

French Pyrenees

High Altitude Adventure

Article and Photos by Lisa K. Harris

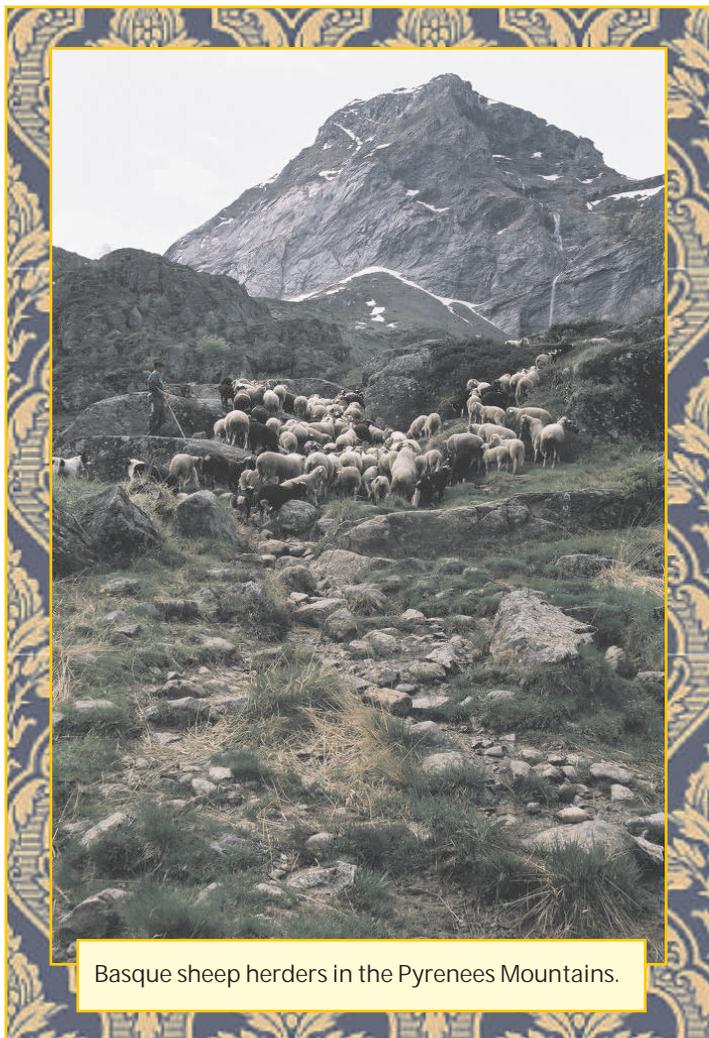
Cyclists whiz past, traveling faster than our car. Hell bent for leather they zip down the narrow Pyrenees road preparing for the high mountain stages of next month's Tour de France. We have passed through Lourdes, Argelès-Gazost, Luz St. Sauveur, names familiar to Tour enthusiasts, towns with centuries old cobblestone streets and stone buildings tucked into narrow valleys between snow-capped peaks.

The pavement is almost as colorful as the cyclists' jerseys, spray painted with race directions, ads, and team propaganda, a testament to the greatest cycling race on the planet. But the landscape offers more than reminders of Tour history, the Haute-Pyrenees district is home to the Basque culture and Pyrenees National Park, with hiking, parasailing, river rafting, and awesome precipitous cliffs at every turn.

steep cliffs. Fast flowing rivers and streams rush from glaciers and pour off mountains. The sound of running water is everywhere, intermingled with the tingling and bonging of bells hanging from sheep and cows grazing the hills.

My husband, David, and daughters, Lyda and Ava, and I are staying in a gîte, a French vacation home, in the hamlet of Ouzous, above Argelès-Gazost.

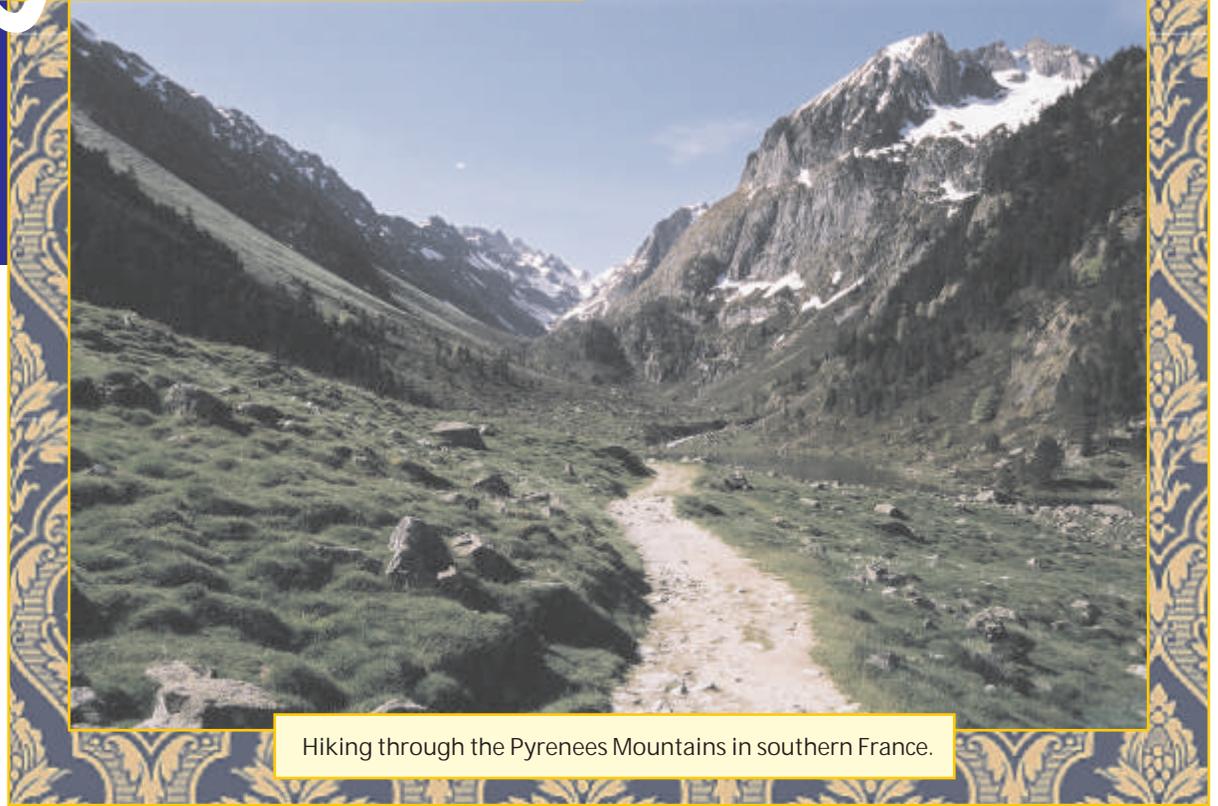
Our two bedroom-one bath apartment is a second story of a garage, and includes a large family room/kitchen with a fireplace. The owners, a family of four, live in the adjacent farmhouse. Ouzous is bucolic, bordering on too-quaint-to-be-believed, with ancient-looking stone buildings huddled along narrow one-lane roads. It is early June and gardens are awash with spring wildflowers. In the green-as-green-can get pastures sheep baa and cows moo. From our gîte's picture window, snowy cirques seem just an arm's-length away as do miles and miles of hiking trails.



Basque sheep herders in the Pyrenees Mountains.

There is nothing subtle about these mountains. They loom above the pilgrimage town of Lourdes, rising to more than ten thousand feet at Vignemale Summit. Finger-like green valleys dead-end at cirques, glacial bowls surrounded by semi-circles of

On market day, a Tuesday, the Argelès-Gazost's central square is packed with vendors selling fruit, vegetables, honey, bread, sausage, and cheese. After buying picnic supplies, we head south in our car along twisty roads through clouds of fog towards Lac des



Hiking through the Pyrenees Mountains in southern France.

Glorietties. Water weeps from craggy rocks and cascades into streams. Our progress is slowed by weather and then stopped altogether when sheep engulf us near the trail head parking lot.

Black and white dogs bark and snap at reluctant animals as the herd crosses the road and moves into the hills. The dogs circle, constantly on the move for both mavericks trotting in the opposite direction and individuals more interested in filling their stomachs than hoofing it to higher ground. Three Basque men, wearing black berets and carrying staffs, stand on rocks and oversee the flock's movement.

Once our path clears we stuff both two-year old Ava and our lunch into the toddler carrier and head off along a trail that hugs the turquoise blue lake. Above tree line, the trail weaves its way through grass, low junipers, and stone barns. White and purple orchids grow in bunches on the hillside. At the lake's far

end, the trail forks and the right-hand side follows a fast-moving stream flowing from Cirque de Estauble.

We head up toward the cirque, crisscrossing the icy stream until our stomachs tells us it is time to stop. Finding a grassy area, we arrange a picnic, avoiding dried cow-pies, although Ava thinks they are Frisbees and must be reminded not to touch them. We feast on local cheese and sausage with hunks of fresh bread spread with blueberry jam.

After refueling, Lyda and I scramble up the steep rocky hillside to investigate a waterfall. We move crab-like, with both hands on the upper slope because feet easily slip on loose rocks. Mid-size burrow holes are tucked under boulders and I spot several marmots sunning themselves near the falls, the crashing water covering our slip-slidy approach.

All this water has to go somewhere and after a few inquires in town we learn of nearby white-water recreational

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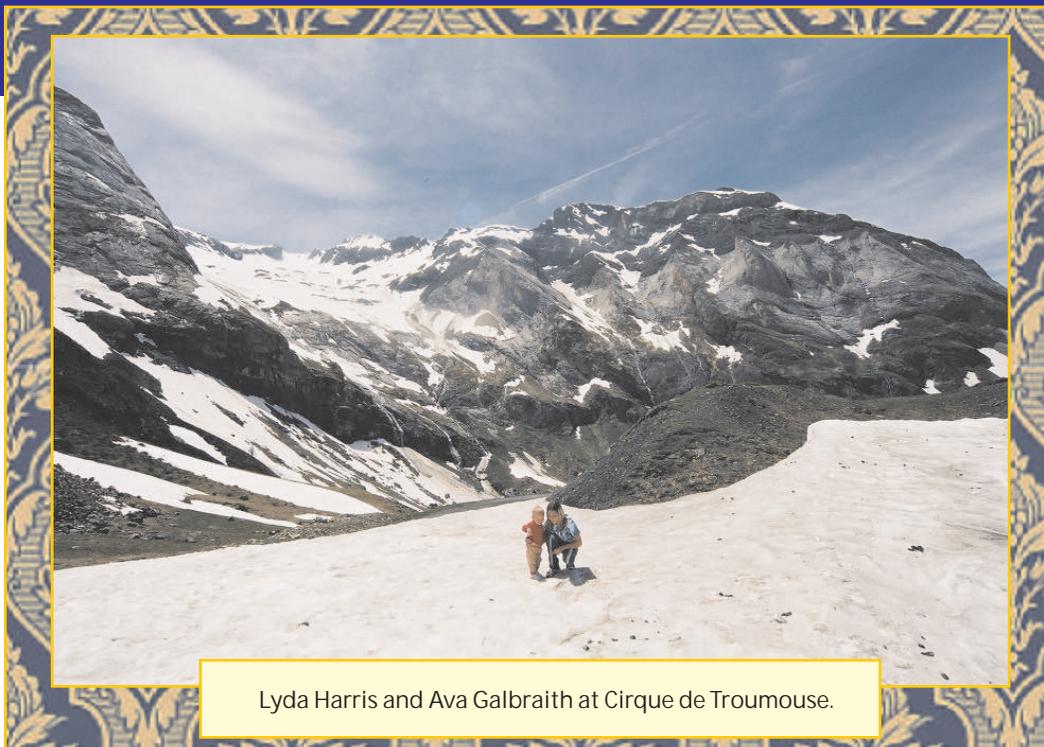
Hiking towards Cirque de Estauble in the Pyrenees Mountains.

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opportunities. Working through a local outfitter, David and Lyda put-in at the Argèles-Gazost bridge and run Gave de Gavarnie, a Class III river, spending the afternoon madly paddling on the calm stretches toward Lourdes. Although the current doesn't generate an adrenaline rush like rafting the Colorado, the scenery is spectacular, with lush trees, cliffs, and medieval-looking villages.

Lyda returns with soaking-wet shoes, and since we travel light, I loan her mine, which leaves only "good-shoes" for me to wear. Hiking in open-toed sandals with a wedge heel is not a wise choice, especially in rocky terrain. We keep the hiking to a minimum and investigate Ouzous's cultural trail, a stroll through three villages which points out vestiges from life a hundred years ago. With the aid of a brochure and interpretive trail signage, we find wind mills, saw mills, churches, vineyards, and charcoal-making pits. The most interesting are pigeon houses, outbuildings on stilts (to protect birds from foxes), some as large as walk-in sheds. One had been built to replicate the manor house, complete with the same number of chimneys and windows.

History did not interest the younger family members, and once Lyda's shoes dry, she pushes us out of the sleepy village to seek adventure elsewhere. On the mountain side above Arrens-Marsous, a half-hour's drive south of Argèles-Gazost, she takes to the sky in a tandem parasail. Harnessed to an



Lyda Harris and Ava Galbraith at Cirque de Troumouse.

instructor, she walks down the steep grassy slope until the wind fills the sail and she soars over the valley, finally landing in a mowed field.

Cirque de Gavarnie, on the French-Spanish border, is the most famous of the rocky formations and is accessible by car. Postcards show an almost perfect cliff semi-circle with a thin cascade plummeting from its peak — a must-see. We arrive in the morning and find a "tourist" trap, a crowded parking lot filled with buses from Lourdes, souvenir stores selling spoons, postcards, key-chains, and food vendors hawking weird looking hot dogs made from local sausage. If that

wasn't bad enough, the cirque is completely fogged in, its photogenic waterfall, rocks, and grassy basin lost behind a white veil. It takes me five seconds to realize I wouldn't have enjoyed the experience anyway, not with all the people.

Cirque de Troumouse lacks the geologic symmetry as well as Gavarnie's amenities, but appeals to me more because it is off the bus tours' agenda. Cyclists think so too, as we pass many peddling along the switch-back road to its base as part of their training. We wind our way up the mountain until we are stopped by an avalanche of snow. On foot, we follow the snow-plow's path through hardened white stuff which towers over us. After a wicked snowball fight, with Lyda tucking a frosty wet one down my pants, we retreat to the restaurant at the cirque's bottom.

Sitting in the sun with a blue sky and the cirque's rim as back drop, we enjoy a bowl of ice cream, mug of hot chocolate, and a plate of fresh crepes with lemon. The cyclists pull up next to us, throw off their helmets, and with an ease I think impossible after what for me would have been an arduous collapse-on-the-ground ride, do the same. I am envious of their abilities, but then I've never dreamed of racing in the Tour de France. *W*

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.



If You Go:

- Pyrenees National Park: parc-pyrenees.com/index_english.htm
- Gites for rent: gites-de-france.com
- Hiking: pyrenees-pireneos.org
- Rafting and parasailing: pyreanean-activities.com

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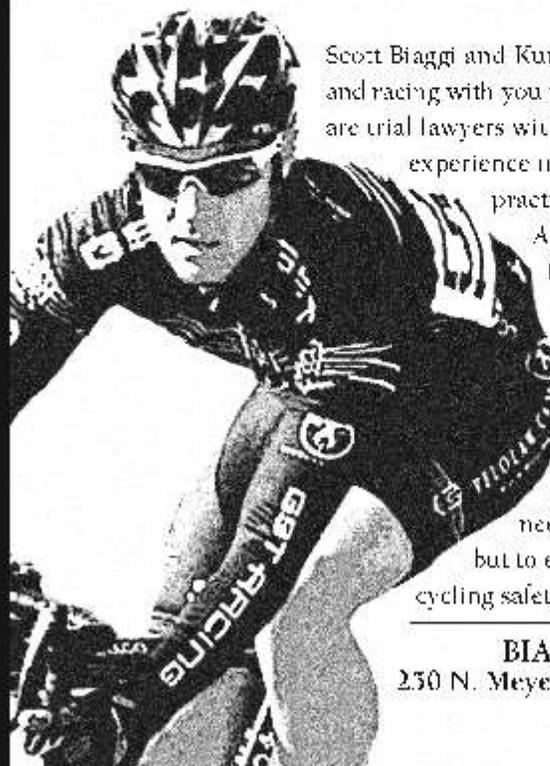


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