

Walk 16: CRÊTE DES ISARDS

Distance: 11.5km/7.2mi; 7h

Grade: moderate, with about 850m/2790ft of ascent

Equipment: mountain walking equipment according to season (highest point 2381m/7810ft); see notes on 'Walking', page 38. The Riutort Valley can be quite boggy, so stout, water-resistant footwear is advisable.

How to get there and return:

☞ (Car tour 5). From Tarascon-sur-Ariège take the N20 south to Les Cabannes. Turn into the village and follow signs for Aston and Barrage de Laparan (D520A). The road gradually deteriorates but is quite passable. Park after

20km, just beyond the dam wall, beside the little Riutort waterfall.

Shorter walk: From the **Cabane de Riutort** go directly to the **Refuge du Rulhe** along the Riutort Valley, saving 1h30min. The path is well-marked (allow 3h to get to the Rulhe and 2h30min for the return by the same route).

Easy walk: From the parking area, amble beside the **Etang de Laparan** and as far along the valley as you wish.

Note: *The Refuge du Rulhe (05 61 65 65 01), the farthest point of the walk, is an excellent base for treks.*

For general information: Tarascon Tourist Office 05 61 05 94 94

The climax of this itinerary, the Crête des Isards, provides an exciting but safe ridge walk with marvellous views. Given the vertiginous drops on each side, you'll understand how it got its name.

Start out from the parking area at the **Riutort WATERFALL**, following the clear path signposted 'REFUGE DU RULHE' and marked with yellow flashes. The rocky path climbs very steeply at first, but after about **20min** of hard effort, you enter the pastures and follow the valley as it curves around towards the south.

At the **Cabane du Riutort (1h15min; 1825m/5986ft)**, we leave the Riutort Valley footpath (unless following the *Alternative walk above*). Do not cross the river by the bridge, but, instead, attack the slope to the east. This is not a marked path, but the open hillside, though steep, presents no problems. About half-way up, swing more to the north and in just under an hour reach the **Col de la Didorte (2093m/6865ft; 2h10min)**.

From here you will follow the GR10, marked by red and white stripes, climbing southeast at first,

and then swinging south as you make your way all along the ridge as far as the Col de Belh. The terrain is increasing spectacular, and onwards from the highest point (**Pic de Belh, 2381m/7810ft**) the ridge is very aptly known as the **Crête des Isards**, a reference to the agile Pyrenean

chamois. The ridge ends at the **Col de Belh (2247m/7370ft; 4h)**. Do not take the path northeast from here; instead follow the path southwest to the **Col de Terre Negre** and on down to the **Refuge du Rulhe (2185m/7167ft; 4h 30min)** a large, modern refuge

built on a wide grassy shelf high above the **Ruisseau de l'Estagnol**. After refreshments, take the clearly marked path (yellow stripes) along the **Riutort Valley** back to the **Cabane du Riutort (5h45min)**, and then retrace your steps to the **Riutort WATERFALL PARKING (7h)**.



View along the Aston Valley from the Riutort Valley