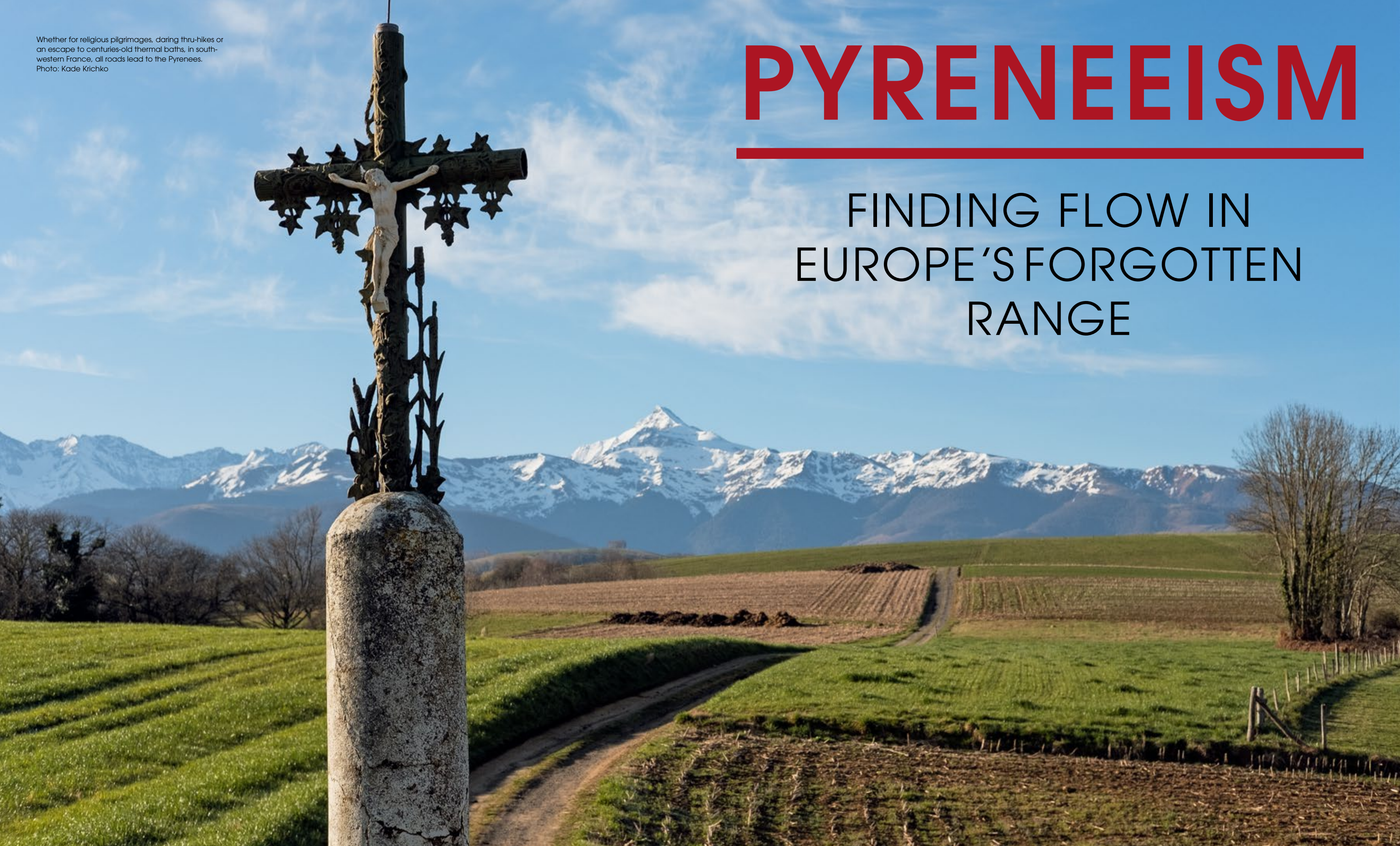


Whether for religious pilgrimages, daring thru-hikes or an escape to centuries-old thermal baths, in southwestern France, all roads lead to the Pyrenees.
Photo: Kade Krichko

PYRENEEISM

FINDING FLOW IN
EUROPE'S FORGOTTEN
RANGE





"French bakeries are full of surprises, but this one might take the cake. After missing out on early morning crepes, Guillaume Arrieta and I settled for these orange-infused fritters, pastries that in French roughly translate to 'Nun's Fart.' Needless to say, it was the most delicious desert I've ever tasted."
Photo: Kade Krichko

Words **KADE KRICHKO**

"AH, PUTAIN!"

Bouncing the expletive off his front windshield, Guillaume Arrieta shakes his head and bears down on the steering wheel. Until this point, the 30-year-old photographer has been all smiles, almost alarmingly optimistic considering the midwinter drought that has decimated snowpacks across Europe. But now something has changed, and as our van rises and falls with the undulating French countryside, I begin to fear our ski mission, and maybe even our lives, are in serious danger.

Twisting a blonde, curly cue mustache, "I forgot the meat," he says, dejected. Suppressing the urge to laugh, I'm at once hit by my own pang of sadness. Arrieta and I had been playing phone and geological tag for weeks now and, with our final weather window closing, a forgotten lunch feels like the drop threatening to spill our rapidly filling cup. Starting from the Basque surf haven of Biarritz, we're tracing the Adour River to its source, two hours east and up into the mercurial Hautes-Pyrénées and one of the world's sneakiest sea-to-ski pilgrimages. A corner of Europe forged by pounding surf and rocky alpine, southwestern France was the historical home of hearty fishermen and weathered shepherds long before it became a summer destination for the country's rich and famous. Nowadays Arrieta and a growing group of adventure sports enthusiasts are harvesting a different kind of regional bounty, opting out of the

dizzying crowds of the Alps to carve out a life of wave-catching and couloir-hunting in this natural anomaly.

A hopeful storm system had petered out overnight, and reports from Arrieta's friend and local skier Julien Colonge aren't looking promising. A few inches here, maybe a bit of wind-loading there—not enough to cover the scars of a two-month melt-freeze cycle. But the Pyrenees are as fickle as they are intricate, a pop-up book of narrow river valleys and unforgiving jagged gneiss flirting with the freezing line and trapping storms off the turbulent Bay of Biscay.

Sometimes, Arrieta says, you don't know until you go. Hungry or not, that's just enough to keep me in the game. We grab a roadside baguette and a half wheel of sheep's cheese. It's time to roll the dice one more time.



HENRI SALLENAVE was only 22 years old when he changed the Pyrenees forever. The year was 1903, and after reading about the Norwegian pastime of skiing in his local paper, the young French sportsman decided he needed alpine instruments of his own, commissioning a nearby weapons factory to build a custom pair of skis, poles and sealskin climbing skins. Within a week of returning home to the Pyrenean hub of Pau with his new contraptions, he was scaling and sliding down the slopes of Benou and 8,573-foot Pic de Ger. Days later, a Pau-based music teacher had ordered three more pairs, and mountaineers from the area started to followed suit.

Sallenave continued to pick off descents in the Pyrenees and eventually organized the range's first international ski race in 1908. Two years later, the France Skiing Championships came to nearby Cauterets. About the time Alps stalwart Chamonix became France's first ski resort, the sport had found purchase along the country's southern border.

An area already rich in resort towns built around systems of natural hot springs (thermal baths that attracted the likes of Napoleon III) the Pyrenees seemed ripe for a ski explosion. But as the Alps started building up their post-WWII ski infrastructure and the Pyrenees began constructing ski hills of its own, the boom never came.

The Alpine Region had nearly 100 peaks over 13,000 feet, while the Pyrenees topped out at 11,168 (on the Spanish peak of Aneto). Tight rockfall- and avalanche-prone accessways made for difficult travel through the Pyrenees come wintertime and, where Alps resorts were able to link mountains via public transportation and interconnected ski hills, many of the resorts in France's southern range were geographically and economically isolated. Because many of the Pyrenean ski hills were run by the municipalities themselves, they offered a low price point for local skiers, but often stalled when it came to allocating government funds for expansion projects or infrastructure improvements.

Today, the Alps accounts for 80 percent of France's 55 million average annual ski visits, according to the country's tourism department. The Pyrenees splits the remaining percentage with the country's Massif Central. Despite opening the second ski area in all of France (Barèges in 1921), the Pyrenees continues living in the lengthening shadow of its sister range to the east.



LEFT
Skiing in the Pyrenees can be traced back to a single pair of skis in the early 1900s, but soon mountain folks from across the region were fashioning their own. Some of the original shred sticks appear next to a photo of the region's early skiers in a temporary exhibit in Lourdes, France.
Photo: Kade Krichko

HERE
"A sneaky powder day on top of two months of consolidated base make for prime Pyrenean party shredding. Guillaume Arrieta and Julien Colonge give 'r hell."
Photo: Kade Krichko



LEFT

The view from Château fort de Lourdes. Placed at the gateway to seven mountain valleys, the Pyrenean fortress was born a castle before being converted into a royal prison and later a museum.

Photo: Kade Krichko

BELOW

Remy Maisonnave pairs his local sheep's cheese with a fresh batch of spring corn.

Photo: Kade Krichko

REMY MAISONNAVE doesn't like crowds. Ten days before meeting up with Arrieta, Maisonnave and I followed the gushing Gave de Pau on our way to Gavarnie, a massive rock amphitheater that forms France's southern border with Spain. As small clusters of ski-racked cars forked left, the 38-year-old jet-engine pilot grinned as he steered us right.

"This is why I like skiing," he explained. "With no one around, you can just put on your skis and go to the wilds of the mountains."

We'd started the morning in Lourdes, a medieval town and home to a hand-dug spring that, according to Catholic lore, provided healing miracles for any who bathed in its waters. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims make their way to the small town every year (many buying church-branded jugs to carry healing water back home), but few continue the pilgrimage from there, and even fewer follow our route into the Hautes-Pyrénées.

Maisonnave was born and raised in the foothills of these mountains. His work often brought him to far-flung corners of Europe, but he always made a point to come back here—especially in winter. A lifelong skier, Maisonnave picked up telemark skiing 10 years ago, and gave up the resort shortly after. After meeting Colonge at the High Fives Film Festival in 2018, he linked up with locals Arrieta, Jeanmi Gouldain and Matt Viveau, galvanizing a cast of alpine-minded skiers exploring beyond resort boundaries.

But on this morning, it was just us. The waterfalls cascading off Gavarnie's towering cirque walls hung frozen solid in the March shade as we ascended toward a leftward basin and the promise of afternoon sun. After an active and early start to the season, the Pyrenees were experiencing a two-month drought, and our only hope for decent skiing was a late-day corn cycle. With skis on our packs, Maisonnave waxed poetic about a December storm that had left three feet of snow in the trees before anyone had dug their skis out of the closet—a private powder week for the motivated few. Arrieta had told me the same tale just weeks before.

Should have been there. It's a skier's adage that has additional meaning in these mountains. Much like the Cascades in the Pacific Northwest, the Pyrenees rely on turbulent, ocean-powered storms for their snowpack, systems that jump back and forth across the freezing line almost hourly, proving maddening for even the keenest weather expert.



"You have to ski in the storm," Maisonnave said. "It can't be the day after. In the Pyrenees that's too late."

A few months too late, we let the sun do the work for us. Switching to skins in the snowy basin at the edge of 112,640-acre Pyrenees National Park, we climbed toward the warm rocks above Refuge des Espuguettes, a summer shelter for hikers, as the frozen crystals below our skis softened in the midday heat. From our rocky perch, Maisonnave gleefully pointed out the only humans we'd see all day—two tiny specks picking their way along a faraway ridgeline.

Derived from the Alps themselves, the word "alpinism" suggests athletic achievement and goal-based movement in the mountains. Pyreneism, on the other hand, is about being in nature, enjoying exactly where you are, rather than where you are going. Maisonnave had kept a slow and deliberate pace all day, savoring each glide step away from the human current. It felt almost forbidden to be alone out here. All of these mountains and not a single track to cross.

By 4 p.m., our frozen layer had transitioned into what Maisonnave called moquette, or "carpet." Stashing our baguette lunch, we aimed ourselves in the direction of the shadowy waterfalls below, arcing effortless, sun-kissed s-curves toward the basin, nary a speck of hurry between us.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT

"Morning surf check above Le Grande Plage in Biarritz. After a morning dip, we could make it to the mountains for first chair and, with enough espresso, back to the beach for a sunset session."

Photo: Kade Krichko

Picking up the backcountry baguette from the source in Bareges, France.
Photo: Kade Krichko



RIGHT TOP

The connection between sea and mountain is undeniable in the southwestern corner of France, but few are blurring that line more than Franck Bernes-Heuga, who, with the help of his sponsor Zag Skis, has built a pair of floating skis to tow into Basque Country's biggest

winter swells—ski poles and all.
Photo: Guillaume Arrieta

RIGHT BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

"When it comes to open-water swimming, how cold is too cold? Members of Les Ours Blancs, a Biarritz-based swim club have been searching for the limit since 1929. Swim caps are recommended, as are flippers and a warm change of clothes. The only thing not permitted? Wetsuits, of course."
Photo: Kade Krichko

Biarritz's Port Vieux, where you're bound to spot a polar plunger or two any day of the week. Photo: Kade Krichko

BACK AT THE COAST, Biarritz's Port Vieux was all but deserted. A salty wind bit through my softshell, as five figures cut through angry whitecaps just offshore. Wearing nothing but swimsuits and their signature orange bathing caps, Les Ours Blancs (the polar bears) have been swimming at this beach year-round since 1929. With dozens of active members, it's one of the largest open-water swim clubs in the area, a testament to the seabound souls that call La Côte des Basque home.

Emerging from the water, Maritxu Darrigrand walked calmly across the frozen sand. The 65-year-old would be the first to admit she's at home in the ocean, but Darrigrand's story has traveled full circle. Once a national surf champion, Darrigrand moved to California in the 1970s and discovered the mountains shortly thereafter. After spells at Mammoth and Sun Valley, she was part of the original ski-bum crew that worked out of the Cliff Lodge at newly opened Snowbird in the mid-'70s before stowing away and sailing back to France. She lived a few more years in Chamonix (where she allegedly introduced the resort's first monoski) before the sea called her back home, but the connection between sea and sky had been forged.

In the early '90s, she helped bring Quiksilver's European headquarters to Europe, and eventually spearheaded the creation of the company's women-focused brand, Roxy. As part of that initiative, she created the Quik Cup in 1993, a ski and snowboard competition based between Biarritz and the Pyrenean resort of La Mongie, two and a half hours east. It was a first-of-its-kind event in southwestern France, and a chance for Darrigrand to combine her two passions on Basque soil.

Skiing had its history in the region, but ever since Hollywood film crews brought surfboards to Biarritz in 1956, surfing has had its heart. Handfuls of French surf champions have come from La Côte des Basque over the decades, and wave riders worldwide descend on the area's barreling beach breaks every year.

But few if any have truly harnessed the two natural elements' unparalleled proximity. While Darrigrand showed the way with her Quik Cup, Arrieta and a new generation took her blueprint and made it their life's work.

"One side of me is skis and a piolet, and the other a board and wetsuit," Arrieta said. "There aren't many doing it at the technical level we are doing it. People want to specialize on one side."





"Combining Barèges and La Mongie ski areas, Grand Tourmalet is the most established ski resort in southwestern France, but even during one of the country's busy vacation weeks, the area felt almost empty. It's a feeling I'd run into again and again during my time in the Pyrenees." Photo: Kade Krichko

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Julien Colonge knows that on the Basque coastline, the early board gets the wave. The 34-year-old lives by the sea, but spends most of his winters in the mountains, often setting up his camper van outside of his engineering firm and making a game-time decision between surf or sea. Photo: Courtesy of Julien Colonge

Far from the Alps' fondue stations and mid-mountain nightclubs, lunch breaks look a little different at Grand Tourmalet. Photo: Kade Krichko

Skinny ski culture is alive and well along France's southern border. Photo: Kade Krichko



Arrieta was born by the sea to mountain-loving parents. For his entire childhood, he traveled between Biarritz and the nearby ski area of Gourette, straddling two worlds until a camera helped him combine them into one. After growing up an alpine ski racer, he followed his university friends into the waves, fostering a budding photography obsession from inside the barrel. Eventually he brought the camera to the mountains, and as he pushed higher beyond resort Pomas, it became a means of documenting not only his personal exploits, but also campaigns for outdoor brands throughout France. Nowadays Arrieta juggles clients like Quiksilver, Picture, O'Neill and the World Surf League, and was recently tapped to shoot Olympic surfing in 2024 (an event that will take place in Tahiti), commuting multiple times a week between the area's natural playgrounds.

Colonge has established a similar balance. Resting his head in the neighboring port city of Capbreton, the 34-year-old checks the surf in the morning before shipping up to the Pyrenees, leading groups of mostly French skiers and boarders through his guiding service, UBAC Images.

Their friend and Pau native Franck Bernes-Heuga has taken things a step further, designing a pair of surf skis built to perform in the Atlantic's sizable winter swell. For Bernes-Heuga it's an organic progression, bringing together the two elements that have shaped the better part of his adult life. In between mountain missions in the Pyrenees and Alps, the Frenchman has been working to create a government-supported ski-to-sea event, while training to be the first human to ski into a barrel.

"Where else on Earth can you do this?" Colonge mused.

LEFT TO RIGHT

An unexpected day of cold powder and blue skies is reason enough to celebrate on the skin track. Julien Colonge (pictured) and Guillaume Arrieta shadow cheers their good fortune. Photo: Guillaume Arrieta

In European ski culture, snacking is a full-time sport. The author, Guillaume Arrieta and Matt Viveau, go for gold between bowl laps. Photo: Julien Colonge



BY THE TIME ARRIETA and I reach his snow camp, Colonge can't stop shaking his head. The longhaired mountain guide had stayed the night in the zone adjacent to Bareges, where the Adour begins its journey down to the Basque coast. He'd given us a pessimistic snow report just hours before, but his physical disbelief has given way to a wide smile. A sunrise run had been way deeper than expected, and even though skies had broken blue, temperatures had stayed cold. If the wind had blown the way he anticipated, the next basin over could provide some elusive Pyrenean magic.

Raised in the shadow of Chamonix, Colonge grew up skiing classic, technical descents. When he chased an engineering job to this corner of France 11 years ago, he was excited to finally live near a coastline, but didn't have high expectations for the mountains.

"People in the Alps think the Pyrenees are hills," Colonge says. "We were wrong. We didn't know how to look for it."

He and Arrieta linked up through their ski sponsor, Zag, a few years back, and have been exploring the border range's intricacies ever since. Grounded during the pandemic, the pair, along with Maisonnave, Bernes-Heuga, Gouldain and Viveau put together the homegrown *Meu Pirenèus*, a comprehensive video diary of the sheer possibility to be found in these jagged peaks.

But as we skin up into a trackless, rock-spire-lined bowl, Colonge says it's not the objectives made that have turned this place into his adopted home.

"In Chamonix, we had to wait to take the first chairlift, there was stress, so many guides, so much lack of knowledge," he recounts. "Here? No sounds, no crowds, no people. I appreciate it more and more."

Putting his camera away, Arrieta lays down first tracks. It has been a long, dry winter, and the first powder turns of 2022 are nothing short of cathartic. Letting out a primal scream, he slashes a silent arc before launching off a 10-foot cliff at full speed. Colonge and I follow one by one, each putting our original signature on an otherwise blank canvas.

We take our time slapping on skins for round two, the only other people in our zone just beginning their long ascent at nearly 11 a.m. Now all three of us are our shaking our heads in disbelief. If this is Pyreneism, I'm here for it.

Knowing conditions in this range could change at a moment's notice, we ski until our legs can't take anymore, standing atop our final line in the late-afternoon sun. Colonge has already peeled off from our pack and, as if on cue, the clouds start their journey eastward from the sea. Harvesting cold crystalline perfection, I milk my last turns in Europe's overlooked alpine holdout. Arrieta yo-yos past me and points toward the river leading us home. ¶



"With clouds starting to roll in from the west, Arrieta took advantage of the late-afternoon sun and scored one last line through picturesque rock spires. Always a gracious host, he left more than enough fresh turns for me." Photo: Kade Krichko