Running the length of the Pyrenees – attempt

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The plan was to run the length of the Pyrenees, following the Haute Route, which was the highest and toughest of the trails which follow the Spanish/French border from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. It would involve navigation of 800km+ of rough trail and 42,000m ascent. I'd be going solo, bivvying as much of the way as possible, and carrying all of my stuff (up to 8 days food in places). And for the extra challenge, I had just 31 days in order to get back to Leeds in time for my graduation.

It was going to be incredible! I was going to have an amazing mountain experience, be living the dream, then come back a true mountain goat with legs of steel ready to finish of the fell running season for the rest of the summer. I was even fundraising for the Jack Bloor Fund after the suggestion by Hilary, which I was super excited to do as it felt so good to be giving back to an organisation which had helped fund my trip. I promoted it all over social media and was overwhelmed by the support I had within just a few days.

Unfortunately, it didn't quite go to plan. Day One was forecast for torrential rain the entire day. I set off in good spirits regardless, buzzing to be on Day One of my trip and knowing the forecast was meant to improve each day for the rest of the week. I ran around Hendaye in the pouring rain to find some camping gas, soaked through within minutes. There was no gas to be found, and after 4hrs of searching and half an hour in McDonalds wondering what to do, I set off without, hoping to get some on the way or to rehydrate my cous cous with cold water.



My pack felt ridiculously heavy. I'd done a month's running trip with almost exactly the same kit a year before in New Zealand, but this time my training hadn't been good – I'd been running well a few months before, but had been limited to the roads around Leeds due to final year exams and deadlines – no big mountain days. The month before, when I'd planned to get in the longer runs, I'd been hit by examseason flu, and had felt exhausted and run down for weeks, and as a consequence had done nothing more than short jogs the weeks before leaving in an attempt to get my energy back. A few days before leaving I finally felt like I was back to my 'normal' self, but I was definitely not physically prepared. By this point there was nothing I could do other than hope that my body would adapt as I went – something which is possible on a long trip.

Moving on from the lack of camping gas, things continued to just not be in my favour. It was like my guardian angel had gone on holiday and been replaced by an evil wizard. In the torrential rain and mist I took a turning which gradually sent me back around the hill I'd just been over, so I ended up back where I started – wasting another 2hrs. My map disintegrated. Over the next week it continued to rain, and there was still no gas – meaning the food I could buy was limited to tortilla wraps and pâté/Nutella, packets of Uncle Ben's semi-cooked rice (they are designed to cook the last bit in the microwave), and cold sardines. Every day the forecast said the weather would improve, and every day it didn't, again saying the next day would be good… There was five days of mist, making navigation difficult – after spending hours lost on a hillside trying to find the road, I realised I was just metres away but the mist had been too thick to see it. After this (and a few other times being lost in the mist), I followed roads round where possible as the Haute Route isn't a marked trail and is often on very faint paths (and sometimes off-path), so was pretty impossible in bad visibility. This meant long days on hard tarmac in my worn-out trail shoes, which meant more impact on the legs. My 'breaks' where short as it was too cold to stop long, and my legs were cold all day from the rain, warming up once per night usually about 3am when the warmth finally made it down to my toes. It was hard to stay positive through days of just me in the mist, with the only company the endless cows just out of sight with their clanging bells, and every person I met didn't speak English. I felt rude and ignorant for not being able to speak either French or Spanish, and it made the mist even more lonely – something I had been entirely unprepared for as I've never felt lonely in mountains before.



My whole body was hurting but usually, I'd wake up the next day to realise the aches had moved to a different place, so it was just my body adapting, and even within a few days it felt more natural carrying a pack. So, when my feet/ankles started really hurting I presumed (hoped) it was another ache that would move on or disappear. But this didn't happen and within just 5 days I had to have a rest day. My right ankle was double the size, with my left also very painful, with the tendons making creaking sounds when I moved it. I emailed Jim Davies (sports therapist and legendary fell runner) for advice and he warned it didn't sound good, and I may need some serious rest. Where I'd stopped was a soul-destroying-ly miserable Col which was apparently right on the mist-line – the guy running the café hadn't seen the sun since November. It wasn't a good place to be, so I decided to set off slowly again, doing very short days – my feet had improved even in just one day of rest so I felt there was hope. And this time, the forecast said sunshine ALL DAY, even for the top of the first 'mountain-peak' of the trip I had the climb.
The next day it rained and was misty – again, all day, the forecast was wrong. By the end of the day I was barely walking and knew I wouldn't be able to make it, and had to find some way of having some serious rest. Both ankles were very sore and swollen, and my right knee now hurt too. I was devastated and couldn't believe after all the planning and support from everyone I had only managed 6 days and wouldn't complete the trip. I limped down to the nearest village the next day and hitched out – and that was the end of my attempt.

Despite what felt like a failure at the time, I believe it was a hugely valuable experience and taught me a lot, and will prove itself to be incredibly useful for future, bigger adventures. Things like keeping the legs warm when running in the wet, not under-estimating the importance of shoes, having enough food – all simple things which everyone knows in theory, but are easy to let slip in reality. Also, more important things like making an effort to learn some of the language in a foreign country – people have different opinions about this but I made myself swear to never neglect this one again as I found it so limiting and lonely, and felt so rude! Making sure training goes well – and changing plan if it doesn't. Allowing enough time to start with shorter days and build up, without the pressure to do big days every day. Taking a book, taking LOTS more snacks, and not ditching the guidebook.
There were also some incredible moments which I can remember so vividly – mad even better from the fact that the rest of the time it was one misty blur! A huge eagle swooped across the road out of the mist ahead of me, visible for seconds but so close – it had clearly not heard me as the mist made everything so silent. Another time two shepherds dogs sprinted barking out of the mist – I was immediately worried in case they were guard dogs, but they were so lovely and I stood stroking them for a while – appreciating that language barriers didn't exist with dogs! They then walked with me along the track as I tried to find the tiny path which took me down to the stream. In the end, they were the only reason I found my way - the point they kept pausing at by the track as we walked backwards and forwards marked the start of the path, and when I turned down it they went ahead, basically leading me half an hour down the very steep, rough hillside to the bridge – a 'path' which would have been almost impossible to find on my

It took almost 3 weeks to recover - luckily some old family friends let me stay at their house in the Pyrenees so I spent the time with them, helping out with their gardening work. It was great to spend time with them in their beautiful small French village, and at the end of it I was fit enough to do a 5 day trip in the high-mountains – in good weather, finally with some views! Most of the trip was over 2000m, with the first day climbing up to Pic D'Estats at 3143m which was the best mountain day I've had in my life, and I had the top completely to myself. Lots of big rocky mountains, snow and beautiful lakes.



I'm hugely grateful for the Jack Bloor Fund for supporting this trip, and despite not going to plan it was invaluable in my development and will help future adventures to be more successful.