

Backpacking in the Picos and Pyrenees with my daughter

By Nicholas and Violeta Brooks

As we climbed higher into the mist on the steep switchbacks to the Lacs de l'Embarrat on the Marcadau lakes circuit my six year old daughter was getting tired. What else could I do to motivate her? Suddenly a group of ten young French walkers descended quickly towards us. "Go on Violeta!", "Keep going Violeta!" they shouted cheerfully in encouragement. The two of us were speechless: how on earth did they know her name? Or that they should talk to us in English? Before we could find out, they had disappeared down the track. Whatever the answer, she was so inspired that we reached the first lake in no time at all.

We had sailed to Spain two weeks earlier on the ferry from Portsmouth to Santander. A fantastic experience for young and old, with lots of dolphin and whale watching – and the bonus of arriving close to our first backpacking destination in the Picos de Europa.

My daughter and I had walked and camped together frequently in Wales and the Lakes for the last year, and I thought it was time to introduce her to my beloved Pyrenees. Given that we'd have a car with us, we'd take the opportunity to see the Picos as well. Although I had backpacked in the Pyrenees six times before, it took considerable planning to come up with routes to provide varied interest for a young one, but which weren't overly ambitious. Other things couldn't be planned: would it be too hot or would the thunderstorms be too frightening?

Our first backpack was the Mancondiú circuit in the north eastern Picos, reached from Sotres. Our guidebook billed this as "superb walk ... breath-taking scenery and an incredible diversity of wildflowers ... you'll never meet a soul": it sounded perfect. The highlight of day 1 for Violeta was the discovery of a rich bank of alpine strawberries. After walking through incredible, but very dry, limestone scenery, I was grateful that the spring at the Fuente de los Lobos was flowing (and Violeta was relieved that there weren't any wolves, *lobos*, around!).

As we walked she led role-playing games – families, schools and the like. At our camp she realised that all of our spare warm and waterproof clothes could be used as theatre props, so we acted out a short play before I got the pasta cooking!

Day 2 gave Violeta her first experience of a mountain hut – the tiny Casetón de Ándara sitting under the west wall of Mancondiú (2002m). Hot chocolate proved a popular hit here and in subsequent refuges.

Our second route was to the Arriel lakes in the Spanish Pyrenees. We started from Sallent in fierce heat. Luckily we were climbing up alongside the Rio de Aguas Limpias (river of clean waters) so there were plenty of opportunities to cool down! On the second day we were treated to a spectacular wild camp at 2270m by the upper Arriel lake, directly under the frontier ridge and Pic Palas (2974m) and Balaitous (3144m). Lake swimming – with snow patches dripping into the water – cooled us in the afternoon, and we had fun with a tarp to make a den and shade for reading. Day 3 took us on an airy *balcon* route, traversing to the Refugio de Resposuso, before we descended to Sallent and ice cream.



Start of the Arriel lakes circuit - Nicholas Brooks



Upper Arriel lake campsite with Pic Palas and the frontier behind - Nicholas Brooks



Picos de Europa above Fuente De - Nicholas Brooks

Lastly we headed over to France and the splendid Marcadau lakes circuit. We climbed up and up in thick mist, always hoping that we'd pop out through the cloud into glorious sunshine. The mist was so wet that we wore waterproofs for the first time since using them as costume props in the Picos. Despite the cloud, my daughter enjoyed searching for dens under the truck-sized boulders near our campsite.

In the French Pyrenees good weather comes to those who wait, and the next day we had perfect blue skies for the 920m descent back to the Pont d'Espagne via Refuge Wallon (and a last *chocolat chaud*). It was a day for nature spotting: we saw large fish in Lac Nère, marmots, a mouse and lizards. A griffon vulture flew so low overhead that its shadow crossed our path. We had magnificent views across the Upper Marcadau to the Vignemale (3298m) and Grande Fache (3005m).



Lac Nere on Marcadau lakes circuit - Nicholas Brooks

It was on this last trip that the motivating chorus from the French group was so appreciated (it turned out they had been tipped off about Violeta's name by a kindly French couple we'd spoken to lower down!). Indeed, wherever we walked in the Picos and Pyrenees fellow walkers had nothing but encouragement and kind words for my daughter. She made me a very proud dad. And I think she rather enjoyed her adventures as well.

Tips for backpacking with children:

- When planning routes, look for day walks on good paths that would be an interesting, longish day for an adult, and then see how they could be split into 2-3 days. Check for potential camping spots and river/lake paddling to break the walk up.
- Rucksack: kids like to feel grown up and carry a 'proper' bag: great, but just put in a few very light things, such as a down sleeping bag, hat, gloves, a teddy, sweets and 250ml of water. Be aware for when it's time to carry the bag for them, on steeper climbs or at the end of the day. You'll be walking slower than normal, so no excuses not to carry a larger sack to haul all the games, spare clothes and treats!
- Plan lunch options carefully; half way through a backpack is not the time to fall out over food. My daughter loved hot chicken noodle soup and this had multiple benefits: it was warming and rehydrating, and forced us to stop for long lunches ensuring a proper rest.
- Kids always want walking poles. Violeta got used to them quickly and they proved more useful for a young one than you'd imagine – especially for stream crossings and boulder hopping. I'd also recommend a lightweight tarp for den building and shade.