

Trans Pyrenees winter crossing

by Steve Kentish

The goal was to cross The Pyrenees from coast to coast, Mediterranean to Atlantic in winter, by ski or foot only, no lifts, cars etc. The trip was scheduled for 2019 but had to be delayed to winter 2020, with a reduced team of 2 (Steve Kentish and David Hamilton) from the original 4.

David had completed a comprehensive route planning process, offering several alternatives for various weather and snow conditions. I had checked out accommodation options, which were updated as our progress speed varied and route altered.

We met up in the NE Pyrenees, where Ian Storey who helped with supply drops is based, to sort our supplies. The traverse was broken into 9 stages, the first and last being purely walking to and from the respective snow stages. Supply drops were planned at road heads. Ian made the majority of the deliveries, augmented by posting to tourist offices or known hotels.

We set off from Banyls-sur-Mer on the Mediterranean, arriving the day before and enjoyed a sunny afternoon on the beach, departing before sunrise the next day, 15th January.



Day before the start – Claire Marvin

The next 4 days took us through the wooded hills of the Pyrenees Orientals. These offered glimpses of the snow topped mountains ahead. It was however obvious that the snowline was depressingly high, almost certainly well above 2,000m. We completed the walking stage to Batere, where we were supposed to be skiing from, in cold conditions but sadly with no snow. The weather forecast was however for considerable precipitation over the next few days. Storm Gloria duly arrived, which caused considerable disruption over the eastern Pyrenees but for us was a real blessing.



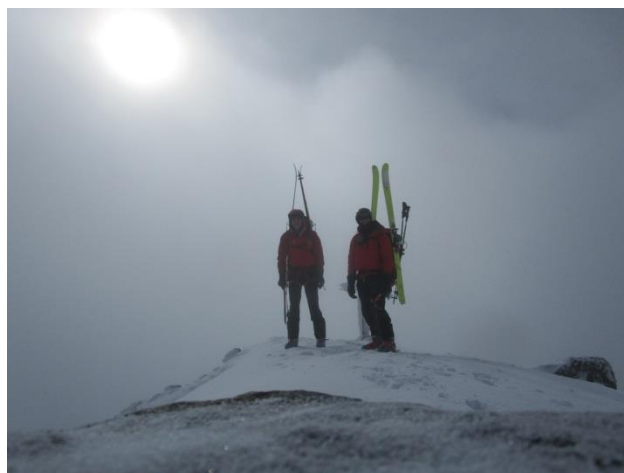
On skis from Batere – Graham Wallis

After residing with Graham Wallis, who kindly provided hospitality nearby, for a few days we arrived back at Batere to find about 20+cm of fresh snow; we were in business. Logistics meant we spent a night in the derelict part of the Batere building, putting our sleeping system to test. The system, consisting of a foam mat, airbed and 3 season sleeping bag, worked well in providing comfort, protection from a rough ground and warmth. The night's sleep was however interrupted by mice, who decided to party around us, looking for grub.

The next morning was sunny and Graham joined us for half a day as we set off on skis. After the first col, still in the trees we followed the often-elusive path traversing on steeply angled slopes, which proved to be rather time consuming and energy sapping. Progress slowed further when crossing, usually avalanched, streams. The result was late, after dark arrival at our first hut, Refuge des Cortalets, where the wall graffiti confirmed that we were in Catalonia, rather than Spain!

The next day took us over the first significant mountain, Canigou 2785m. After a short abseil from the summit we had a great ski to the trees, where yesterday's forest issues re-surfaced and we had to stop at an earlier hut, at Mariailles.

From here the recent snow enabled good progress over rolling hills, stopping at the virtually fully buried Refugio de la Portelle de Roth's. After much digging we found that the door had failed so we shared a cool night with a significant internal snow drift.



Canigou – Steve Kentish



Refugio de la Portelle de Roth's – Steve Kentish

Our next stop at Refugi Ulldeter was excellent till 3 local lads arrived on foot at about 10pm very cold but planning a bit of a party. They were somewhat upset to discover that the chimney leaked, so they were unable to warm up and stayed a little subdued. Fortunately, we were tired enough to still get reasonable sleep.

We continued through fantastic and varied scenery over snow that was firm in the morning and softening most afternoons as the sunny

weather generally warmed everything. The weather was having a significant impact on the snow line, which was creeping up, resulting in more walking at lower levels than we wanted. Our decision to take some light shoes proved excellent.

We passed through the Ariège area in France and then through Northern Andorra, before returning to Catalonia/Spain. Virtually all the huts were unguarded with basic facilities and often required a fair bit of digging out. Our sleeping system enabled a good night's rest, especially as we were generally the only guests so had suitable peace and quiet, which was especially enjoyed when we arrived early on sunny afternoons. Our day to L'Hospitalet-près-l'Andorre saw a brief spell of cool, windy and damp weather, almost a relief!

As we left L'Hospitalet-près-l'Andorre we met a team of 4 from Météo France and they confirmed that the weather in February was due to stay warm and largely dry. We had mixed thoughts as we would like some more snow lower down but were enjoying largely bright sunny conditions. We had occasional exceptions, like being blown clean over in strong storm force winds as we approached the Collada de Meners on route to El Serrat.

On route to Isil, meeting Ian with a supply drop, we met Carles LLuch, who lived in Vielha, our subsequent supply drop. Ian transferred the Vielha drop with Carles, who kindly put us up for a couple of nights as well as ferrying us to/from the south end of the Vielha tunnel. We had kept going for 20 consecutive days before having an overdue rest at Vielha.

We then faced a delay as our schedule put us in the Restanca refuge on a Saturday night, which was full. We split the next day stopping at Refugi Molières. Again, we had late arrivals just after dark, a couple of local lads walking and planning an ascent of the Tuc de Molières the next day. They had started with 2 axes and pair of very light crampons. On the ascent they had lost one axe, leaving them pretty poorly equipped. The following day they sensibly turned around on steep ice. We noted that walking, usually without snowshoes is popular in the Pyrenees, especially Spain. We often saw several kms of deep post holes throughout the mountains!

We arrived at the Restanca on Sunday, out of Catalonia and into Aragon, enabling a quieter ascent of Aneto, 3404m, on Monday. Apparently, no-one had summited the day before due to high winds, so fortuitous for us to be delayed a day. The ascent was relatively straight forward with a bit of a prolonged traverse after crossing the Portillón Superior. The final rocky ridge to the summit, the Pont de Mahomet had significant drops on both sides making the last section a little



Aneto – Steve Kentish

nervous. This roughly indicated half way and the highest point in the Pyrenees, as well as great views from the summit. Downhill from here?

Our next night was at the Hospital de Benasque, which constituted the most luxurious and splendidly renovated accommodation of the trip. (Maybe return for a more relaxing break one day.) The next day we met a couple of Spaniards doing the traverse in the other direction. We later heard that while they were making good progress, they had no walking shoes and were suffering in their ski boots.

By now conditions were getting rather warm and on south facing slopes we found skiing below 2000m rare, so the walking increased. Our route changed, offering a higher, potentially better snow covered and less populated option, based on recommendations from Carles, who had extensively ski toured and co-authored books in the Pyrenees (indeed a useful person to meet). Fortunately, we had the required maps with us to manage the alteration.



Monte Perdido with Ian – Steve Kentish

We arrived at our lowest ski point at Gèdre, ironically marking our entry to the Haute-Pyrénées. We were joined for a few days by Ian, who also bought further supplies with him. After a walk to the basic Cabane d'Estaubé we continued the next day to the Brèche de Tuquerouye, where we had planned to stop. However, with poor weather forecast in 2 days we went straight on to the Refugio de Góriz via Monte Perdido, 3355m, where we enjoyed spectacular views, probably the best of the trip, in all directions. The next day saw the weather breaking but fortunately, after

brewing-up, it backed off while we crossed the iconic Brèche de Roland before deteriorating again as the day went on.

We lost a day to weather in Gavarnie before heading for the Refuge de Baysellance in a day of mixed weather. Shortly before arriving I had a nasty fall slipping on the ice and falling a good distance. It took a while to collect various bits of kit that got thrown from me, fortunately successfully, leaving me shaken but uninjured.

We arrived at the hut soon after in a bit of a blizzard and warmed up with the fine stove.

Shortly before midnight a couple of cold and tired climbers arrived, who had spent 5+ hours near



La Brèche de Roland – Steve Kentish

the hut but unable to locate it in the poor weather: they had no GPS. We really appreciate the benefits of our GPS to assist in such situations.

The following day was sunny but breezy. We passed to the north of Vignemale enjoying the fresh snow and arrived at the Refuge Wallon Marcadau mid-afternoon. We acquired a weather report which confirmed bad weather approaching so the following day we retreated to Port d' Espagne on foot and then to Cauterets where we found suitable accommodation. The bad weather was sadly set in for a while losing 8 days in the valley and a couple more getting to/from Wallon.

We took the opportunity to hire a car and relocate our kit from Ian's house in the east to our anticipated end of the ski section at the Chalets d' Iraty in the west. We also started reading of potential issues with the spread of Corvid 19, already deterring Claire from coming out to assist with the walking stage from Iraty.

With better weather forecast and fresh snow down to below 1500m we finally set off for the Refuge de Larribet. The temperatures soon frustratingly rose again, rapidly melting much of the lower fresh snow and setting up a thaw freeze cycle again, but this time greater thaw than freeze. The Refuge de Larribet, in the Pyrenees Atlantic region, was a fine hut with running water.

The following day we crossed the Port du Lavedan, where we saw the largest avalanche on the trip covering the entire approach bowl with significant depth and distance. A reminder how quickly windblown snow builds up and then releases. We arrived at the Col du Portalet, where our supplies had been posted successfully for the remaining days on snow.

In very warm weather we had spring snow all day to Candanchú before a warm but rather misty day onto Arlet and then another day onto the Cabanes d'Ansabère in Basque country. Our next stop was the Refugio Belagua, which we knew to be under renovation, so planned to bivi or head down the valley to a hotel for the night. When we arrived, the hut was a building site, bad weather was forecast for 24 hours and Spain was in Covid 19 lockdown. We needed 2 nights of indoor accommodation but were unable to move anywhere due to the eerie feeling of lockdown. A Park Ranger arrived and once he realised we had food and a stove suggested that we could stay in a ranger hut close by and on our onward route. This was an ideal solution. As we set off the police arrived who said that we had to go home or to a hotel 'in our car'. We pointed out that we were on foot/skis, which did not compute with them. They talked about



Approaching Refugio Belagua – Steve Kentish

making a report, whatever that meant but eventually left us, so we headed without delay to the ranger hut. The weather indeed arrived with vengeance in the form of lightning, thunder, hail, snow rain and wind; glad to be under cover for 2 nights. We realised with the lockdowns increasing that our traverse would end pretty soon.

With improved weather we set off for the Cayolar d'Ardane Gagnekoa hut in France. On departure we heard from various people trying to help with our predicament. Graham Wallis noted that with France also going into lockdown that the Chalets of Iraty were closing that day. He arranged for us to be able to stay that night, but that involved 2 days into one for us. With great early progress, we modified the route to go round the base of Pic d' Orhy rather than over it. We arrived at Iraty soon after 8pm in darkness, a little tired but had accommodation and food, thanks to them opening the shop. We also had our entire luggage, including clean clothes.

The traverse had to terminate here as there was no effective, legal, way to continue. We had completed, what we believe to be, the first British continuous crossing of the snow/ski section of the Pyrenees in winter, e.g. from Batere to the Chalets of Iraty. Covid 19 had thwarted the complete coast to coast crossing; 5 walking days to go.

The following day, 18th March, we were able to get a taxi to Biarritz, waiting a couple of days for a flight to Stansted and home. This was the last UK bound flight from Biarritz for a while with lockdown closing things down.

We hope to return to complete the final walking section to the coast. We had moved on 46 days out of 62 days, travelled 783Km, climbing 49,094m.

Our thanks to those who helped with the crossing: Claire Marvin, Ian Story, Graham Wallis, Carles Lluch and the Austrian Alpine Club (UK) in providing sponsorship money.