

FROM END TO END

BRIGID WILLISON

At the end of the 1959 summer holidays we decided that the following year we would spend every minute of our next long holiday abroad. The idea of walking from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean along the Pyrenean frontier appealed strongly and we decided to make that our main objective.

All through the winter we planned our route and made lists of equipment. We read Belloc's *The Pyrenees*, and Spender's *Through the High Pyrenees* until we knew parts by heart. We ordered all the French 1 : 50,000 maps showing the frontier. Finally we booked our tickets to Bayonne and arranged to return from Perpignan.

Once our maps arrived we were able to make a provisional programme. We realised that it would be very provisional as most of the maps, particularly those showing the Spanish side of the ridge, were very inferior to our own O.S. one-inch maps. In many cases the printing was so blurred that it was impossible to read all the names. As we were later to discover several maps were very inaccurate. However, despite the provisional nature of our programme, one aim stood out clearly—we were going to walk from coast to coast and that journey was to be through the Pyrenees. We planned to climb as many summits as possible and made out an ambitious list of fifteen peaks. We had to modify this part of the programme seriously, owing to the time factor.

After a good deal of discussion we made a list of kit and this we kept to rigidly. We took a Black's Good Companions tent, two plastic air-beds, Icelandic sleeping bags, a Gilwell canteen, mugs, cutlery and a small solid fuel cooker. Climbing equipment consisted of 150 feet of nylon three-quarter weight and two slings and karabiners. Personal kit was kept down to the minimum and we only took one change of clothing. Camera, maps, and compass completed our packs ; their average weight, including food, was 35 lb. each. We both decided to do the complete trip in klettersohles which we find the most comfortable form of mountain footwear.

The expedition started soon after 6 a.m. on July 26th when we arrived at Bayonne after a night on the train. We started walking and by mid-day we had our first glimpse of the Pyrenees. Three days later we attempted our first genuine mountain crossing over the Pic d'Escaliers and down into the Larrau valley. That crossing taught us a lot.

Firstly we learnt to regard the map with suspicion. Seemingly well-marked tracks turned out to be virtually non-existent. This was

particularly true of forest tracks, and on numerous occasions throughout the trip we became hopelessly lost in primeval forest.

Secondly we discovered just how difficult it was to go down into the right valley when surrounded by thick mist. We were somewhat dismayed to learn from a shepherd, who miraculously appeared just as we were preparing to spend an uncomfortable night in a sodden, mist-shrouded forest, that we were in the Alcaÿ valley and not the Larrau one as we thought. However, we had resolved never to go back unless absolutely essential—we simply altered our route. On that first crossing we experienced many aspects of Pyrenean weather including a rather frightening hailstorm.

The crossing took two days and eventually, soaked to the skin and very tired, we arrived in pitch darkness at the village of Lacarry-les-Bains. We found an inn built over a hot spring and here we stopped for the night. The hot spring provided us with our one and only hot bath and we were made extremely welcome ; the food was excellent and the bill ridiculously cheap.

After that, the mountain crossings grew steadily easier, mainly because we knew what to expect. We repacked our kit so that Graham carried the sleeping bags and spare clothing in his waterproofed sack and I had the cooking things and air-beds. The crossings were two to three day expeditions and we always carried three to four days' food supply so that we were prepared for emergencies. Bread, cheese, chocolate, soups and wine provided the main items of food in the mountains and we lived mainly on fruit when we were in the valleys.

Shepherds provided us with valuable information and we found the language difficulty to be much less than we had anticipated. However we did find that, whereas the shepherds knew their own valley well and could point out the port or crossing, they could give us little information regarding the other side as very few actually leave their own valley.

The first major peak on our provisional programme was the Pic d'Anie (8,800 feet) and we were told that it was a three-day crossing. On the first day we followed an excellent track up to a col where we met a shepherd who told us that we would not find water higher up. We were rather alarmed by the lack of connexion between our map and the country but we were reassured by the shepherd who told us how to reach the Pic d'Anie. Next morning we were up at 5.30 and off as soon as it was light ; we were lucky as it was cloudless and we were able to identify the peak easily. Reaching it was another problem as the country between us was deeply crevassed limestone and we had to make long detours. It was extremely hot and there was no water. We finally reached the summit by 3 p.m. and duly wrote

our names in the book that we found in a metal container. We could not find any other English names in it. The way down was unpleasant—a rotten gully followed by a huge scree slope. We continued down until we reached water and a camp site ; that night there was a spectacular thunderstorm and we felt extremely isolated.

We discovered fairly soon that the five and a half weeks at our disposal would not allow us to carry out the peak bagging aspect of our programme, and after the Pic d'Anie we concentrated on mountain crossings and on seeing the major peaks.

The crossing from Cauterets to Gavarnie passed through the Vignemale group, the highest in the French Pyrenees. The summit of the Petit Vignemale can be reached from the col by a fine ridge so we ascended it, making it our first 3,000 metre peak. The summit of the Vignemale is actually British since during the last century the British Count Russel leased the summit from the French government for one franc a year. The lease is not yet up. The same Count spent much of his time living on the summit in a series of caves or grottoes that he had built and we were very pleased to pass by three of these caves; however, we were not tempted to spend the night in them as they did not appear over comfortable !

Our first frontier crossing was by the well marked Port de Venesque and shortly after ten o'clock on August 17th we stood in a rocky gap, staring down into Spain. Painted on one side of the rock was the letter F and on the other the letter E. We had a marvellous view of the Maladetta range, the highest peaks of the Pyrenees. All day we walked through very wild country, seeing no one but a shepherd, and that night we camped beneath the Pic d'Aneto. Next day we made a somewhat perilous descent by the Col de Toro—aptly named as at the bottom we were confronted with a huge herd of cattle—and so down to our first Spanish village, Las Bordas. We spent the night in the village shop which was also the inn, where we were the first guests for some time, and we were treated excellently although the accommodation was rather primitive. Our supper was cooked over a wood fire in the back-yard.

Perhaps the best crossing was over the Port de Rat from France into Andorra. We camped some way above the French village of Marc which appeared to consist of one church and one house. A very early start was planned since we were beginning to find the mid-day heat of the eastern Pyrenees too intense for walking, and we left our camp site soon after 5 a.m. and raced the sun through impressive scenery up to the foot of the port. Here we found a shepherd's cabin and two frontier guards who spend their summer waiting for smugglers. They told us we would reach the top of the port in two hours. Although the track itself was inferior it was surprisingly well

caired. It was steep, but we were helped by a cool breeze which helped to make it most enjoyable. An indifferent track led us down into Andorra and we reached signs of habitation just before sunset.

At the end of the expedition we found we had a day in hand and we used it to climb the last major peak of the range, the Canigou. For the first time we spent two nights in the same place so we were able to leave our kit and climb the Canigou unhampered by packs. By this time we were both extremely fit which was just as well as it involved a twenty mile walk and over 8,000 feet of ascent. It provided a fitting end to our expedition.

The Pyrenees certainly has its tourist centres such as Cauterets and Bagnères-de-Luchon. We found Gavarnie particularly unpleasant : crowded by people and litter. Everyone rides up to the Cirque on mules, but in the mountains themselves we were on our own and we only met one party of climbers and two walkers. There is plenty of first-class climbing and walking but much of it is rather inaccessible, and camping is unavoidable since accommodation in the mountains is practically non-existent.

Altogether we walked or climbed through 450 miles of magnificent mountain scenery and much of our journey was across completely unspoilt country. Although it was reputed to have been the worst Pyrenean summer in living memory we only experienced three really wet days.

