés.

From a distance, Llagunes, which we hiked to on day three of our trek, looks like it's painted red, so colorful are the rocks used to build the village. The 8-mile trail from the riverside town of Sort to Llagunes ascends modestly along a creek, skirts crumbling stone walls, and passes through the forests and agricultural fields that dominate the foothills of the Pyrenees. In truth, it wasn't very dramatic scenery—which is exactly why I loved it.

Don't get me wrong: I like alpine terrain as much as the next hiker, and I was glad our route took us through the high country on the previous two days. But one of my favorite things about trekking in Europe is walking the in-between zones—the obscure trails used only by locals, and which weave in and out of villages that were established when footpaths were the main form of travel.

Nowadays, of course, people here mostly get around by other means, just like anywhere else. For most of the daylong hike, we felt like we were the only people in Catalonia. That feeling didn't change much in Llagunes. A light snow started falling after we arrived, and the narrow walkways were deserted. Which made it even more surprising when a black-haired man of about 30 materialized and said, "You want to see the church? No problem, I'll go get the key."

And just like that, we got a private tour. Our host had grown up in the village and was visiting his parents for the weekend, and was happy to come to the aid of a few curious visitors.

Inside, the church seemed barely big enough to

Guide Says

THE DOLMEN STANDS ALONE, as it has for centuries, on a windswept rise over the small village of Valls d'Aguliar. It has two upturned rocks supporting one large slab that would take many, many hands to lift. Altar? Shelter? Tomb? Perhaps the latter by design, Jordy says. The story goes that a king of England was killed in battle here and was interred beneath this monument. Archaeologists determined the dolmen is part of a larger structure, perhaps 25 feet across, and beneath it, found human bones. But that's all that's known—and you'll never find it without a guide.



The church's bell tower watches over Llagunes (top). Tiny villages dot the hillsides along the trail.

accommodate 20 people, with a brightly colored angels-in-the-clouds painting behind the altar. The tour included a trip up the steep spiral stairs to the top of the bell tower.

Afterward, we learned the village wasn't quite as deserted as it seemed. About a dozen people—apparently most of the population—had gathered to watch El Clásico, a soccer game between Barcelona and Real Madrid. Llagunes doesn't have a bar or café, but it does have an unmarked, street-level door that opens into an oversize living room stocked with cold beer and a big screen. Call it a clubhouse for grownups. They waved us in.

When you make it to Catalonia, you should definitely hike in the high mountains and the deep canyons. But don't miss the villages in between. And if it seems like no one is around, just knock on a few doors.

Visit backpacker.com/Catalonia to see videos and more photos from our trip to northeast Spain.



Meat and potatoes, Catalan-style

WINE AND DINE

Catalans are famously good hosts. I'll drink to that. *By Eli Bernstein*

MY PHOTOS FROM hiking trips are largely the same: Peak, alpine lake, valley view, maybe the odd sweaty-but-happy group shot. The locales may differ, but the subject matter rarely does.

But take a look at my pics from a weeklong trek in the Pyrenees, and there's a clear difference. Interspersed with shots of craggy mountains and cliffside ruins, there's food. Loads of it: Table-filling spreads of charcuterie and cheese. Meat roasting in an open hearth. Wine labels galore.

If you've become accustomed to the Clif Bar-and-dehydrated-chili routine that defines backcountry eating stateside, it's easy to assume that's the

way it has to be. But there's a better way. Much better. Our trip in Catalonia was as much a feasting tour as a walking one, and it started on the first night. In Aiguestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park, after a 7.8-mile hike over an alpine pass and past cerulean lakes, we arrived at Refugi d'Amitges to plates full of crusty bread, perfectly crisped roast chicken, and two bottles of a velvety red from Costers del Segre, a Catalan wine denomination. I could get used to this, I thought later as I succumbed to food coma in my bunk.

"Used to this" might be an understatement. More accurately, I've been ruined to standard hiker food, which I used to rave about. Catalanian custom, especially in the small mountain towns we stopped in, calls for welcoming trail-weary guests and making them comfortable. Catalans have had hundreds of years to perfect their hospitality, and they've settled on a killer formula: a menu best described as gourmet farmer food and a crackling fire to enjoy it by.

In Llagunes, a town that's stood for a millennium, the hostess at the Refugi Vall de Siarb taught us to rub garlic into the morning bread and then cover it with fresh tomato paste. We followed that up with a full-day trek that brought us to the hilltop ruins of Bronze Age settlement, through pasture lands, and up to a windswept ridge.

In the Refugi di Cuberes, another day's walk away, we devoured a dinner of potato-and-egg soup followed by perfectly grilled sausages, and ended the meal with a hand-bottled digestif made with local herbs. It was the perfect complement to hours spent winding our way down shepherd's paths, among cattle, and through tiny stone villages.

I like to think I'm richer for any outdoor time I get. But after hiking through Catalonia, I'm heavier than when I started, too.

Guide Says



THE TRENCHES AREN'T THAT FAR APART. We could see where soldiers removed skull-size rocks with hand tools to dig into the hillside outside a small church and do battle with their countrymen. In the late 1930s, Catalan separatists fought valiantly but lost to the dictator Francisco Franco, Jordy says. The land still bears the scars of hastily made positions as both sides ground out a battle front that never seemed to shift more than a few meters. It was a tragic chapter in local history, but Catalans still take pride in their defense of their homeland.



The roof is mostly gone and the walls are iffy, but the orientation is true. In these types of churches, the shotgun-style layout always points east-west with the altar on the sunrise side.

Returning to the ground, we see new features in the cliff face—cracks that lead to openings with sooty walls. A few families lived here, tucked into the walls above terraced fields and the Collegats Canyon, where cliffs' top rolling forested hills and vultures ride thermals above.

We descend as our guide points to a darkened mouth high above us on another cliff wall: L'Espuga de Cuberes. You barely see the place before you're inside it. The back of the cavern cuts deeply into the rock, a stream trickles from the ceiling, and tiny plantlife chases the water downhill. This was an 11th century village.

The walls have partially fallen, allowing us to see from room to room. Here is where the owners lived. There are the servant's quarters. Over there is where the large livestock took shelter. And around the corner, another church.

This one, oriented true as the last, is rough as the other, too. But the structure seems pasted to the rock walls—outside the window, the ground drops away hundreds of feet. Inside, the security feels durable.

As dusk envelops us, I try to imagine how the sounds of life and livestock might have filled the space. I picture it echoing out into the cloud-whiskered canyon, lost in all that air. But mostly, I marvel that I can stand here at all, in a cave that opens into more than the rock. It tells the story of a time when the best home was the biggest, highest, and most hidden cave around. And how today, the link between that time and ours is a hiking path.

LIVING ROCK

Step inside a medieval cave dwelling and step back into history. *By Casey Lyons*

TIME DOESN'T WAIT.

It doesn't matter that my boots are still wet from yesterday's march into twilight, or that the hut keeper just piled another log into the hearth. We've got a date with the past, which in Catalonia is never far from the surface.

And so we pour out of the fieldstone refuge as the rain pours down. We dodge puddles on country roads, then switch to a steep, old trade route into the bush. Rock walls rise up alongside the trail and water pools at their bases. The rain lets up as we reach Solduga, a cave dwelling that dates back to the 6th century.

Our guide leads the way up some greasy stone to a ledge on a dun-colored cliff. We come around the corner and find ourselves in what's left of a church.

Guide Says

"LOOK UP AT THE CLIFFS," Jordy says, directing our attention to a series of shallow caves near the rim. "That's where the vultures live." The majestic, airborne recyclers are beloved in Catalonia. He points out a griffin vulture as the birds take tentative sorties into the rain. You can pay a man to throw a carcass in a cave with a viewing platform so you can watch vultures pick it apart. "Yes. There's an order," Jordy tells us. This vulture is good with skin, that one with bone. If everything works in the proper sequence, not a speck remains.



TRIP PLANNER Our 50-mile route crossed national parks and villages. Guide Outdoor Adventure offers similar itineraries. The Pyrenees tour is \$622, the cave segment is \$1,045 (includes meals, lodging, vehicle transfers, and guides; prices based on four-person parties); outdooradventure.com/info_catalunya.com