

# The Pyrenees



Snow-capped for much of the year, the jagged peaks of the Pyrenees (les Pyrénées) form a natural, 430km-long boundary between France and Spain.

With sufficient time and energy, you could follow the GR10 walking trail that bucks and twists from Hendaye beside the Bay of Biscay on France's Atlantic Coast all the way to Banyuls beside the Mediterranean Sea – but you'll probably have to select from its three distinct zones.

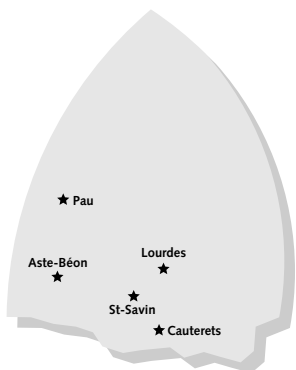
Rising steadily from the Atlantic through mist and cloud, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques cradle the mountains' largest and most stylish town, Pau.

The Hautes Pyrénées, the focus of this chapter, are wilder and higher. Their rugged ridges and precarious cols fall within the narrow strip of the Parc National des Pyrénées that shadows the frontier for about 100km. You can disappear into these protected mountains for days and spot only other walkers, marmots, izards (cousin to the chamois) and, perhaps, one of the Pyrenees' few brown bears. Pastoral valleys, such as the Vallée d'Aspe and the Vallée d'Ossau, cut laterally into the central Pyrenees, steepening and narrowing as they climb to shimmering lakes and tarns fed by swift mountain streams. Small-scale winter ski resorts and summer walking bases such as Cauterets and Bagnères de Luchon defer to the sheer grandeur of the mountains. To the north sits Lourdes, one of Christianity's most revered pilgrimage sites.

Eastwards, in the Pyrénées Orientales, the climate becomes warmer and drier, and the vegetation pricklier, squatter and more abundant as the mountains taper down into Roussillon, then finally dip into the Mediterranean.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Ride the century-old, timber-seated funicular to the panoramic **bd des Pyrénées** (opposite) in Pau
- Swoosh down the slopes from the ski station of Cirque du Lys, linked by *télécabine* (cable car) to **Cauterets** (p727)
- Immerse yourself in an icy **bath** (p715) at the spiritual sanctuary in Lourdes
- Learn to make traditional Pyrenean dishes at a **cooking class** (p720) in the storybook-pretty village of St-Savin
- Watch griffon vultures nest, hatch, feed and glide in the skies above **La Falaise aux Vautours** (p725) in Aste-Béon



■ POPULATION: 3,050,000

■ AREA: 8400 SQ KM

## Getting There & Away

The two main towns, Pau and Lourdes, are well served by rail. Both also have airports. Pau is served by Ryanair flights to and from the UK and Belgium, while Air France has domestic services, and Transavia connects Pau with Amsterdam. Lourdes' airport primarily handles charter flights, but also has scheduled services to Paris.

Outside of the towns there are limited bus services but to really explore you'll need your own wheels. Drivers needn't worry – the roads are well maintained and nowhere near as hair-raising as other precipitous regions such as the Alps. Alternatively, you can get around with good hiking boots and a healthy amount of lung power.

## THE TOWNS

### PAU

pop 80,600

Palm trees might seem out of place in this mountainous region, but its chief city, Pau (rhymes with 'so'), has long been famed for its mild climate. In the 19th century it was a favourite wintering spot for wealthy English and Americans, who left behind grand villas, English-style flower-filled public parks and promenades with dizzying vistas of the snow-dusted peaks.

In recent years the city has owed its prosperity to a high-tech industrial base and a huge natural-gas field, plus spin-off chemical plants, at nearby Lacq. It's also at the cutting edge of communications technology. Yet it retains the elegance and style of its past, bolstered by an energetic student population.

### Orientation

The town centre sits on a small hill with the Gave de Pau (River Pau) at its base. Along its crest stretches *bd des Pyrénées*, a wide promenade offering panoramic views of the mountains. The town's east-west axis is the thoroughfare of *cours Bosquet*, *rue Maréchal Foch* and *rue Maréchal Joffre*. Separating the latter two is the main square, *place Clemenceau*.

### Information

**Cyber Café** (☎ 05 59 82 89 40; 20 rue Lamothe; per hr €4.50; ☎ 10am–2am Mon–Fri, 2pm–2am Sat & Sun) One of over a dozen internet cafés around town.

**Laundrette** (☎ 05 59 83 90 51; 81 rue Castetnau)

**Librairie des Pyrénées** (☎ 05 59 27 78 75; 14 rue St-Louis) Sells an excellent selection of walking maps.

**Main Post Office** (21 cours Bosquet)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 59 27 27 08; www.tourisme-pau.com; place Royale; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat, 9.30am–noon & 2–6pm Sun, closed Sun afternoon Sep–Jun) Stacks of information on the city and surrounds, including a pair of free booklets in English: *History & Heritage* and *Parks & Gardens* for DIY walking tours around town.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Pau itself poses no problems, but avoid *Parc Lawrence*, which can be dodgy both day and night.

### Sights

#### CHÂTEAU

Originally the residence of the monarchs of Navarre, Pau's **château** (☎ 05 59 82 38 02; www.musee-chateau-pau.fr, in French; adult/18–25yr/under 18yr €5/3.50/free; ☎ 9.30am–12.15pm & 1.30–5.45pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9.30–11.45am & 2–5pm mid-Sep–mid-Jun) was transformed into a Renaissance château amid lavish gardens by Marguerite d'Angoulême in the 16th century. Marguerite's grandson, the future Henri IV, was born here – cradled, so the story goes, in an upturned tortoise shell.

The painstakingly restored château holds one of Europe's richest collections of 16th- to 18th-century Gobelins tapestries and some fine Sèvres porcelain. These items apart, most of the ornamentation and furniture, including an oak dining table that can seat 100, dates from Louis-Philippe's intervention. In the room where Henri IV was born is the tortoise-shell cradle.

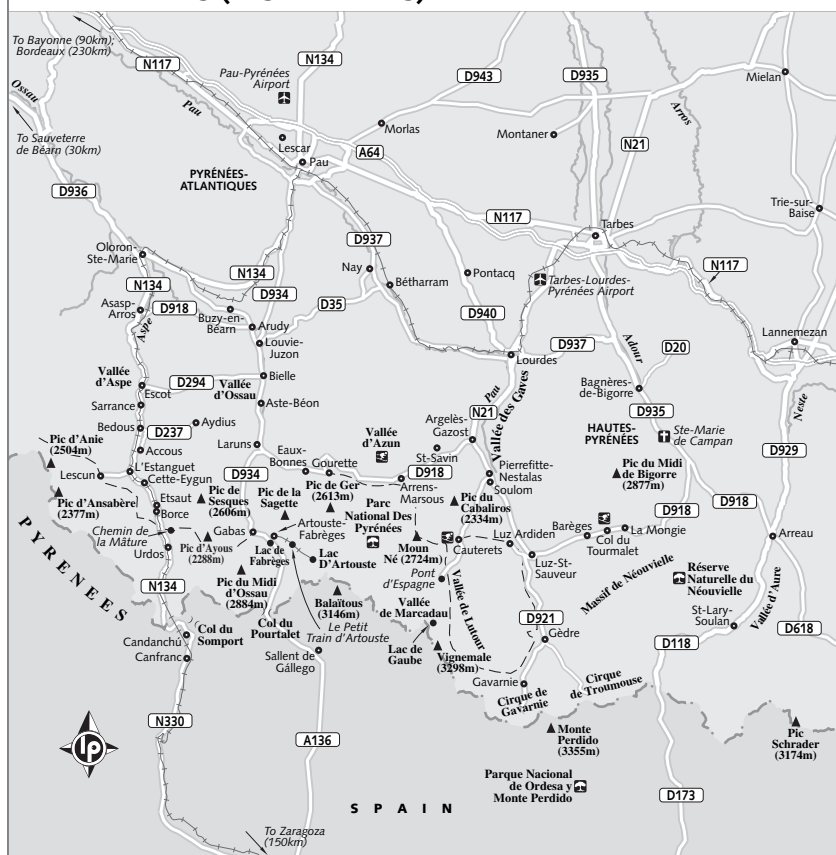
Within the brick-and-stone **Tour de la Monnaie** below the main château, a modern lift (free) hauls you from *place de la Monnaie* up to the ramparts.

Admission includes an obligatory one-hour guided tour in rapid-fire French (departing every 15 minutes), but you can pick up an English-language guide sheet at the reception desk.

#### PYRENEES PANORAMA

A mesmerising panorama of the Pyrenean summits unfolds from the majestic *bd des Pyrénées*. An **orientation table** details the names of the peaks. For information on the funicular, see p714.

## THE PYRENEES (LES PYRÉNÉES)



## VIEILLE VILLE

Of Pau's old centre, only an area of around 300m in diameter abutting the château remains, yet it is rich in restored medieval and Renaissance buildings.

## MUSÉE BERNA DOTTE

The **Musée Bernadotte** (☎ 05 59 27 48 42; 8 rue Tran; adult/student/child €3/1.50/free; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) has exhibits illustrating the improbable yet true story of how a French general, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, born in this very building, became king of Sweden and Norway in 1810, when the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) reckoned that the only way out of the country's dynastic and political crisis was to stick a foreigner on the throne. The present

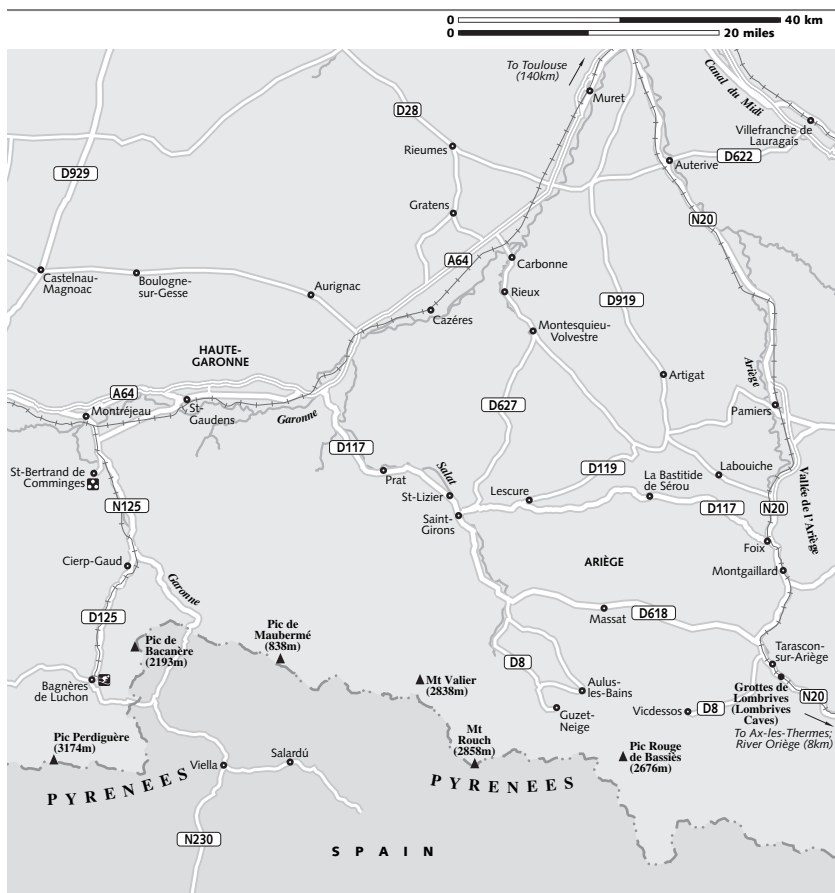
king of Sweden, Carl Gustaf, is the seventh ruler in the Bernadotte dynasty. You'll spot it by the blue-and-yellow Swedish flag fluttering outside.

## MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS

Works by Rubens, El Greco and Degas are among the rich collection of 15th- to 20th-century European paintings at Pau's **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Fine Arts Museum; ☎ 05 59 27 33 02; rue Mathieu Lalanne; adult/student/child €3/1.50/free; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon).

## Activities

The tourist office has reams of information about aerial activities like **hot-air ballooning**, **gliding** and **parachuting** in the clear mountain



skies, as well as down-to-earth pursuits such as **walking** and **horse riding**.

## Festivals & Events

**Carnival Week** The prelude to Lent brings winter gaiety to the town around late February.

**Festival of Dance** March brings a month-long celebration of contemporary dance.

**Grand Prix Historique** In the week before Whitsuntide: vintage vehicles parade through town on the first weekend, while Formula 3 WTCC Grand Prix motor race through the city's streets on the second weekend.

**L'Été à Pau** (Summer in Pau) Free, often high-quality music concerts at venues throughout the town.

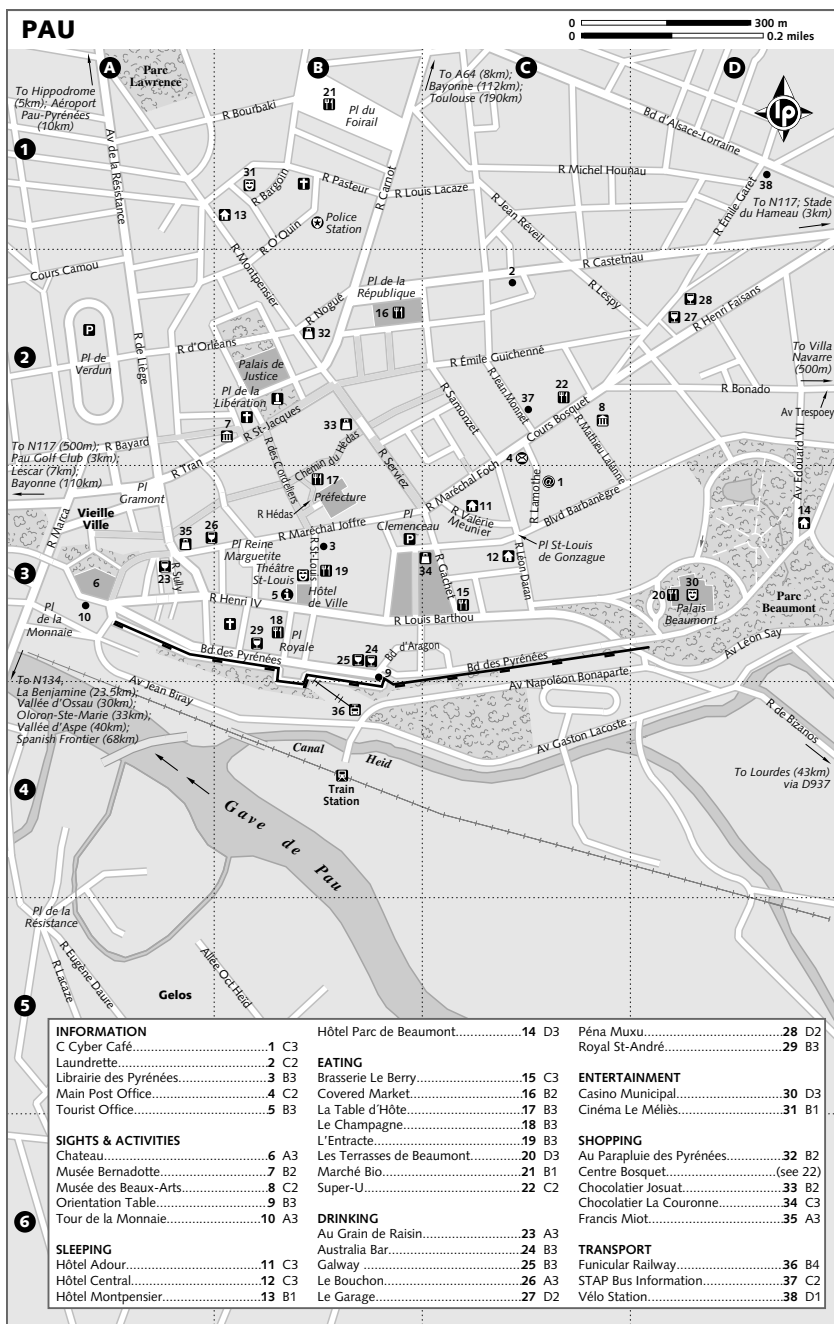
**Concours Complet International** Some of the world's best horse riders compete in dressage, cross-country and jumping during October.

## Sleeping

Pau is a popular venue for congresses so it's a good idea to book ahead at any time of year. Rates can spike during festivals and special events.

**Hôtel Adour** (☎ 05 59 27 47 41; [www.hotel-adour-pau.com](http://www.hotel-adour-pau.com); 10 rue Valérie Meunier; s €44-46, d €44-60; ☒) Even though the street isn't particularly noisy, rooms overlooking this central hotel are *triple* glazed. High-ceilinged rooms are colourful and comfy, and secure parking from €4 is a bargain.

**Hôtel Central** (☎ 05 59 27 72 75; [www.hotelcentral-pau.com](http://www.hotelcentral-pau.com), in French; 15 rue Léon Daran; s €50-57, d €53-72; ☒ ☒) Eye-catching rooms are individually decorated at this appealing and friendly spot that, true to its name, is in a prime spot 50m



from the pedestrian zone and not far from the leafy sprawl of Parc Beaumont. Wi-fi's free; parking costs €5.

**Hôtel Montpensier** (☎ 05 59 27 42 72; www.hotel-montpensier-pau.com; 36 rue Montpensier; s €75-95, d €85-95; ☎ ☒) Sunlit, coir-carpeted rooms spill over with shimmering taffeta and silk cushions, and metallic and timber furniture at this boutique gem. In fine weather you can take breakfast (€9) on the garden terrace; wi-fi and parking are both free.

**La Benjamine** (☎ 05 59 21 48 27; www.labenjamine.net; Quartier Candeloup, Monein; r incl breakfast €85-110; ☎) Expansive timber floors and crisp neutral fabrics fill the four guest rooms at this dreamy *chambre d'hôte* (B&B) 23.5km southwest of Pau. Occupying a renovated farmhouse, the rooms take their cue from aromatic plants growing in the rambling garden. Breakfast is an outdoor feast including flaky pastries and homemade jam. *Tables d'hôtes* are available by reservation for €42 with wine (€35 without).

**Hôtel Parc de Beaumont** (☎ 05 59 11 84 00; www.hotel-parc-beaumont.com; 1 av Edouard VII; r from €195; ☎ ☒ ☒) Built from striking materials including steel, wood and glass, public areas at this ultracontemporary hotel are hung with original works of art. Rooms – most with balconies overlooking the park – are particularly spacious. So are the 2m-by-2m beds (they can even hitch on an extension for visiting basketball teams). There's an inviting indoor pool, a sauna, a hammam (Turkish bath) and a Jacuzzi, all free to guests. Wi-fi's available; parking costs €12.

## Eating

**our pick Pau Golf Club** (☎ 05 59 13 18 56; www.paugolfclub.com; rue du Golf; menus €10-20, mains €7-15; ☎) lunch daily) A veritable museum, this 1856-built, still-operating golf course was the first ever on the European continent. Dining at its brass-and-timber restaurant allows you to survey its antique golf clubs, artworks painted at various stages of its history, and cabinets full of old trophies. The food is hearty and regional, and diners often break spontaneously into song (it's a Pyrenean thing...). There's a wonderful bar here too.

**L'Entracte** (☎ 05 59 27 68 31; 2bis rue St-Louis; mains €12-20; ☎) lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) For something light and/or late, L'Entracte (The Interval – it's right opposite Pau's main theatre) is a winner, serving crunchy salads and quality pizzas until midnight.

**Brasserie Le Berry** (☎ 05 59 27 42 95; 4 rue Gachet; mains €13-18; ☎) lunch & dinner) Adored by locals for its top value, original 1950s ambience and classical brasserie fare including scrumptious homemade desserts, Le Berry's tables are hotly contested (they don't take reservations). Be sure to arrive early, especially at lunchtime, when there's a €7.80 *plat du jour*.

**Villa Navarre** (☎ 05 59 14 65 65; www.villanavarre.fr; 59 av Trespoey; menus €16-55, mains €39-50; ☎) closed dinner Sun) In a turreted 19th-century villa, this sumptuous spot is strong on fish (baked sea bass encrusted in lime juice and salt, citrus-marinated bream and the like) as well as tender meats (rack of lamb with dried fruit and lemon balm, say). The villa also shelters an ultraluxe hotel (rooms from €192).

**La Table d'Hôte** (☎ 05 59 27 56 06; 1 rue Hédas; menus €18-31; ☎) lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) On a little country-like lane, this 17th-century tannery is all beams, mellow exposed brickwork and rough plaster. Service is cheerful, and dishes – such as *cochon noir Gascon*, locally reared pork stuffed with frilly mushrooms and soaked in its juices – are creative and delightfully presented.

**Le Champagne** (☎ 05 59 27 72 12; 5 place Royale; menus €19-23; ☎) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Traditional Béarnaise cuisine using local produce is dished up at this laid-back linchpin of Pau's social scene. Tables spill out onto place Royale when the weather's warm; you can also just drop by for a drink.

## SELF-CATERING

Stock up on picnic goodies at the big **covered market** (place de la République). The smaller **Marché Bio** sells exclusively organic food on place du Foirail every Wednesday and Saturday morning.

There's a large **Super-U** supermarket in the basement of the **Centre Bosquet** (cours Bosquet) shopping mall in the heart of town.

## Drinking

Pau has several distinct drinking zones; bars open from 10am to 2am unless noted otherwise.

'Le Triangle', bounded by rue Henri Faisans, rue Émile Garet and rue Castetnau, is the centre of student nightlife. Good bets are **Le Garage** (☎ 05 59 83 75 17; 49 rue Émile Garet) – look for the giant stucco mechanic sitting on the roof – and **Péna Muxu** (☎ 05 59 83 92 37; 35 rue Émile Garet; ☎) 7pm-2am Wed-Sat), which sometimes has live music.



A short string of international bars (**Galway** and **Australia** among them) extends along bd des Pyrénées and around the corner into bd d'Aragon. Also on bd des Pyrénées, you can flop in a deck chair and gaze at the mountains in the chic *salon de thé*, **Royal St-André** (☎ 05 59 98 44 02; 26 bd des Pyrénées; ☎ 10am-2am May-Oct, 2-7pm Nov-Apr).

Congenial wine bars near the château include **Au Grain de Raisin** (11 rue Sully), which also has a good range of draft beers, and **Le Bouchon** (46 rue Maréchal Joffre). Look out for the local **Jurançon wines** (www.cavede jurancon.com), whose vineyards ribbon the surrounding countryside.

## Entertainment

For theatre, music, dance and upcoming exhibitions, get hold of *La Culture à Pau*, published every three months and available free from the tourist office.

Exclusively nondubbed films screen at **Cinéma Le Méliès** (☎ 05 59 27 60 52; 6 rue Bargoin), Pau's only cinema.

**Casino Municipal** (☎ 05 59 27 06 92; ☎ 10am-3am Mon-Fri, to 4am Sat & Sun) occupies a sumptuous building, the Palais Beaumont, within Parc Beaumont. In the same building is a free, permanent exhibition commemorating the Wright brothers, who established the world's first-ever flying school in Pau in 1912. There's also a snazzy on-site restaurant, Les Terrasses de Beaumont (mains €19.50 to €24, open lunch and dinner daily).

The renowned **Hippodrome du Pont Long** (☎ 05 59 13 07 07; 462 bd du Cami-Salié), 5km north of the town centre, has steeplechases from December to April. Rugby fans will want to take in a home game of **Section Paloise** (www.section-paloise.com/accueil.php, in French), one of France's leading club sides at **Stade du Hameau** (☎ 05 59 02 50 91; bd de l'Aviation); schedules are posted on the team's website.

## Shopping

Pau's renowned chocolatiers include **La Couronne** (place Clemenceau) and **Josuât** (23 rue Serviez). Champion jam-maker **Francis Miot** (48 rue Maréchal Joffre) also makes wonderfully quirky sweets and handmade chocolates.

If you've ever despaired of finding a wind-proof, soak-proof umbrella, stop by **Au Parapluie des Pyrénées** (12 rue Montpensier), whose traditional beech-handled, rattan-ribbed umbrellas are used by Pyrenean shepherds.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Aéroport Pau-Pyrénées** (☎ 05 59 33 33 00; www.pau.aeroport.fr) is about 10km northwest of town. There are regular Ryanair flights to/from London (Stansted), Bristol and Brussels (Charleroi). Transavia flies direct to/from Amsterdam, while Air France has frequent flights to Paris (both Orly and Roissy) and Lyon.

### BUS

**Citram Pyrénées** (☎ 05 59 27 22 22) buses roll up the Vallée d'Ossau to Laruns (€4, one hour, two to four daily).

### TRAIN

Up to 10 daily trains or SNCF buses link Pau and Oloron-Ste-Marie (€6.10, 40 minutes) via Buzy-en-Béarn (€3.80, 25 minutes). There are three onward SNCF bus connections from Buzy into the Vallée d'Ossau and three to four from Oloron-Ste-Marie into the Vallée d'Aspe. Most of the latter continue to the Spanish railhead of Canfranc, from where trains run to Zaragoza (Saragossa). Regular trains link Pau with Lourdes (€6.80, 30 minutes).

Around 10 direct trains run to Bayonne (€15, 1¼ hours) and Toulouse (€27.10, 2¾ hours). There are five daily TGVs to Paris' Gare Montparnasse (from €79.70, 5½ hours).

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Shuttle-bus services from the train station to the airport had been suspended at the time of research, but are expected to resume – check with the tourist office for updates. A taxi costs around €25.

### BICYCLE

**Vélo Station** (☎ 05 59 02 27 54; 9 bd Alsace Lorraine) rents out all manner of bikes.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

There's extensive free parking on place de Verdun. Major rental-car companies such as **Avis** (☎ 05 59 12 80 01) have branches at both the airport and the train station.

### FUNICULAR RAILWAY

The train station is linked to bd des Pyrénées by a free **funicular railway** (☎ 6am-10pm, approximately every 3 min), a wonderful creaky little con-

traption dating from 1908. (The short walk, even uphill, takes much the same time.)

### PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The local bus company, **STAP** (☎ 05 59 14 15 16; www.bus-stap.com, in French), has a sales and information office on rue Jean Monnet. Single tickets/daily passes/eight-ride *cartes* (books of tickets) cost €1.10/2.50/5.60.

### TAXI

For a taxi, call ☎ 05 59 02 22 22 or reserve online at <http://pau-taxi.com> (in French).

## LOURDES

pop 15,700 / elevation 400m

Descending the steep streets of Lourdes towards its Santuaires Notre Dame de Lourdes initially feels like entering a religious theme park.

Lourdes, 43km southeast of Pau, has become one of the world's most important pilgrimage sites since 1858, when 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous (1844–79) saw the Virgin Mary in a series of 18 visions that came to her in a grotto. The Vatican confirmed them as bona-fide apparitions and the little country girl turned nun was beatified in 1933.

Catering to some six million visitors annually, the town is now awash with neon-signed hotels and over 220 souvenir shops selling cut-price statues, rosaries and crucifixes and Virgin Mary-shaped plastic bottles (just add holy water at the shrine).

But beyond the tacky commercialism are humbling reminders that some people spend their life savings to come here. Each year sees some 70,000 invalids in wheelchairs and on stretchers cared for by over 100,000 self-funded volunteers, in addition to numerous elderly visitors. And the commercialism doesn't extend to the sanctuaries, which are free of charge, and mercifully without a souvenir shop in sight.

### Orientation

Lourdes' two main east–west streets are rue de la Grotte and bd de la Grotte, both leading to the Sanctuaires Notre Dame de Lourdes, which lies west of the River Pau. The principal north–south thoroughfare, called av du Général Baron Maransin where it passes above bd de la Grotte, connects the train station with place Peyramale, where you'll find the tourist office.

## Information

**Forum Information office** (☎ 05 62 42 78 78; www.lourdes-france.com; Esplanade des Processions; ☎ 8.30am–6.30pm Apr–Oct, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Nov–Mar) For information on the Sanctuaires Notre Dame de Lourdes.

**Laundrette** (10 av du Général Baron Maransin; ☎ 8am–7pm)

**Micro Point Com** (8 place du Champ Commun; per hr €4; ☎ 2–7pm Mon, 9.30am–noon & 2–7pm Tue–Sat) Internet.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 62 42 77 40; www.lourdes-info-tourisme.com; place Peyramale; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–12.30pm Sun Apr–Jun & Sep, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Sat Jan–Mar & Oct–Dec) Has details of various discount passes to the town's sites.

## Sights

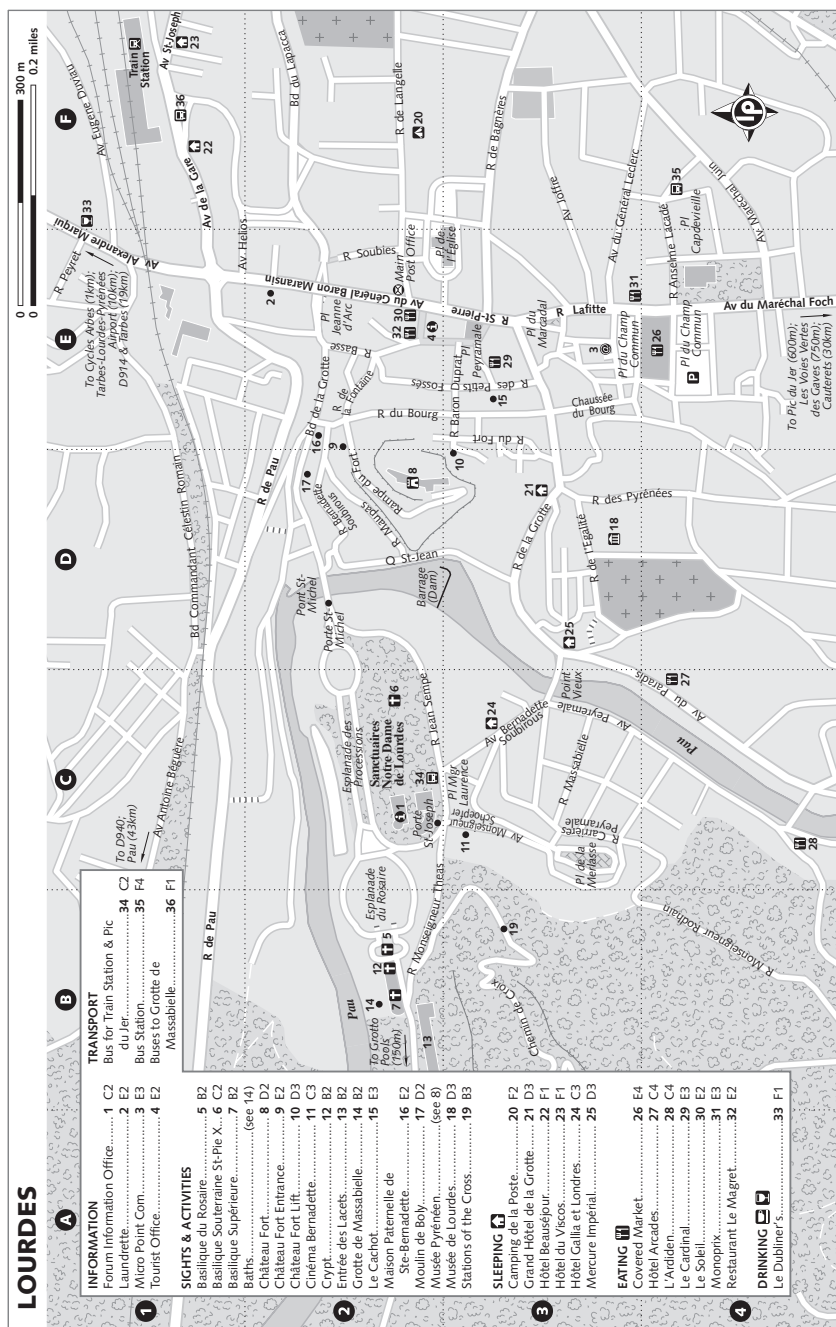
### SANCTUAIRES NOTRE DAME DE LOURDES

The development of the Sanctuaries of Our Lady of Lourdes began within a decade of Ste Bernadette's apparitions in 1858. The most revered site is known variously as the **Grotte de Massabielle** (Massabielle Cave or Grotto), the Grotte Miraculeuse (Miraculous Cave) and the Grotte des Apparitions (Cave of the Apparitions). Open 24 hours, its walls are worn smooth by the touch of millions of hands over the years. Hundreds of candles, donated by pilgrims, flicker. Adjacent are 19 individual **baths** (☎ generally 9–11am & 2.30–4pm Mon–Sat, 2–4pm Sun & holy days), separated into men's and women's areas. Volunteers in the change rooms shield you with blue cloaks as you strip off your clothes (yep, all of them), swaddle you in a wet, white, cotton sheet, then – after you step into the bath, walk to the end and kiss the Virgin Mary statue – they take you by the arms and lower you backwards, dipping you into the bath's seriously icy stream water for a few seconds. The baths are often used by invalids seeking cures (see p718) but are open to all-comers (of any or no religious affiliation).

The main 19th-century section of the sanctuaries has three parts. On the western side of Esplanade du Rosaire, between the two ramps, is the neo-Byzantine **Basilique du Rosaire** (Basilica of the Rosary). One level up is the **crypt**, reserved for silent worship. Above is the spire-topped, neo-Gothic **Basilique Supérieure** (Upper Basilica).

From Palm Sunday to at least mid-October, solemn **torchlight processions** nightly start from the Massabielle Grotto at 9pm, while at 5pm there's the **Procession Eucharistique** (Blessed





Sacrament Procession) along the Esplanade des Processions. When it's wet, the latter ceremony is held inside the vast, bunkerlike **Basilique Souterraine St-Pie X** (Underground Basilica of St Pius X), with a capacity for 25,000 worshippers and vibrant backlit works of *gemmail* (superimposed pieces of coloured glass embedded in enamel).

All four places of worship open 6am to 10pm in summer and 7am to 7pm in winter. You can enter the grounds around the clock via the **Entrée des Lacets** (rue Monseigneur Theas). The **Porte St-Michel** and **Porte St-Joseph** entrances are open 5am to midnight year-round.

### STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Also called Chemin du Calvaire (Way of Calvary), the 1.5km Chemin de Croix (Way of the Cross), leading up the forested hillside from near the Basilique Supérieure, is punctuated by the 14 **Stations of the Cross**. Especially devout pilgrims mount to the first station on their knees.

### OTHER BERNADETTE SITES

On rue Bernadette Soubirous are the **Moulin de Boly** (Boly Mill; No 12; admission free), Bernadette's birthplace; and the **Maison Paternelle de Ste-Bernadette** (No 2; admission €1), the house that the town of Lourdes bought for the Soubirous family after Bernadette saw the apparitions. **Le Cachot** (15 rue des Petits Fossés; admission free), a former prison, is where Bernadette lived during the period when she saw the apparitions.

### MUSÉE DE LOURDES

The **Musée de Lourdes** (☎ 05 62 94 28 00; adult/child €5.50/2.70; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Apr-Oct), in the Parking de l'Égalité, portrays the life of Ste Bernadette as well as the general history of Lourdes.

### CINÉMA BERNADETTE

To learn yet more about Ste Bernadette (or to simply rest your feet), **Cinéma Bernadette** (☎ 05 62 42 79 19; 6 av Monseigneur Schoepfer; adult/disabled/child €6.50/5/4.50) shows the two-hour feature film *Bernadette* (with optional English dialogue) at 2pm, 4.30pm and 8.30pm daily from Easter to mid-October.

### CHÂTEAU FORT

On a rocky pinnacle, the **Château Fort** (Fortified Castle; adult/child/disabled €5/2.30/2; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-

6.30pm Easter-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Oct-Easter) is home to the **Musée Pyrénéen**, with displays on folk art and local traditions.

Take the free lift (elevator) from rue Baron Duprat or walk up the ramp at the northern end of rue du Bourg.

### PIC DU JER

Panoramic views of Lourdes and the central chain of the Pyrenees unfurl from the summit of Pic du Jer (948m). It's a six-minute ride from valley level by the **funicular railway** (☎ 05 62 94 00 41; bd d'Espagne; adult/child one-way €6.50/5, return €9/6.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Mar-Nov).

The signed trail to the summit from the lower station is a more strenuous route (allow 2½ to three hours for the return journey) or simply ride up and walk down. The ticket booth has a free map.

While here, you can take a 45-minute **guided cave tour** (adult/child €3.50/2; ☎ by reservation); English tours can be arranged.

Take bus 2 from place Monseigneur Laurence.

### Activities

To get away from Bernadette Soubirous for a day, cycle along all or part of **Les Voies Vertes des Gaves** (Mountain Streams Green Routes). The route follows the old, long-abandoned Lourdes-Cauterets train line up the lovely Vallée des Gaves to Cauterets, where you can catch a bus back to Lourdes.

### Festivals & Events

Lourdes' renowned **Festival International de Musique Sacrée** is a week of sacred music held around Easter.

### Sleeping

Lourdes has over 270 hotels – more than anywhere in France outside Paris. Even so, you may have to scout around during religious holidays and from August to the first week of October. Conversely, the town is so quiet in winter that most hotels shut down. Virtually all hotels have facilities for travellers with disabilities. The tourist office has details of self-catering apartments.

**Camping de la Poste** (☎ 05 62 94 40 35; 26 rue de Langelle; camping for 2 people €10; ☎ Easter-mid-Oct) There are a dozen or so campsites ringing town, but this tiny, friendly place is right in the heart of town – and consequently often full.

**Hôtel du Viscos** (☎ 05 62 94 08 06; fax 05 62 94 26 74; 6 av St-Joseph; d €36-60, with shared bathroom €32; ☹ Feb–mid-Dec) A true bargain, this friendly, family-run place has a bustling bar (guests only), has free parking and couldn't be handier for the station.

**Hôtel Beauséjour** (☎ 05 62 94 38 18; [www.hotel-beausejour.com](http://www.hotel-beausejour.com); 16 av de la Gare; d €66-185; ☹) The Beauséjour, with its scrubbed white and ox-blood facade, offers free parking, and runs a good restaurant (*menu* €15). Rooms at the rear have impressive views of town and the Pyrenees beyond.

## MIRACLE CURES

There's only around one certifiable miracle cure in Lourdes every decade, but there are thousands at various stages of consideration, and more every week. The most recent 'official miracle', the 67th overall, confirmed in 2005, was that of Italian Anna Santaniello, crippled by and cured of chronic rheumatism.

To find out what makes a cure miraculous, we spoke to Dr Patrick Theillier, Director of the Lourdes Medical Bureau.

### How did you come to work in this field?

In 1998, the Bishop of Tarbes-Lourdes, Jacques Perrier, asked me to come here as a permanent doctor to receive people who've been cured, to see whether there's a medical explanation or not.

### Do you have a clerical background?

I'm married with six children and 16 grandchildren, so I'm not a priest! I'm a traditional doctor but I've done many works and studies about the spiritual dimension of medicine.

### What's the difference between a cure and a miracle?

The church has seven criteria: the illness must have a fatal prognosis; the diagnosis must be precise; the illness must be organic; the cure can't have been caused by medical treatment; the healing must be sudden, unexpected and instantaneous; the cure must be complete; and it mustn't be remission but lasting healing. The process of determining takes many years. The first thing is to check for medical explanations, then (if there aren't any) analyse the patient's case against the church's criteria.

### How many 'miracle' candidates do you see?

Every year about 40 unexplained cases, but there are others that we don't know about (inexplicably cured people who don't contact the medical bureau).

### What have the patients done to be cured in Lourdes?

Sometimes it's because they prayed, sometimes it's the water...you find all cases. There's a 'prayer climate' here...not just for Catholics, but Muslims and all other religions. Cures can happen the first time people come in the sanctuary or the 15th time...there's no rule, everything's possible. It's always a surprise. An 81-year-old man came to see me this week; he had been diagnosed with liver cancer at Christmas and was sent home to die within three weeks. His children came to say goodbye and one brought him some water from Lourdes and got him to drink it. He started getting better in January, and by 1 February he was going so well he swam 1km.

### Does his cure qualify as a 'miracle'?

I need to see his test results but I don't feel it strongly; it's an intuitive thing. A Spanish woman came this week who has recovered from muscular disease – I think it's a miracle but it will never be recognised as one because her prognosis was serious but not fatal. Another woman, with MS, came to receive the sacrament for sick people last year and went to the bath; from that point she started to get better and was later able to stand, walk, and now drives a car again. It's not clear if it's a miracle, because it's a gradual improvement, not a sudden halt of the disease.

### Worst thing about your job?

Sometimes people believe they're getting better but they're not. It's difficult, but it's part of the job of any doctor... you have to tell them.

### Best thing about your job?

Seeing people who've suffered for years find life again...it shows that life is stronger than death.

**Mercurie Impérial** (☎ 05 62 94 06 30; www.mercurie.com; 3 av du Paradis; r €69-145; ☹ Feb–mid-Dec; ☺ ☑ ☒) Don't be dissuaded because it's part of a chain: this 1930s hotel preserves its original ambience, and its roof terrace is a sublime place to sip an aperitif, overlooking the river and Pont Vieux. The lounge opens out onto a rear garden, and the restaurant (mains cost €11 to €15) is splendid. It's wi-fi'd; parking costs €11 to €13.

**ourpick Grand Hôtel de la Grotte** (☎ 05 62 94 58 87; www.hotel-grotte.com; 66 rue de la Grotte; s/d/tr from €71/80/94; ☹ mid-Feb–mid-Oct; ☺ ☑ ☒) Established in 1871, Lourdes' first-ever hotel has belonged to the same family for four generations. With richly coloured rooms and suites, a gorgeous garden, a bar and a couple of restaurants (mains cost €18 to €22), it embodies old-world courtesy. Rates rise by 10% in peak season.

**Hôtel Gallia et Londres** (☎ 05 62 94 35 44; www.hotelgallialondres.com; 26 av Bernadette Soubirous; d €120-240; ☹ Apr–Oct; ☺ ☑ ☒) The spacious bedrooms (some with sanctuary views) are individually and attractively decorated à la Louis XVI. You'll gasp at the chandeliers and the wooden panelling of the dining room with its side alcoves for intimate eating. Equally seductive is the lovely little garden.

## Eating

Alas, your options aren't great in this town of pack-'em-in, fill-'em-up hotels with accompanying restaurants. Most offer half or full board; many even require guests to stay on those terms, especially in the high season. On the upside, prices are reasonable.

See also listings under Sleeping.

**Le Cardinal** (☎ 05 62 42 05 87; 11 place Peyramale; dishes from €5, daily menu €8.50; ☹ Mon–Sat) Popular with locals, this unpretentious bar-brasserie is great for a drink or for tucking in to huge, healthy salads and filling daily menus.

**Hôtel Arcades** (☎ 05 62 94 20 59; 13 av du Paradis; menus €16-21.50, mains €10.50-13) The restaurant of Hôtel Arcades, open daily year-round, could save you from starvation. Entry is directly from the street, the service is swift and smiling and the food more than acceptable (if not perhaps 'gastronomic').

**Le Soleil** (☎ 05 62 94 53 22; 8 rue des Quatre Frères Soulas; mains €12-15; ☹ Tue–Sun) A bold Muslim presence in such a fervently Catholic town (that nevertheless welcomes visitors of all persuasions), this North African restaurant dishes up delicious couscous.

**Restaurant le Magret** (☎ 05 62 94 20 55; 10 rue des Quatre Frères Soulas; weekday lunch menu €13, dinner menus €26-33, mains €17-23; ☹ Tue–Sun Feb–Dec) Rustic decor embellished with early photos of Lourdes makes an evocative backdrop for dining on innovative regional cuisine including a crayfish 'cappuccino' with wild nettles, served in a glass; raw Pyrenean black-pork ham; and Vallée d'Ossau cheese.

**L'Ardiden** (☎ 05 62 42 24 35; 48 av Peyramale; mains from €13; ☹ Wed–Sun) It's well worth the short walk upstairs to L'Ardiden, pleasantly situated beside Pont Peyramale and the river. It's strong on pizza and pasta, along with fresh seafood and southwestern French specialities. It's a good bet if you're travelling with littlies, with a kid's menu for €6.50.

## SELF-CATERING

Lourdes' **covered market** (place du Champ Commun) occupies most of the square. Opposite you'll find a **Monoprix supermarket** (9 place Champs Commun).

## Drinking

Unsurprisingly, nightlife is not Lourdes' forte – the town has only one Madonna and she's far from a Material Girl (despite the merchandising around town). Your best year-round bet is the pub–piano bar **Le Dubliner's** (☎ 05 62 42 16 38; 7 av Alexandre Marqui), which usually has music from 8pm.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées airport** (www.tarbes-lourdes.aeroport.fr) is 10km north of Lourdes on the N21. It mainly handles charter flights, but has up to three scheduled daily Air France flights to/from Paris (Orly). The airport is not served by public transport.

### BUS

The small **bus station** (place Capdevielle) has services northwards to Pau (though trains are much faster) and is a stop for buses running between Tarbes and Argelès-Gazost (at least eight daily), the gateway to the Pyrenean communities of Cauterets, Luz-St-Sauveur and Gavarnie. SNCF buses to Cauterets (€7, one hour, at least five daily) leave from the train station.

### TRAIN

Lourdes is well connected by train to French cities including Bayonne (€17.70, 1¾ hours,

up to four daily), Pau (€6.80, 30 minutes, 10-plus daily) and Toulouse (€23.40, two hours, six daily). There are four daily TGVs to Paris' Gare Montparnasse (from €88.80, six hours).

## Getting Around

### BICYCLE

Opposite Leclerc supermarket, **Cycles Arbes** (☎ 05 62 94 05 51; 10 av François Abadie) hires out a variety of bikes.

### BUS

**Citybus** (☎ 08 00 10 02 39) bus 1 links the train station with place Monseigneur Laurence and the Sanctuaries (€1.20).

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

To keep things fair for the souvenir traders, the one-way traffic routing through the town is reversed every 15 days (the only town in France to do so). This, combined with the caterpillar of tour coaches, swarms of pedestrians and fuming summer traffic jams, means that you're better off leaving your vehicle near the train or bus stations, where there's free parking, and walk.

Major car-rental companies have desks at the airport and the train station.

### TAXI

For a taxi, call ☎ 05 62 94 31 30.

## AROUND LOURDES

The **Grottes de Bétharram** (☎ 05 62 41 80 04; www.betharram.com; adult/child €11/7; 🕒 2.30-4pm Mon-Fri Jan-Mar, 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm daily Apr-Oct, closed Nov & Dec),

14km west of Lourdes along the D937, are among France's most spectacular limestone caves. Guided visits, by minitrain and barge, last 1½ hours.

To see fauna that you would be extremely lucky to stumble across in the Parc National des Pyrénées, visit **Parc Animalier des Pyrénées** (☎ 05 62 97 91 07; www.parc-animalier-pyrenees.com, in French; adult/child €10/6; 🕒 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Apr, May & Sep, 1-6pm Oct), at the northern side of the village **Argelès-Gazost**. Animals in this small park include marmots, wolves, lynx, otters and a couple of brown bears.

Just 4km south of Argelès-Gazost (16km south of Lourdes) is one of the Pyrenees' jewels, St-Savin. Not only is it officially 'one of France's prettiest villages', but it's home to the wonderful hotel-restaurant **Le Viscos** (☎ 05 62 97 02 28; www.hotel-leviscos.com; d €85-126; 🕒 closed 2 weeks Jan). Run by the seventh generation of the St-Martin family, its clutch of countertop rooms have hand-sewn bedspreads, cushion covers and canopies. But the real draw is the gastronomic restaurant (*menus* €27 to €78; closed dinner Sunday and all day Monday for nonguests), where you can savour chef Jean-Pierre St-Martin's regional fare, including *pomme farcie au boudin et foie gras* (blood-sausage-stuffed apple topped with pan-fried foie gras and caramel), in its elegant dining room, the winter garden or the summer courtyard. Jean-Pierre also offers two- to three-hour **cooking classes** (in English and French) for €60 per person, including the fruits of your labour plus two glasses of wine (reservations essential). The tiny village has long been a haven for artists and writers; check out the photo of guest Paulo Coelho at Le Viscos' reception (oh yeah, and Michael and Kirk Douglas and President Sarkozy, among other celebs seeking time out of the spotlight).

## PARC NATIONAL DES PYRÉNÉES

Rich in plant life and teeming with fauna, the Pyrenees National Park extends for about 100km along the Franco-Spanish border – from the Vallée d'Aspe in the west to the Vallée d'Aure in the east. Its boundaries are marked by a red lizard head on a white background, painted on rocks and trees. Within are 230 lakes

### HATS OFF?

The archetypal beret-wearing, baguette-carrying Frenchman may be a caricature, but berets are still sported by plenty of folk in these parts (often carrying baguettes, too).

This quintessential headgear is honoured at the **Musée du Béret** (Beret Museum; ☎ 05 59 61 91 70; place St-Roch; adult/child under 10yr €4/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 2-6pm Tue-Sat Nov-Mar), in the bustling little market town of Nay (a well-signed 24km west of Lourdes along the D937 towards Pau), and have been made here since 1812. Cap off a visit by browsing its boutique's rainbow of colours.

and Vignemale (3298m), the French Pyrenees' highest summit. It interlinks and collaborates closely with Spain's 156-sq-km Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido, to its south.

Glance up to spot birds of prey like golden eagles, griffon vultures, bearded vultures, booted eagles, buzzards and falcons. Some 42 of France's 110 species of mammal are also here; some reintroduced including marmots, the izard (close relative of the chamois, all but blasted out of existence half a century ago), and brown bears (see the boxed text, p724).

### MAPS & BOOKS

Each of the six park valleys (Vallée d'Aure, Vallée de Luz, Vallée de Cauterets, Val d'Azun, Vallée d'Ossau and Vallée d'Aspe) has a national park folder or booklet in French, *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées*, describing 10 to 15 walks. Worthwhile for the route maps alone, they're on sale at local parks and tourist offices.

The park is covered by IGN's 1:25,000 Top 25 maps 1547OT *Ossau*, 1647OT *Vignemale*, 1748OT *Gavarnie* and 1748ET *Néouvielle*.

### Information

There are **national park offices** ([www.parc-pyrenees.com](http://www.parc-pyrenees.com)) with visitor centres at (from west to east) Etsaut, Laruns, Arrens-Marsous, Cauterets, Luz-St-Sauveur, Gavarnie and St-Lary-Soulan. All are open year-round; call ahead to check closing days in May and November.

### Activities

#### WALKING

Some 350km of waymarked trails (including the Mediterranean-to-Atlantic GR10) criss-cross the park; some link up with trails in Spain.

Within the park are about 20 *refuges* (mountain huts), primarily run by the Club Alpin Français (CAF). Most are staffed only from July to September but maintain a small winter year-round.

#### WHITE-WATER SPORTS

Rivers racing from the Pyrenean heights offer some of France's finest white water, since spring snow melt is supplemented by modest (sometimes not-so-modest) year-round rain, bringing a fairly steady annual flow. Organisations offering rafting and canoeing within or downstream from the national park include **A Boste Sport Loisir** (☎ 05 59 38 57 58; [www.aboste.com](http://www.aboste.com); rue Léon Bérard, 64390 Sauveterre de Béarn) and **Centre Nautique de Soeix** (☎ 05 59 39 61 00; <http://soeix.free.fr>; quartier Soeix, 64400 Oloron-Ste-Marie).

## THE VALLEYS

### VALLÉE D'ASPE

The Vallée d'Aspe has been a transfrontier passage ever since Julius Caesar's Roman legionnaires marched through. South of Pau, the Gave d'Aspe (River Aspe) flows for some

### SKIING IN THE FRENCH PYRENEES

Let's be frank: the best Pyrenees skiing lies across the watershed, in Spain's Baqueira-Beret and Andorra's Gran Valira. But the more modest resorts on the French side offer reasonable downhill skiing and snowboarding for beginners and intermediates.

The Pyrenees receive less snow than the much higher Alps and the falls are generally moister and heavier. In addition to downhill skiing, the potential for cross-country skiing, ski touring and, increasingly, snowshoeing, is also good.

The French side has over 20 downhill ski stations, and more than 10 cross-country areas. See also [www.bearn-basquecountry.com](http://www.bearn-basquecountry.com).

**Ax Trois Domaines** Above Ax-les-Thermes (p733) are 75km of gentle runs, tracing their way through pine forest and, higher up, the open spaces of Campels.

**Barèges-La Mongie** This combined resort, on either side of Col du Tourmalet and at the foot of the Pic du Midi de Bigorre (p730), has 69 runs, making it the French Pyrenees' most extensive skiing area.

**Cauterets** Snow lingers late at this long-established spa town-ski resort (p727); you can still whiz downhill here when other resorts have closed down for the season.

**Superbagnères** A cabin lift hurtles up from the spa town of Bagnères de Luchon (p731) for skiing above the tree line at 1800m.

**Val d'Azun** The best cross-country skiing in the Pyrenees, about 30km southwest of Lourdes, where you can plough along 110km of trails between 1350m and 1600m. There's a tourist office in Arrens-Marsous.



50km from the Col du Somport, which marks the frontier with Spain, down to Oloron-Ste-Marie. Fewer than 3000 people live in the valley's 13 villages. Its upper reaches are still among the most remote corners of the French Pyrenees and one of the final refuges of their more timid wildlife. But such seclusion may soon be lost due to the much-protested Tunnel de Somport, the Pyrenees' newest, 8km-long road tunnel.

### MAPS

The 1:50,000-scale *Béarn: Pyrénées Carte No 3*, published by Rando Éditions, is a practical general trekking map of the area. A more detailed option is IGN's 1:25,000-scale Top 25 map No 1547OT, *Ossau*.

The national park's *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées: Aspe* is a pack of information sheets on 11 walks, varying from 1½ hours to eight hours, in and around the valley.

### Information

The valley's **tourist office** (☎ 05 59 34 57 57; www.aspecanfranc.com, in French & Spanish; place Sarraillé; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm or 6.30pm Mon-Sat) is in the main square of Bedous. It carries a reasonable selection of walking maps.

The **Maison du Parc National des Pyrénées** (Park Information Centre; ☎ 05 59 34 88 30; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm May-Oct) occupies the old train station in Etsaut (trains have long since stopped serving the valley) and houses a good display (in French) about the fauna of the Pyrenees.

### Getting There & Away

**SNCF** (☎ 08 92 35 35 35) buses and trains connect Pau and Oloron-Ste-Marie up to 10 times daily. From Oloron there are three to four onward bus connections into the valley via Bedous to Etsaut, the majority continuing to Somport and the Spanish railhead of Canfranc.

### Bedous & Around

Bedous, the valley's largest village (albeit with a population of just 578) is 25km south of Oloron-Ste-Marie. Despite its diminutive size, it's still surprisingly easy to get lost in its little maze of narrow stone streets.

Breathtaking scenery notwithstanding, there's little in the way of sights, although the village's 18th-century working watermill, **Moulin d'Orcun** (☎ 05 59 34 51 70; adult/child €4/3;

### VALLEY HOPPING

If you're hopping from one valley to the next, you can cut kilometres by skipping the main thoroughfares in favour of scenic back roads rolling over the valleys' lower flanks.

The narrow D294 between Escot and Bielle corkscrews for 21km over the Col de Marie-Blanche (1035m) between the Aspe and Ossau valleys. A gentler alternative is the road linking Asasp-Arros and Arudy, which primarily traverses forest.

The drive along the D918 between Laruns (Vallée d'Ossau) and Argelès-Gazost (Vallée des Gaves) is a true summer spectacular, but closes due to snow from approximately October to May. Year-round, the D35 between Louvie-Juzon and Nay is easier going, lined with farms selling cheese.

☎ visits 11am, 3pm & 6pm Jul, Aug & school holidays), 500m out of Bedous on the Aydius road, opens for visits during holiday periods.

A further 7km up the N134, towards Pau, the storybook-pretty village of Sarrance is an age-old stop on the pilgrim's route to Santiago, with a historic cloister and church, and the **Écomusée de la Vallée d'Aspe** (☎ 05 59 34 57 65; adult/child €4/2.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Jul-Sep, 2-6pm Sat, Sun & school holidays Oct-Christmas & Feb-Jun, closed Christmas-Jan), which evokes the myths, legends and origins of the village.

### ACTIVITIES

The tourist office in Bedous (left) and other outlets in the valley sell the excellent locally produced guide *45 Randonnées en Béarn: la Vallée d'Aspe* (€9). It can also put you in touch with organisers of a whole host of outdoor activities: mountain biking, canyon clambering, rafting, climbing, skiing, snowshoeing and winter mountaineering trips.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Camping Municipal de Carole** (☎ 05 59 34 59 19; per person/tent/car €2.50/2/2; ☎ Mar-mid-Nov) Small and quiet (it's a good 300m west of the N134), it's well signposted from the main highway.

**Le Mandragot** (☎ 05 59 34 59 33; place Sarraillé; dm €10) This welcoming *gîte d'étape* (walkers' guest house) is a frequent staging post for walkers undertaking the Chemin de St Jacques. Accommodation is in rooms for two

to eight. There's a cosy common room and self-catering facilities.

**Chez Michel** (☎ 05 59 34 52 47; michel.abrioux@wanadoo.fr; rue Gambetta; r with breakfast €45, menus €10-20) Overnight guests can unwind here after a hard day's walking, either in the sauna or in the neat little restaurant, which dishes up regional treats like *garbure* (a pork-based gruel, thick with vegetables and pulses), trout with wild mushrooms, and bilberry pie. The restaurant is closed Saturday lunch July and August, as well as lunch Friday and Saturday and dinner Sunday September to June.

**Restaurant des Cols** (☎ 05 59 34 70 25; Aydius; d €33; ☹ closed dinner Sun & Mon except school holidays, plus 1-15 Oct) A 6.5km (uphill) drive east of Bedous in the hamlet of Aydius. It also has three delightful double guest rooms with self-catering facilities.

A heady variety of local cheeses fill the *fromagerie Ferme Miramon* (☎ 05 59 34 53 76; N134), situated just near the post office.

## Accous

At the yawning mouth of the Vallée Berthe, 2.5km south of Bedous and 800m east of the highway, this little village has a splendid backdrop of 2000m-plus peaks. For the ultimate panorama, sign up with one of its two *parapente* (paragliding) schools. **Ascendance** (☎ 05 59 34 52 07; www.ascendance.fr, in French) offers accompanied 15-minute introductory flights (€65) and five-day induction courses (€400).

**Air Attitude** (☎ 05 59 34 50 06; www.air-attitude.com, in French) has similar prices.

The **Fermiers Basco-Béarnais cheese centre** (☎ 05 59 34 76 06; ☹ 8.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Sat, Sun & school holidays), a farmers cooperative and thriving *fromagerie* (cheese shop), is beside the N134. It has free sampling and offers a 20-minute audiovisual presentation in French, plus the opportunity

to buy the best of local ewe's-, goat's- and cow's-milk cheeses.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Camping Despourrins** (☎ 05 59 34 71 16; per person/site €2.80/3.10; ☹ Mar-Oct) This tiny campsite is just off the N134, tucked behind the Fermiers Basco-Béarnais cheese centre.

**Maison Despourrins** (☎ 05 59 34 53 50; http://maison-despourrins.vallee-aspe.com, in French; dm €14, cold/hot meals €7/14) Colourfully decorated and ecominded, this *gîte d'étape* has 23 beds in two- to four-share rooms. Meals made using local produce will revitalise the weariest walkers, or you can use the kitchen facilities to self-cater.

**Auberge Cavalière** (☎ 05 59 34 72 30; www.auberge-cavaliere.com; s half board €56.60, d half board €119; ☹ year-round by reservation) The low-beamed restaurant with sheep and goat pelts around the walls at this well-established place is like eating in a cosy barn. The hotel also arranges horse treks of four to seven days (from €595 and €1010 respectively, including full board). It's about 3km south of Accous and just off the main road.

## Lescun

It's worth risking vertigo along the steeply hairpinned, 5.5km detour south of Bedous to the mountain village of Lescun (900m) for jaw-dropping westerly views of the Cirque de Lescun, an amphitheatre of jagged limestone mountains, backed by the 2504m Pic d'Anie.

## WALKING

Several great walks start from Lescun. For a day walk with spectacular views back over the Vallée de Lescun and the distinctive Pic du Midi d'Ossau (2884m), follow the GR10 northwest via the Refuge de Labéroutat and along the base of Les Orgues de Camplong (Camplong Organ Pipes) up to the Cabane

## ECOFESTIVAL

Some 30% of the Pyrenees is agricultural, compared to just 3% on average of the nation as a whole. Animals graze naturally, production is still small-scale and artisan, and products are made directly on the farms and sold locally. These generations-old traditions mean that sustainability and 'green' practices are already entrenched in the Pyrenean way of life, hence measures like renewable energy and solar power, which are gaining ground in more populated areas, are slow to catch on here. But the natural environment is celebrated in the Vallée d'Aspe during **Les Phonies Bergères** (www.phoniesbergeres.fr, in French; ☹ May of even-numbered years). This three-day festival features unique art exhibits set in nature, such as giant impressions created by mown mountainside grass, various sculptures and paintings, as well as ecotemed concerts and performance art.

## BEARS, OH MY!

In 2004 in the Vallée d'Aspe, a boar hunter shot the one animal that might (with a great deal of luck) have ensured the genetic survival of the Pyrenean bear. 'In self-defence', he claimed, maintaining that the bear charged him. France was in uproar; even then-President Chirac weighed in, declaring it 'a great loss for French and European biodiversity'.

So the Pyrenean brown bear is emphatically dead. But over the past decade-and-a-half, bears have been imported from Slovenia, released, and have now bred successfully. Today, between 15 and 20 brown bears roam the Pyrenees. (Tragically, in 2007 one of them was killed by a car on the road between Argelès-Gazost and Lourdes.)

The reintroduction of bears is not universally welcomed, though, particularly in the western Pyrenees, where free-roaming sheep are bred for meat (as opposed to fenced sheep producing cheese as in the east). Some 124 sheep were killed and around 15 beehives destroyed by bears in 2007. Effective protection requires nightly vigils or the construction of kilometres of fencing to protect flocks. As one valley resident told us, 'It's easy for people to sit in their offices in Paris and care about the bears, but they're not out here trying to protect their sheep.'

As bear numbers increase, so too does the controversy. You'll see slogans daubed on rocks, such as '*Non aux ours*' (No to the bears) or '*Pas d'ours*' (No bears), which proliferate throughout the valleys. But the bears still have fans, as evidenced by occasional signs of support such as '*Bonne année et longue vie aux ours!*' (Happy New Year and long life to the bears!).

du Cap de la Baigt, a *fromagerie* (open only in summer) where you can buy cheese directly from the shepherd.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Gîte & Camping du Lauzart** (☎ 05 59 34 51 77; [campinglauzart@wanadoo.fr](mailto:campinglauzart@wanadoo.fr); camping for 2 people €10.40; ☽ May–mid-Sep) Spacious, friendly and beautifully situated, 1.5km southwest of the village, the on-site *gîte* has dorm beds for €11 to €12.

**Maison de la Montagne** (☎ 05 59 34 79 14; [t.croquefer@tiscalif.fr](mailto:t.croquefer@tiscalif.fr); per person €15, half board €30) An old barn has been atmospherically converted into this cosy, rustic *gîte*, where rooms sleep four or five. The owner, a qualified guide, leads mountain walks.

**Chambre d'Hôte Pic d'Anie** (☎ 05 59 34 71 54; [www.vallee-aspe.com/hebergement/pic-anie](http://www.vallee-aspe.com/hebergement/pic-anie), in French; r €53; ☽ mid-Jun–mid-Sep) In the village itself, this summertime-only *chambre d'hôte* has five simple, well-maintained rooms.

**Au Château d'Arance** (☎ 05 59 34 75 50; [www.auchateaudarance.com](http://www.auchateaudarance.com), in French; r €58-63) From the hamlet of Cette-Eygun, 12km from Lescun, climb eastwards up a narrow, winding lane for 2.25km to reach this intimate 13th-century castle. There are eight rooms, one of which is wheelchair accessible. Its restaurant (*menus* €16 and €26) is equally captivating, and the sweeping view of the valley below from the terrace makes a sundowner taste all the sweeter.

## Etsaut & Borce

The twin villages of Etsaut and Borce are set back on either side of the N134, 11km south of Bedous. Both are popular bases for higher-elevation walks. The **Maison du Parc National des Pyrénées** (Park Information Centre; ☎ 05 59 34 88 30; ☽ 10.30am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm May–Oct) is in the old train station in Etsaut (hours can vary). For more information on the area, visit [www.haute-aspe.net](http://www.haute-aspe.net) (in French).

Up the hill, the trim little hamlet of Borce has been restored and documented with care yet it's still a living community, just the right side of twee.

One route for medieval pilgrims heading for Santiago de Compostela (nowadays the GR653 long-distance trail) was via the Vallée d'Aspe, through Borce and over the Col du Somport. **Hospitalet de St-Jacques de Compostelle** (☎ 05 59 34 88 99; admission free; ☽ 10am–6.30pm) in Borce is a tiny museum, housed in a former pilgrims' lodging and 15th-century chapel. Pop €2 in the slot for 20 minutes of haunting plainsong.

**Espace Animalier** (☎ 05 59 34 89 33; adult/child €8/4.60; ☽ 9.30am–7pm Jun–Sep, 1.30–6pm Apr, May, Oct & Nov) is a large open area above the village where three brown bears together with izards, roe deer, marmots and mouflons (wild mountain sheep) live in semicaptivity – though authorities, under pressure from local herders, did veto plans to introduce a small pack of wolves.

**WALKING**

For a challenging half-day walk, join the GR10 in Borce or Etsaut and follow it south to **Fort du Portalet**, a 19th-century fortress used as a prison in WWII by the Germans and the Vichy government. In summer, two- to three-hour tours (€3; English tours possible) are organised through the tourist office in Bedous. From the fort, head east to negotiate the Chemin de la Mâtüre, a vertiginous path originally hacked into the vertical cliff face to allow bullock trains to transport timber for ships' masts from the upper slopes.

To lighten the load, Rand'en Âne, run by **La Garbure** (☎ 05 59 34 88 98; www.garbure.net, in French), can line you up with a donkey (per hour/half/full-day €11/23/35).

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**La Garbure** (☎ 05 59 34 88 98; www.garbure.net, in French; per person €11.50, half board €23.50) This popular *gîte d'étape*, down the alleyway beside Etsaut's parish church, has donkeys to rent and can arrange a host of other outdoor activities. The owners have mountains of info about local walks. There's a kitchen for self-caterers and even free wi-fi. Rooms accommodate between two and eight people.

The same family also runs **La Maison de l'Ours** (which has the same rates and hours as La Garbure) in the village square. In July and August you can sit on its terrace and savour its lip-smacking homemade ice cream.

**VALLÉE D'OSSAU**

The River Ossau makes a 60km journey from the watershed at Col du Pourtalet (1794m) to its confluence with the Aspe at Oloron-Ste-Marie. The Vallée d'Ossau, through which the river cuts a swath, is one of contrasts. The lower northern reaches, as far as Laruns, are broad, green and pastoral. As it cuts more deeply and more steeply into the Pyrenees, it becomes narrow, confined, wooded and looming before broadening out again near the hamlet of Gabas.

**MAPS & BOOKS**

The most practical general walking map of the area is the 1:50,000-scale *Béarn: Pyrénées Carte No 3*, published by Rando Éditions. For more detail, consult three IGN 1:25,000-scale Top 25 maps – numbers 1547OT *Ossau*, 1647OT *Vignemale* and 1546ET *Laruns*.

The tourist office produces *Randonnées en Vallée d'Ossau* (€7), describing 30 signed

walks between 5km and 16km long, plus five mountain-bike routes. The national-park visitor centre stocks *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées: Vallée d'Ossau* (€6.40), describing 14 more challenging walks in the area, supported by 1:50,000-scale maps.

**Information**

**La Maison de la Vallée d'Ossau Office de Tourisme** (☎ 05 59 05 31 41; ossau.tourisme@wanadoo.fr; place de La Mairie, Laruns; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun & public holidays, plus 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug) On Laruns' main square, dispensing valley-wide information.

**National Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 05 59 05 41 59; pnossau@espaces-naturels.fr; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Jun-Sep, Tue-Sat only Oct-May) Beside the tourist office.

**Activities**

The valley's tourist office, La Maison de la Vallée d'Ossau Office de Tourisme, can reserve a host of activities including summertime caving, climbing, kayaking and rafting, and winter snowshoe treks and guided cross-country ski outings.

**Getting There & Around**

**Citram Pyrénées** (☎ 05 59 27 22 22) runs buses from Pau to Laruns (€4, one hour, two to four daily).

SNCF trains from Pau stop at Buzy-en-Béarn from where there are three onward bus connections daily as far as Laruns (40 minutes).

During school holidays, **Transports Canonge** (☎ 05 59 05 30 31) runs a morning and an evening bus between Laruns and Artouste-Fabrèges (€2 return, 40 minutes, daily). The summer service continues as far as Col du Pourtalet.

For scenic routes between the Ossau and Aspe valleys, see the boxed text, p722.

**Falaise aux Vautours**

The gliding flight of the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) is once more a familiar sight over the Pyrenees. It feeds exclusively on carrion, fulfilling the role of alpine dustman.

The 82-hectare protected area of the Falaise aux Vautours was originally a haven for 10 griffon-vulture pairs nesting in the limestone cliffs above the villages. Now there are more than 120 couples, plus various other raptors – notably a couple of Egyptian vultures which come back each spring; miniature cameras beam images from the heart of their nest.

**La Falaise aux Vautours** (Cliff of the Vultures; ☎ 05 59 82 65 49; www.falaise-aux-vautours.com, in French;

adult/child €7/5; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jun-Aug, 2-5pm Apr & other school holidays, 2-6pm May & Sep) in Aste-Béon shows live, big-screen, round-the-clock images from nests on the cliffs 500m higher up; you can peek in on nesting, hatching and feeding in real time. There's also a good display about vultures, with captions in English.

## Laruns

pop 1500 / elevation 536m

Laruns, 6km south of Aste-Béon and 37km from Pau, is the valley's principal village.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Campsites sprawl nearby, though you're often hemmed in by caravans and mobile homes.

**Camping du Valentin** (☎ 05 59 05 39 33; per person/site €3.35/7.05; ☎ May-Oct) By contrast, this highly recommended campsite, 2.4km south of the village beside the D918, has separate zones for mobile homes, caravans and family tents. Overlooking all, and enjoying the best of the impressive views northwards, is a grassy area for lightweight campers.

**Refuge-Auberge L'Embarcadère** (☎ 05 59 05 41 88; 13 av de la Gare; dm €15, half board €29; ☎ closed 1-21 May) This long-standing walkers' budget option is a reasonable bet but you'll need to plan ahead as there are no meals or self-catering facilities.

**Hôtel de France** (☎ 05 59 05 33 71; www.vallee-ossau.com/hotel/france, in French; av de la Gare; r €50, with shared bathroom €29) Although no longer young (and all the more characterful for that), this place is spotless and spruce. It serves real jam for breakfast, unlike the usual sealed plastic goo. The friendly family owners readily dispense information about hiking opportunities.

**L'Arrégalet** (☎ 05 59 05 35 47; 37 rue du Bourguet; menus €15-30; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun) Sit out on the terrace of this highly recommended place about 200m northeast of Laruns' main square, which smokes its own trout, bakes all its bread and marinates its own duck foie gras in Armagnac. The tempting desserts (many of them cream-based) are all homemade, too.

## Eaux-Bonnes

If you've a penchant for faded glamour (with an emphasis on faded), take the briefest of detours to this sad spa that got left behind. Frequented by no less than the Empress Eugénie herself in its 19th-century heyday, it's now all but a ghost resort. The once magnificent Hôtel des Princes stares unseeing, all shutters closed, across the oval square at Hôtel du Parc, once its keen-

est rival, and now closed over 40 years. More recently, some slick, quick-buck cartel took over the casino – and promptly dropped the place when it failed to squeeze out the profit it had banked on. The **tourist office** (☎ 05 59 05 33 08; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri year-round plus 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Sat May-Oct, 10am-noon & 3-6pm Sun Jul & Aug), God bless it, squats lonely in what was once the town's bandstand.

The valley's largest ski resort of Gourette is a mere 10-minute drive away. Even higher, the col beyond is a favourite torture point of the Tour de France.

## Gabas

Tiny Gabas, with fewer than 50 souls, is now mainly a trekking base, 13km south of Laruns. Its equally small-scale 12th-century **chapel** is the only vestige of what was once a monastery, the very last Chemin de St-Jacques pilgrim hostel before the Spanish frontier. Pick up a hunk of tangy *fromage d'Ossau*, made here in the high mountains from ewe's milk and matured in this very hamlet.

The **CAF refuge** (☎ 05 59 05 33 14; half board per person €26-31; ☎ Jun-Sep & school holidays, Sat & Sun only other times, closed Nov & Dec), 500m south of Gabas, offers cheery accommodation in rooms for four to 12, and a culinary reputation that extends way beyond the valley; Marie-France's homemade desserts are to die for.

**Hôtel-Restaurant le Biscaü** (☎ 05 59 05 31 37; fax 05 59 05 43 23; d €36-46; menus around €15; ☎ mid-Dec-Oct) Le Biscaü is the most comfortable option in Gabas, offering hearty cuisine (save room for the cheese course; the owner himself matures cheeses brought in by the local shepherds).

From the **CAF refuge**, a 3.5km forest track brings you to Lac de Bious-Artigues (1420m) and a superb view southeast to Pic du Midi d'Ossau and southwest to Pic d'Ayous.

## Le Petit Train d'Artouste

Winter skiers and summer holidaymakers converge upon charmless lakeside Artouste-Fabrèges (1250m), 6km by road east of Gabas, to squeeze into the **cable car** (return fare €7; ☎ 9.30am-6pm), which soars up the flanks of the 2032m Pic de la Sagette. Between June and September, an open-topped **train** (☎ reservations 05 59 05 36 99; www.trainartouste.com, in French; adult/child €21/17; ☎ half-hourly 9am-5pm Jul & Aug, hourly 9am-3pm Jun & Sep), built for dam workers in the 1920s, runs for 10km at 2000m from the upper cable-car station to Lac d'Artouste



(1991m). Views are heart-stopping and the 'little train' tucks away over 100,000 passengers in its four months of operation. Allow a good four hours.

There's a seasonal **tourist office** (☎ 05 59 05 34 00; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jun-Sep & Christmas-Mar) beside the cable car.

## CAUTERETS

pop 1300 / elevation 930m

Crowded in by slopes towering to 2800m, the thermal spa and ski resort of Cauterets, less than 30km south of Lourdes, is a superb summertime base for exploring the forests, meadows, lakes and streams of the Parc National des Pyrénées. In winter Cauterets is doused with snow; it's usually the first of France's Pyrenean ski stations to open and the last to close.

### Information

**Laundrette** (19 rue Richelieu; ☎ 8am-8pm)

**Maison de la Presse** (8 place Maréchal Foch) Stocks walking maps.

**Maison du Parc National des Pyrénées** (☎ 05 62 92 52 56; place de la Gare; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 3-7pm Jun-mid-Sep, 9.30am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-Apr) Sells walking maps, has an impressive free exhibition on Pyrenean flora and fauna, and shows park-related films. Organises guided walks (€9.15/15.25 per half/full day in July and August; free for children under 16).

**Pont d'Espagne Information Office** (☎ 05 62 92 52 19; ☎ Dec-Sep, hours vary)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 62 92 50 50; www.cauterets.com, in French; place Maréchal Foch; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 3-6pm Sun school holidays, otherwise 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun, closed Sun Nov & May)

### Sights & Activities

#### WALKING

Dozens of walks start right from town or from Pont d'Espagne at the end of the spectacular D920 road, 8km south, 600m higher and accessible in season by shuttle bus (p730).

The area west of Cauterets is covered by IGN's 1:25,000-scale Top 25 map No 1647OT *Vignemale*; land east of town features on No 1748OT *Gavarnie*. Rando Éditions' *Bigorre Carte No 4* covers the region at 1:50,000.

The national park produces *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées: Vallée de Cauterets* (in French; €6.40), which maps 15 walks. The tourist office carries *Sentiers du Lavaudon* (in French; €5), outlining seven easy walks in the area.

For a pleasant day walk from Cauterets (allow around six hours), follow the Vallée de Lutour southwards as far as Lac d'Estom, where the lakeside *refuge* offers refreshments.

From the giant car park at **Pont d'Espagne** (where you can rent a multimedia guide to the valley's flora and fauna in summer for €6), Chemin des Cascades passes by a series of spectacular waterfalls as it drops northwards towards Cauterets.

Heading south from Pont d'Espagne, you've a choice of two valleys, each different in character. Following the Gave de Gaube upstream through a pine wood brings you to the popular **Lac de Gaube** and, nearby, *Hôtellerie de Gaube*, where you can sip a drink or recharge with a snack or midday *menus* (around €15) on the terrace, overlooking a waterfall. Three hours, not counting breaks, is generous for this out-and-back walk.

A longer trek up the gentler, more open **Vallée de Marcadau** leads to **Refuge Wallon** (☎ 05 62 92 64 28; dm €15, half board €36.90; ☎ Feb-mid-Apr & Jun-Sep) at 1866m. Allow about five hours for the round trip.

### SKIING

The shining new Télécabine du Lys cabins shoot up to 2000 skiers per hour from Cauterets to the 21-run **Cirque du Lys**. The 36km of runs here, ranging from 2415m to 1850m, are best for beginner and intermediate **downhill skiers**. Lift passes cost €27 per day or €140 for six days. In summer it morphs into a mountain-biking area, including a kids' bike park with a 1500m drop in altitude.

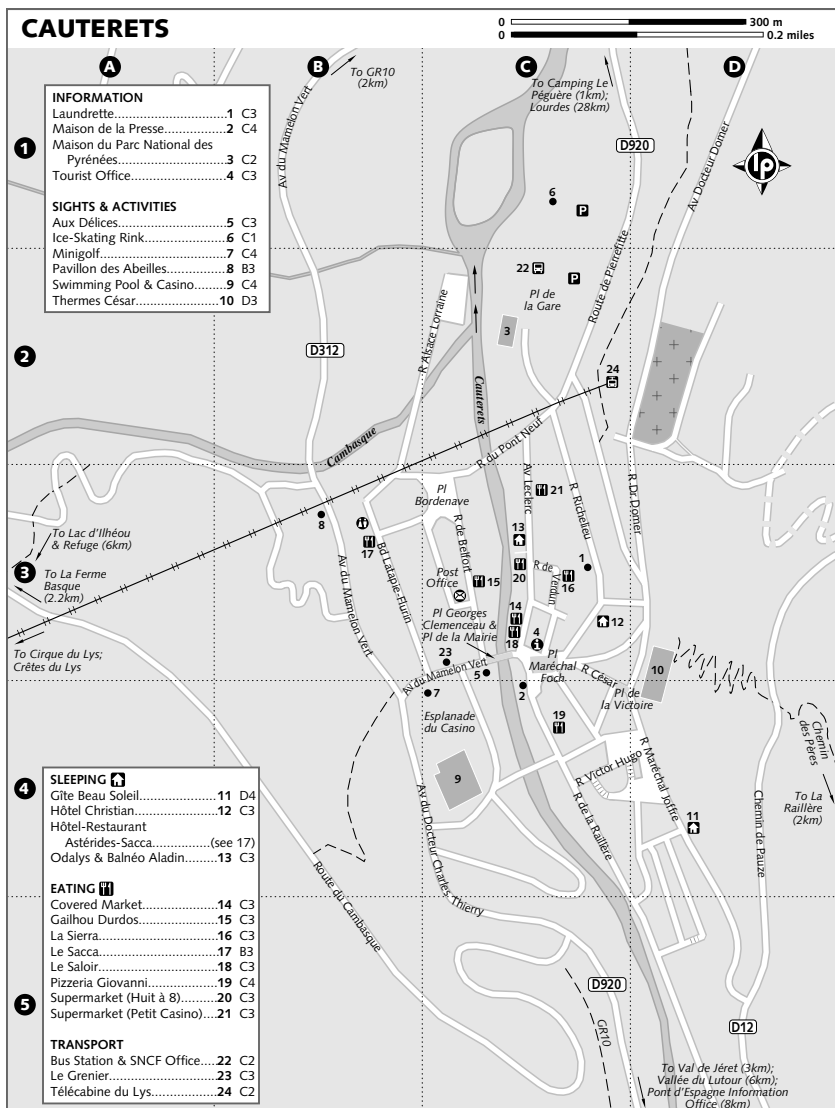
**Pont d'Espagne** (1450m) is primarily a **cross-country skiing** area. From it, 37km of maintained trails, paralleled in their lower reaches by a 6km circuit for walkers and snowshoers, lead up the Vallée du Marcadau. A one-day trail pass with/without cable-car transport costs €7.30/8.30.

Several shops in Cauterets hire out ski equipment. Typical prices per day are downhill €12 to €20, snowboards €19 to €25 and cross-country gear €8 to €10.

### SNOWSHOE TREKS

Several mountain guides organise day and half-day treks into spectacular scenery. Typical prices are around €21 to €26 for a three-hour outing and €29 to €32 for a full day including transport and hire of snowshoes and poles. Ask at the tourist office or try **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 06 12 94 81 88).





### THERMAL SPAS

Cauterets' hot springs, bubbling from the earth at 36°C to 53°C, have attracted visitors keen to soak up the springs' health-giving properties since the 19th century. Some use artificially heated water, but for the real deal try the variety of water-based facilities (starting from €8) at **Thermes César** (☎ 05 62 92

14 20; [www.thermesdecauterets.com](http://www.thermesdecauterets.com), in French; rue Docteur Domer; ☒ Feb-Nov).

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Esplanade du Casino and Esplanade des Œufs (Egg Esplanade, named in an age before public-relations officers and spin doctors, for the stench the sulphurous waters gave off) are

### A LITTLE SWEETENER

When the 19th-century *curistes* (those seeking a cure) in Cauterets had swallowed their daily dose of sulphurous spa water, they – and their nearest and dearest – were inflicted instead with halitosis. But an enterprising villager set about making a boiled sweet that would mask it.

Brightly coloured, these pillow-shaped, striped *berlingots* are made by a quartet of small producers in Cauterets including **Aux Délices** (☎ 05 62 92 07 08; www.berlingots.com, in French; place Clemenceau). They'll always give you a sample and if you call by in the late afternoon you can usually see a batch being made.

home to cafés, a swimming pool, **minigolf** and the town's large **casino** (☎ 05 62 92 52 14; www.casino-cauterets.fr, in French; esplanade des Œufs). It would be an even more lovely little open space for prom- enading if they'd banish the parked cars.

**Pavillon des Abeilles** (☎ 05 62 92 50 66; 23bis av du Mamelon Vert; admission free; ☎ 10.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–7pm Mon–Sat school holidays, otherwise 3–7pm Wed–Sat) is all about bees, with a glass-sided hive, video and honey of every possible flavour.

Cauterets also has an **ice-skating rink** (place de la Gare; adult/child €8/5.50).

### Sleeping

Cauterets has a wide-ranging choice of accommodation in all categories. The tourist office can also provide details of apartments to rent by the week.

**Camping Le Péguère** (☎ 05 62 92 52 91; www.les-campings.com/peguere; per site €10.32–13, cabins per person with/without bathrooms from €25/35; ☎ May–Sep) This grassy, shady campsite, 1.5km north of town on the D920, has some choice pitches right beside the Gave de Cauterets, and a variety of bright, clean chalets and cabins available on a weekend or weekly basis.

**Gîte Beau Soleil** (☎ 05 62 92 53 52; gite.beau.soleil@wanadoo.fr; 25 rue Maréchal Joffre; per person incl breakfast €22–23, half board €36–37; ☎ closed Nov–first snow) The Beau Soleil has the comfort of a hotel as well as the friendly informality of a *refuge*. Beds are in spick-and-span en-suite doubles or quad-shares, and there's a green rear garden, a large lounge, and a kitchen for self-caterers.

**Hôtel-Restaurant Astérides-Sacca** (☎ 05 62 92 50 02; www.asterides-sacca.com; 11 bd Latapie-Flurin; r €38–85;

☎ closed 10 Oct–20 Dec) On one of the Pyrenees' prettiest streets, lined with 19th-century buildings and often used as a film set, is this venerable, family-run establishment. The checked-fabric rooms have a more contemporary feel than the pastel, floral ones but all are spacious and appealing. Half- and full-board options let you take full advantage of its renowned restaurant (below).

**Odalys & Balnéo Aladin** (☎ 05 62 92 00 00; www.hotelbalneoaladin.com, in French; 11 av Général Leclerc; d incl breakfast €106–150, half board per person €65–114; ☎ Christmas–mid-May & Jun–Sep) The Aladin also doubles as a spa (though with artificially heated water; also open to nonguests) and offers every luxury, including a fitness centre and a sauna. The minimum four-night stay is negotiable outside peak periods, but half board is obligatory during the ski season.

**Hôtel Christian** (☎ 05 62 92 50 04; www.hotel-christian.fr, in French; 10 rue Richelieu; r incl breakfast €66–80; ☎ Dec–Sep) Rooms are large and comfortable at this friendly hotel, in the hands of the same Cauterets family for three generations. There's a charming rear garden, and wi-fi.

### Eating & Drinking

Dining prices are competitive around town.

**Pizzeria Giovanni** (☎ 05 62 92 57 80; 5 rue de la Raillère; pizza around €9, menus around €15; ☎ lunch & dinner daily school holidays, otherwise dinner only, closed Wed & mid-May–mid-Jun & Nov–mid-Dec; ☎) Pizzas (eat in or take away) are superior, steaks are hearty and generous and the home-baked desserts are a dream. Bonus: diners can log on to the internet for free (nondiners pay €3 per hour).

**La Sierra** (☎ 05 62 42 68 97; 8 rue Verdun; menus around €15; ☎ Thu–Tue) Tucked away down a side street, this intimate little place consistently offers a variety of good-value deals such as a bottomless *garbure*.

**En So de Bedau** (☎ 05 62 92 60 21; 11 rue de la Raillère; menus €15–20; ☎ seasonal hours vary) This very regional place is a valley favourite for tapas accompanied by good beers and wines, or a hearty mountain meal.

**Le Sacca** (☎ 05 62 92 50 02; www.asterides-sacca.com; 11 bd Latapie-Flurin; menus €16.50–42; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed 10 Oct–20 Dec) By common consent the finest place to dine in Cauterets (read: book ahead). Chef Jean-Marc Canton's cuisine blends classical French fare and artistic presentation with subtle mountain flavours. Kids are welcomed warmly with a well-priced *menu* (€10) too. For accommodation here, see left.

**La Ferme Basque** (☎ 05 62 92 54 32; rte de Cambasque; ☞ seasonal hours vary) With a plunging view of Cauterets from its terrace, this place 4km west of town by road makes a great spot for a daylight drink.

### SELF-CATERING

Follow your nose to Cauterets' **covered market** (av Leclerc; ☞ daily during school holidays, individual traders' hours vary), where a couple of stalls do tasty takeaway dishes while another sells wonderful mountain cheeses. Regional cheeses and jams are also sold at **Le Saloir** (av Leclerc).

Still on av Leclerc, you'll spot two small supermarkets, **Huite à 8** and **Petit Casino**.

**Gailhou Durdos** (rue de Belfort), opposite the post office, has a rich selection of local wines and specialities.

### Getting There & Away

The last train steamed out of Cauterets' magnificent, all-wood station in 1947. Like something left over from a cowboy film set, it now serves as the **bus station** (☎ 05 62 92 53 70; place de la Gare).

SNCF buses run between Cauterets and Lourdes train station (€7, one hour, at least five daily).

### Getting Around

#### BICYCLE

**Le Grenier** (4 av du Mamelon Vert; ☞ closed Nov & May) rents out winter ski equipment and mountain bikes (per half-/full day from €16/25) in summer.

#### BUS

**Navette d'Espagne** is a shuttle service (single/return €4/6.50) between the bus station and Pont d'Espagne during the ski season (twice daily) and in summer (six times daily).

#### CABLE CAR

The fast new **Télécabine du Lys** operates mid-June to mid-September and from December to the end of April. It rises over 900m to the Cirque du Lys, where in summer you can catch the Grand Barbat chairlift up to Crêtes du Lys (2400m). A return trip costs €8/6 per adult/child to Cirque du Lys or €10/7.50 including the chairlift.

#### TAXI

Ring **Bordenave Frères** (☎ 05 62 92 53 68) for a taxi. The trip between Cauterets and Pont d'Espagne costs €16 one-way.

## VALLÉE DES GAVES & AROUND

Gentle and pastoral, the Vallée des Gaves (Valley of the Mountain Streams) extends south from Lourdes to Pierrefitte-Nestalas. Here the valley forks: the narrow, rugged eastern tine twists via Gavarnie while the western prong corkscrews up to Cauterets.

### Pic du Midi de Bigorre

Once the preserve of astronomers and scientists, the Pic du Midi (2877m) is now accessible to all by **cable car** (☎ 08 25 00 28 77; adult/student/child €25/22/15; ☞ daily Feb & Jun–late Sep, closed last 3 weeks Nov, call for dosing days rest of yr). Leaving from the ski resort of La Mongie (1800m), it gives access to one of the Pyrenees' most soul-stirring panoramas.

### Gavarnie

pop 165 / elevation 1360m

In winter, Gavarnie, 52km south of Lourdes at the end of the D921, offers limited downhill and decent cross-country skiing plus snowshoe treks. In summer it's a popular take-off point for walkers – consult the IGN Top 25 map No 17480T *Gavarnie* or the National Park pack *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées: Vallée de Luz* (€10) for the rich menu of routes.

The most frequented trail, accessible to all (in winter too, with skis or snowshoes), leads to the **Cirque de Gavarnie**, a breathtaking rock amphitheatre, 1500m high, fringed by ice-capped peaks. The round-trip walk to its base takes two hours. Between Easter and October you can clip-clop along on a horse or donkey (€24 round trip). In late July, Gavarnie hosts an **arts festival** in the dramatic setting of the Cirque.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 05 62 92 49 10; www.gavarnie.com; ☞ 8.30am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm daily school holidays, otherwise 9am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm Mon–Sat) is at the northern entrance to the village. You'll find the **national park office** (☎ 05 62 92 42 48; ☞ 9.30am–noon & 1.30–5.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon & 1.30–6.30pm daily school holidays) 200m beyond.

**Camping Le Pain de Sucre** (☎ 05 62 92 47 55; www.camping-gavarnie.com; per person/site €3.60/3.80; ☞ mid-Dec–mid-Apr & Jun–Sep) enjoys a lovely riverside spot a little north of town.

**Hôtel Le Marboré** (☎ 05 62 92 40 40; www.lemarbore.com; half board per person €62; ☞ mid-Dec–mid-Nov; ☞) stands out among Gavarnie's few overnight options as much for its acclaimed restaurant as for the comfort of its rooms. In a characterful, thoroughly modernised, 19th-century

## NO PASARÁN!

'No pasarán', say the banners and posters around Lourdes and the Vallée des Gaves: 'They shall not pass', echoing the famous Republican slogan of the Spanish Civil War. The long environmental campaign to save the Vallée d'Aspe was lost and the tunnel de Somport now allows easy truck access to the valley. The battlefield has now moved two valleys eastward, to Vallée des Gaves, as residents and environmentalists resist plans for the Traversée Centrale des Pyrénées (TCP), or Central Pyrenees Crossing.

The TCP is still being actively pursued by the governments of the Midi-Pyrenees region and of Aragón, over the Spanish frontier, despite the opposition of local councils in the valley. What's proposed is a 42km tunnel burrowed under Vignemale, France's highest Pyrenean peak. Should it go ahead, it will facilitate land crossings into Spain, with more than 250 trains set to use this twin-track rail-freight link per day. But not if its opponents get their way.

building, it's family-run and friendly. Kick back in Le Swan, its pub, or work out in its fitness centre. Half board is compulsory in the ski season and high summer.

During school holidays only, two SNCF buses run daily between Gavarnie and Luz-St-Sauveur (€7), from where there are connections to Lourdes (€7).

## Cirque de Troumouse

From Gèdre, 6.5km north of Gavarnie, a toll road (€4 per vehicle) winds southeast up a desolate valley into the Pyrenees to the base of the wild and little-explored Cirque de Troumouse. Snows permitting, the road is open between May and October.

## UPPER GARONNE VALLEY St-Bertrand de Comminges

On an isolated hillock, St-Bertrand and its **Cathédrale Ste-Marie** (adult/child incl audioguide in English €4/1.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Oct-Apr) loom over the Vallée de Garonne and the much pillaged remains of the Gallo-Roman town of Lugdunum Convenarum, where you can wander at will for free.

The splendid Renaissance oak choir stalls, carved in 1535 by local artisans, sit below the soaring Gothic east end of the cathedral.

## Bagnères de Luchon

pop 3032 / elevation 630m

Bagnères de Luchon (or simply Luchon) is a trim little town of gracious 19th-century buildings, expanded to accommodate the *curistes* who came to take the waters at its splendid spa.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 61 79 21 21; www.luchon.com; 18 allées d'Étigny; ☎ 9am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-7pm

Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Sun Dec-Mar, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Sep-Nov & Apr-Jun)

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Once only for the ailing, the **Thermes** (Health Spa; ☎ 05 61 79 22 97; ☎ Apr-mid-Oct), at the southern end of allées d'Étigny, now also offers relaxation and fitness sessions for weary skiers and walkers, the mainstay of the town's tourism-based economy. It's €14 to loll in the scented steam of the 160m-long underground *vaporarium*, then dunk yourself in the caressing 32°C waters of its pool. (Specific seasonal opening hours are exceptionally complex, even for France, so call ahead or check with the tourist office.) Follow this with a flutter in the elegant surroundings of the casino and you'll have had a good night out.

The stylish allées d'Étigny, flanked by cafés and restaurants, link place Joffre with the Thermes. Just to the west of this boulevard is the base of the **cabin lift** (single/return €5.90/7.90) that hauls you up to **Superbagnères** (1860m), the starting point for winter skiing and summer walking and mountain biking. It operates daily in the ski season and during July and August (weekends only during most other months).

## Cycling

Although you'll huff and puff, the area is rich in opportunities for mountain biking. The tourist office has copies of the free *Guide des Circuits VTT*, prepared by the local mountain-bike club, and also a miniguide to four runs starting from the top of the cabin lift. To rent a bike, see p732.

## Walking

Pull on your boots and head for the hills: an amazing 250km of marked trails, ranging from

gentle valley-bottom strolls to more demanding high-mountain treks, thread their way from Luchon and Superbagnères. The tourist office carries a useful free pamphlet, *Sentiers Balisés du Pays de Luchon*, and also sells the detailed *Randonnées autour de Luchon* (€10.95). Alternatively, pick up IGN 1:25,000 map No 1848OT *Bagnères de Luchon*.

### Other Activities

For the full range of outdoor possibilities, ask the tourist office for a copy of its free *La Montagne Active* brochure. The skies above Superbagnères are magnificent for **parapenting**. Contact **École Soaring** (☎ 05 61 79 29 23; www.soaring.fr, in French; 31 rue Sylvie). More down-to-earth, **Pyénées Aventure** (☎ 05 61 79 20 59; www.pyneesaventure.com, in French; 9 rue Docteur Germès) arranges canyon clambering and guided walks.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Camping Beauregard** (☎ 05 61 79 30 74; camp.beau regard@wanadoo.fr; 37 av de Vénasque; adult €3.50-4, site €4-5; ☽ Apr-Oct) This is the larger and more welcoming of Luchon's two campsites. A mere 300m from Les Thermes, it's popular with *curistes*.

**Hôtel des Deux Nations** (☎ 05 61 79 01 71; www.hotel-des2nations.com; 5 rue Victor Hugo; r €52-58, with shared bathroom €30-35) Nearly into its second century, this hotel has been run by the same family for five generations. Rooms are comfortable and good value, but the major attraction is its restaurant (*menus* €15 to €35, closed Sunday dinner and Monday November to January), fronted by a striped awning, which serves hearty local cuisine like flaming locally reared lamb chops in gargantuan quantities.

The allées d'Étigny are packed with bars and restaurants, some fine delicatessens and the usual pizza-and-pasta joints.

**Caprices d'Étigny** (☎ 05 61 94 31 05; 30bis allées d'Étigny; menus €10.50-23.50; ☽ closed dinner Thu) Staffed by a young, friendly crew, this central spot does great grilled meats on its open fire.

**L'Arbesquens** (☎ 05 61 79 33 69; 47 allées d'Étigny; menus €11-23; ☽ closed Wed & dinner Sun) Beneath its hefty timber beams (or the steel-frame winter garden), dip into the house speciality, fondue (minimum two people), in some 17 varieties.

Self-caterers should pass by Luchon's 1897-established **market** (rue Docteur Germès; ☽ daily Apr-Oct, Wed & Sat only rest of yr).

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

SNCF trains and buses run between Luchon and Montréjeau (€6.30, 50 minutes, seven daily), which has frequent connections to Toulouse (€14.90) and Pau (€16.30).

For bicycle hire, contact **Luchon Location Loisirs** (2 allées d'Étigny; from €8/12 per half-/full day).

### VALLÉE DE L'ARIÈGE

The Vallée de l'Ariège offers some great pre-Pyrenean walking, caving and canoeing. Ask at any tourist office for the *Carte Touristiques: Guide Pratique*, which lists in French a host of local entrepreneurs.

### Foix

pop 9700

In the crook of the confluence of the Rivers Ariège and Arget, Foix merits a small detour from the N20 to visit its castle, an 11th-century church and streets lined with medieval, half-timbered houses on the west bank of the Ariège.

The **tourist office** (☎ 05 61 65 12 12; www.ot-foix.fr, in French; ☽ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is near the covered market on cours Gabriel Fauré, the wide main thoroughfare.

### SIGHTS

The triple-towered **Château des Comtes de Foix** (☎ 05 34 09 83 83; www.sesta.fr, in French; adult/student/child €4.30/3.20/2.20; ☽ 9.45am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.45am-noon & 2-6pm Jun & Sep, 10.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Wed-Sun Oct-Dec & Feb-May, Sat & Sun Jan, daily in school holidays) stands guard above the town. Constructed in the 10th century as a stronghold for the counts of Foix, it served as a prison from the 16th century onwards; look for the graffiti scratched into the stones by some hapless inmate. Today it houses a small **archaeological museum**. Guided tours in English depart at 1.30pm in July and August.

### ACTIVITIES

Canyon clambering, canoeing, mountain biking and hiking can all be arranged through **Pyrénevasion** (☎ 05 61 65 01 10; www.pyrenevasion.com). The tourist office sells *Le Pays de Foix à Pied* (€7.80), an excellent guide to short and more challenging walks in the area.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Camping du Lac** (☎ 05 61 65 11 58; www.campingdulac.com, in French; per person €3-8, car free-€3; ☽ year-round; 🚰)

Beside the RN20 2.5km north of Foix, this attractive campsite has a good restaurant serving hearty mountain fare as well as tasty pizzas.

**Hôtel Restaurant Lons** (☎ 05 34 09 28 00; www.hotel-lons-foix.com; 6 place Dutilh; d from €52.50) Several of the colourful, good-value rooms at this former coaching inn overlook the river, and bike rental can be arranged for forays into the mountains. The attached restaurant (lunch/dinner menus from €11/14; closed from late December to late January) offers similar river views through its picture windows.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular trains connect Toulouse and Foix (€12.30, 1¼ hours, 10-plus daily).

### Around Foix

Beneath **Labouiche**, 6km northwest of Foix, flows Europe's longest navigable underground river, Rivière Souterraine de Labouiche. You can take a spectacular 1500m, 75-minute **boat trip** (☎ 05 61 65 04 11; adult/child €8.50/6.50; ☎ 9.30am-5.15pm Jul & Aug, 10-11.15am & 2-5.15pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10-11.15am & 2-4.30pm Sat & Sun Oct-mid-Nov) along part of its length.

**Les Forges de Pyrène** (☎ 05 34 09 30 60; adult/child €7.50/4; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 1.30-6pm Apr-mid-Nov, plus 10am-noon Jun & Sep), in Montgaillard, 4.5km south of Foix, is a living museum of Ariège folk tradition with its own blacksmith, a baker, a cobbler and a basket weaver. Spread over 5 hectares, it illustrates a host of lost or dying trades such as glass-blowing, tanning, thatching and nail-making.

### Ax-les-Thermes

pop 1500 / elevation 720m

Ax-les-Thermes flourishes as a small skiing and walking base and, with over 60 hot-water

springs, as a spa town. Like Foix, 43km north-west, it lies at the confluence of two rivers: the Ariège and – here's scope for confusion – the Oriège.

Several detailed walking guides (€5) are sold at the **tourist office** (☎ 05 61 64 60 60; www.vallees-ax.com, in French; av Delcassé; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun ski season, 9am-noon & 2-6pm non-ski season, closed Sun during Nov), which also has information on the area's spas, including **Thermes du Teich** (☎ 05 61 65 86 60; treatments from €7; ☎ Easter-mid-Nov), with a pool, a sauna, a hammam and an aqua gym.

The heart of town is place du Breilh. On one side of the square is the faded elegance of the casino. On the other is the **Bassin de Ladres**, a shallow pool originally built to soothe the wounds of Knights Templar injured in the Crusades; pull off your socks and steep your feet in its waters. A couple of interesting narrow streets with overhanging buildings are tucked between place du Breilh and place Roussel.

**La Petite Fringale** (☎ 06 87 74 03 21; 6 rue Rigal; menus €15-30) is a popular, friendly place, down a pedestrianised alley near the Bassin de Ladres, with a small summertime terrace. It does lots of tempting cheese-based dishes, including steaming fondues.

Most trains serving Foix (see left) continue as far as Ax.

### Around Ax-les-Thermes

At **Lombrives** (☎ 05 61 05 98 40; ☎ May-Sep & school holidays), 22km north of Ax on the N20 near the village of Ussat-les-Bains, is Europe's largest underground cave. Routes range from 1½ hours underground (€7.50/4.50 per adult/child) to a five-hour 'journey to the centre of the earth' (€34.70/25) by prior reservation.

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