

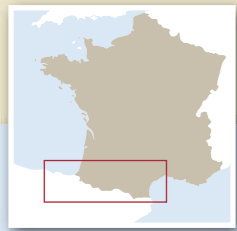
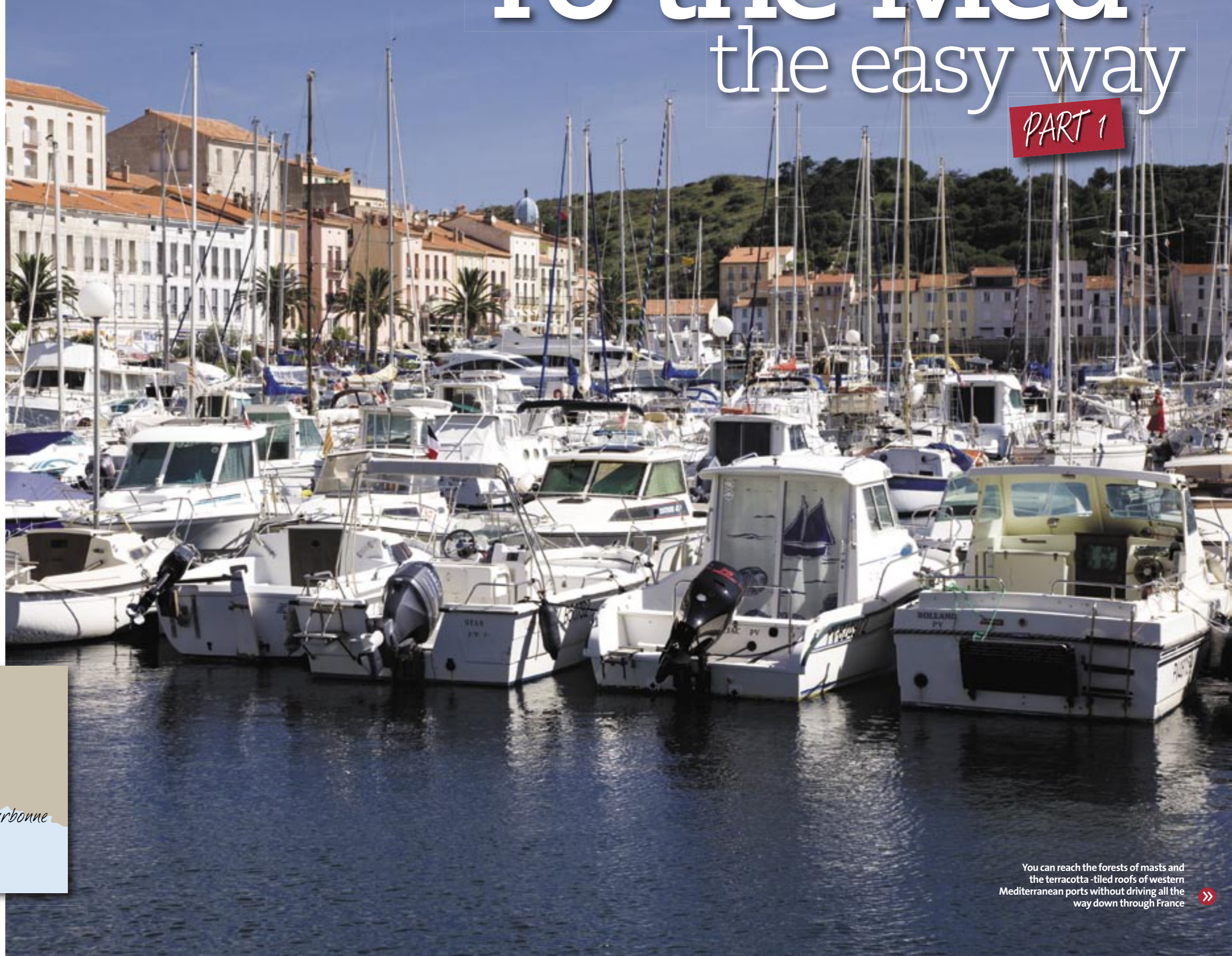


We discover an easy journey to the Mediterranean which takes you on a cruise then pops you out on a motorway network that will take you all the way to the sun

WORDS Val Chapman PHOTOGRAPHY John Chapman

# To the Med the easy way

PART 1



You can reach the forests of masts and the terracotta-tiled roofs of western Mediterranean ports without driving all the way down through France >>

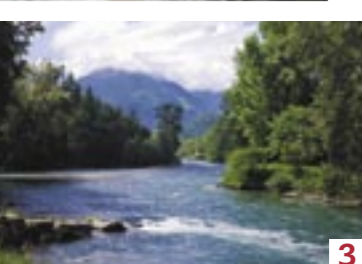




1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10

1 Our on-test Bailey on the flat lands before we start to cross the Pyrénées 2 Pounding white water in the village of Barèges en route to the Col de Tourmalet 3 Rivers and mountains – typical of spectacular Pyrenean scenery. 4 Sheep, kept for cheese production, near the snowline on the Col de Tourmalet 5 The statue of St Jacques de Compostela at a service area

It's late afternoon and the early June sun is still high over Brunel's 1860 iron ship Warrior in Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard, and the huge Spinnaker Tower artistic creation is standing out white against a vivid blue sky as we stand on the deck of the cruise-ferry.

Inching our on-test Bailey into position on the car deck had been easy and we are enjoying a cool beer before dinner at a French restaurant on board.

In another part of the ship entertainment is happening – a band, vocalists, disco – but food takes precedence for us as we easily slip into a cruise mindset and discover this is a superbly relaxing way to start a journey.

Our cabin (with shower) has a porthole and we wake early, the vista of pale sun over glass-calm water enticing us to walk around the deck to start off a day's cruising to Spain.

The route from Santander to the French border takes you into a spectacular terrain, of tree-clad mountains and Alpine-style houses with red roof tiles. You quickly join the part-toll A8; it's dual carriageway but it twists its way through the mountains, so you can't sustain a good speed – just sit back and enjoy the views.

All signs are in Catalan and Castilian – including the place names. The driving is easy. In four hours 20 minutes we are at the French border, at Irun. The terrain levels out, the road becomes three lanes and we pick up speed.

As we approach Hasparren we turn right off the A63 towards Paul and Toulouse. Basque is the first language on the place names now.

We stop at Aire de Hastingues (spacious service areas like this one are numerous on autoroutes) because it signs an exhibition of facts on the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. There's a giant statue of the apostle St Jacques himself, a cloaked figure, in walking stance.

We're crossing the flood plain of Le Gave de Pau now. We tow across the river four or five times as it snakes its way to the sea. This is a region of lush pasture, crops and vineyards. We get our first view of the Pyrénées, blue-hazy, to the right of the road and we pause at Aire de Lescar; like most French aires it has a dedicated caravan parking area.

We take the N21 to Lourdes now, and the Pyrénées get larger, their peaks more dramatically defined.

Select Sites has chosen the Aïrotel de Pyrénées campsite for us to spend two nights; the road to it is amazing. Sheer cliffs rise on the left, the river on the right, running shallow and turquoise over boulders, foaming, racing, and eroding its banks. The road through the ravine gets narrower but is perfectly passable for the Bailey Pageant Limousin.

We're delighted to find we have mountain peak views direct from our pitch and we quickly down corner steadies and set off to explore.

From this site we set out to discover one of Europe's most dramatic mountain passes. We follow the road

### “SHEER CLIFFS ON THE LEFT, THE RIVER ON THE RIGHT, RUNNING TURQUOISE OVER BOULDERS, FOAMING, RACING... THE ROAD GETS NARROWER...”

through Luz St Saveur, the village close to the campsite, and the route gets more spectacular with every mile. We are heading towards Barèges, the largest ski resort in the French Pyrénées. By this point in the route we are convinced that this mountain pass has to be one of the great driving roads of Europe – yet is little known. The following day, though, we were to discover even more dramatic driving...

At Barèges we take a break from driving to walk through the town, alongside a river that bounds, foams, tumbles over boulders, fed by snowmelt even in June.

We're on the D918 and we pause to capture on camera another peak, the summer sun illuminating the gleaming ice that spears through a soft collar of white cloud. It's one of countless awesome sights amid a kaleidoscope of thrilling scenery. But on this day we turn back, as the weather changes, visibility diminishes and precludes further photography. We figure we've a better chance tomorrow.

We set out, instead, on lower ground, in search of the turquoise-coloured river, the Gaves, that we had glimpsed when towing to Luz St Saveur yesterday.

Waterfalls are everywhere. La Vallée des

Gaves is a lush, green valley of deciduous trees thriving on the water-fed steep slopes.

We pause again further down the valley. The river has cut a wider course here and deposits water-worn stones on the apexes of its bends. Sheer mountains rise all around and everywhere is the sound of running water from the waterfalls that feed them.

Closer to Lourdes, further down the valley, we discover, at Argelès Gazost, a picnic place where the turquoise water runs wide and has deposited islands of pebbles. This is Lac des Gaves and the region is a mosaic of little quiet villages, lakes and deep ravines.

The mountain weather looks more photographically promising on Day Two and we set out again for the Col de Tourmalet. If

you follow our route, be prepared to give your driving skill a workout here... We head up into the mountains, along the D918 from Aïrotel des Pyrénées, and find ourselves in the domain of the



#### Don't miss...

The Bay of Biscay is one of the best places in the world to observe dolphins – and the top deck of a ferry is a great vantage point from which to watch for them. The one you're most likely to see on this voyage has bold yellow bands on its sides; it's the Common Dolphin.

#### Wine shopping

The little town of Luz St Saveur is a laid-back place in which to browse for souvenirs, locally-produced sheep-milk cheeses (including the delicious and tangy Etoriki) and sausage delicacies – and spend time in Luz's wine store that's amazingly big for such a small town. Locally produced wine is here. Our tip: look for Irouleguy, one of the finest wines produced in the Pyrénées.

#### Walk the ramparts

The best way to see the city of Carcassonne is to take the rampart walk; that way you can appreciate the enormity of Carcassonne – and then climb down to explore its fascinating little streets.



# OUR HOME

**BAILEY PAGEANT LIMOUSIN**  
£15,555



## What we liked

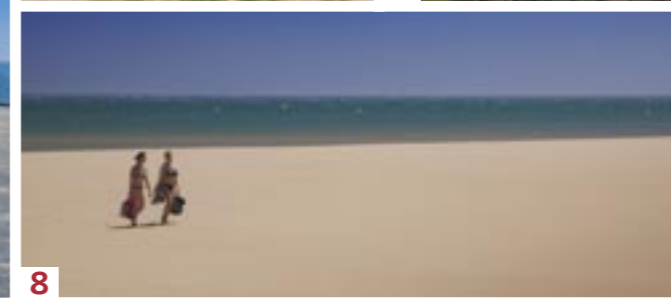
- ➔ Twin-axle stability and ease of towing; from autoroutes to twisting, narrow roads, this caravan's behaviour was predictable and impeccable.
- ➔ ATC trailer stability control system
- ➔ Double-bed luxury: no need to make up a bed at the end of a long day of exploration.
- ➔ Plenty of space to store stuff; when you're away for two weeks you appreciate capacity
- ➔ Big washroom with big shower
- ➔ Table with hinged sides that expand the surface area

## What we didn't like

- ➔ It would have been nice to have the AL-KO Secure wheel lock as standard on this model – but for this money you can't have everything! (Bailey puts these locks on the Pageant's successor Pegasus)
- ➔ Curtains didn't stay in place on tow; they migrate along the track so every time you stop you have to tidy them!



To buy a similar one-to-two year old Bailey Pageant, see the ads on p58



**1 Carcassonne:** Ancient alleyways and structures spanning many epochs and, **2 Red ridge-tiled roofs typical of the Med** and **3 Great towers and turrets of the old city**

brébis sheep. (Brébis means ewe in French and the word is used to describe the cheese of the region.) The melodic ting of the bells they wear around their necks give a percussive element to the music of running water that is ever-present here. We reach the snow that we'd seen from Airotel des Pyrénées. We'd also found the summit of the Col de Tourmalet, 2115 metres high.

The next stage of our journey proved to be the drive of my life. Spectacular, scary, every inch of the way demanding accurate positioning and power-

## “THICK CLOUD ENGULFED THE VEHICLE. FEARSOME DROPS WERE JUST INCHES FROM THE CAR. JUST AIR BETWEEN US AND THE BASE OF THE MOUNTAIN”

**4 Narbonne:** Camping la Nautique – we reach the Med **5 Sails and boards on the lagoon adjacent to Camping la Nautique**

control as the road twists, narrow tortuous hairpin after hairpin. As we reached the most dramatic, the most hazardous part of the climb, thick cloud rolled down from the mountains, engulfing the vehicle and reducing visibility to less than two metres. Fearsome near-vertical drops were just centimetres from the offside tyres. There was no conversation for miles until passenger John decided to state the obvious, quietly and with fear in his voice: “There’s a sheer drop on your side. I’ve just seen it.” I had been seeing the sheer drop for miles, no guard-rail, no verge, just air between us and the base of a mountain.

Down, down, to the Cascade de Garet waterfall and into the Vallée de Gripp; we’re heading for Bagnères-de-Bigorre, via the Vallée de Campon and, now, the driving is less arduous and conversation returns to the vehicle.

It’s Day Three of our journey, and within an hour and a half of towing out of Luz St Saviour we are in the Haut Garonne region.

We’re skirting Toulouse on the A61 that calls itself the Autoroute des Deux Mers. Next stop: the 12th century walled city of Carcassonne and a campsite nine miles south of the autoroute, Domaine d’Arnauteille, at Montclar.

Carcassonne is one of the world’s great heritage sites. Its fortifications dominate the skyline as you traverse the A61. Parking is close to the city.

Cross the great drawbridge over the now-dry moat and you enter a city of awesome history. The epochs of its development are evidenced in its differing stonework of its gargantuan fortifications, complexity of deep arrow-slits for longbows, turreted hiding places and double walls.

Tourism is here in quantity – but in a quality, tasteful manner. Tapestries, tableware of Mediterranean olive designs, restaurants hiding deep in ancient alleyways... We find Porte de Rodez and follow the steps towards the outer walls. Another scene of distant mountains, vineyards and the modern city of Carcassonne spread out like a terracotta and cream patterned carpet. We’re walking in a small circular walled section, on a narrow ledge high above the streets... By now we were back at Tour de la Porte Narbonnaise, the main entrance; we had walked around the entire city in less than an hour. Now we take a different turn, towards Grant Puits and find restaurants under rooves made of rushes, nougats, a well in a courtyard.

The following morning the journey to the Med resumes, on the A61, taking us through the Corbières wine region, a land of oleander trees, gentle mountains and an easy-driving autoroute. There’s a gradual descent to the coast; we begin to see the occasional seabird and the temperature rises.

We get our first glimpse of the Med at Étang de Bages. In two minutes we are at Camping la Nautique, with sand under our toes. We’ve reached the Med; we’ve discovered just how much easier this journey is than driving from the

Channel ports. Two coasts, one to the north-east, the other to the south, each of very different character, stretch out before you here.

## Ferries to Spain

Brittany Ferries operates five crossings a week to Spain, four from Portsmouth and one from Plymouth.

The Portsmouth-Bilbao service departs every Sunday and Friday, returning Tuesday and Saturday. Crossing time is 24 hours.

The Portsmouth-Santander departs every Tuesday and Wednesday, returning Monday and Thursday.

The Plymouth-Santander service departs Sunday and returns Wednesday.

As a guide, prices for a car and caravan (7.9m) with two passengers occupying an en suite cabin on board vary from £728 to £1230, depending on time of year and duration of stay. For a family of four with an car and 7.9m caravan travelling from in June, for example, return fares costs around £1088 including en suite cabin accommodation both ways (£1265 in August).

More info at [www.brittanyferries.com](http://www.brittanyferries.com) or 0871 244 1400.

**7 Our pitch at Camping la Nautique – every one has its own shower and toilet building** **8 Narbonne Plage** **9 The beach at the lagoon of Etang de Bages et de Sigean that borders Camping la Nautique** **10 The enormity of the ancient city of Carcassonne – viewed from an autoroute aire** **11 Village Montclar, in the mountain foothills close to the western shores of the Med**

## Next month

We take the north-east route from Narbonne – and discover an amazing, remote ninth century village; this is unchanged, natural France and the more you travel in this country, the greater its lure. In our March issue we follow the coast south from Narbonne.





# USEFUL STUFF

## » Atlantic to the Med in a day – or longer

➔ Journey times: You could drive from Bilbao or Santander to Narbonne in a day, all on easy-tow motorways. But this time we chose to pause in the Pyrénées and then in Carcassonne en route, making the route to the sun an adventure rather than just a journey.

## » Best route from Santander to France – and Luz St Saveur

➔ Follow the A8 to the French border at Irun, pick up the A64 just outside Bayonne and follow it to Junction 12, Tarbes. Take the N21 to Lourdes and follow signs to Argeles-Gozat. You're on the D821 now – follow signs to Luz St Saveur. Airotel des Pyrénées is on the left. Easy!

## THE COL DE TOURMALET – ROUTE TIPS

➔ From Camping Airotel des Pyrénées at Esquièze-Sère, near Luz St Saveur, take the D918. This takes you over the Col de Tourmalet to Sainte-Marie-de-Campan, where you turn left onto the D935 to Bagnères-de-Bigorre.

After Trébons, turn left onto the D937, signed Lourdes. Then follow the N21 and D921 back to Luz St Saveur and the campsite. Take a tip from us: Drive the D198 from Luz St Saveur to Lourdes, rather than the other way round, because you'll have the mountain on your right for most of the way. For the majority of the tortuous route, you'll have the sheer drop on your offside and the driver gets a more precise view of the edge of the road; that's assuming you're driving a right-hand-drive car, of course.



## THE SITES: The best places to stay

### » THE SITE: Airotel Pyrénées Esquièze-Sere, Luz St Saveur

Spectacularly surrounded by high mountains, Airotel's sheltered valley position is dramatic. There's a gym and indoor pool opening onto a sun terrace, plus a waterslide.

There's a fascinating surprise here: The natural spring drinking water contains arsenic levels which are above the recommended minimum, Select Sites, which booked our pitch here, informs its customers. The easy alternative is bottled water, of course but if you wish to live as the natives do, make use of the free fountain of spring water in the centre of the nearby village of Esquièze-Sere.



#### ➔ OPEN:

1 December - 30 September

➔ PRICES: From 31€

➔ CONTACT: [www.select-site.com](http://www.select-site.com), [eurocampindependent.co.uk](http://eurocampindependent.co.uk) or



### » THE SITE: Domaine d'Arnauteille Montclar Carcassonne

This site perches amid hills that rise from the motorway that's your route across the Pyrénées. It's an old farm and it retains that character. The site's small shop, library with internet access, and restaurant are housed in ancient farm buildings.

There's an amazing amphitheatre-style swimming complex, with 25-metre pool, plus sun terraces, all with views of the Corbières Mountains. And the facilities, created in stunning Greek-Roman style buildings, give you all the usual laundry, dishwashing and showering arrangements, in courtyards of pillars and statues and tiles.

➔ OPEN: 4 April – 28 September

PRICES: From 19€

➔ CONTACT: Select Sites at [www.select-site.com](http://www.select-site.com) or [www.arnauteille.com](http://www.arnauteille.com)

### » THE SITE: Camping Lou P'tit Poun, St Martin de Seignanx

Ten minutes from the Atlantic coast, this site is close to the resort town of Biarritz. Wide alleys divide the pitches. Weekly sports events are held for children in high season.

➔ OPEN: 2 June - 12 September

➔ PRICES: From 22,50€

➔ CONTACT: Select Sites or [www.louptitpoun.com/gb1](http://www.louptitpoun.com/gb1)

### » THE SITE: L'Europ Camping, St Jean-Pied-de-Port

The site is a few minutes' walk from the old character town of St Jean-Pied-de-Port, 10km from the Spanish border, in the foothills of the Pyrénées.

Pitches are hedged and most are large. There's a restaurant and bar, offering local-style entertainment; a Basque dance is held each Wednesday during the high season.

➔ OPEN: 12 April - 30 September

➔ PRICES: From 29€

➔ CONTACT: Select Sites or [www.europ-camping.com](http://www.europ-camping.com)

### » THE SITE: Camping Le Ruisseau des Pyrénées, Biarritz

Gym, sauna, tennis, indoor and outdoor pools, entertainment – this is a comprehensive family site with all the trimmings. Most pitches are flat; some are on terraces. But beware that the narrow access road to this site might be a problem for larger caravans.

➔ OPEN: 30 April - 19 September

➔ PRICES: From 19€

➔ CONTACT: Select Sites