

PROGRAMME...CHEMIN DE LA LIBERTE...5th to 12th July 2016

TUESDAY 5TH JULY, 2016. TRANSFER DAY.

Flight: UK – Toulouse. Coach Transfer: Toulouse – St Giron.

It is important that all participants arrive in Saint-Girons on the Tuesday afternoon. Where possible, it is requested that all those who have decided to fly to France book flights with **EASYJET** from **LONDON GATWICK** to arrive at **TOULOUSE BLAGNAC** airport during the morning of Tuesday July 5th 2016. A coach will then collect hikers and veterans and take them to the prearranged accommodation in Saint-Girons. It is just under two hours' drive between Toulouse and Saint-Girons. Hikers pay for the coach, veterans travel free. Cost of the coach will depend on number of hikers - but expect to pay app. 45 euros in total for both trips, coming and going, aller et retour.

FLIGHT INFORMATION GATWICK - TOULOUSE

Depart London Gatwick Tuesday 5th July.....0825 hours. Flight EZY5333

Arrive Toulouse Blagnac Tuesday 5th July.....1110 hours.

Depart Toulouse Blagnac Tuesday 12th July.....1545 hours. Flight EZY5336

Arrive London Gatwick Tuesday 12th July.....1635 hours.

All hikers will be accommodated in the **Parc de Palétès** leisure centre two kilometres outside the town. There are studio rooms in two main buildings which sleep 2-4-6 people. All these rooms have showers, toilets and self-catering facilities. Accommodation is in bungalow tents complete with a fridge, or wooden chalets which accommodate four people with en-suite toilet and shower. Please note...this is **NOT AN HOTEL** but accommodation for hardy hikers! There is also a swimming pool open to residents, tennis courts, volley ball courts and a miniature golf course. There is an excellent restaurant on site.

The centre is a very friendly location and everyone can get to know each other before the hike starts. I also give a vital last-minute briefing! Veterans and their wives who obviously like a calmer and more luxurious place to stay are usually accommodated in one of the local hotels. Naturally, the price of their stay will increase accordingly!

NOTE: Vegetarians can be catered for at the **Parc de Palétès** in Saint-Girons but at the end of day one in Seix, at the mountain Refuge des Estagnous on day three and at the reception in Spain...it is difficult indeed for vegetarians due to no choice of menu and sheer weight of numbers. I have not yet found a satisfactory answer to all this...vegans are obviously in more trouble than most...although I must admit, all stalwart mountaineering non-meat eaters do manage to solve their own dietary problems in their own inimitable way! Bravo, bon courage et bonne continuation!

WEDNESDAY 6TH JULY, 2016. FREE DAY.

Kercabanac Memorial Ceremony and Reception at the Chemin de la Liberté Museum.

There will be the chance today to prepare and pack kit and complete last minute shopping in St Giron. For those needing a gas cartridge there will be a selection available for free left over from the Chemin in 2015. Members of the Chemin Association will be on hand to answer questions and provide transport into town if necessary.

1630 hours: all participants, veterans, wives and friends will be taken by coach to Kercabanac near the village of Oust (16 km south of Saint-Girons), which during the war was on the line of the Zone Interdite or Forbidden Zone set up by the Germans along the entire length of the Pyrenees. A memorial has now been erected at Kercabanac on the site of a former German Command Post. The President of the Chemin de la Liberté Association, Colonel Guy Sérès will give a brief speech on the work of the passeurs and guides who operated and travelled incognito within the Forbidden Zone during the war years.

1830 hours: all participants will return to the Chemin de la Liberté Museum in Saint-Girons for an official reception and vin d'honneur with the Mayor, Monsieur François Murillo. Smart casual dress appropriate. If any participant or team leader would like to say a few words at the reception or present a military unit plaque, please let me know in advance. The Mayor's reception will last for approximately one hour. Transport will then be provided to return all participants to the Parc de Palétès.

THURSDAY 7TH JULY, 2016. CHEMIN DE LA LIBERTE HIKE. DAY 1.

0500 hours: Breakfast will not be available in the restaurant this early but the Parc proprietor has very kindly agreed to leave thermos flasks of coffee and a supply of rolls, bread and croissants on the tables so that participants can help themselves to a dawn snack.

0630 hours: Coach transport to the Chemin bridge and the start of the hike proper. Please note that the coach will NOT climb the several z-bends which lead from the main road to the leisure centre itself, so all participants must walk down to the flat area below (five minutes), with their rucksacks. Spare kit and equipment can be left in a room which will be securely locked during your four days in the mountains. Full details concerning this will be given to team leaders on arrival.

0645 hours: The first day of the hike starts on the bridge over the River Salat in Saint-Girons. Once an impressive railway bridge of iron girders, it formed part of the main line between Foix and Saint-Girons. In the 1950s the line was closed and became the local ring road. The iron girder bridge itself was demolished in 1991 and replaced by a much more modest and modern construction of concrete and steel with a few fish-bowl street-lamps thrown in for bad measure. Inaugurated in 1995 as "Le Pont Chemin de la Liberté", it commemorates the many wartime French and Allied evaders who leapt from the train at this point - warned by two blasts on the steam whistle from the driver - and were collected by waiting guides to be formed into groups in isolated barns ready for their final night ascent to the Spanish frontier.

0700 hours: On the bridge itself there is a short ceremony, a few words of encouragement from the Mayor, the playing of the Marseillaise, the Hymn of Resistance (the famous "Chant des Partisans" which you'll hear several times over the four days) and then...WE'RE OFF! It's advisable to carry two litres of water for this first stage, plus a few energy bars, etc. The first two hours are up and down, mainly through beech woods in the hills above Saint-Girons. We will have one 15-minute break at approximately 0930 hours before a longish descent and then a tough stretch up through to the village of Alos

1130 hours: The village of Alos has an ice-cold local fountain where water bottles can be refilled. We're now into the fourth hour of walking. We then climb VERY STEEPLY up through another beech wood to the highest point of the day, the Col de Plantach at 1000 metres (3300 feet). Time now 1230. Another 30 minutes' descent takes us to the Col de l'Artigue and a barn where 19 year-old passeur Louis Barrau was betrayed by a Spanish "friend" and shot by the Germans in September 1943 while waiting to guide a mixed group of Allied airmen and French évadés on their final ascent to the Spanish frontier. Vehicle transport to the Col from Saint-Girons will be organised for supporters and veterans.

1230 hours: At the Col de l'Artigue after 6 hours of walking, there will be a ceremony and laying of wreaths, followed by a very filling, merry and enjoyable outdoor lunch provided free by the Barrau family and the municipality of Saint-Girons. This is an exceptional chance to meet the local people (especially the Barrau family), and if the weather is good, you'll have stunning views of the Pyrenees and...the problems to come! Supporters and veterans are given vehicle transport from the Col de l'Artigue to Aunac

1400 hours: Start the final stage to Aunac - assuming we arrive on schedule at the Col de l'Artigue at 1300 hours. There is a gratifying descent followed by another steep climb and we arrive at the memorial to the Evadés de France at Aunac at approximately 1800.

1700 hours: Height now 700 metres (2310 feet). The third ceremony of the day is held here and then transport is again provided to shuttle all hikers and supporters down to the town of **Seix**, where the hikers spend the night.

1900 hours: A brief vin d'honneur offered by the local Mayor, and then we'll move to the offered accommodation in the local **gymnasium**. Everyone sleeps on the floor of the gymnasium. Toilets are available plus seven or eight fairly lukewarm showers. Sometimes, we can borrow judo mats from the local club next door, but please be prepared to sleep on your own Karrimat. Do your best to ignore the snoring and other animal sounds which will pervade the atmosphere during the hours of darkness. This is a FREEDOM TRAIL after all, and you're not looking for a comfortable bed just an escape from injustice and tyranny!

2000 hours: To offset the night-time misery, aching limbs and weeping blisters, a very good meal (with wine included) is served at "La Maison de Haut Salat", a restaurant in Seix. The cost of this meal is included in the overall price of the four-day hike ("Approximate Cost Details" to follow), but individual veterans and supporters will have to pay (usually 20 euros).

Total distance from Saint-Girons to Aunac is 21 kilometres (13 miles) but my advice on this first day is to forget distance and think of difficulty of terrain, stumbling through head-high ferns, bushes, mossy ravines, etc, etc...all of which slows a group up. Believe you me, it will take 8 hours of walking to cover this fairly modest distance. So go easy on all the free booze at lunchtime. A few years ago an eager young Royal Signals apprentice soldier from Harrogate reached the Col de l'Artigue in fine fettle, met two former French evaders, was offered a glass or two...or four...and then...well, it's all history now, anyway!

Bonne nuit!

FRIDAY 8TH JULY 2016. CHEMIN DE LA LIBERTE HIKE. DAY 2.

0700 hours: A very good continental breakfast is served at La Maison du Haut Salat . This is included in the overall price.

0800 hours: The start of day two's hike. For the first hour we'll be walking on a minor road which climbs steadily up the Esbints valley. The tarmac ends at the Gîte d'étape d'Esbints and a well-marked trail leads on through woods ending in a steep climb up to the Col de la Core at 1395 metres (4603 feet).

1200 hours: Col de la Core and lunch. Here another memorial has been erected in memory of all the local wartime passeurs. There will be a short ceremony here followed by a buffet lunch which is provided for us. At this point we meet up again with local people and veteran evaders. Water replenishment is provided here as well.

PLEASE NOTE...ANYONE IN ANY DOUBT ABOUT HIS OR HER ABILITY TO COMPLETE THE TREK MUST ABANDON AT THIS POINT WHILE ROAD TRANSPORT BACK TO BASE IS STILL AVAILABLE.

1430 hours: We set off on the final stage to La Cabane de Subera, into the mountains proper. No more roads just soaring mountain peaks.

1700 hours: Arrive at the Shepherd's Shelter. The height now is 1499 metres (4946 feet). One half of the cabin is occupied by a French shepherd during the summer months and the other half is reserved for the French guides.

1900 hours: Aperitif. Drinks and nibbles provided for participants.

There is plenty of space for walkers to pitch their own tents and cook their own meals in the company of a friendly and curious herd of cows - several adorned with large bells around their necks. The ones with bells never seem to go to sleep at night, so be warned! There may also be two haughty and very impressive BULLS sauntering through this scenario, but no hiker has actually been gored or trampled to death by wearing a red T-shirt (or even a Red Poppy) up until now as far as I know.

Animal life apart, if the weather at Subera is bad this will NOT be a fun night, so keep smiling. There is an ample supply of COLD fresh water for cooking, drinking and washing, but no toilet facilities exist. The shepherd who lives at Subera during the summer months has given this advice: Please walk at least 100 metres from the refuge/camp site . You do not have to dig a cat hole for your human waste but all toilet paper must not be left. Put used toilet paper it in a small plastic bag (or 2) and carry it off the mountain with all your other rubbish.

SATURDAY 9TH JULY 2016. CHEMIN DE LA LIBERTE HIKE. DAY 3.

0800 hours: The French contingent of hikers joins us for the last two days. There can be as many as 60 of them which brings the total number of participants to 100-plus. After brief introductions all round and hot coffee provided by the French guides, we are now split into groups of 10 for the next two days of the escape trail - the most difficult.

In principle there will be one qualified mountain guide for every ten participants. All these professions will be instantly recognisable by the armbands or special clothing they wear (usually yellow t-shirts and caps), so if any participant is in trouble physically and needs help, please seek out one of the pros. It is NOT a race, so RAF and military teams please leave any ideas you may have about inter-unit rivalry firmly locked up back at base. The pace we climb at is the pace of the slowest and there will be regular pauses for the hikers to re-group.

0830 hours: The day starts with a two hour walk ascending from 1499 metres (4946 feet) at Subera to just over 2000 metres (6600 feet) to the place which the local French know simply as "l'avion" or aeroplane. Here at the base of the Pic de Lampau a Halifax bomber from 644 Squadron Royal Air Force based at Tarrant Rushton in Dorset, crashed on the 19th of July 1945 with the loss of all seven crew. The aircraft was on a cross-country training flight and more than 80 kilometres off-course when the accident happened at night and in bad weather. Wreckage is still scattered around and you are asked to leave it untouched as a mark of respect.

1030 hours: There is a memorial plaque at the crash-site and every year a few words of remembrance are spoken and there is a minute of silence. High in the mountains and surrounded by pieces of twisted wreckage, this is truly a moving moment. From the 'plane we ascend ever more steeply upwards to the snow-line and the knife-edged ridge of rock that is the Col de Craberous at 2382 metres (7860 feet). The descent from this Col towards La Cabane des Espuges can only be described as dizzy. It is steep and walkers are fed down slowly ten at a time, aided by the guides. This process naturally slows the pace up and you may be forced to wait on the Col over which an icy wind often blows so make sure you have some warm clothes to wear. During the ascent and descent of this Col listen out for the shout or scream of "caill-oux"! (roughly pronounced "kai-yew"), which warns you of rolling stones or rocks dislodged by walkers above and now hurtling towards you at an alarming speed. From the col/saddle, we begin the descent towards the Cabane des Espuges.

1300 hours: Arrive at the Cabane des Espuges a small mountain shelter - 2110 metres (6963 feet) hours and stop for lunch, which you have to provide yourself. There is a good supply of fresh water here.

1430 hours: We set off again and for half an hour descend along a rutted, stony track to a large mountain lake (Milouga). The height is now 2139 metres (7058 feet) and walkers re-group at this point to tackle the ascent of the steep eastern slopes of Mont Valier which at 2838 metres (9365 feet) is the highest mountain in this section of the Pyrenees

1630 hours: the walkers will have reached the Col de Pécouch at 2462 metres (8124 feet), which looks directly down on the Refuge des Estagnous where we'll eat and spend the night. It is another extremely steep (and in places dangerous) descent to the refuge, (45 minutes) round and over enormous granite boulders.

The Refuge at Estagnous at 2242 metres (7398 feet), was first built in 1912 but completely refurbished several years ago. It can sleep 78 people and offers real toilets and even hot showers (you have to pay a modest fee to secure a token to make the hot water arrive. Cold showers are free!) The food provided here for our evening meal is excellent. Wine is also included in the overall price. Not everyone can be fed at once so there are 2 sittings.

In principle all the beds in the refuge are occupied by the French while the foreign group (usually British, Dutch, Belgian and American) sleep outside in tents. Normally there are several two and three-man tents already pitched and available for our use, BUT BE PREPARED TO PITCH AND USE YOUR OWN TENTS FOR THE NIGHT AT ESTAGNOUS.

1700 hours: Arrival at the refuge, a full ten-hour day from Subera.

18.30 hours: Apéritif followed by evening meal. The night at Estagnous can be a noisy and extremely merry one. As the worst part of the hike is over, several celebrations and even wine-drinking competitions have been known to take place. Be cautious...there is still day four to be faced and the freedom of the Spanish frontier to be reached! The Refuge des Estagnous cannot take your rubbish so please take responsibility for your own rubbish and carry it off the hill.

SUNDAY 10TH JULY 2016. CHEMIN DE LA LIBERTE HIKE. DAY 4.

0630 hours: Continental breakfast is provided in the refuge from 6am.

0745 hours: the last day of the hike starts with a 45-minute descent to Lac Rond (the round lake), at 1929 Metres (6365 feet), then a sharp, VICIOUS 30-minute climb up to Lac Long (the long lake) directly above at 2125 metres (7012 feet). We now enter the snow-filled gully that leads directly to the Col de la Clauère and the Spanish frontier at 2522 metres (8322 feet). The professional guides kick steps in the frozen snow for the hikers to zig-zag their way upwards in single file.

1130 hours: Border crossing. After reaching the frontier, the steep descent into Spain begins. Although this descent is steep, there are no rocks, just wide, snow-flattened grass slopes.

1300 hours: An hour or so into Spain we stop for lunch (self-provided) at the Lake de Clauère and then re-group for the final 3 hours' descent to the River Palleresà in the valley below,

1700 hours: It is at this river that we are picked up by four-by-four vehicles and transported in small groups to Esterrí d'Aneu.

1800 hours: Official reception in the local community hall. After the speeches a full, extensive buffet meal is laid on by the municipality of Esterrí d' Aneu. All participants who have successfully completed the four-day hike will be asked to sign the Royal Air Forces Escaping Society memorial book which was presented to the town of Saint-Girons by the society in 1997. Chemin de la Liberté tee-shirts and berets will also be on sale. Cost approximately 10 euros for each item or less if you buy both.

2100 hours: Coaches will take all the hikers back to Saint-Girons. The journey takes about 3 hours, so don't expect to get to bed early. Those staying at Palétès will be taken directly there. Arrival time will be shortly after after midnight.

MONDAY 11th JULY 2016. FREE DAY.

Rest and recuperation day at Palétès. Depending on individual travel arrangements, Chemin helpers are usually on hand to provide transport to local rail and bus stations also depending on the numbers involved.

TUESDAY 12th JULY. TRANSFER DAY.

Morning coach from Palétès to Toulouse Blagnac (Airport). Flight back to UK.

Scott Goodall