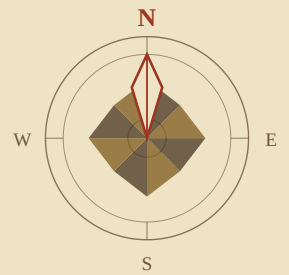
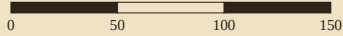


LEGEND

- the driving route
- stage stop
- △ summit above 1,500 m

SCALE — KILOMETRES



MADE TO EXPLORE

THE BORDER ROAD

Nine stops from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, on the border that was never a line

9 stops · 1,100 km · by campervan

1

SAN SEBASTIÁN

Donostia — the Basque on the Atlantic side

THE BORDER An almost closed bay in the shape of a shell, with the town all round it and two hills guarding either end. La Concha is reckoned among the finest urban beaches in Europe. The town also has one of the highest densities of Michelin stars in the world, but what matters for this route is something else: the language spoken here is the same as at Saint-Jean, across the border, an hour away. The Basques were here before Latin, and the border of 1659 cut them in two without changing them.

THE CAMPER The town is hard work in a camper: a low-emission zone in the centre, narrow streets, height barriers in the underground car parks. There are camper places at the edge of town, towards Igueldo and in the Gros district; the centre is reached by bus or on foot, twenty minutes.

FREE The beach, the promenade and the Parte Vieja are open. Pintxos are paid for one by one, and a lunch across three bars costs about the same as a pizza. Monte Urgull is climbed on foot and gives the view over the bay, free; the funicular to Igueldo costs.

San Sebastián → Irún → Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, 100 km · ~2 h by camper. You cross the border on a valley road, with nobody stopping you.

2

SAINT-JEAN

Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port — the pilgrims' gate

THE BORDER A fortified Basque town at the foot of the Roncevaux pass, which for a thousand years has been the last stop before the mountains for pilgrims to Santiago. Tens of thousands still pass through its gate each year. Here the border does not separate: the Basques on both slopes speak the same language, which resembles no other in Europe and was spoken here before Latin arrived.

THE CAMPER Campsite and camper place in the town and at Saint-Jean-le-Vieux. The streets inside the citadel are narrow; leave the camper in the car park below.

FREE The citadel, the walls and the pilgrims' street are open. The pilgrims' office stamps anyone who walks in. And the Roncevaux pass, 25 km away, is free and is where Roland died in the song that invented French literature.

WHERE TO SLEEP Camper area · Aire de camping-car du Fronton, Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port · GPS 43.15962, -1.23626

Saint-Jean → the Roncevaux pass → the Roncal valley, 90 km · ~1½ h by camper. You cross into Spain with nobody stopping you.

3

RONCAL

The valley where thirty heifers are paid

THE BORDER Every 13 July, the mayors of three French villages in the Barétous valley climb to the boundary stone at Ernaz and hand thirty heifers to the mayors of the Roncal valley. It is compensation for a fight over pasture in 1375, settled by treaty and paid without interruption ever since — the oldest treaty in Europe still in force. The border between states has moved more than once; the agreement between the villages, never.

THE CAMPER Camper places at Isaba and Roncal, down the valley. The Esca valley road is narrow and fine, with stone villages. From Roncal you climb to Ernaz on a forest track — not in a camper.

FREE The valley, the villages and the boundary stone are open. The ceremony on 13 July is public and lasts an hour. Roncal cheese, the first in Spain to be given protected status, is bought at the farm.

WHERE TO SLEEP Campsite · Camping Asolaze, Isaba · GPS 42.90084, -0.88227

Roncal → Jaca → Ordesa, 140 km up the Aragón valley, beneath the highest Pyrenees · ~2½ h by camper.

4

ORDESA

The canyon with red walls

THE BORDER	Ordesa y Monte Perdido is Spain's oldest national park, from 1918, and it is a glacial valley with vertical walls a thousand metres high, in reddish limestone, beneath Monte Perdido — the third summit of the Pyrenees, 3,355 m. It is the Spanish side of the same massif that, on the French side, gives the cirque at Gavarnie. The same rock, two countries, two names.
THE CAMPER	In summer the road to the Pradera de Ordesa is closed to traffic and a bus runs from Torla. Campsites at Torla and down the valley. The camper stays below; the car park above is small and controlled.
FREE	The park is free; only the summer bus costs. The path to the Cola de Caballo, the waterfall at the head of the valley, is easy and flat and takes four hours there and back, along the canyon floor.
WHERE TO SLEEP	Campsite · Camping Río Ara, Torla-Ordesa · GPS 42.63244, -0.10658

Ordesa → Bielsa → the tunnel → Gavarnie, 200 km · ~4 h by camper. You cross the mountain underneath it, through the tunnel of 1976.

5

GAVARNIE

The cirque — the colosseum of nature

THE BORDER	A glacial amphitheatre four kilometres wide and fifteen hundred metres high, with steps of limestone and a waterfall of 422 metres, the tallest in France. Victor Hugo called it the colosseum of nature. In the wall, at 2,700 metres, is the Brèche de Roland — a gap forty metres wide which legend says was cut by Roland's sword. It is the border: on the other side is Spain.
THE CAMPER	Campsite and camper place at Gavarnie and Gèdre. The village is at the end of the road; beyond it you go on foot or by donkey, two hours to the foot of the waterfall.
FREE	The cirque, the path and the waterfall are open. The view from the village entrance is already the classic one. Donkeys and horses cost; walking does not.
WHERE TO SLEEP	Camper area · Aire pour camping-cars, Route des Espézières, Gavarnie · GPS 42.73813, -0.01919

Gavarnie → Luz-Saint-Sauveur → Tourmalet, 40 km of continuous climb · ~1 h by camper.

6

TOURMALET

2,115 m — the pass from the Tour de France

THE BORDER	The most frequently climbed pass in the history of the Tour de France, crossed more than eighty times since 1910, when the first rider to reach the top shouted at the organiser that they were murderers. At the summit stands the statue of Octave Lapize, that rider, put up every summer and taken down in autumn before the snow. In winter it is closed; in summer it is full of cyclists.
THE CAMPER	Good wide road with a steady gradient of 7-8%. The camper climbs it without trouble, but in summer it takes patience with the cyclists. Parking at the summit. Usually open from June to October.
FREE	The pass, the statue and the view are free. And from the top the cable car leaves for the Pic du Midi — the one thing on this route worth a full ticket.

Tourmalet → Pic du Midi, by cable car from La Mongie, fifteen minutes.

7

PIC DU MIDI

2,877 m — the observatory on the summit

THE BORDER	An astronomical observatory built on the summit in 1878, for which the materials were carried up on men's backs over twenty years. NASA photographed the Moon from here for the Apollo missions. Today it has a terrace suspended over the drop, a museum and the best sky in France — the area is an international dark-sky reserve. You can sleep up there, in the astronomers' old cells.
THE CAMPER	Reached only by cable car from La Mongie; the camper stays in the car park below, where you may spend the night. Up top it is below zero even in summer.
FREE	Nothing — it is the one stop where everything costs. But the view from 2,877 metres, with the whole chain from Atlantic to Mediterranean in a single turn, is the argument.

La Mongie → Bagnères → Saint-Girons → Andorra, 270 km on valley roads · ~5½ h by camper. The longest stage.

8

ANDORRA

The state that exists because nobody gave way

THE BORDER	In 1278 the bishop of Urgell and the count of Foix failed to agree who ruled these valleys and signed an act by which they ruled them jointly. The act has never been annulled. Today Andorra has two heads of state: the bishop of Urgell and the president of France. It is the last working remnant of the medieval system of unclear borders — a state that exists because the border was never drawn.
THE CAMPER	Campsites at Canillo and La Massana. Andorra is outside the EU for tax, so it is duty-free: diesel, alcohol and tobacco are far cheaper. Fill up here. The customs check on the way out is real and does look.
FREE	The Romanesque churches in the valleys — Santa Coloma, Sant Joan de Caselles — are open and are the oldest thing in the country. The Madriu valley, a UNESCO site, is a valley without a road, entered on foot.
WHERE TO SLEEP	Campsite · Càmping Casal, Canillo · GPS 42.56840, 1.60423

| Andorra → Puigcerdà → Figueres → Cadaqués, 250 km · ~5 h by camper. You drop towards the Mediterranean.

9

CADAQUÉS

Cap de Creus — where the chain ends

THE BORDER	Here the Pyrenees run into the sea and stop: Cap de Creus is the easternmost point of mainland Spain, with rock twisted by the tramontana which Dalí painted all his life — his house is at Portlligat, two kilometres away. It is the end of the chain and the end of the border. From the Atlantic to here, the border has crossed four hundred kilometres of mountain without ever truly separating the people on its two slopes.
THE CAMPER	Campsites at Cadaqués and Port de la Selva. The road to Cadaqués is narrow and winding — it is the only way in and it is taken slowly. In the village the camper is left at the car park by the entrance.
FREE	The nature park, the lighthouse and the paths to the coves are open. Dalí's house has a ticket and compulsory booking. Cadaqués, the white town, is walked on foot.
WHERE TO SLEEP	Campsite · Càmping Cadaqués, Avinguda de Salvador Dalí · GPS 42.29262, 3.28273

| End of the route. Girona is 70 km away, Barcelona 170, and the French border 40.

THE ROUTE IN BRIEF

Distance	~1,100 km
Driving time	~21 h in all, without stops
Recommended time	13–17 days
Stage stops	9
Countries	FR · ES · AD
Highest point	Pic du Midi, 2,877 m
Direction	west → east
Best months	Jun · Sep

GOOD TO KNOW BEFORE YOU LEAVE

San Sebastián is hard with a camper: a low-emission zone in the centre, narrow streets and underground car parks with height barriers.

In summer the road to the Pradera de Ordesa is closed to traffic; a bus runs from Torla.

The Col du Tourmalet is closed in winter; in summer it is full of cyclists.

WHEN TO GO

Ideal: June and September. The passes are open, the green is complete, and there is neither the August heat nor the crowd.

Workable: July–August, but Gavarnie and Ordesa queue, and the Tourmalet is full of cyclists. An early start solves both.

Avoid: November–May for the whole route. The Tourmalet closes with snow, the valley roads are cold and wet, and Ordesa has limited access.

The tramontana: the north wind on the Catalan side can blow for three days and reach a hundred kilometres an hour. Park the camper nose into the wind.

THE PASSES, ONE BY ONE

Tourmalet, 2,115 m: good wide road, 7–8% gradient, usually open June–October. No charge.

The Roncevaux pass, 1,057 m: open all year, an easy road. It is the historic crossing between France and Spain.

The Bielsa–Aragnouet tunnel, under Monte Perdido: open all year, with a small charge, and it saves a detour of two hundred kilometres.

Port d'Envalira, 2,408 m, in Andorra: the highest surfaced pass in the Pyrenees, open all year, with a tolled tunnel as the bad-weather alternative.

No pass on this route has a width limit for campers. There is no vignette in France, Spain or Andorra — motorways are paid at the barrier.

WHERE YOU SLEEP

France has service areas in almost every mountain village, and Spain has municipal areas in Aragón and Catalonia. Both are cheap and rarely full outside August.

Overnighting is tolerated on the French side in car parks outside villages, where it is not expressly banned. In the national parks — Ordesa, the French Pyrenees — it is banned and enforced.

Andorra has good cheap campsites, and diesel is well below the French and Spanish price. Fill up before you leave.

Nights above 1,500 metres are cold even in August. At the Pic du Midi, in the car park below, it drops under zero.

THE BORDER THAT WAS NEVER A LINE

What was drawn The Treaty of the Pyrenees, 1659, set the border on the crest and it is one of the oldest stable borders in Europe. On the map it is a line almost unchanged for three hundred and fifty years.

What remained The people on both sides were the same: Basques to the west, Aragonese in the middle, Catalans to the east. The language, the cheese and the pastures did not stop at the crest, because there was no reason for them to.

How they agreed By treaties between villages, not between states. The oldest still in force is the Treaty of the Cows, from 1375: thirty heifers paid every 13 July, from the French Barétous valley to the Spanish Roncal valley. It has been paid under kings, under republics and under dictatorship.

What crossed here Pilgrims to Santiago for a thousand years. Smugglers with tobacco and cattle, permanently. Spanish republicans fleeing in 1939. Jews and Allied airmen going the other way between 1940 and 1944, on the paths now called the Chemins de la Liberté.

What you see today Numbered boundary stones, from 1 to 602, set between 1858 and 1868. Many stand on the crest paths and can be touched. They are the only physical form the border takes.

Why does Andorra have two heads of state?

Because in 1278 the bishop of Urgell and the count of Foix failed to agree who ruled the valleys and signed an act by which they ruled them jointly. The act was never annulled, and today the two co-princes are the bishop of Urgell and the president of France.

What is the Treaty of the Cows in the Pyrenees?

An agreement from 1375 by which the French villages of the Barétous valley pay thirty heifers a year to the Spanish villages of the Roncal valley, as compensation for a fight over pasture. It is paid every 13 July and is the oldest treaty in Europe still in force.

What charges are there in the Pyrenees with a camper?

No vignette — not in France, not in Spain, not in Andorra. Motorways are paid at the barrier, the Bielsa–Aragnouet tunnel has a small charge, and the Tourmalet is free. No pass on the route has a width limit for campers.

When is the best time for the route?

June and September. The passes are open, the green is complete, and there is neither the August heat nor the crowd. From November to May the Tourmalet closes with snow and the route cannot be driven whole.

THE RULE OF THE ROAD

*“The border was drawn on the map in 1659 and was never a line on the ground.
The villages came to terms three hundred years before the states did,
and that agreement is still paid, in heifers, every July.”*

Documentary check: September 2026. Places, hours and conditions change — check them before you leave.