

# **THE GR11 TRAIL LA SENDA PIRENAICA**



#### About the Author

Since taking early retirement from his career as a physics and sports teacher, Brian Johnson has found time for three through-hikes of the Pacific Crest Trail, a 2700-mile round-Britain walk, eight hikes across the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, a hike along the Via de la Plata from Seville to Santiago and a single summer completion of the Munros (Scotland's 3000ft mountains) as well as climbing all the Scottish 2000ft-plus mountains. He has also completed a 2200-mile cycle tour of Spain and France and done multi-week canoe tours in Sweden, France, Spain and Portugal.

In his younger days, Brian's main sport was orienteering. He competed at a high level and coached both Bishop Wordsworth's School and South-West Junior Orienteering Squads and has now been able to return to orienteering after recovering from injury, and won the British Middle Distance Championships for his age-group in 2017. He has walked and climbed extensively in summer and winter conditions in Britain, the Alps, the Pyrenees and California, often leading school groups.

As a fanatical sportsman and games player, Brian competed to a high level in cricket, hockey, bridge and chess. His major achievement was winning the 1995/96 World Amateur Chess Championships.

#### Other Cicerone guides by the author

*The Pacific Crest Trail*

*Walking the Corbetts Volume 1: South of the Great Glen*

*Walking the Corbetts Volume 2: North of the Great Glen*

*GR10 Trail: Through the French Pyrenees*

## THE GR11 TRAIL LA SENDA PIRENAICA

THE TRAVERSE OF THE SPANISH PYRENEES

by Brian Johnson

**CICERONE**

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### Updates to the Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website ([www.cicerone.co.uk/921/updates](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/921/updates)), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to [updates@cicerone.co.uk](mailto:updates@cicerone.co.uk) or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL United Kingdom.

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Front cover: Lac de Mar (recommended variation, Stage 23)

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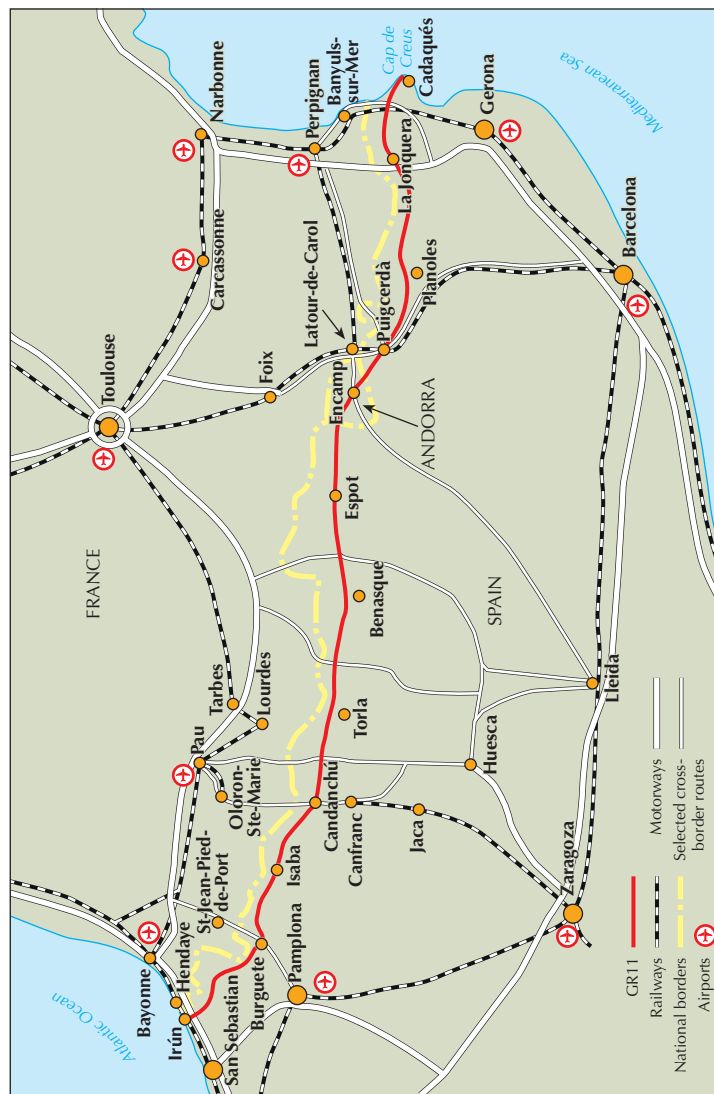
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## Map Key

	start of stage
	end of stage
	start/finish point
	alternative start
	alternative finish
	GR11 featured route
	GR11 alternative route
	optional route
	minor track or dirt road
	minor track or path
	railway
	railway station
	settlement
	significant building
	summit
	accommodation
	bothy (unmanned refuge)
	campground
	bar/restaurant
	tourist information office
	food shop
	water
	saddle/col





## PUBLISHER'S DEDICATION



*Punta Gabelallo over Ibón d'Estanés (Stage 10)*

This new GR11 guide is dedicated to the memory of Paul Lucia.

Paul pioneered La Senda and the Spanish Pyrenees for English-speaking trekkers nearly 20 years ago. Paul's first edition came out in 1996 under the aegis of Walt Unsworth, my predecessor as Publisher at Cicerone. New updated editions that I worked on with Paul followed in 2000 and 2004, with a final posthumous edition in 2008, the proofs of which were checked by Paul's son, P-J, and daughter, Anna.

Paul brought a lifetime's precision to his passion for the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, the result of which was a guide that Cicerone was proud to publish for many years. Many trekkers have commented that Paul had very long legs and his timings were referred to as 'bold' by some, 'unattainable' by others! I particularly remember well Paul's frustration with the continual re-routing in Navarre, although he was delighted to have an excuse to return to the route.

In the 2008 edition, P-J and Anna wrote: 'If asked to describe our father, the word "indomitable" invariably springs to mind. Dad's exploits formed a thread of marvellous adventure through our upbringing.'

My thanks to Christine Lucia for agreeing to let us build on Paul's work, to Paul's family and the many Cicerone trekkers whose comments have helped the GR11 and our guides to it go from strength to strength.

*Jonathan Williams*

## Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

### International Distress Signal *(emergency only)*

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

### Helicopter Rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:  
raise both arms  
above head to  
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:  
raise one arm  
above head, extend  
other arm downward



### Emergency telephone numbers

(If telephoning from the UK, the dialling code for Spain is 0034)

*Spain:* The Guardia Civil (police) are responsible for mountain rescue in Spain. Tel 112.

*Andorra and France:* Mountain rescue tel 112.

**Note** Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*Limestone outcrops, Sierra de Abodi (Stage 6)*



The first Cicerone guide to the GR11 was published in 1996. At that time the route was ill-defined with little waymarking; navigation was a serious problem and there was much walking on tarmac and dirt roads. Constant changes and improvements in the route kept Paul Lucia busy producing updates and his fourth edition was published in 2008. Since 2008 there have been major route changes to the GR11, especially in the Basque Country and Navarre. Road walking has been reduced to a minimum, the route has been well signed and waymarked and the GR11 has now developed into a magnificent route through largely unspoilt and wild mountains. The author walked the main route again in 2017 for this updated guide but has not walked all the alternative routes since 2013. This update includes the new route between La Mina and Candanchu, the only major change since 2013.

It is now possible to walk the GR11 without camping or using bothies and this new guide is organised into 47 stages for the benefit of those who are using accommodation along the route. Walkers who, like the author, prefer wild camping in the mountains will find much greater flexibility in their planning.

*Brian Johnson*





Lac Redon and Lac Long (Stage 25)

## INTRODUCTION

Punta Chistau (Stage 20)



The Pyrenees is the mountain chain which forms the border between France and Spain, stretching over 400km from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. The GR11, which stays on the Spanish side of the border, provides a very varied scenic route through magnificent, often remote, high or deserted mountains.

As the GR11 leaves the border town of Irún on the Atlantic Coast, it follows ridges on the gentle grassy and wooded hills of the Basque Country and Navarre. There is then a rapid transition into steep limestone mountains, passing through the world-renowned Ordesa Canyon before the fantastic granite peaks of the High Pyrenees are reached. The High Pyrenees rise to over 3000m, with snowfields surviving well into the summer and the remnants of the glaciers which carved out the deep valleys. The

GR11 generally heads up these alpine valleys before crossing a high pass and descending into the next valley. These rough, tough mountains continue into Andorra. The mountains become gentler once Andorra is passed but, surprisingly, the highest point on the GR11 is reached after the High Pyrenees are left behind. As the Mediterranean is approached, the GR11 follows a line of steep, rugged, wooded hills to reach the sea at the spectacular peninsula of Cap de Creus.

### NATIONAL AND NATURAL PARKS

The GR11 passes through two national parks and six natural parks:

- Parque Natural de Valles Occidentales
- Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido
- Parque Natural de Posets-Maladeta

- Parc Nacional d'Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici
- Parc Natural Alt Pirineu
- Parc Natural Valls de Comapedrosa
- Parc Natural Val del Madriu
- Parc Natural Cap de Creus

The Valles Occidentales (western valleys) of Aragón is predominantly composed of limestone and is a relatively gentle introduction to the tough alpine terrain ahead of you.

Ordesa and Monte Perdido, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is the largest limestone massif in Western Europe. The highest peak is Monte Perdido (3355m) but it is the deep valleys, with thundering cascades and waterfalls edged by towering limestone, which attract the tourist.

Posets-Maladeta is a granite massif containing half the 3000m summits in the Pyrenees including Aneto (3404m), the highest mountain in the Pyrenees. Highly glaciated granite mountains provide some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in the world with thousands of little sparkling lakes nestling in a landscape dominated by bare rock.

As you pass into Catalonia, you pass through Aigüestortes and Sant Maurici National Park, another magical granite massif, and then the Parc Natural Alt Pirineu, the largest natural park in Catalonia. Alt Pirineu continues into Andorra as the Parc Natural Valls de Comapedrosa. The Val del Madriu as you leave Andorra is the final alpine section, with more fine granite scenery.

The GR11 ends with the Parc Natural Cap de Creus, which is a complete contrast: a rocky dry region, with almost no trees, on a peninsula sticking out into the Mediterranean Sea.

#### FROM THE ATLANTIC TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

There are three long-distance paths along the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean:

- GR10
- High-level route (Haute Randonnée Pyrénienne, HRP)
- GR11 (La Senda Pirenaica)

The oldest and most popular of these routes is the GR10, which is entirely in France. This well-waymarked path is not so wild and rough as the GR11 but it passes through equally spectacular terrain. Frequent visits to towns and villages means accommodation and supplies are not usually a problem. Staying to the north of the watershed, the GR10 has a much cooler and cloudier climate than on the GR11.

The HRP, which passes through France, Spain and Andorra, is not so much a walk as a mountaineering expedition. The route is not waymarked, except where it coincides with other routes, and you must expect to get lost! There is a lot of very rough terrain, including some very steep, possibly dangerous descents, and a lot of snow can be expected until late summer. Visits to towns and villages are infrequent so resupply is difficult and you will have to camp most of the time. You will spend a lot of time on high mountain ridges with a serious risk of thunderstorms and even fresh snow. The HRP is a daunting route for the inexperienced but is a magnificent expedition for those with the right experience.

The GR11 is a well-waymarked path which passes through Spain and Andorra. Like the HRP, it crosses many high mountain passes where there are

boulderfields, scree and some easy scrambling at about the maximum difficulty the inexperienced would want when carrying a heavy rucksack. The weather tends to be considerably sunnier and drier than on the GR10 and thunderstorms are less of a problem than on the HRP as you don't spend long periods on high ridges. Frequent visits to towns and villages mean that resupply isn't much of a problem. Those who prefer not to camp or bivouac will find that a few of the days are rather long and that some of the alternative routes featured in this guide will need to be taken. There could be problems with snow in early season, but not later in the summer. Although the GR11 stays much higher than the GR10, there is actually considerably less climb.

#### THE GR11

The total route is about 820km long with 46,000m of ascent and is described here in 47 stages. It can be seen as breaking into three broad sections.

- The first 11 stages through the lower and more verdant Basque Country and Navarre, gradually climbing into the higher mountains south of Lescun before dropping to the Puerto de Somport cross-Pyrenees (Jaca-Pau) road. This section covers

Col d'Angliós from Ibón d'Angliós (Stage 22)





## GETTING TO CABO DE HIGUER FROM IRÚN

The simplest solution is to take a taxi from Irún to Cabo de Higer. In summer there are buses (route E25) about every 15min from Paseo Colón, in the centre of Irún, to Playa de Hondarribia. It would take about 1hr 50min to walk to Cabo de Higer from Irún or 2hr 15min from Hendaye Railway Station in France.

You need to continue past the Playa de Hondarribia, the main beach of Hondarribia, to reach the harbour at the N end of the sea-front. Follow the road which climbs steeply from the N end of the harbour switchbacking up to a junction. Turn right to reach the S side of the lighthouse, Faro de Cabo Higer, and Camping Faro de Higer (40m, N43°23.479 W001°47.546).



*Faro de Cabo Higer*

Camping Faro de Higer has a bar-restaurant. Open all year. Tel 943 641 008 [www.campingfaro dehiger.es](http://www.campingfaro dehiger.es)

See Stage 1 for facilities in Hondarribia and Irún.

## STAGE 1

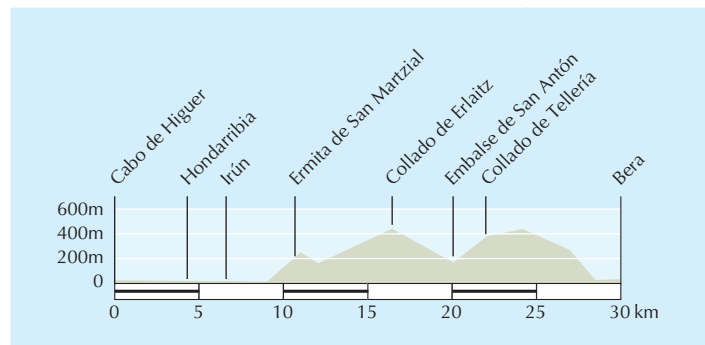
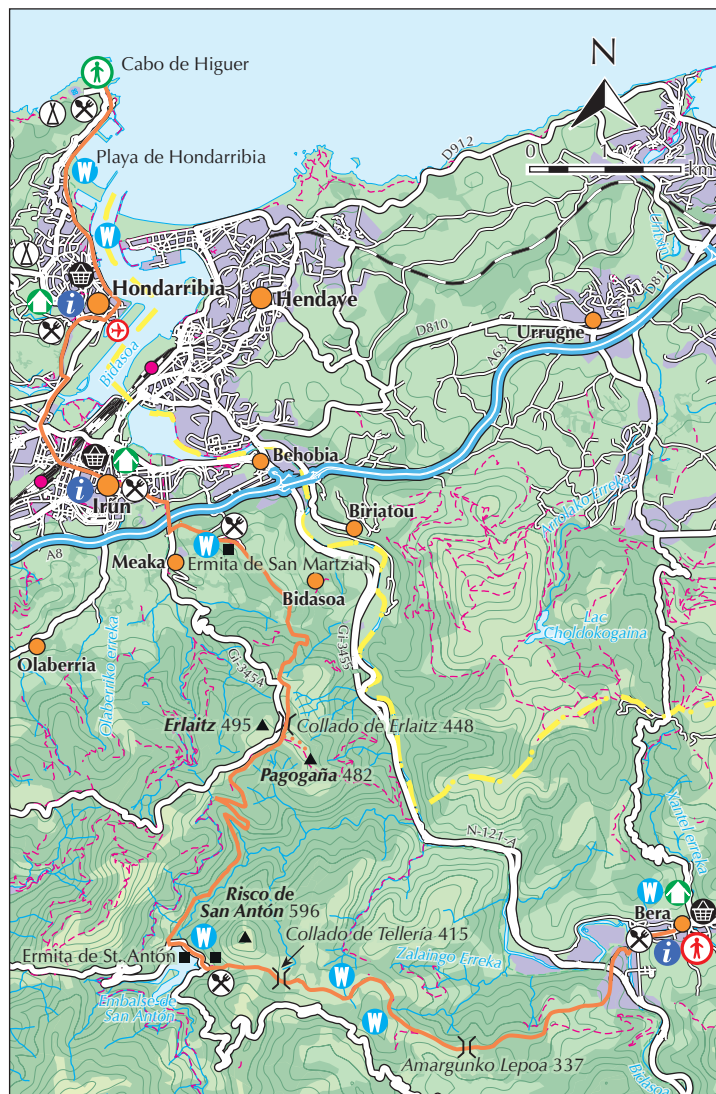
### *Cabo de Higer to Bera (Vera de Bidosoa)*

<b>Start</b>	Cabo de Higer
<b>Distance</b>	30km
<b>Total Ascent/Descent</b>	800m
<b>Difficulty</b>	Easy. Waymarking does not begin until the S edge of Irún, after which it is very good.
<b>Time</b>	8hr 30min
<b>High Points</b>	Collado de Erlaitz (448m), Collado de Tellería (415m)

Stage 1 is too long for a first day unless you are already 'trail fit'. If you are camping it is sensible to take three days to get to Elizondo at the end of Stage 2. If you are staying in Irún you could walk the section from Cabo de Higer to Irún on the evening of your arrival and then set out from Irún in the morning. Once clear of Irún, the route is typical of the Basque Country as you traverse steep rolling hills on good tracks through a mixture of woodland and pasture.

There doesn't seem to be an official starting point for the GR11 but the **Faro de Higer lighthouse** is the prominent feature on the cape. You could of course climb down the rocks to dip your toes in the Atlantic Ocean.

Follow the tarmac track, signed 'GR121 to Hondarribia', down between the lighthouse and the campground, soon forking left along a path which loops round the lighthouse and follows the slumping undercliff. On reaching the road, turn left down to the harbour and follow the coast road past the sandy **Playa de Hondarribia** (25min) where there are water-points, toilets and beach showers. [There are water-points at regular intervals along the seafront.](#) Continue past



the large marina and along the shore until the road turns inland alongside a canal opposite the airport (1hr).

Hondarribia is a large tourist resort with all facilities. Camping Jaizkibel, 500m W of the centre of Hondarribia, also has cabins and a bar-restaurant. Albergue Juan Sebastián Elcano is at the N end of Hondarribia, inland from the marina. You must show the youth hostelling international card in this youth hostel.

After the road veers right, go straight (W) across a double roundabout, fork left at the next small roundabout, past the Eroski supermarket, left at a big roundabout and immediately right down the Santa Engrazia Kalea. This road returns to the main road by the Puente de Amute (1hr 30min). After crossing the bridge, fork left along road GI-636 before veering left into Irún, under a road bridge, straight across a large roundabout and up the Calle de Fuenterribía. Fork left up Hondarribia Kalea and over the railway into the wide boulevard of the Paseo de Colón to reach a big square (1hr 50min).

Irún is a large town with an international railway station. All types of camping gas are available at Decathlon in Parque Comercial Txingudi which is in Ventas at the SW end of Irún near junction 2 of the A-8 autopista. There are buses to Txingudi from Hondarribia and Irún every hour.



*Aldabe Farm,  
above Irún*

Keep straight on as the road becomes the Avenida de Navarra after a large multi-way junction and heads downhill. Head down the right-hand side of this dual carriageway and cross a stream. Turn right along the second road after the stream, turning left and immediately right at the end. Cross a roundabout and then, at the next roundabout, go diagonally left, signed to San Martzial Ermita. Just before you reach a stream turn right along a path. This veers left to the road. Turn right under the **A-8** (Autopista del Cantábrico), after which there is a GR11 information board by a concrete track on your left (2hr 15min, 20m, N43°20.009 W001°46.634). The GR11 is well waymarked from here.

Turn left up the concrete track, ignoring two left forks, then continue up a rough track. Join another concrete track at Aldabe Farm, with water-point, cross a road and continue up a tarmac track which becomes gravel after another house. Cross the road again and reach a large picnic area with [water and toilets](#) (2hr 50min, 205m, N43°19.869 W001°45.920). The building on your right is the **Ermita San Martzial**, which has a bar-restaurant.

**Irún**, on the border of the kingdoms of Navarre, Castile and France, belonged to Navarre, but became part of Castile in 1200. In 1522 Navarre raised an army, assisted by German and French mercenaries, to recapture Irún and they defeated a Castilian army at the battle of Monte San Martzial on 30 June 1522. Success was honoured by the building of a chapel on the shoulder of the hill.

In 1813 Wellington was besieging the French garrison at San Sebastián when he had news of a relief force under General Soult. Wellington broke off the siege and marched his British and Spanish army to meet the French. On 31 August 1813 the Napoleonic troops were defeated in the second battle on Monte San Martzial and the chapel became an important shrine for the people of Irún.

Continue ESE along a concrete track, turning right 50m after a children's play area/picnic area. Don't get confused by the R-11 sign – this is a local footpath and nothing to do with the GR11. Keep straight on when the concrete track goes right and follow a track along the crest of the ridge, descending to a farm on a saddle. Keep straight on, ignoring a track to the right, and climb. You pass a small water catchment dam but the water is of dubious quality. Fork right after a cattle grid along a track which becomes concrete after passing a farm. Turn left up a rough track, under power lines, at the top of the hill. This track soon becomes a grassy path to reach a white cabin. Veer to the right of the cabin to reach a waterless picnic site beside the GI-3454 road. Continue just left of the road to a car park on the **Collado de Erlaitz** (4hr 5min, 448m, N43°18.314 W001°45.380) with Erlaitz (495m) on the right and Pagogaña (482m) on the left. **Dry camping.** ►

Follow a grassy track parallel to and just left of the road, passing through another waterless picnic site. Continue until you reach a track going off diagonally left (438m) just after large parking areas on either side of the road. The GR11 forks left (S) down the track. Gradually descend, forking left and veering sharp right at a junction. ► The good track switchbacks down, reaching a clear-looking woodland stream at the final switchback. Continue down the track until you cross a cattle grid and come out at a small road. Turn right, uphill, to reach the W end of the **Embalse de San Antón** (Endara)

*It would be very  
easy to walk up  
Pagogaña from here.*

*The rocky peak  
ahead is Risco de  
San Antón (596m).*



dam (5hr 40min, 240m, N43°16.624 W001°46.494). Turn left across the dam and continue along the road to pass the **Ermite de St. Antón**, on your right (5hr 50min). This chapel has a [water-point](#) and a covered seating area.

Turn left up a concrete track signed to the Bar-restaurant Ola-Berri, just after the chapel. Before you reach the bar, the GR11 turns right over a stile and up a path across pasture, then forks left as you enter the wood and climbs steeply to reach a concrete track at the **Collado de Tellería** (Collado de San Antón) (6hr 20min, 415m, N43°16.446 W001°45.513). You may prefer to stay on the concrete track left of the Bar-restaurant Ola-Berri, then switchback right and follow the track to the Collado de Tellería.

Continue E along the concrete track, descending past a farm and climbing again. Keep straight on at crossroads and fork right at some houses. Fork right up a track then left along the main track and left again. Turn left and right at a woodland stream and then join a concrete track at a farm with a [water-point](#) in the farmyard. Fork right and then left along a path which joins a track. Soon fork right as the track becomes a path. Cross a concrete track at Alasta (357m) and follow the track along the crest of the ridge. [Dry camping](#). Fork left after a white building at **Amargunko Lepoa** and contour to the next saddle, Amargaga Lepoa (7hr 30min, 304m). Take the middle track, then fork left, then right, then left again to start the descent to Bera. Follow the main track down to reach a minor road on the outskirts of **Bera**. Keep straight on at a crossroads before veering right to an old narrow bridge across the **Rio Bidasoa**.

There is a memorial plaque on the bridge to the men of the **Rifle Brigade** who died on 1 September 1813 defending the bridge against the French. During their retreat following defeat at the Battle of San Martzial, the French army reached San Miguel Bridge over the Rio Bidasoa at Bera. The river was in flood following a severe thunderstorm and the bridge was the only crossing point. The bridge was defended by a 70-man company of green-jacketed riflemen (well known to readers of the *Sharpe* novels by Bernard Cornwell or viewers of the TV films starring Sean Bean) under Captain Daniel Cadoux. This small company held

Memorial plaque on bridge at Bera



the bridge against about 10,000 French troops for about 18 hours. Unfortunately, they were let down by Major General Skerret who refused to send help, despite being camped only a mile away with his Light Brigade. When the Rifle Brigade eventually retreated they suffered heavy casualties and the French were allowed to escape from the trap.

Cross the bridge and follow the road into town, turning left along the main road to the town centre. Turn right at the Bar-restaurant Euskalduna and continue to the square, now a big car park, just after the tourist office (8hr 30min, 40m, N43°16.844 W001°40.928).

Bera is a small town with a tourist office (public toilets inside), a selection of accommodation and an excellent supermarket. Ferreteria Monola stocks 'original' and 'easy-click' camping gas.



**Facilities on Stage 1 (in route order)**Camping Jaizkibel: tel 943 641 679 [www.campingjaizkibel.com](http://www.campingjaizkibel.com)Albergue Juan Sebastián Elcano: tel 943 415 164 [www.gipuzkoangazte.eus](http://www.gipuzkoangazte.eus)Irún Tourist Office: tel 943 020 732 [www.irun.org/turismo](http://www.irun.org/turismo)

Bera Tourist Office: tel 948 631 222

Hostal Auzoa: tel 654 385 363 [www.hostalauzoa.com](http://www.hostalauzoa.com)Hostal Zalain: tel 948 630 967 <https://zalain.info>Hotel Churrut: tel 948 625 540 [www.hotelchurrut.com](http://www.hotelchurrut.com)

Casa Rural Romano: tel 948 631 137

**STAGE 2***Bera to Elizondo*

<b>Start</b>	Bera
<b>Distance</b>	31km
<b>Total Ascent</b>	1300m
<b>Total Descent</b>	1200m
<b>Difficulty</b>	Easy. Waymarking is good.
<b>Time</b>	8hr
<b>High Point</b>	Santa Bárbara (396m), Collado Achuela (795m)

Today's walking is primarily on tracks through woodland and pasture, over steep rolling hills. This is a long day so early in a hike, but there is no obvious way to shorten it for those who are not camping.

Head S from the GR11 information board along the right-hand side of the square and up a concrete track which passes to the right of a tennis court and public swimming pool before joining a tarmac road. Continue to a junction on a bend with a probably dry water-point. Fork right up a track, then left and left again past a house and onto a concrete

