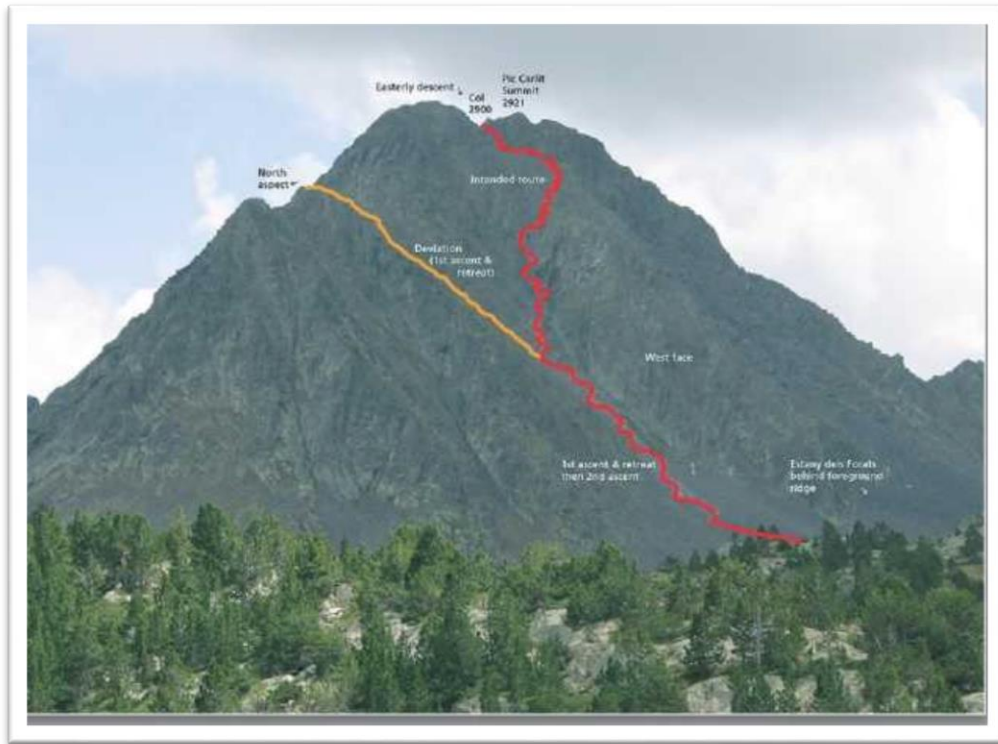


As the Crow Flies

by Nigel Braggins



Pic Carlet from NW in fine weather - Nigel Braggins

I was at two-thirds height when the storm struck Pic Carlit from the Southwest. Above the increasing fury of the wind I heard the rumble of distant thunder and fear quickened my pace. Once I crossed the col and descended onto the east face, I should be reasonably sheltered from the relentless wind and rain.

The loose, scree slope felt exposed and the faintly discernible ridge on my left offered a tempting handrail in the thick cloud. A shaky banister feels better than nothing on a rickety staircase, so I allowed it to lead me on up.

Eventually passing through a notch, I descended a few metres into relatively still air and marvelled at the sound of the express train roaring above my head. I peered into the clouds below, searching for the route. I was puzzled by the absence of any obvious signs of human traffic on the rocks around me.

A worm of doubt began to tum in my stomach as I moved back and forth across the slope hunting for the descent route. I remembered the guidebook describing the col at 2900 metres and from there the summit a twenty metre scramble up to the right. I wedged my rucksack firmly under an overhanging rock and, trying to stay on the sheltered eastern side of the mountain, I started to climb into the swirling clouds. After about thirty metres the rock continued to rise up steeply in front of me and I knew I had made a mistake.

I climbed down carefully, retrieved my rucksack and studied the map. A quick check on my wristwatch compass gave me cause for concern and, no matter how hard I willed it not to, my Silva compass confirmed the northerly aspect of slope. The altimeter on my Suunto Vector showed 2800 metres (100 metres lower than the col I should be on). I was at the wrong col - separated from the right one by loose rock and precipitous drops.

If I descended the apparently easy angled north face, I could immediately escape out of the storm into the sheltered valley below. The roar of the express tram over my head made this a tempting proposition but this would also put me on completely the wrong side of the mountain, a very long way from the CAF hut where I intended to stay that night and even further from the tent that I had left earlier in the day. In the poor visibility I had allowed the shaky banister to lead me off route. I was annoyed that I had made such a rudimentary mistake.

On the two dimensional map, this error only put me a few millimetres away from the correct col. But on the three dimensional mountain it was a rising traverse covering 100 metres of ascent and 300 metres distance as the crow flies. Unfortunately I was not a crow. Even if I had been, I'm not sure I would have taken off into the teeth of the storm. So I stuck my head above the parapet once more, into the forceful blast of the oncoming express train and made a slithering retreat as fast as I could down the way I had come. I soon came across the track I had unwittingly left on my way up and in no time at all I was safely down at the bottom of the scree slope. Relieved but disappointed to arrive once again at the little Estany (lake) dels Forats, I contemplated the ignominious 14km schlep back to my tent. As I looked up again towards the mountain, the clouds parted momentarily and I stared in disbelief at the obvious path winding its way up through the scree towards the correct col. How could I possibly have missed that? On a clear day you could see that track from outer space!

In the next moment, the clouds descended and the route was once again obscured, but I could not erase from my mind what I had clearly seen. The wind was still strong but the lightning had not arrived with it and the rain now seemed more intermittent.

Fearing a change of mind, I headed back up the slope at a gallop. Tire weather was better initially but 100 metres below the (correct) col the wind returned with a vengeance, driving torrential rain and sleet. Tire last few metres were wild as I climbed through the gap on to the eastern side. I dropped down a short distance to the shelter of some rocks and listened to the next tram pass loudly overhead. Finishing the last of my food and water, I waited for the train to move on. Leaving my sack under the rock, I scrambled quickly up the 25 metres to the summit.

A few minutes later I had retrieved my sack and was heading down the rocky, eastern ridge as the sky brightened, rain turned to sleet with some brief flurries of mid-summer snow. By the time I had descended to easy ground, the sun came out and an incredible double rainbow appeared below me spanning the beautiful Estany (lake) de Sobirans. At the end of the rainbow, about 8kms away, I could make out Lac des Bouillouses. On the other side of that lake lay the CAF hut, a warm welcome, a cold beer and a great meal.

ROUTE SUMMARY Pic (or Puig) Carlit is the highest peak in the eastern Pyrenees. My west-east traverse covered 42 kms of beautiful mountain scenery, sections of the GR10, GR7, and Pyrenean Haute Route, returning around the massif after a night in the hut. A full description, along with guidebooks, maps, pictures and kit list is at www.kragrags.com



Improving conditions over Estany de Sobirans - Nigel Braggins