

THE PYRENEES—FROM END TO MIDDLE

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During the fortnight that it occurred, the English summer of 1957 was characterised by excessive heat and a vitality-sapping heaviness of air. It was in such an atmosphere and at the hour of three in the morning when the spirit is at its lowest ebb that David Jacobs and I were transported away from Birmingham on the first stage of our Pyrenean journey. This little publicised mountain chain had always held a fascination for both of us, as we had discovered in the previous autumn when we fell by chance into talking of mountains off the beaten track. Then we had laid plans to visit the area under the pretext of walking through it from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean seaboard. Friends had poured scorn on our proposals; the less knowledgeable had described the mountains as accessible only through valleys choked with vegetation as thick as any tropical jungle and recommended taking machettes instead of ice axes. The more romantic inclined towards tales of brigands hidden behind boulders on lonely mountain passes and pouncing on the unsuspecting traveller and stripping him of his possessions. But our own apprehensions were directed towards the more technical problems of whether an expected scarcity of water would affect our finding camp sites, whether the natives would be friendly and we be able to live out our journey under the notorious Spanish sun.

The eventual realisation of months of planning and anticipation always adds a particular flavour to Continental train journeys to the mountains. In its character and richness of incident ours to Irun was no exception. This town at the western extremity of the Spanish frontier was our starting point, and although jaded by the rigours of an all-night journey spent in the squalor of a coffee-soaked corridor floor we kept up the momentum of travelling and set out immediately into the hills behind the town. Our plan was to follow a line south to Pamplona and on the basis of experience gained in this fairly easy country so decide on later stages. We were somewhat jarred by this first contact with "easy" country as after toiling for three or four hours to the top of a col the other side of which we had interpreted as leading down easy slopes into a village we were confronted instead with a precipitous descent into a ravine bottom and an abomination in steep hillsides opposite. As was to happen time and time again we had underestimated the size of the country. In fact as we swayed from exertion at the top of that col it seemed nightmarishly large. But what matter! Up here we breathed for the first time in weeks cool sweet mountain air, and below at the foot of fifteen hundred feet of admittedly rough hillside glistened a river promising relief to sweat soaked limbs. We descended.

The pattern of our days was dictated by the need to avoid exertion in the afternoon sun, and following a turn in at sundown we would strike camp early next morning and walk until mid-day with occasional passing stops at villages for coffee. In the afternoon, finding a sun-sheltered spot ideally in a woodland glade with a stream running by we would stop, start a fire and relax over brews of tea or set about the tasks of housewifery so essential if we were to retain our prestige as clean campers. Then again in the cool of the evening further progress would ensue, often as great as in the morning, before a final camp site for the night was decided on. And there was no dearth of excellent sites ; hardly a kilometre passed without the requisite combination of water, wood and flatness presented itself in situations as flawless as an artist's motif.

As we moved south our enthusiasm for the country and the people it contained mounted. There the peasant folk live in villages that are but clusters of white-walled pantiled dwellings haphazardly sited on sporadic outcropping hillocks of uncultivable ground. We soon learnt that from them we would receive the most heartening welcome and came to look forward to the time when rounding the next bend in the track or spur of the hillside we would find the expected welter of red roofs and promise of coffee, a rest and a chat with the inhabitants. That such conversations were possible is a tribute to David's mastery of Spanish. On a trip such as this it is the manifold tiny incidents and chance personal encounters which are so delightful and remain ever the happiest memory ; the lonely shepherd of sun and wind-chiselled countenance who proffered his gourd of wine at the summit of some long winding hill, the pride with which a local youth skinned a frog whilst it was still alive, the inevitable collection of people, intensely curious but always gay, who would gather round when we pitched our evening camp ; all this in a country which whilst not aspiring to heights of Alpine magnificence had more rewarding compensations in the contrasts of tilled field and stony hillside.

To rest from our initial labours we planned to arrive in Pamplona at the opening of the annual fiesta. Here the great friendliness we had been meeting since Irun reached its climax ; the intensity which Spaniards put into the enjoyment of the celebration of the Feast of San Fermin, the patron saint of bulls, was incredible and even we fatigued-sobered Englishmen had our last barriers of traditional reserve broken down as we joined in the wine, song, dance and the spectacle of a bull-fight.

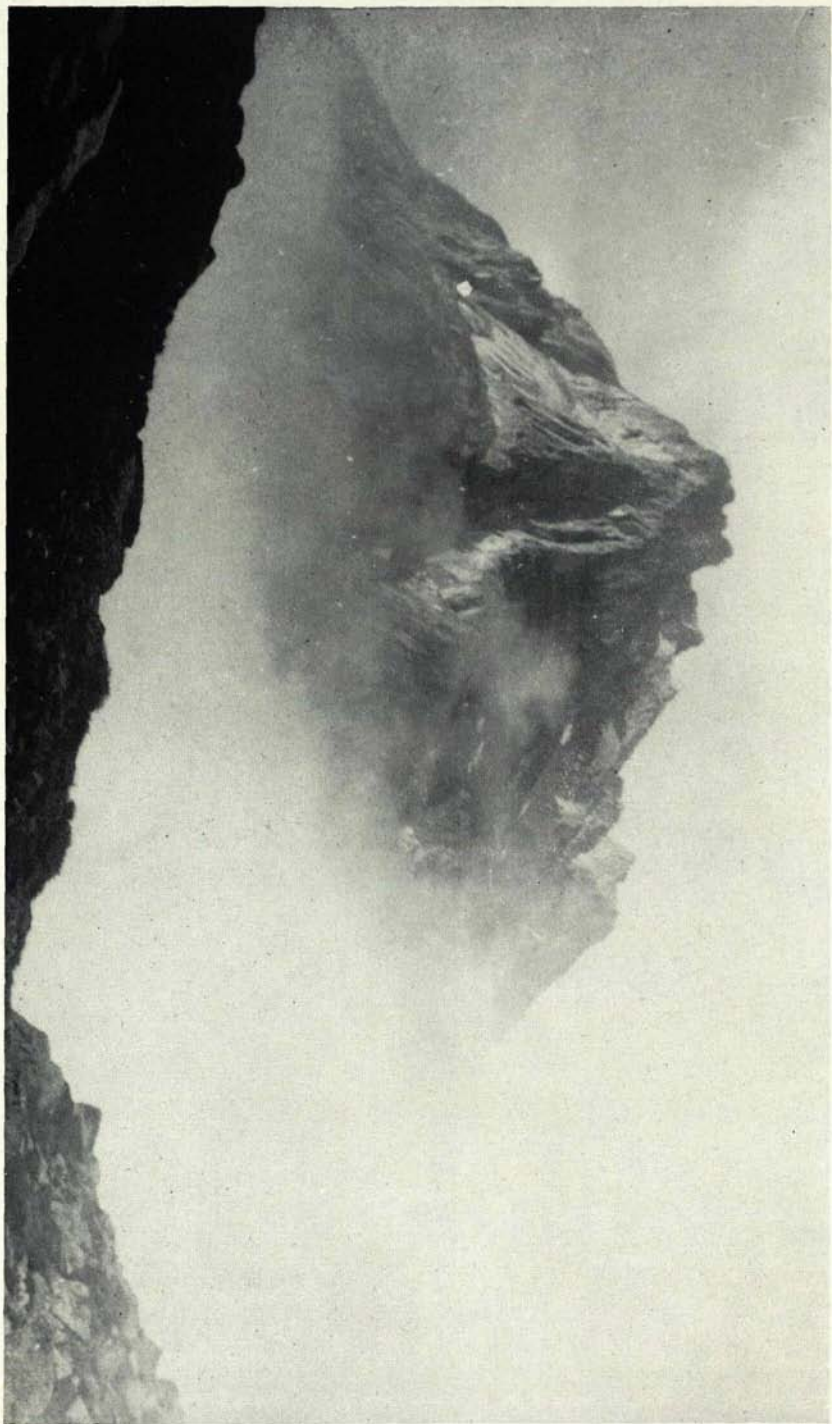
We were certainly more worn out by that fiesta than any day yet and were in poor shape next morning when we resumed our

journey. However, we had so much to look back on and talk about in the next two or three days that we really experienced the truth of the "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive" philosophy. The country through which we now passed began to lose its verdure and luxuriance and became more arid and more harsh; we were approaching the really big peaks, those of the Pic d'Anie and Pic d'Ansabere group whose presence was sometimes hinted at as we crossed the summit of a pass. The people were obviously having to work harder to exist here; sheep and goats replaced the cornfields and vegetable gardens, hills were steeper, passes higher, ridges more rocky, rivers ran more quickly and tempers were occasionally a little shorter. However, after a particularly trying morning spent traversing ephemeral paths round a never-ending sequence of spurs we topped the crest of a ridge and all our rancour melted away, for across our route lay a wall of mountains of superb beauty, their rock dazzlingly white in the brilliance of the sun and scarcely to be distinguished from the snow which covered their summits.

A further day's march and we camped in their midst, our site a pleasant green meadow separated from the rest of the world by a river gorge of terrifying aspect and encircled by peaks. Here we were joined by Richard Peplow, whose arrival made us a more satisfactory climbing party, and reluctantly we left our meadow, crossed a col and dropped down into France and so to Lourdes.

From this city of pilgrimage we returned to the mountains, this time up the valley of the Gave d'Azun above Arrens. Here the weather was less fine, but nothing daunted we aimed to ascend the Balaitous, which was the highest peak in this district. We were camped rather low down the valley and yet in spite of an early start four o'clock found us still below the summit, moving cautiously along a ridge, our only confidence in being on the right route at all coming from a piton knocked into a patch of disconcertingly loose rock below us. Then in the space of thirty feet and as many seconds we had climbed above the cloud and on to the summit, out of oppressive cloud and into a flawless blue sky. This peak and the few surrounding ones of similar height, the Vignemalle, Midi d'Ossau and the Pic du Ger just cleared the upper level of cloud. It was one of those unique occasions a mountaineer will treasure as justifying his craft and all its attendant setbacks.

We spent two more days in this area, sampling a little of its incomparable rock climbing. The rock of the Balaitous massif is a firm, rough confidence-inspiring granite resembling in character the gabbro of Skye, and by virtue of being nearly always in sun is probably without parallel in Europe for being sure to provide climbing of high quality.



The Balaitous

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Back in our granite mountains the travel bug had bit us again, and shouldering our food-depleted rucksacks we crossed over the Col de la Peyre St. Martin, a col with a wonderful name made memorable for us on account of the blueness of its gentians, and so into Spain. Once again in the country of soaring solitary poplars and intimate villages our initiative vanished and we whiled away a couple of days in the plains, adventuring on Spanish 'bus services and seeing the town of Jaca in slightly unconventional fashion, as is the wont of mountaineers.

Our aspirations when we returned to the mountains round Sallent bent towards the Pic du Midi d'Ossau if only on account of its lyrical name. It lay in France and to reach it we had to cross over another col at the top of which, instead of gentians or a rugged shepherd, a local fête was in progress. Basque flute and drum music and Spanish dancers encouraged us to linger overlong, but we still had time to reach the Refuge de Pombie before nightfall. Unfortunately our excursions into France had been hitherto marred by bad weather and this one was no exception. Next morning, when it dawned, was cold, wet and windy ; the mountain was a completely unknown quantity and prudence dictated a retreat.

For me also the time had come to return ; Richard stayed for a further two days and together David and he climbed the Pic du Ger. Then too Richard had to return, leaving David to complete the journey to the Mediterranean. For me the poor weather allayed only in part my regret at having to leave these friendly mountains, the complete traverse of which must constitute the finest journey in Europe.

