

Capstone Project: Transforming on the Transhumance: One transformational day on a longer “Authentic Ariège” Itinerary

Pre-trip: Potential guests will be sent a questionnaire with general background questions and the following pointed questions:

1. What is your favorite season and why?
2. What feelings does the change of seasons or the time change evoke? Are there times of the year that you look forward to? Why? Are there times you dread? Why?
3. What process or transformation in nature signals to you at home that spring (or fall) has arrived?

Suggested pre-reading: Guests are invited to read and reflect on one of these articles before arriving

1. “How Change of Seasons Affects Animals and Humans”: <https://www.livescience.com/8639-change-seasons-affects-animals-humans.html>
2. “5 Ways the Change of Seasons Might Affect Your Mental Health....and what you can do about it.” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/when-your-adult-child-breaks-your-heart/201710/5-ways-the-change-seasons-might-affect-your>
3. Any of the articles on this site: <https://seasonwatch.umn.edu/mindfulness>

Background: Ariège, France is a department in the French Pyrenees mountains that is wild, pastoral and relatively-unknown to tourists both inside and outside of the country. It also happens to be where I have chosen to make my home. This transformational day is meant to be a part of a longer, in-depth itinerary to this part of the world.

The Transhumance is a seasonal movement of livestock to higher mountain pastures for the summer and then back to lower valleys in the autumn. The early summer ritual of moving the herds is a time for gathering, cooperation and celebration. It is a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The Transhumance “migrations” occur in June (early summer) and in October (autumn). This itinerary could be run at either time.

Accommodation: This small group will stay at one of the small bed and breakfast lodgings that have been created in this region – largely by expats. These are old cow and sheep barns lovingly renovated using eco-conscious (hemp and lime) techniques. Breakfast will consist of jams, fruit, cheeses, yogurt, honey and bread made onsite or very nearby (all of these are easy to source locally).

Guests will learn that many who choose to live here have found that running a small lodging alongside other pursuits (teaching yoga, knitting, weaving, doing market garden stalls) through discussions with the owners of the properties.

Possible accommodation:



Morning, lunch and early afternoon: Guests join the shepherd and his/her flock of sheep on a hike from the valley up to their summer pastures. This is a multi-hour hike and will include other tourists, locals and the team of helpers. The walk is fairly strenuous but moves at a slow pace. Elevation gain is approximately 2000 feet/590m in 2.8 miles/4.5km. Of course, guests will need to descend afterwards! On the hike, there will be plenty of time to enjoy the scenery, chat with locals, each other, or reflect on the meaning of transhumance, the lifestyle choices of the people who live here or anything else.

Once the summer pastures are reached, the shepherd(ess) invites the group to a celebration with small cups of wine and a short speech. It is a time for happy celebration and for the group, a picnic lunch.





Picnic lunch will have been purchased from the huge farmer's market we will have visited the day before and will include local sausage, cheeses, vegetables, fruits, herbs, and local dessert, croustade (a custard tart).





Afternoon: Return to accommodation for rest and rejuvenation.

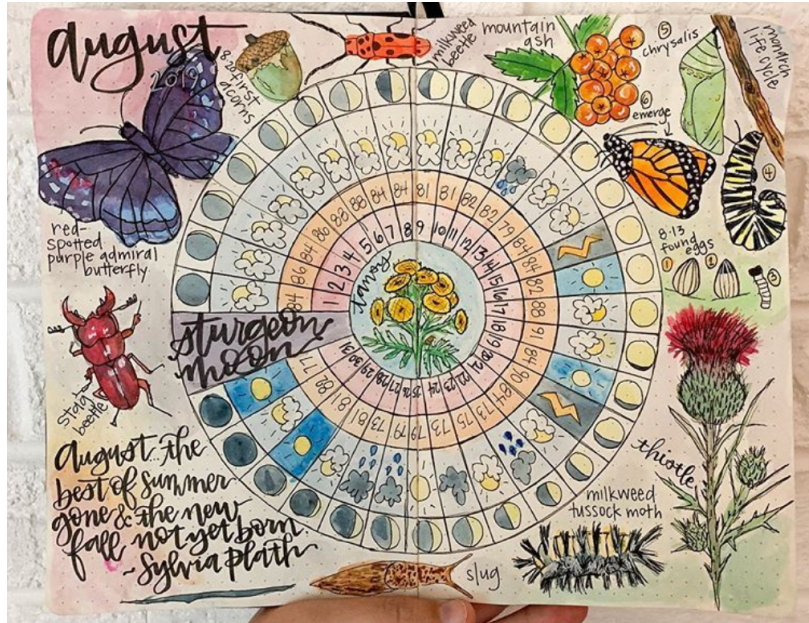
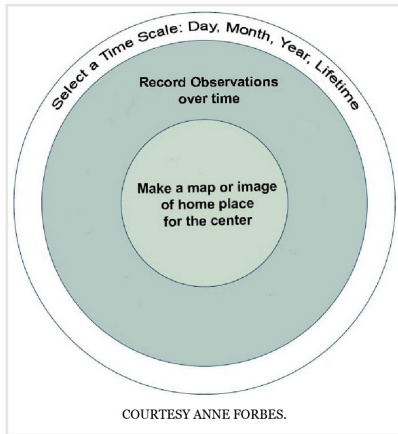
Late afternoon: Guest Speaker: a young, female shepherdess will speak to the group about her decision to live alone in the mountains during the summer. Discussing the barriers to this traditionally male pursuit, the training process, the daily life, and the challenges of working in an environment where bears have been re-introduced.

*The subject of bears is a delicate one and has, is and will be the cause of much controversy amongst the local population. On another day, I would plan to have a meeting/speaker from the Ariège Natural Park organization to discuss the re-introduction project.

Reflection and discussion: During the “apéro” – a French tradition of sharing a drink before dinner. In this part of France, pastis, a licorice or star anise-flavored liqueur, mixed with water is a very popular choice. Hypocras, a fortified wine, is another aperitif that is made in this region from the original medieval recipe including cinnamon, cloves, ginger, cardamom and rose petals. These will be served and explained.

Discussion questions: what things in your life signal the change of seasons? What do you look forward to? What feelings do those things evoke? Do you have any rituals around them?

Discuss **phenology** - the study of [cyclic](#) and seasonal natural [phenomena](#), especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life. Provide pens and paper and have them start a phenology wheel that they can bring home with them.



(see: <https://earthzine.org/phenology-wheels-earth-observation-where-you-live/>)

Dinner: Celebration meal at the accommodation prepared by the host with bio products according to the dietary needs of the guests. Can include locally raised meats, regional wines and juices, salads, and dessert.

Environmental note: Local transportation will need to be by vehicle. If an electric van is available, that would be ideal. Otherwise, all transport will need to have carbon offsets. Arrival to the region will be encouraged by train or electric bus service.

The Bigger Picture: This project comprises 1 to 1.5 days on a possible 5 day itinerary called **Authentic Ariège**, which would provide other themes and activities for transformation, such as rewilding and the reintroduction of bears and alpine ibex (both successfully reintroduced in the Pyrenees), visiting a bio-organic farm to source ingredients for a shared meal preparation, local instruction in petanque (jeu de boules) and play, and understanding the diaspora of locals in the 19th century, including about a hundred (!) who escaped extreme poverty here and took their trained bears to perform abroad. There will be many opportunities to interact with locals who are raising bees, brewing beer, making cheese, baking bread, and raising cattle to sell at the local markets which are a major part of weekly life here.

Guided Meditation/Nature Observation There would be another opportunity to do a helpful activity on a picnic with beautiful mountain views:

https://seasonwatch.umn.edu/sites/seasonwatch.umn.edu/files/2023-02/a%20phenologist%27s%20mediation_1.pdf

This is a guided meditation to support observation in nature. It provides a step-by-step method for breathing and then using the senses to observe the life around us. We will practice this technique during the week and then encourage guests to use it when home making seasonal observations.

Follow Up: Immediately upon arriving home: Participants will receive an email thanking them for their participation and asking the following questions:

How do the sunlight hours and quality of light differ where you live from Ariège, France? Is your spring (or fall) season further along? What kinds of signs (flora and fauna) do you see at home that give you an indication of the time of year? What is your energy level now that you are back home? Are there things that you are noticing that you didn't notice before you left? How has the season progressed in your absence?

Encourage them to use the guided meditation technique above to observe their natural world and continue to add to their phenology wheels. Guests will be invited to share them with the group through a group chat.

Later: After traveling with us on this journey, guests will be engaged on a seasonal basis (in spring and autumn) through direct mailings and on social media with stories of seasonal transformations. These will include invitations to share what is changing in their natural world at home – a photo capturing new buds on trees, for example, as a catalyst to discussion, observation and wonder.

The website: <https://journeynorth.org/> has a wonderful list of springtime observations and maps of the coming of Spring and that are created by observations submitted by readers. This could be a springboard for guests to participate in data gathering for the first dates they see butterflies, or tulips, or lilac bush buds.