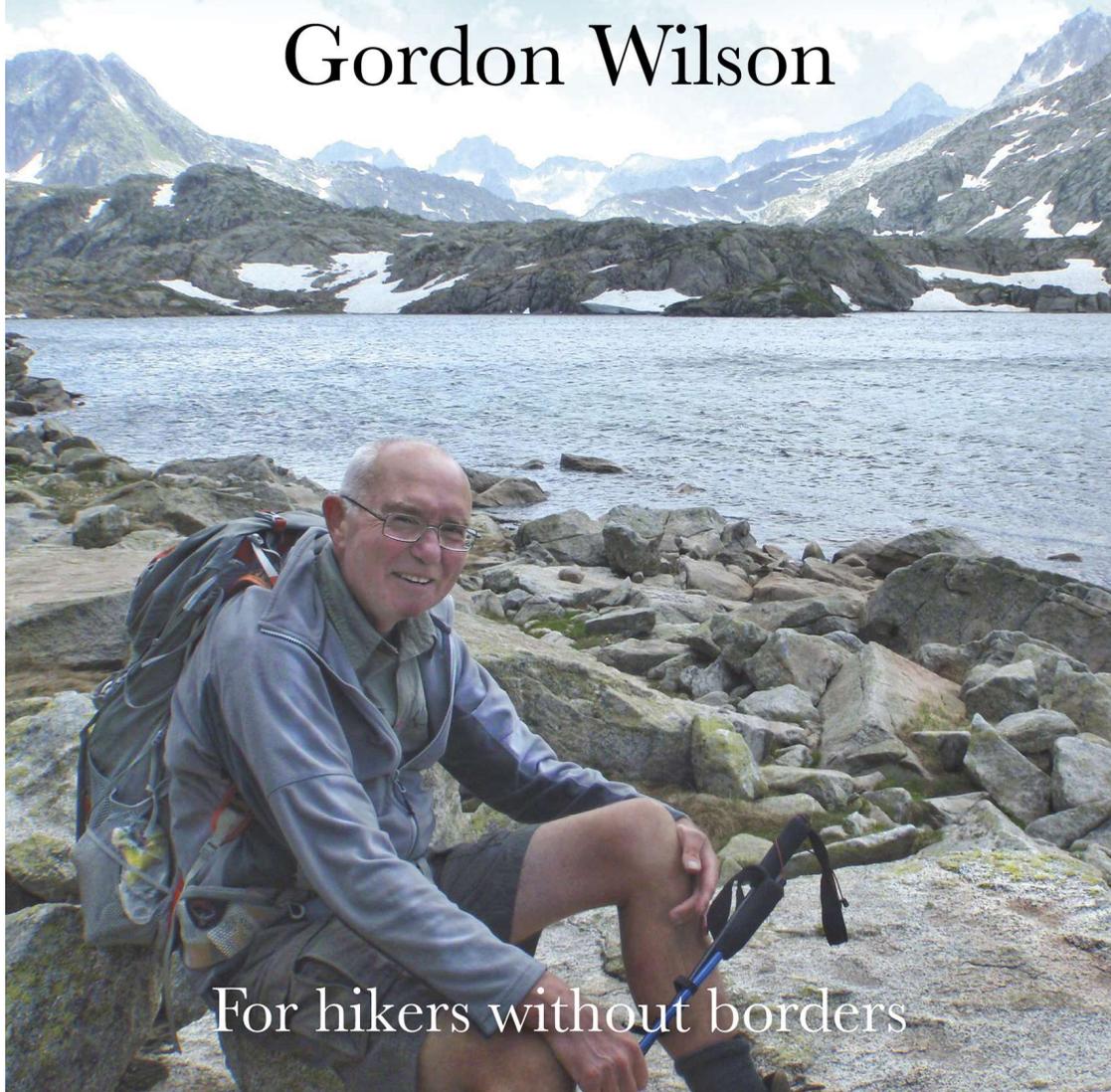


# A guide to trekking the mountain frontier of the Pyrenees

Gordon Wilson



For hikers without borders

## Preface

This is the second edition of an e-book originally titled Space For Wonder: A Guide to Trekking the Mountain Frontier of the Pyrenees, which was also published as a companion print version with the same title (ISBN 978-0-9934422-0-9).

As well as the title change, this second e-edition contains:

- Minor sub-edits, corrections and updates
- Complete updates of chapter 4 and the Maps section of the Appendix: (i) to recognise the increasing use of maps on electronic hand-held devices; (ii) to provide websites and further information on obtaining paper trekking maps to the Pyrenean traverse, including substitutes where maps become out of print or otherwise unavailable
- Two significant route updates. These appear in Chapter 7 where: (i) Days 23 and 24 of the traverse have been changed to reflect the fact that the Refuge de Barroude no longer exists – it was destroyed by fire and no replacement is yet on the horizon; (ii) Days 28/29 where a new refuge, the Refugio de Cap de Llauset, opened in July 2016, changing a very long and arduous trek into one that can be completed over two days, thus enabling one to take in the sumptuous scenery on the South side of the highest Pyrenean Peak, Aneto.

In all other respects, this e-book remains the same as the companion print book.

Gordon Wilson, February 2017

# 1

## A frame of mind

It was a beautiful Sunday in late July 2008, deep in the Spanish Pyrenees. My partner Angharad and I were in the middle of a lonely, tough, four-day stage of the Haute Randonnée Pyrénéenne – the HRP or High Level Traverse. We had struggled up the sketchiest of paths, traversing two boulder fields, to a narrow pass at an altitude of almost 2,500m. So far we hadn't seen a soul. We had wild-camped the night before and so were carrying a small tent and cooking gear. The pass was the first of three that we had to cross before reaching our destination for the day – an unstaffed mountain refuge. We were behind schedule as we sat eating a late lunch and surveying nervously our descent to the tarn below. It looked to be about 300 metres, almost vertically down a gully of loose scree and bits of grass. Our English and French guidebooks both warned us to take care. Suddenly, a young Frenchman in his 20s appeared from behind us. We exchanged the usual greetings and off he went, nimbly down. He was more than half way to the tarn by the time we set off on the longest, most agonising descent that we had ever made.

([Ref10](#)) Two days later, as we prepared to leave the Refugi de Certascan, where the Frenchman – Jean-Paul – was also staying, we spoke with him in French and the conversation went something like this:

*Angharad*: 'You are so fast and nimble compared to us. We wish we had done this [the HRP] when we were your age.'

*Jean-Paul*: 'I hope that I can still do it when I'm your age.' At the time, Angharad and I were respectively 58 and 62.

The three of us then laughed about the philosophical turn to our conversation, and he was gone. The point had, however, been well made. We never again dwelled on the suspicion that perhaps we should have walked the Pyrenees when younger, and that what we were attempting was really for the super-fit. We were doing it now, in the present and in our own way. That was all that mattered.

In retrospect it was during moments like these that the idea for this book was born. If Angharad and I could traverse this barrier that divides Spain from France, so could any other reasonably fit person who loves to walk in high hills and who is grabbed by the idea of traversing a mountainous border from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean – whatever their age. Unfortunately, the existing guidebooks to the traverse, while providing generally excellent instructions, give off an aura that this is an extremely tough physical and mental challenge for the super-fit. Following these books to the letter means that you constantly have to put one foot in front of the other for long days (sometimes very long) over at least six weeks. Even this, however, is not sufficient challenge for some individuals who elevate the traverse to an even higher status – that of a combat sport. They try to reduce the overall time to four or five weeks, or even ten days, which is the current 'record', I believe.

If this is how you get your kicks, I am sure that the sense of achievement at the end is immense and you feel great for a while, as would any person who has just stopped banging their head against a brick wall. Without constant reinforcement, however, such a feeling is ephemeral. As noted in several guides to long distance hiking trails, friends and relations will never quite understand what you have done. They will listen politely to your story and may even say ‘well done’ or ‘that’s a tremendous achievement’, but these are easy words. Their purveyors certainly won’t stretch to erecting a plaque, or even putting up bunting to welcome you home. An early edition of one of the guidebooks to the traverse says that you will find out what kind of person you are. I guess that, being a person of mature years, I already knew the answer to that question in relation to my physical fitness and mental stamina before I ever embarked on the great Pyrenean traverse.



*What is this life if full of care*

*We have no time to stop and stare*

(William Henry Davies 1871-1940)

This book, in contrast, is for people who, like me, hike because we enjoy it. There is no denying that high mountain days can be physically tough, mentally demanding and require care, because a clumsy trip can do serious damage. Nor do I wish to belittle the importance of the personal satisfaction felt at ultimately achieving the goal. The first sight from on high of Banyuls-sur-Mer, our finishing point on the Mediterranean, and still three to four hours away, gives a tremendous thrill, not to mention a spring in the step.

Satisfaction, however, is multi-faceted: completion is just one contributing element. A second, obviously, is the stupendous scenery that is habitually encountered – alongside the changing light and other sights that linger in the memory. The panoramas on a grand scale are part of that element of wonder that mountains inspire, as articulated in the final chapter of Robert MacFarlane’s ‘Mountains of the mind’. There are many other parts to that element: the cascading streams; the woodlands becoming thinner and eventually disappearing as you climb higher; the alpine flowers covering high meadows but sometimes solitary in their own micro-climate, provided by a single rock; the call of those cute, furry, brown mountain mammals, the marmots, perched on rocks above, or scurrying away as you approach; the herd of isards running away at first sight of you; the two eagles swooping round the ridge just as you have stopped a few moments for a snack. Yes, you will gaze in wonder.



*[These trans-border footpaths] have become the silent testimony of the passages of hundreds of persons who, during the years of the Second World War (1939-1944), fled from the Nazi barbarianism that devastated Europe. The Government of Catalonia wishes to render a tribute to all those persons who escaped and to all those who helped them and made it possible for the Pyrenean mountain ports to be converted into mountains of hope and freedom.*

(Information board at the start of a trans-frontier trail to France from a valley in Spanish Catalonia)

Our experiences over time, however, have taught us that wonder and deep satisfaction do not only concern ‘nature’. Further elements shape our constructions of mountains in our minds, and these concern the visible hand of people.

([Ref2](#), [Ref8](#)) Firstly there are the people you will never meet because they are now dead. Yet, the above quotation illustrates in a few moving words the Pyrenees as a political frontier with a tragic, relatively recent, human history. The board refers to the crossing by refugees from France to Spain during the Second World War. Other boards at the foot of trans-frontier trails indicate a two-way refugee flow, because a few years earlier republican refugees fled in the opposite direction to escape the victorious General Franco in the Spanish Civil War. One particular Second World War route from the French Département known as the Ariège – which borders much of the north side of the Haute Pyrénées – to the Vall d’Aneu in Spain has been inaugurated as a *chemin de la liberté*, or road to freedom. It is commemorated by a four-day trek each year that is open to the public.

You wonder first of all, how the refugees actually did it, inadequately clothed and usually in April or May when deep snow added to the hazards – carrying whatever belongings they could muster, and often with babies. Of course, many didn’t make it, but then you wonder about the risks and dangers faced by those who helped them. For everybody involved, this was a matter of life and death. While several books have been written about the Pyrenees and these two wars, reading them will only increase your wonder, not to mention confusion about what really happened beyond what is written in romanticised accounts. Until recently, these episodes seemed unmentionable to locals – they were too raw in the memory. Now, however, at least the younger generation is more interested. Complementing the *Chemin de la Liberté*, another four-day trek, this time circular, linking France and Spain has been devised, complete with official map and guide.



A sobering moment at around 1,600m on the *Muntanyes de Llibertat* trail, and also [Day 35 of the Brown Route](#) (Chapter 8): Little is known of the circumstances. According to one story, the members of a fleeing family during World War II were passing by this spot when they heard a rumble above. The Croix de la Portière (Cross of the Gateway) commemorates their deaths beneath the snow, ice and rocks of an avalanche. Another

**story, however, suggests that a Spanish group lost their way in a snow storm and the cross commemorates where they fell into the ravine below.**

Secondly there are the people you meet in the present. Sometimes, as in the opening lines of this book, the meeting is all too brief, but for those moments you are locked into a kind of intense friendship. Occasionally you meet those who eke out a living from this land. Once, at dinner in a mountain refuge, with heavy rain outside, the door opened and in walked a shepherd, dripping from head to toe. He was beckoned silently to a seat next to us and fed. He told us snippets about his life, of the transhumance agricultural method that transforms him from a town labourer in winter to a shepherd in summer. Then he left, going out again into the dark and mountain rain, into a life so different from ours – and we wondered.



*Scene: July 2012, and we are with a group of French friends, a friendship that has been forged after a five-day stretch on the same route. We are having dinner together in a small village restaurant. A television in the corner is showing coverage of the London Olympics. It takes us to the French studio, seemingly set above the River Thames, with Tower Bridge in the background and a beautiful mellow, evening light. I comment that this must be a very expensive location for the French studio, at which one of our new friends, a Parisian, comments: ‘C’est le Photoshop.’*

Our most memorable experiences have been the lasting friendships we have forged with co-trekkers. The potential for this is not so great on the HRP because of its long, tough days, and because most trekkers are focussed men and (less frequently) women walking alone. On the two official traverses, however, the French Grand Randonnée 10 (GR10), and the Spanish GR11 (more about these later), the potential is much greater. This is because you start to meet the same people each evening, and soon a group of ten or more may come together to eat, drink and generally make merry. It doesn’t always happen, we are told, but when it does, it is enriching and you wonder about other people, about their lives away from the mountains that have institutionalised us all, and how in many basic ways we are pretty much the same.

So yes, again you wonder about more and more things, until at times you feel as if your mind is exploding: the modern livelihoods associated with tourism, especially the intrusion of ski resorts and the roads that have been driven to them; the hydro-electric schemes; the devastation in the valleys caused by floods; the inns, *gîtes* and the first sight of the refuge; the graffiti denouncing the reintroduction of bears; and the mountain dog (*patou*) that guards sheep against bears and wolves. Then there are specific experiences that leave a lasting impression and often questions: the reason for the nine crosses that one suddenly comes across on a high ridge; the *vin doux naturel* that was served to us as an aperitif in a mountain refuge. I could go on indefinitely, but your specific experiences and wonderment will surely be different. Paradoxically, however, wonder at all these things induces a certain modesty, as Robert Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind* also suggests. From landscapes on a grand scale to animal and plant life in its myriad forms, to human trials and tribulations, the total panorama is so vast – and you are so insignificant. Modesty is the other side of the coin to ‘feeling great’ on completion.

Alas, the existing guidebooks to the Pyrenean traverse allow no time for wonder, whether it be at the marvels of panorama, animal and plant life, fellow human beings

creating a history of ‘hope and freedom’, or the simple enrichment of conversation with those who are sharing the experience. The books provide the walking time only, with no stops, not even to enjoy a snack or dabble in the water. Of course they are right in a sense, because you can’t put a number on stop-time, when so many variables contribute, from blisters to the roughness of the terrain, to weather, to contemplating the marvels of nature. Our own recorded actual timings for each day suggest that, to the guidebook walking time, anything between 30 and 70 per cent might be added to arrive at the total duration. Given that a rough average walking time in the guidebooks is eight hours per day, you soon realise that there isn’t much opportunity to do anything apart from keeping utterly focused on your feet and falling asleep at night. Full of care to keep to the ambitious schedule, perhaps break a record even, there is no time to stop and stare, or read about refugee crossings, or talk to other people. Perhaps I exaggerate to make the point!

So, this is a book for those whose enjoyment of the traverse also comprises embracing a fuller experience of the Pyrenees beyond the physical endurance. Ultimately, this fuller experience means suspension of everyday reality and immersing yourself in the present with its beguiling simplicity. Walk for several hours, take in the breath-taking views, the animals and plants; and at the end relax, perhaps hand-wash a few clothes and dry them on a rock before resuming acquaintance with recently-made chums over dinner. Then it’s time to go to bed. There’s a bit more to it than that, as I will explain, but that is the essence, when a new rhythm of daily life takes hold.

In other words the aims of this book are firstly to get you interested in the Pyrenean traverse; secondly to get you to want to do it; thirdly to help enable you to do it; and fourthly to ensure you enjoy doing it – in spite of the aches and pains. And that you enjoy the lows as well as the highs, through gaining a full social as well as physical experience.



I started writing, indeed the words that you have hopefully just digested, today, Monday. Yesterday, Angharad and I went for a walk with friends in the South Pennines of England – that tract of high ground that lies between the National Parks of the Peak District to the south and the Yorkshire Dales to the north. The South Pennines do not themselves enjoy National Park status, but they are still fine walking country and a playground that serves the great industrial conurbations to the east and west. Angharad and I live to the east, in the town of Huddersfield, which made its name in the 19th century for the production of fine ‘worsted’ woollen yarns. The South Pennines, which provided the original water power for the British Industrial Revolution, are thus on our doorstep.

Yesterday we were walking above the town of Hebden Bridge, in Calderdale, towards Stoodley Pike, whose modest height of 400m still imposes itself above the valley. Six months previously I had passed this way in the opposite direction with a friend. We were walking the Pennine Way – the 429 km long-distance path that runs south to north the length of the ‘backbone of England’. That was the colloquial name given to the Pennines in geography lessons at school. I mentioned this three-week trek to our friends, pointing out the spot where we had deviated from the official route. We had done so to enable us to descend into the fleshpots of Hebden Bridge where we rested, wined and dined with two of the friends we were walking with yesterday. We had then rejoined the official route about three kilometres further on from where we had

deviated. The joking response to my remark was that perhaps we had ‘cheated’ by not walking the official Pennine Way every step that we took. I responded in turn that a) we had perhaps walked further through our deviation and b) it had never been our intention to be slaves to the tyranny of the painted or engraved acorn symbols that mark the official route. Instead, we had treated the Pennine Way as a ‘concept’, in which the aim was to walk from one end to the other and certainly not concern ourselves over minor deviations.

I too have digressed from my narrative by describing an incident in my native Pennines of England, rather than focusing solely on the Pyrenees. The reason is – and this is my first tip to those who are buying into the idea of traversing the Pyrenees – that, likewise, you should treat it as a ‘concept’. As a concept, or ‘general idea’ if you don’t like that word, you continually adapt your route and expectations. You certainly don’t feel obliged to follow at all times the red and white paint flashes of the GR10 and GR11, indispensable as they are when hiking sections of these official trails, or follow the guidebook instruction of the HRP. ([Ref2](#), [Ref10](#)) To put the idea positively, think of yourself as a *hiker without borders*, that is a hiker who transcends: (i) the physical boundaries of individual peaks and passes; (ii) the political and cultural boundaries that separate France, Spain, Andorra, The Basque Country, Catalonia, Aragon and other entities; (iii) the social boundaries including those of age, gender, and where you come from; (iv) and most importantly the boundaries of the mind that determine what you allow yourself to think about. You transcend them because, whatever the differences, you share the experience of the Pyrenees as your living mountain.

Treating the Pyrenean traverse as a concept connects with the explorers of more than a century ago, such as the Anglo-French writer and historian Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) whose goal was simply to be among these mountains and their people, not to mention the inns, which inspired his famous poem [Tarantella](#) written in 1929:

*Do you remember an Inn,  
Miranda?  
Do you remember an Inn?  
And the tending and the spreading  
Of the straw for a bedding,  
And the fleas that tease in the high Pyrenees,  
And the wine that tasted of tar?  
And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers  
(Under the vine of the dark veranda)?*

Hilaire Belloc also wrote a 1909 Guide, *The Pyrenees*, in which his aim was to inform others of the things he wished he had known before setting off. I have taken this as the practical objective of this book, in which subsequent chapters will cover:

**Travelling** to and within the Pyrenees – aided by Google – and when to go;

**Gear** for comfort and weight, together with the pros and cons of different forms of accommodation, from hotels to bivouacs;

**Customising** and calibrating to personal circumstance the existing guidebooks, maps, footpaths and waymarks;

**Being** aware of and responsible towards the local environment, and those who live and work in it;

**In** addition to the stunning scenery, being aware of the cultural, political, social and economic history that has left its mark on contemporary Pyrenean life;

**Being** prepared for the full, social experience, while maintaining privacy and independence;

**The** routes that Angharad and I have used over the years, during which time we have traversed the entire range twice and walked many variants, and how you might like to create your own route.

While this book provides (Chapters 6-9) daily descriptions of the route and variants, they are not as detailed as those provided in the step-by-step guidebooks. These guidebooks are strong on detail, but generally short on context. ([Ref4](#)) They are a bit like walking in blinkers without reference to the overall surroundings through which you travel, and will see every time that you lift your eyes from the ground at your feet. You should also beware because they can never provide enough detail to remove all doubt.

On the other hand, my descriptions are designed to complement the large-scale walkers' maps of the Pyrenees that I describe in Chapter 4 and the Appendix. These maps demonstrate amply the surrounding physical context, in that they show the trail in relation to features such as peaks, ridges, lakes and valleys. Key navigation features along the trail are also apparent.

Thus, this book gives both more and less than the guidebooks and the maps. It gives less detail of the route than the guidebooks and less of the overall physical context than the maps. It does, however, tell of the nature of the terrain, the places where you might go wrong and an idea of the overall time you will take. To this it adds the human contexts and the spaces for wonder. Finally, it provides links to other sources, should you be seeking more. I, of course, think that the balance is right in that the book provides what I would like to have known before immersing myself in the Pyrenees. On that point, however, you, the reader, are the ultimate judge.



To end this introductory chapter, I tell a little more about regarding the Pyrenean traverse as a concept. First and foremost, it is an attitude in which, sure, the basic-aim is to walk from one coast to the other across the mountain passes – but you are not a failure if you adopt easier routes than those prescribed occasionally, because of bad weather, for example. You are not a failure if you even resort to four wheels on occasion, when a stage in the journey involves a stretch of road. Remember, Hilaire Belloc and others of his generation, never beat themselves up because they hired a mule after a good night in an inn. *'Ce n'est pas un concours!'* I once remarked to some French friends who were marvelling over dinner one night that Angharad and I had passed them en route that day – 'It is not a competition!' Nor is it a conquest in the usual sense. Even the HRP as described in the guidebooks only scales the summits of three major peaks in the entire range, all on the relatively easier terrain of the Pyrénées Orientales (eastern Pyrenees). The route of everyone undertaking the traverse – the odd complete head-banger excepted, perhaps – is overwhelmingly over the passes, albeit many of them being high altitude passes.

([Ref10](#)) To put yourself into a frame of mind to do something more enriching than mere conquest, I recommend taking a cue from Nan Shepherd's beautifully written account of immersion over a lifetime in the Scottish mountain range, the Cairngorms.

The Living Mountain was originally written in 1944 but lay unpublished after an initial rejection – until a small publisher printed a limited edition in 1977. More recently it has been resurrected, with an introduction by the aforementioned Robert Macfarlane. For the record, the Cairngorms contain the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth highest mountains in Britain, and five of the nine that are over 4,000 feet (1,219m) in height. For Nan, however, it is not the individual peaks, but the range that becomes your summit and you do not reach this summit by only putting one foot in front of the other with no time or inclination to immerse, reflect and wonder.



**Part of your living mountain: the Pyrenees in Andorra**

As you wonder about a multitude of things while traversing the Pyrenees, you create a story, perhaps the best story of your life. It is a story of considerable subtlety that connects the unique personal experience of the eye of the beholder with quests for beauty and truths about humanity. It is your lived experience of the range. It is a story in the best tradition, which creates a universal out of the local. Without necessarily articulating it, you become, if you aren't one already, a hiker without borders.

You won't, however, create this story-experience if on a stage of the traverse that the guidebook says will take ten hours, not allowing for stops. You won't create it if your focus is to complete the traverse ever faster. An accident is likely if you try to stare without stopping. You will create it if you stop, stare and engage with those you meet during your journey.

The hiker without borders takes in everything.

### **Top tips from Chapter 1**

1. If you are reasonably fit, used to hill walking, and are interested, possibly fascinated, in walking the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, you can do it, whatever your age.

2. Do not be put off by conventional guidebooks that might leave the impression that the traverse is for super-fit, young adults only. It is neither a combat sport nor a competition.
3. Put yourself in the frame of mind that the whole range is your mountain, not the individual summits, which the traverse rarely visits.
4. Put yourself in the frame of mind to treat the traverse as a concept rather than a set route that you must follow slavishly.
5. Put yourself in the frame of mind to have a full experience; that is an experience that is both broader and deeper than the physical endurance of putting one foot in front of the other for hours on end, day after day.
6. Put yourself in the frame of mind to allow the mountains to inspire wonder – wonder at the scenery, wonder at the wild and lonely places, wonder at the wild animals and flowers, wonder at the human history, wonder at contemporary human lives that are created in these mountains.
7. Put yourself in the frame of mind to enjoy the traverse and be a hiker without borders.