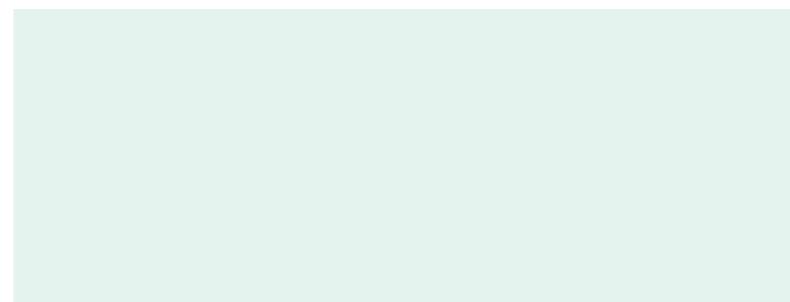




Parc National



Walking is easy and accessible to everyone. The pleasure of hiking comes from the sense of freedom and independance that it gives you...

Conduct in the mountains

The mountains we hike through can be private or communal property. They are usually a farmer's place of work: keep out of cultivated fields and hay meadows, or use paths to cross them. Close the gates after you to prevent animals from wandering away. Dogs are forbidden even on a lead within the Pyrenees national Park, and must be kept on a lead in grazing areas (local by-laws).

Don't hesitate to talk to local people you meet, shepherds, refuge wardens, climbers. Respect the people and their work, and also the environment. Observe plants and wild flowers but don't pick any of them. Respect the peace and quiet of these places. Don't disturb the wildlife. Keep to the paths without taking short-cuts. Take all rubbish home with you.

Risks in the moutains

Hiking in the mountains means walking in a relatively wild area which differs greatly from our daily environment. Because of the high altitude, the environment here places restrictions upon us not encountered elsewhere. Mountains will always retain a certain unpredictability and mystery, even for those with experience....

The risks are real, and are due to the fragility of human beings in an environment which can quickly become very hostile, and feeling isolated, being careless or over-confident can worsen many delicate situations.

In the mountains, freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility. There is always a certain level of risk and the hiker has to rely on his or her own resources, and must therefore be well prepared, and the hike carefully planned.

Planning a hike

Mountain hiking is not a competitive sport based on performance, but rather an opportunity to walk in a natural environment and to discover its richness and diversity.

Effort and altitude considerably increase the pulse rate. It is therefore advisable to acclimatize oneself gradually to altitude in order to allow the body to adapt. The best way to train for hiking is to walk or cycle regularly.

It is best to choose your route from recognized paths marked on the 1/25 000 or 1/50 000 maps. It is the height climbed more than the distance travelled that must be taken into account: an average hiker can climb 300 m and descend 500 m in an hour. A ten minute rest every hour is always welcome and gives you a chance to eat something and have a drink.

Always check that the refuges you plan to stay in are open and book your bed and your meal (see the "Refuges" leaflet). The refuge warden can give you valuable information about the state of your route and its waymarking, the presence of snow patches and things to see in the sector. All refuges provide blankets.

Finally, professionals such as the "Accompagnateurs en Montagne" (mountain leaders) are there to guide you and give you advice, you will find their details in the tourist offices.

Equipment

It is indispensable to be wearing good footwear. Strong boots with a good tread must support your feet so as to protect your ankles from sprains and hold your heels in place. They must also be waterproof.

As for socks, the cotton/synthetic kinds are perfectly suitable. A spare pair should be taken, as well as a pair of gaiters.

Three layers of clothing are recommended: - synthetic fibre underwear designed to draw humidity away from the body, -a fleece layer, both damp-proof and warm, and a waterproof / windproof layer which should be light enough as it will often remain in your rucksack.

Always take some warm clothes, for even in the summer, it can freeze and snow in the mountains.

Solar radiation is twice as intense at 1 800 m as it is at sea level, and it often causes serious sunburn. Suncream is indispensable.

Do not forget your sunglasses, a hat and gloves. A water bottle, a torch (the "headtorch" type allows you to keep your hands free) and a knife are also indispensable, and a whistle will prove very useful if you need to call for help.

Good high-energy food such as cereal bars, chocolate, dried fruit and fruit bars are useful day rations and easy to carry. Don't forget to take a plastic bag to carry your rubbish home with you, and some string.

All this has to fit in a rucksack (30-40 litre capacity for a day hike) together with an altimeter, a compass and of course a detailed map of the area, preferably on a 1/25 000 scale.

Finally, if you intend to observe the wildlife, a pair of binoculars is indispensable.

The weather

It is imperative to check a look at the weather forecast before leaving. Weather reports are displayed at the tourist office and can also be consulted by telephone.

The main problem when it starts raining is that the ground becomes very slippery, you will therefore need to be twice as careful. Torrential rain can also lead to a rise in the level of mountain streams which can make their crossing very difficult. Remember too that water levels are higher towards the end of the day because of melting snow or glaciers.

Storms are the most impressive and sudden danger. In case of storms keep away from any metallic and pointed object, isolate yourself from the ground by sitting on your rucksack and keep a 2 to 3 meter distance between each person. Above all never shelter under a tree, an isolated boulder, a tent or an umbrella.

The main danger when caught out in the mist is getting lost: your compass, altimeter and map are therefore of the utmost importance. But the most important thing is never to leave the path.

Advice on walking

To conserve energy for the duration of the hike, don't set off too fast. Try to reach your normal rhythm and keep to it, avoiding irregular stops. This is the best way to keep your breath and last until the end of the hike.

It is essential to drink before you are thirsty, taking little sips. Your water should not be too cold. Avoid filling your bottle from a stream ; the water, even though crystal clear may have been polluted by animal excrement upstream. Use purifying tablets if you need to drink stream water.