



A 'WOW' AROUND EVERY CORNER

**JOHN PEARSON JOINS A THRILLING
ONELIFE ADVENTURE ALONG THE
LENGTH OF THE PYRENEES MOUNTAIN
RANGE, DRIVING WEST TO EAST**

WHO: John Pearson,
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WHERE: Pyrenees, west to east
VEHICLE: ex-G4 Defender 110





Driving the length of the Pyrenees has been on my list of must-do adventures for many years. On occasions I've ventured onto tracks across this 250-mile range of mountains, which form a giant limestone barrier between France and Spain, and vowed that I would return for the full trip.

So this August I tagged onto one of the Pyrenees Explorer expeditions run by Paul Blackburn's OneLife Adventure company. I've known Paul for a number of years and I'm impressed by his very professional attitude and thoroughness. He does drive a Toyota instead of a Land Rover, but he assures me he's seen the light and will be buying a Defender 110.

The adventure starts from the Ariztigan campsite near Sunbilla, just a few miles into Spain, in the Basque region at the western end of the Pyrenees. My partner Pat and I took a fairly leisurely drive down there from Calais in our ex-G4 Challenge Defender 110, stopping over at a couple of cheap but decent municipal French campsites en route.

We met with our fellow travellers over dinner at the campsite's restaurant, with everyone looking forward to the trip.



There were four 110s in the party, one 90, a Disco 1 and Paul's Toyota. Three of us had roof tents, the rest ground tents, with Oztents the most popular.

DAY ONE, SUNBILLA TO OCHAGAVIA

The next day after a comprehensive briefing the convoy sets off, trundling through a number of picturesque villages, with many houses having window boxes full of vibrant red geraniums.

Then we pick up the first loose surface track and start climbing through forests then open grassland. There has been



heavy overnight rain and some of the tracks are fairly slippery, requiring low range and difflock. Low cloud is engulfing the area, so we can't see any of the views that must be out there. We stop for lunch on a ridge at 1430metres (4691ft), 90metres (300ft) higher than Ben Nevis, Britain's tallest mountain.

We drive a number of tracks, some



This pic and far right: We climbed to 7380ft and saw some breathtaking views

We encountered most types of terrain, including stream crossings



Lovely wild camping location near Laspaules. En-suite toilets available with every plot



Olly Ramshore celebrates lighting the wild camp fire

with steep drops to the side, but the mist persists. Occasionally walkers emerge from the gloom; they're pilgrims making their slightly soggy way along El Camino de Santiago, or St James' Way, to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, northwest Spain.

As we drop down through the Sierra de Abodi mountains to the campsite at Ochagavia the mist clears, the sky is blue and it will stay that way for the rest of the adventure.

DAY TWO, OCHAGAVIA TO ANSO

After overnighing at the crowded but friendly campsite, cooking our food on communal barbies, we set off the next

day, climbing quickly into the mountains. Up through dense pine forests on dry gravel tracks, with the convoy spreading out to avoid the dust billowing from behind each Land Rover. We stop for lunch in a large clearing, with splendid views of the mountains all around.

We drive on through the Roncal valley, an area famous for its rich flavoured cheese make from sheep milk. Traditionally the locals took their cheeses to market down the river on rafts.

Before arriving at the campsite we stop for the braver members of our party to take a 'refreshing' swim in the extremely blue coloured and icy cold river.

We're stopping two nights at the site, just outside the historic, very picturesque town of Anso. The 17th century church, with its abundant use of gold leaf on the internal decor, is worth a visit.

Tomorrow is a rest day, so after a meal

at a lovely restaurant in the town with Phil, Vicky and Olly Ramshore, we all sit out and chat into the early hours. The sky is clear and the stars are very bright – with the occasional satellite and shooting star cutting across.

DAY FOUR, ANSO TO HECHO

We're looping around the Anso valley before crossing over into the neighbouring Hecho valley. It's an exciting drive up tracks hugging the side of the mountains, with sheer drops to the side. There are more big views, with the Aragon river running through a large valley. The aroma of wild thyme pervades the air as we continue, the track getting significantly rougher. There are some deep washouts, and sections of sharp rocks demand careful driving to avoid tyre damage. It's a good, testing section for drivers, tyres and suspension systems.

PYRENEES NEED TO KNOW

- Language: You will encounter various Basque dialects to the west, then Catalan, but some French and Castilian Spanish (or phrasebooks) should get you by
- Visa: Not needed for EU passport holders
- Currency: Euro
- Jabs: Make sure your Tetanus is up to date
- Approx cost of fuel: Varies from €0.95 (Andorra) to €1.25 (French autoroute services)
- One thing you really should buy: Fill your tank and jerry cans with cheap diesel in Andorra
- Time difference (compared to GMT): +1hr
- Recommended reading: The Rough Guide to the Pyrenees (roughguides.com, amazon.com).
- Maps: detailed mapping isn't needed if you go on a guided adventure like this. Paul Blackburn hasn't found any detailed e-mapping. The Rando Editions Pyrenees 1:50.000 paper maps, sheets 20-25 cover most of the Pyrenees: available from Spanish map shops or on-line from: themapshop.co.uk/europe/Spain/spain.htm
- Drive on the left or right? Right
- Ferries: We travelled by P&O, Dover to Calais (poferries.com), which is included in the adventure price, see OneLife Adventure below. Alternatives are Portsmouth – Le Havre (ldlines.co.uk) or Portsmouth to Bilbao (brittany-ferries.co.uk)
- Fancy trying it? Contact OneLife Adventure (onlifeadventure.co.uk).



PYRENEES WEST TO EAST

Trips like this are great for families, and you meet some really lovely people



The Borda Bisaltico campsite at Hecho is very picturesque, nestling in a valley with mountain views every way you look. It's also very windy, but we manage to snuggle into a corner behind some pine trees, which offer some respite.

As with most adventures I've made with groups, the people on this one are lovely. We create a communal pasta dish before retiring to the Maggiolina roof tent, which is proving cosy. Although it's August, the campsites are at high altitude and night temperatures are low.

DAY FIVE, HECHO TO BOLTANA

After a long road drive we pick up a gravel track to the east of Sabinanigo that climbs relentlessly up to the Santa Orosia church at 1920 metres (6300ft). Hairpin follows hairpin after hairpin. Eleven year old Brant Parker is travelling in our spare back seat for several days, and he lets out the occasional 'oh my word!' at some of the steep drops that

pass alongside his window.

We see some former hermits' caves in the rock faces, which must have been bleak places during the winter months.

After lunch at the top we drive down through wooded areas, with snow-capped mountains looming to the north. These tracks are rougher than the climb, with more washouts, a stream crossing and some rock crawls to contend with.

The Pena Montanesa campsite near Boltana is bigger than most we've stopped at, but all the facilities are good.

DAY SIX, BOLTANA TO WILD CAMP

Tonight we'll be wild camping in the mountains near Abella and there's an air of excitement, especially among the first-timers.

But first there's another day of wending our way through fantastic scenery. After a spell of road driving we climb gravel tracks, passing the village of Sin, which has to be a great address to have.



Our route goes around the edge of a vast valley, then up through dense pine forests on incredibly dusty tracks.

We climb a rocky and occasionally muddy track through woodland, with mud adding to the dust covering our travel stained vehicles.

Our camp for the night is a grassy clearing in a pine forest. Some of the group have brought portable toilets, but for most of us visiting our 'en-suite' means heading into the trees with a shovel.

Paul Blackburn digs a fire pit and 10



Pyrenean tracks hug the mountainsides, taking us through amazing scenery



Top: OnLife's Paul Blackburn finds a monster mushroom. Above: lots of wildlife in the Pyrenees, and some not so wild

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year-old Olly Ramshore gets the fire going with a Ray Mears-style fire stick. It's quickly blazing away and soon we'll be cooking our evening meals over it.

I love the atmosphere at wild camps; sitting around the fire, chatting, singing songs and telling jokes. Then we turn in for a peaceful night's sleep.

DAY SEVEN, ABELLA TO LLAVORSI

This is the best single day's driving I've ever done in terms of wows per mile. It's also one of the longest because I keep stopping for photos at stunning locations and then finding an even more amazing view around the next hairpin turn.

We drop down from the campsite and take in some road mileage, including the 5235metre tunnel near the ski resort of Viehla. Then we drive the amazing scenic tracks through the Vall d'Aran, the only Spanish part of the Pyrenees that's on the north of the range. Many of the tracks here were used during WW2 to smuggle shot down British aircrews into neutral Spain and back to the UK.

We take in the 14.2mile series of hairpin bends that climb upwards nearly

3/4mile to the Puerto de la Bonaigua, a favourite with cyclists. The drop down is equally thrilling.

And it gets even better; we're heading towards the highest point of our trip – 2250metres (7381ft). We climb some very narrow tracks, with scary sheer drops to one side or the other; you think you've reached the end of the earth as you round acute hairpin bends and can see only daylight out in front.

There are immense views up here, with the high peaks of the Pyrenees stretching out majestically ahead of us, highlighted in the late afternoon sunshine. Absolutely thrilling. Even the track down is challenging in parts, with a few interesting off-cambers.

DAY EIGHT, LLAVORSI TO LLES DE CERDANYA

Nothing could top yesterday's spectacular drive, especially as we're dipping into Andorra – a place not renowned for its beauty. But the zig-zag climb upwards is testing, and there are plenty of big views. Andorra's big attraction for visitors is its duty-free status, and diesel sells

for around 84p a litre... and our tanks are conveniently low.

Up and over the other side we join a track that Pat and I drove a couple of years ago in the Defender. Then there was lots of snow around, but now it's clear. We continue on wide tracks that are driven by road cars, due to the area being popular for cross-country skiing and other winter sports, then head for our campsite, the superb El Cortal del Gral near Lles de Cerdanya. With great views over the Sierra Cadi mountain range and five-star toilets and showers this is the best of the trip.

It's also sadly our last. I have to get back to LROHQ to pass the magazine for press, and have to leave the group to head for the Med while Pat and I drive north back up to Calais. So we haven't quite completed the west-to-east adventure, but we have experienced the best parts.

It's been a superb expedition. We've travelled with a lovely group of people, driven some of the best mountain tracks and trails I've ever experienced and seen some breathtaking scenery. It doesn't get much better than that.



Top: Brant Parker travelled with us most days. Above: interesting wildlife



'YOU THINK YOU'VE REACHED THE END OF THE EARTH AS YOU ROUND ACUTE HAIRPIN BENDS AND CAN SEE ONLY DAYLIGHT OUT IN FRONT'