

White Water Rafting in the Pyrenees

France à la carte, the leading French incoming agency, launches a range of rafting packages

September 12, 2007 (FPRC) -- Hurling down a treacherous river gorge, frothy with white water and spray sparkling in the sun, may not be everyone's idea of autumnal fun but white water rafting is becoming a very fashionable sport for low-cost weekenders.

France à la carte, the French incoming travel agency who work closely with low-cost airlines coming into Southern France, have created a range of long weekend packages whereby customers from the UK and Ireland can enjoy the thrills and spills of white water activities in the hot sunshine of the French Pyrenees.

Arriving at one of the many airports adjacent to the Pyrenees on a Friday - Biarritz, Pau, Toulouse, Carcassonne or Perpignan - guests find a hire car waiting for them for the 60 minute or so drive to the rafting base. Accommodation ranges from simple hostel or mobile home to 3* hotel, depending on budget. The action starts on the Saturday morning with a half-hour training session in the do's and don'ts of white water. The 'rafts' are in fact extremely solid inflatable boats which glide over the choppy waters. Eight crew members and a helmsman per boat - all fully equipped with wetsuits, life-jacket, helmet and paddle - are launched out into raging torrents pouring down from the ever-lasting snows of the Pyrenean peaks. The helmsman, a qualified instructor, gets the team to pull together so that the raft avoids the more dangerous whirlpools and rocks and shoots the rapids at optimum angles. On quieter stretches of the river he acts as nature guide, pointing out the different plant life, birds and insects. The surroundings are grandiose: 300 metre high canyons and gorges, deep pools of green-blue water, ancient villages clinging to the banks.

It's not all plain sailing of course. People can fall out of the raft - and often do - but they soon learn how to float down the river on their backs to safety. Every now and again the raft pulls in to the side and crew members do a bit of cross-river swimming or pool jumping (from 5 metre bluffs) just for the fun. The full session lasts for three or four hours and can be physically demanding. Some packages offer a 'rustic' picnic lunch with local sausage and cheeses and red wine. Afternoons are usually a bit lower key with either hydrospeed or hot-dogging on the menu: these are white water activities akin to rafting without the raft. The hydrospeed adepts use a tiny float to guide them down the river while the 'hot-dog' is a sort of spineless inflatable kayak which is piloted à deux.

Saturday evening is spent eating and drinking (we're in France after all) before guaranteed sleep. On the Sunday there's a day of canyoning - another approach to the river - which is a slower and more intimate exploration of these steep-sided river valleys cutting through the Pyrenean piedmont. Again equipped with wetsuit and helmet, the canyoner slides, climbs, jumps and plunges down the river bed through rock pools and streams, over cliffs and overhangs, among juniper bushes and prickly pears. The rest of the day is usually spent stretched out in the sun but more intrepid (or fitter) participants often head off to explore local sights (that's where the hire car comes in handy) like Lourdes, the Cathar Castles or Biarritz. After another night in France guests return to the cold north on the Monday.

The bases used by France à la carte are in the Basque Country near Biarritz, in the Central Pyrenees just south of Lourdes and in Languedoc on the Aude river. Prices start at just 215 euros

per person - hire car, accommodation, white water activities, equipment hire and picnic included. Participants should be over 13 and be able to swim 50 metres. France à la carte report that as well as lots of couples and families they get quite a few corporate clients who use these weekends as a team-building tool. The best seasons are autumn and spring when water levels are high and flights are cheap.

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