

THE PYRENEES AND BASQUE COUNTRY

PERPIGNAN TO BIARRITZ

The high and foreboding, underrated and inspiring granite Pyrenees mountain range, stretching in a straight line across the neck of the Iberian Peninsula and dividing France and Spain, is Western Europe's last great wilderness.

The Pyrenees are incomparable; much older than the European Alps, they are the result of the Iberian Peninsula pushing hard into France for the past 150 million years. From the Bay of Biscay in the west, 500 km (300 mi) east to Perpignan and the Mediterranean Sea, and along its ridges and passes, are proud and ancient traditional cultures that have remained consistent over thousands of years of human habitation, from a time before borders. The Basques have populated the western part of this mountainous coastal zone for perhaps 5,000 years, and the Basque Country is still divided between the

French and Spanish, with these and many other mountain cultures merging along this border. This geological history means that, riding-wise, the mountains smile on the Spanish. The ruptured earth ensures the French Pyrenees plunge off to the north in steep and inhospitable cliffs, like a tablecloth that bunches as it's pushed in one direction, and so the foothills have all formed along the softer border of the Spanish Pyrenees, where they taper south into the communes of Catalonia, Aragon, Navarre, and Gipuzkoa. Here, there are countless small communities in the valleys and hillsides, and vast amounts of exciting riding to be done. The Spanish >

