



ESSAYS

Meet Ordesa Valley, Europe's Less Crowded Answer to Yosemite

BY GARETH WISHART | SEPTEMBER 13, 2019

It's a fact that if you just keep on walking you'll get to where you're headed. That's what I keep reminding myself while breathless deep in the heart of Ordesa y Monte Perdido National Park in the Spanish Pyrenees; my two-year-old daughter asleep on my back.

The Monte Perdido massif in the Aragonese Pyrenees is one of the most remote spots in one of the least populated regions of Europe. Although archeological evidence dates human settlement in the region as far back as the Upper Paleolithic (40,000 – 10,000 BC), it has never been easy scraping a living from these mountains. Due to rugged topography, the area remained extremely isolated until recent times, leaving its hidden cultural and natural heritage relatively unchanged for centuries.

“Until the beginning of the 19th century, the only people who knew Ordesa were smugglers, shepherds, and hunters”

Thanks in large part to the efforts of Pyrenean explorers Lucien Briet and Pedro Pidal, Ordesa was established as a national park by royal decree in 1918, 28 years after Yosemite. A century before its creation, however, very little was known of the valley by the outside world. “Until the beginning of the 19th century, the only people who knew Ordesa were smugglers, shepherds, and hunters,” said the Pyrenean historian Alberto Martínez Embid.

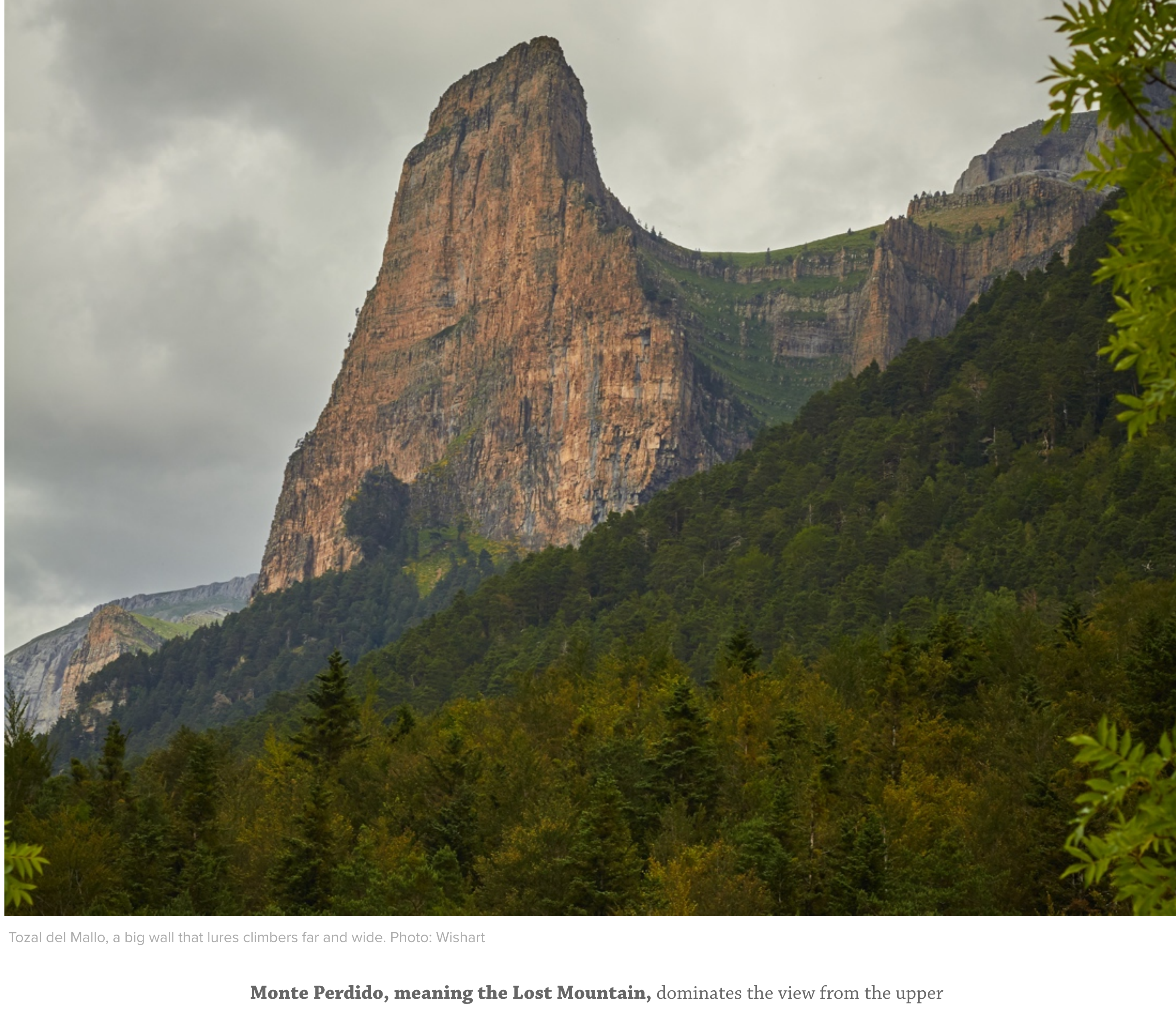
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Obscurity left its characteristic glacial canyons and waterfalls unexplored, and its ridges and peaks unclimbed.

To date, resistance to numerous development onslaughts that have ravaged so many other European mountains and valleys have been halted, including railway lines, ski slopes, cable cars, and of course, damming. While fighting to stop the damming of the Azaras river in the heart of the park, Pidal slammed the project, saying, “Un Santo Cristo con un par de pistolas hace mayor maridaje que un parque nacional con un salto de agua aprovechado”. Loosely translated: *Jesus Christ with two pistols pairs better than a national park with a dammed waterfall.* Sounds about right to me.

Almost 100 years after Pidal's revolutionary speech, the turquoise waters of Ara and Azaras rivers remain the largest unmodified rivers in the Pyrenees, giving them the name “the last wild rivers.” In 1982, the park was expanded after citizens successfully rallied to prevent the flooding of the Añiselo Canyon for hydropower, thus protecting this spectacular gorge for future generations.

In 1997, Ordesa joined the likes of Yosemite and the Grand Canyon when UNESCO declared it and the area around Monte Perdido a World Heritage Site. The national park and included surroundings now cover over 30,000 hectares.



Tozal del Mallo, a big wall that lures climbers far and wide. Photo: Wishart

Monte Perdido, meaning the Lost Mountain, dominates the view from the upper reaches of the Ordesa Canyon and is the third highest mountain in the Pyrenees. The highest calcareous mountain in Europe. It tops off at over 11,000 feet and remains snow-covered for much of the year. The French botanist and geologist, Louis Ramond de Carbonnières, whose party was perhaps the first to reach the summit in 1802, described the top as “the most beautiful limestone peak in Europe.”

Much like Yosemite, Ordesa has a strong history of big climbs on big walls. One year before the first route was set on El Capitan, a group of five French climbers, led by Jean Ravier, crossed the border on skis into Spain to attempt the south face of Tozal del Mallo, a staggering cliff rising like a stone shark fin from the sea of green forest below. After 17 hours and one bivouac, the spent troop was able to summit the face and establish what was to be the first summit on what were still virgin walls of the Ordesa Valley.

Ordesa has an impressive array of wildlife. The park and its buffer zone include half of all the plant species found in the Aragon Pyrenees, including some that are found nowhere else on Earth. Ice age holdovers like the ptarmigan and capercaillie, a giant relative of the grouse, share this land with whistling marmots and the goat-like chamois, which cling impossibly to the high cliffs. Crane your neck skywards and you might be lucky enough to spot one of the rare lammergeier, a true giant known for dropping bones from a height to rocks below to access the rich marrow inside.

Something far larger has also been observed exploring the park recently. What many consider to be the greatest indicator of the wild is slowly making a comeback in the Pyrenees. The brown bear, the same species as the North American grizzly, is steadily clawing a hold in these mountains once again.

After plummeting populations received a much-needed boost through reintroduction efforts, these bears are now venturing into territory that they haven't occupied in ages. In 2005, Civil Guards out patrolling the eastern side of Ordesa spotted what they believed to be a large bear. The grizzle-haired bruin, after noticing the men, charged off deeper into the mountains and disappeared, but not before being captured on film. The sighting adds a wild spirit to the Pyrenees and the park itself which has been sadly missing. As time goes on, more will surely follow in these great first footsteps.



Celia, the last Bucardo. Photo: Wishart

But perhaps the most infamous species of the park is no longer with us. Thunderstorms are common in the Pyrenees and it was during one such storm in January of 2000 that decades of conservation efforts came to an abrupt halt.

Celia, the very last bucardo or Pyrenean ibex, was found crushed to death under a fallen tree blown over by the storm. The bucardo was and remains emblematic of the history and natural ecosystem of Ordesa. These sure-footed goats, with their giant sweeping horns, were a distinct subspecies of the Spanish ibex, which can still be found throughout the Iberian peninsula. Their impressive horns and meat, however, made the bucardo a target for hunters and poachers who slowly eroded the population, along with disease and competition for food from domestic sheep and goats, until there was little hope for their survival.

But before Celia's death, park rangers managed to capture the nanny to fit her with a radio collar and were able to take skin tissue samples.

Controversially, scientists used these to create a clone, which was born on July 30, 2003, becoming the first de-extinction event in history. If only for a moment. The kid died within a few minutes due to lung defects.



Ordesa would take a lifetime to be explored but here's a good starting point: from the small village of Torla it takes a 30-minute drive through forests of pines and rushing waterfalls to get to La Pradera parking area at foot of the Ordesa Valley. From there you head out on foot; no horse, bicycle, or motorized transportation is permitted.

Overnight backcountry camping is permitted over specific elevations; generally above treeline. If you prefer not to spend the night in a tent there are a variety of stone shelters throughout the mountains, ranging from basic huts to larger refuges. Whether you choose a hut or a night under the stars, the views will be stunning and isolation easily found.

Putting aside the rugged mountains, cascading falls, and giant stone walls; there is something else that makes this place so special which is harder to define: its spirit. Ordesa lifts the soul with its grandeur while igniting a passion for place. While some may take any comparison to Yosemite as bordering on sacrilegious, I don't make the analogy lightly. Few places in the world sing to the soul as much as these two mountain valleys.

As I reached the small stone hut located at the head of the Ordesa Valley I slowly lowered my still-sleeping daughter to the ground and felt my legs lighten. If visiting the park for the first time, there is something I'd ask of you: try not to see this place through the preconceived notion of a tamed Europe and instead see it from a different perspective. That of a bear, chamois, or eagle. See it as a place still wild and free where your heart can soar. Ready to be explored.

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Monty DeLozier on September 14, 2019 at 9:42 am
Sounds fantastic. I wanna go.

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Josh on September 14, 2019 at 8:11 pm
Koshersummeradventures a hiking group of religious Jews spent a week hiking ordesa and we're also dumbfounded by it's beauty

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