

Information Pack Regarding The Disappearance of Esther Dingley from the Pyrenees mountains in November 2020

Summary

The purpose of this document is to provide some additional background information into the disappearance of Esther Dingley (37) from the Pyrenees mountains in November 2020.

Esther was last seen in a WhatsApp video call just after 4 p.m. on 22nd November 2020 on top of Pic de Sauvegarde on the border between France and Spain.

Her plans for the night of 22nd November, which she had shared with her partner Dan Colegate and several other witnesses (see below), was to proceed down to the border crossing at Port de Venasque and to spend the night at Refuge de Venasque, an unstaffed shelter on the French side of the border.

Her plan for the following day was to hike a specified route on the French side of the border before returning to Spain via the Port de la Glere crossing.

Consideration of the route details, alternative routes, search activities, Esther's experience and equipment, and possibilities regarding Esther's disappearance are given below.

If anybody reading this document has any information which can help find Esther, please contact:

LBT Global Hotline: +44 (0) 800 098 8485

WhatsApp: +44 (0) 7545 826 497

Email: delta.ops@lbt.global



Contents

Background To Esther’s Hike – Motorhome Tour Synopsis.....	3
Esther’s Fitness, Experience & Equipment	5
Communication On 21 st & 22 nd November	7
Esther’s Route From Pic de Sauvegarde On 22 nd November	8
Refuge de Venasque	12
Esther’s Planned Onward Route	13
Proximity to Access Roads	16
Intensity Of The Search Operation	17
Consideration Of Possible Causes Of Esther’s Disappearance	19
Personal Statement by Esther’s Partner, Dan Colegate	23

Background To Esther's Hike – Motorhome Tour Synopsis

Esther's initial plan was to go motorhome touring for 2 weeks in France. However, after the first week she chose to cross into Spain due to the announcement of a new French lockdown. After this, due in part to the French lockdown restrictions on outdoor activity (which she would be subject to when she returned) and the unseasonably warm weather in the Pyrenees, she chose to keep extending her trip by a few days at a time. An overview of her movements prior to the hike she disappeared on are given below.

4/10 – Completes a summer of hiking with her partner Dan in the Alps.

4/10 – 14/10 – Esther and Dan travelling in France together in motorhome.

14/10 – 22/10 – Esther and Dan house-sitting together in Larroque-sur-l'Osse.

22/10 – Esther departs Larroque-sur-l'Osse in the motorhome and spends the night at a parking in Samatan.

23/10 – Arrives in Arreau in the Pyrenees, a village Esther and Dan had visited many times during the past 6 years. This is the region Esther initially planned to spend the fortnight revisiting.

23/10 – 28/10 – Esther remains in Arreau – cycles up various familiar Tour de France climbs (Col d'Aspin, Col de Peyresourde, Col Louron Azet etc.)

29/10 – In view of the imminent French lockdown, Esther crosses the border into Spain via the Tunnel Bielsa.

30/10 – 2/11 – Completes a 4 day/3 night hiking trip in the Spanish Pyrenees in the area around Refuge Tucarroya.

2/11 – 3/11 – Returns to motorhome on 2nd and drives to Bielsa for resupply. Repacks her equipment and spends the night at Cabane Collata Chietau.

3/11 – 7/11 – Returns to motorhome on 3rd and relocates to Ainsa. Weather is unsettled so she spends most of her time near the motorhome. The forecast is for the good weather to return in a few days and she has been invited to go hiking with some people she met on the '30/10-2/11' hike, so she waits. On the evening of the 7th she relocates to Egea.

8/11 - Goes hiking to Pic Turbon with the people she met during the '30/10 - 2/11' hike.

9 / 11 – 11/11 – Remains in Egea and goes day hiking solo. On the evening of 11th she drives to Benasque following an invitation to go hiking with a girl she met on Pic Turbon.

12/11 – 13/11 – Overnight trip from Benasque with the girl she met on Pic Turbon.

14/11 – Climbing with friends she had made in the area.

15/11 – 16/11 – Trail running from Benasque solo.

17/11 – 19/11 – 3 day/2night hike from Benasque including Refugio de Estos.

20/11 – Poor weather so remains at the motorhome. Plans one more hike before returning to France.

21/11 – Sets off fully equipped for a 4-5 day hike from Benasque (route details are given below). Her immediate plan is to hitchhike to Hospital de Benasque and explore the area around the head of the

valley. She reaches the Pic de Sauvegarde in the early afternoon and lets her family know she is safe but that phone signal is poor in the area. She also shares some pictures on Instagram.

22/11 – After spending the night at Cabane de la Besurtas, she returns to Pic de Sauvegarde at around 15:30. Over the next half an hour she shares WhatsApp messages with Dan and other family members. Final contact is at 16:07 in a WhatsApp video call with Dan from the summit of Pic de Sauvegarde. Esther confirms her onward route and signs off as normal.

After this time, nobody has heard from or reported seeing Esther anywhere.

Note: To the best of the family's knowledge, all of the people she met and spent time with on hikes and climbing etc. have already been contacted by and have spoken with Spanish police.

Esther's Fitness, Experience & Equipment

For 80 days between July 17th and October 4th 2020, Esther and Dan completed a 1000-mile hike through parts of the Swiss, Austrian, Italian, Liechtenstein and Slovenian Alps with a total altitude gain of over 100,000 metres. They took a total of 10 rest days (mostly towards the end as the weather deteriorated). The longest they hiked without a rest day was 27 days.

Their longest day of hiking was 40 kilometres with +3000 metres of ascent. Their average hiking distance for moving days was 22km with + 1400 metres of ascent. Depending on the terrain this took (on average) between 6 – 8 hours of hiking time.

Their hike was a self-supported trip, mostly wild camping in a tent and carrying up to 5 days of food at a time. Large sections of the terrain were more demanding and complex than the area in which Esther went missing. The couple frequently made camp above 2000 metres altitude.

In previous years the couple had undertaken other shorter but similar trips of up to 4 weeks in other parts of the Alps and Pyrenees. In September-October 2019, Esther also completed a 27 day solo hike in the French Pyrenees with 2 dogs, averaging 20 kilometres per day with +1000 metres of climbing.

Esther is also used to taking solo day hikes in excess of 8 hours. She practices yoga daily. In spring she had completed a 3-day, 36-hour cycling challenge to raise money for charity. In short, Esther is a highly experienced hiker and in excellent physical shape.

Esther's usual walking pace is above average. Throughout the Alps and Pyrenees, she usually finds that it takes her about two thirds of the timings indicated on signs to reach locations. e.g. if a sign suggests 3 hours, it takes her around 2 hours, mostly as she doesn't need to stop and take rests.

The equipment Esther was carrying when she set out on 21st November 2020 is as follows (with approximate weight):

- Osprey Exos 46 litre backpack – red and grey - (1.1kg)
- Lanshan 1/2 ultralight tent – bright yellow - (1.2kg)
- Rab Infinity 300 sleeping bag – bright green - (600g)
- Thermarest NeoAir sleeping mat – yellow - (300g)
- Titanium stove + fuel (600g)
- 1 person titanium saucepan and spork (200g)
- 2 x Petzl Bindi headtorches (70g)
- Redmi Note 9 Pro mobile phone – 5000mAh battery – purchased October 2020 (200g)
- 27600mAh Battery pack – capable of charging her phone five times (350g)
- Rab Infinity down jacket – black with purple lining - (400g)
- Berghaus Paclite waterproof trousers – black - (200g)
- Crazy Shark waterproof jacket – black with purple trim - (200g)
- Smartwool 250 baselayers – top and bottom, purple - (500g)
- Gore Windstopper gloves – black - (200g)
- Rab Vapour Rise midlayer jacket – black - (500g)
- Black Diamond Carbon Z trekking poles (300g)
- Kahtoola MicroSpikes (350g)
- Vaude 3 litre water bladder + sawyer in-line water filter (200g)
- Sundries: passport/charger cable/headband/credit cards and some ready cash

Equipment base weight before food and water: approximately 8 kilograms

Other clothing: Esther likes to walk in leggings or shorts depending on the temperature, and carried both. She also wears a blue short-sleeve baselayer, La Sportiva hiking shoes, and merino wool socks. It is possible she had also taken an additional black, long-sleeve base layer on this hike.

For navigation Esther was carrying a physical map of the area which she had also photographed with her phone as a backup.

Her phone also had the Maps.Me app installed which Esther is proficient at using for planning and assessing route distances and timings. This app also allows geolocation and uses maps downloaded to the phone so can be fully utilised without a mobile signal. This is the same app that Esther and Dan had used to navigate for portions of their 80-day summer hike in the Alps.

Esther's phone (and head torches) are supported by the 27600 mAh battery pack capable of recharging her phone fully up to five times.



Communication On 21st & 22nd November

Esther was in near daily contact with her partner and mother during her time away, unless she was out of signal range on a hike. On this specific hike she had indicated she would return to the motorhome in Benasque by Wednesday 25th at the latest (the day she was reported missing). She had also reported that mobile phone signal was poor in the area so people should not worry if she wasn't in touch every day.

The following timeline is based on WhatsApp messages and calls between Esther and Dan on Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd November. Selected messages received from Esther are quoted below to indicate the times she set out, the times she subsequently reached Pic de Sauvegarde on both days and her happiness at the time. The full transcripts and screenshots of all communication have been provided to the police in both France and Spain.

21st November

10:07 – Leaves the motorhome - “Now going to try hitching”

10:08 – Sends Dan photographs of her map to specify the area she will be hiking in.

10:35 – “2 hitches so far – halfway!”

13:11 – Reaches the top of Pic de Sauvegarde.

“So happy....think I can see you”

“That’s bagneres and super bagneres”

“Love you so much XXX thank you for encouraging me and giving me this confidence...Really appreciated all the msgs to get me on my way this morning”

Evening – Spends the night alone at Cabana de la Besurtas on the Spanish side (Esther had no phone signal once she left the peak, but she confirmed this the following day when she returned to Pic de Sauvegarde).

22nd November

15:29 – Returns to Pic de Sauvegarde

15:31 – “Not much signal in this area sorry”

“I’m on a col/peak so can’t stop for too long but wanted you to know. Can’t wait to read all your messages. Thank you xxx.

“Love you very much XXX having a really good time.”

15:41 – Sends 2 selfies.

16:04: “I’m heading off now...Maybe have signal but not sure. Sorry. I think I can see you !!!”

16:06: “Still in the same area. Tomorrow heading for Port de le Glere or something spelt like that. Might dip into France. Hoping Refuge Venasque has a winter room. Keep you posted when can xx”

“Love you xxx”

16:07 – Video Call with Dan lasting for 1:36

Esther's Route From Pic de Sauvegarde On 22nd November

From Pic de Sauvegarde Esther had two options for her descent. She could return down the Spanish side of the mountain and sleep at Cabane de la Besurtas, as she had done on Saturday 21st November, or she could do as she had indicated and cross into France at the Port de Venasque.

Not only had Esther relayed this plan to her partner, she had also communicated this same intention to multiple witnesses who reported meeting Esther during her ascent to Pic de Sauvegarde. The Guardia Civil search team told Dan that they could track Esther's ascent at various stages thanks to the people who came forward to say they had interacted with her.

Also, an individual that Esther met on 19th November came forward to say he had specifically suggested this route through France, between Port de Venasque and Port de la Glere, to Esther when he met her. There is no reason to think that Esther did not stick to this plan.

The route from Pic de Sauvegarde to Refuge de Venasque

Distance: 2.6 km with 489 metres of descent.

Timing: Less than one hour.

Daylight: Sunset in Toulouse this day was at 1723 i.e. Esther had over an hour of good daylight left and it wouldn't have been totally dark until closer to 6 p.m. In addition, Esther had 2 head torches capable of producing 200 lumens of light and an obvious trail on the ground to follow.

Visibility: The weather was excellent and from the summit of Pic de Sauvegarde the French side of the route is completely visible (see photograph below). Esther already knew the Spanish side having twice ascended that way. She would have been confident of the route, even without a map and a GPS enabled phone (both of which she had with her at the time).

Terrain: There are a handful of points on the route that require sure-footing, including one with a handrail to hold on to. Most of the route, however, is a broad and easy to follow path (see images).

Note: After leaving the peak, there is no mobile phone signal anywhere on this part of Esther's route towards Refuge de Venasque.



Southern perspective (Spanish side) of this route.

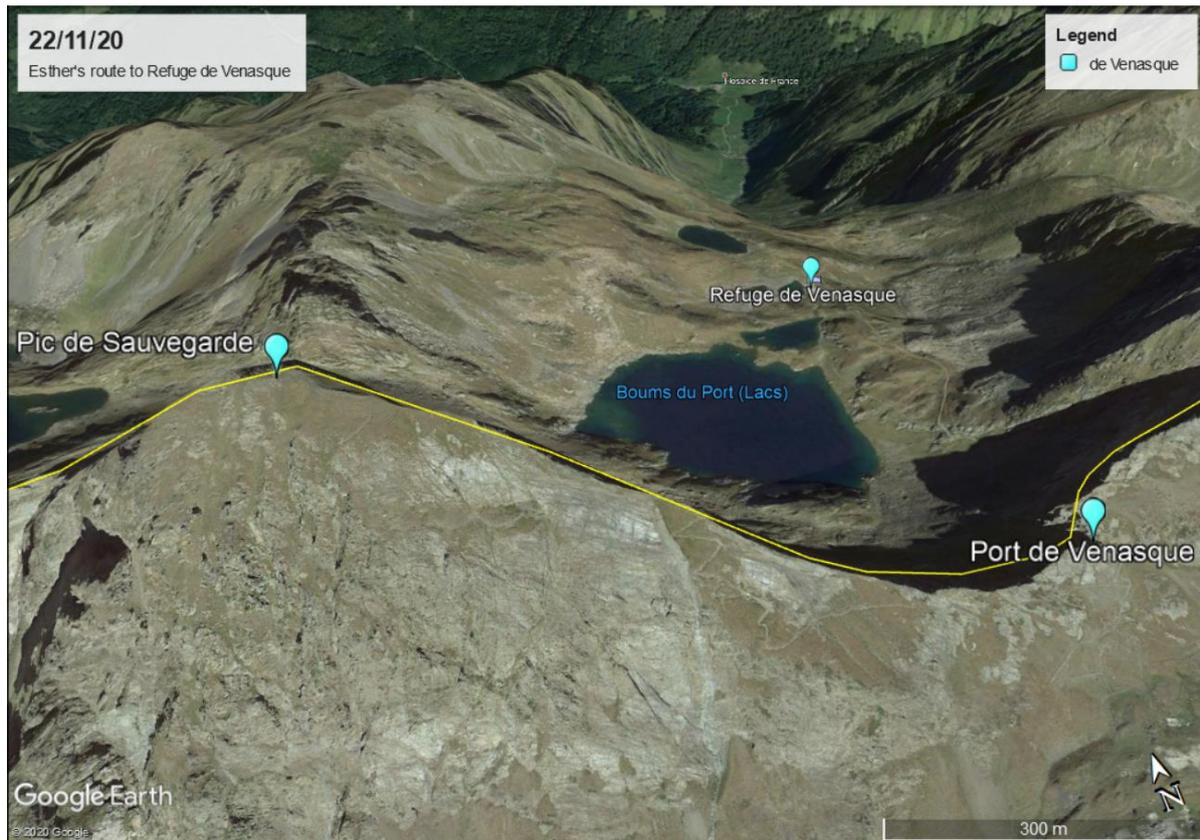
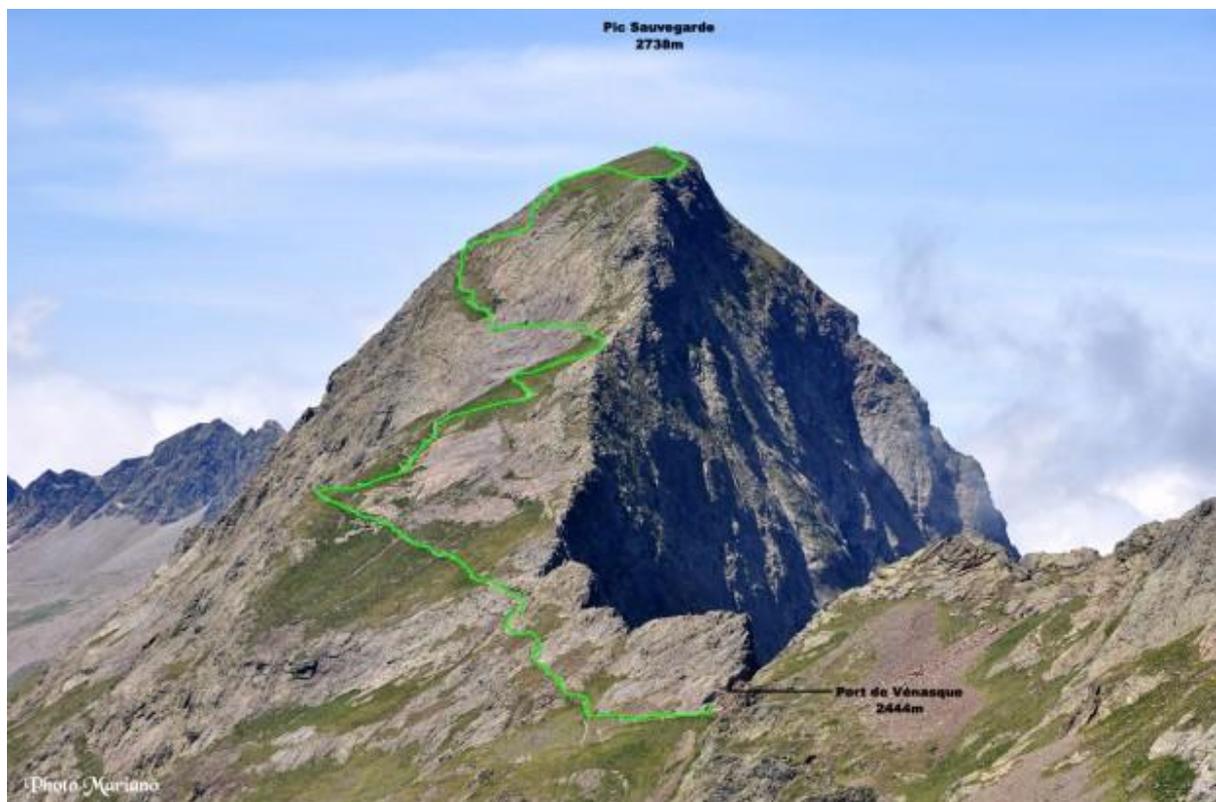


Image of the route taken from <https://www.topopyrenees.com/randonnee-pic-sauvegarde-2738m/>



Northern perspective (French side) of this route



Image of the route taken from <https://www.topopyrenees.com/randonnee-pic-sauvegarde-2738m/>



Nature of the path.



Probably the most demanding part of the trail, about ten metres like this – Obviously such locations were the focus of intense searching. (Image of the route taken from <https://www.topopyrenees.com/randonnee-pic-sauvegarde-2738m/>)



The remainder of the trail is more like this (Image of the route taken from <https://www.topopyrenees.com/randonnee-pic-sauvegarde-2738m/>)

Refuge de Venasque

In November Refuge de Venasque is unstaffed and operates a winter room only. This is a small bunkhouse with an unlocked door.

There is no sign-in book or requirement to leave payment. There is an easy water supply nearby in the form of a shallow stream with a pipe feed coming off it. The stream feeds into the nearby lake about ten metres from the pipe.

At the time of Esther's hike, French residents were required to stay within 1km of their home when exercising as part of lockdown restrictions. No witnesses have come forward to say they saw Esther at the refuge. However, as discussed below, this does not mean that nobody was in the area.

It is not known whether Esther reached the refuge on the night of Sunday 22nd November.



(Image taken from <https://www.topopyrenees.com/randonnee-pic-sauvegarde-2738m/>)

Esther's Planned Onward Route

It is not known whether Esther reached Refuge de Venasque on the night of Sunday 22nd November or not.

Her onward route would have involved a descent northwards towards the Hospice de France, a flat traverse westwards around the Imperatrice Way, and a climb southwards to the border at Port de la Glere. From the border the route descends back towards to Hospital de Benasque. This route would have been well within Esther's capabilities for a day hike, in addition to the fact she had a tent, camping equipment and significant experience using it.

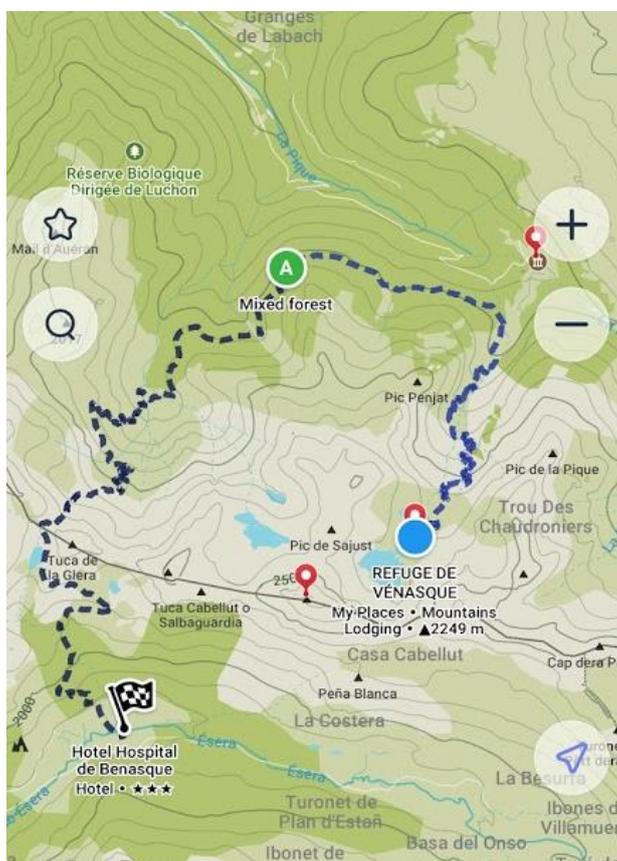
Distance: 16 km with 1100 metres of ascent.

Timing: 5 – 7 hours of hiking time

Visibility: The weather remained excellent on Monday. The route is very obvious both on the ground and also from the terrain when starting from Refuge de Venasque. It's basically impossible to get lost in good visibility here.

Terrain: As shown in the pictures below, almost the entire route is a well-made and easy to follow path.

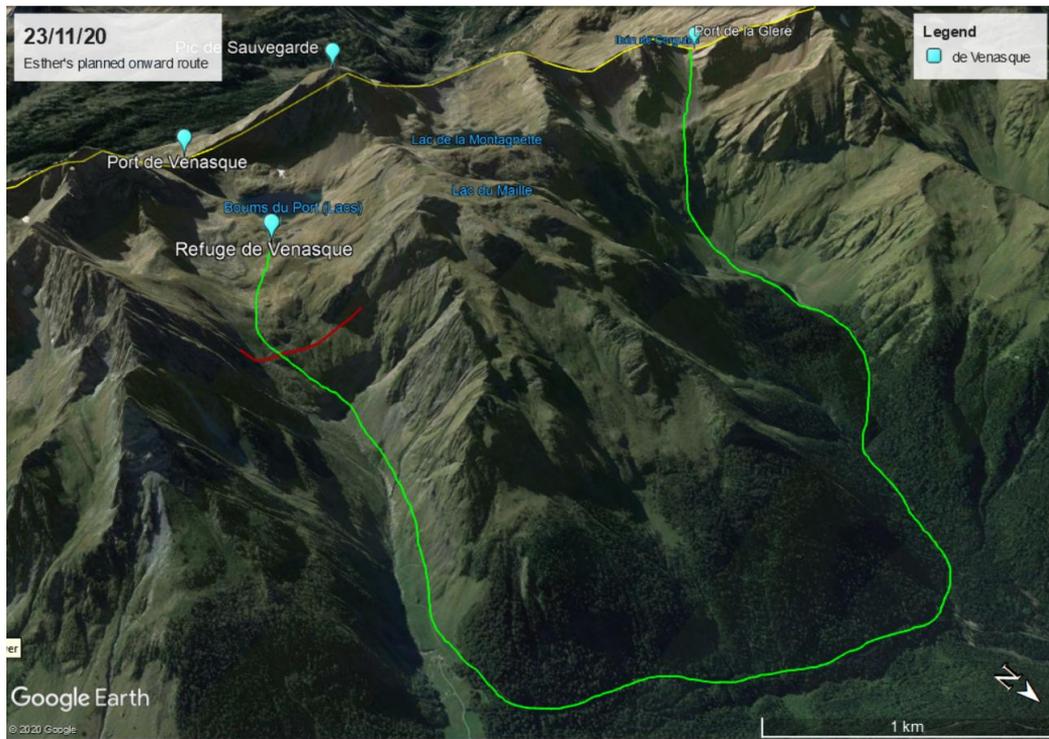
Note: Although Esther believed and had warned family that there was poor signal in the area, in fact the signal is very good on the French side. Within half an hour of leaving the refuge, Esther should have been able to use her phone for most of the rest of the day.



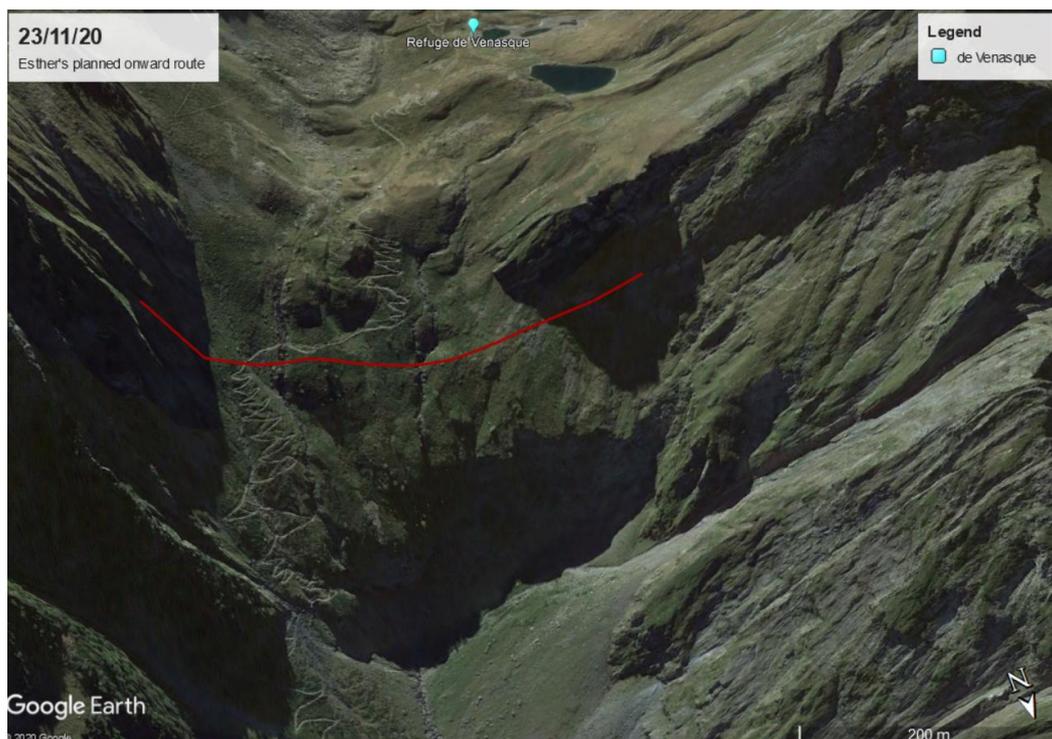
Onward route with mobile phone signal boundary roughly marked with red line.

Note: this signal boundary is indicative based on Dan Colegate's signal coverage when searching. Dan has the same model phone and network operator as Esther and was able to make and receive calls for most of the time he was searching on the French side of the border, apart from in the area close to Refuge de Venasque and ascending to Pic de Sauvegarde.

Note: The green 'route' line is to guide the eye only. It is not a GPS trace and does not follow paths.



A closer look at the descent from Refuge de Venasque showing proximity of phone signal boundary.



Images of the descent from Refuge de Venasque towards Hospice de France



(Images of the route taken from <https://www.topopyrenees.com/randonnee-pic-sauvegarde-2738m/>)

Proximity to Access Roads

On both the French and Spanish sides of Pic de Sauvegarde there are nearby roads accessible to vehicles. Within 1 ½ – 2 hours from the peak it is possible to reach a road.

On the French side the Hospice de France is a popular starting point for walks. On the Spanish side the Hospital de Benasque and Cabane de la Besurtas are also accessible by vehicle.

Geographically the road heads are approximately 5 kilometres apart as the crow flies.



Intensity Of The Search Operation

The search for Esther commenced at first light on Thursday 26th November, the morning after she was due to return to the motorhome in Benasque, with search teams deployed in both France and Spain, some walking with dogs and some in helicopters flying over the area. These are highly trained, highly proficient experts who have been working in this specific area of the mountains for many years. They know the terrain and locations that are likely to cause difficulty for hikers.

For the first two days of the search, visibility on Pic de Sauvegarde was hampered slightly by a light dusting of snow and some cloud, although nothing that prevented the search teams ascending the routes from both sides of the mountain and the helicopters could still see most of the mountainside.

From Saturday 27th – Tuesday 1st December, the sunny weather returned, the light dusting of snow mostly melted and visibility was excellent. In addition to continued search teams retracing Esther's planned route and other nearby trails, helicopter search teams continued to fly up and down the slopes.

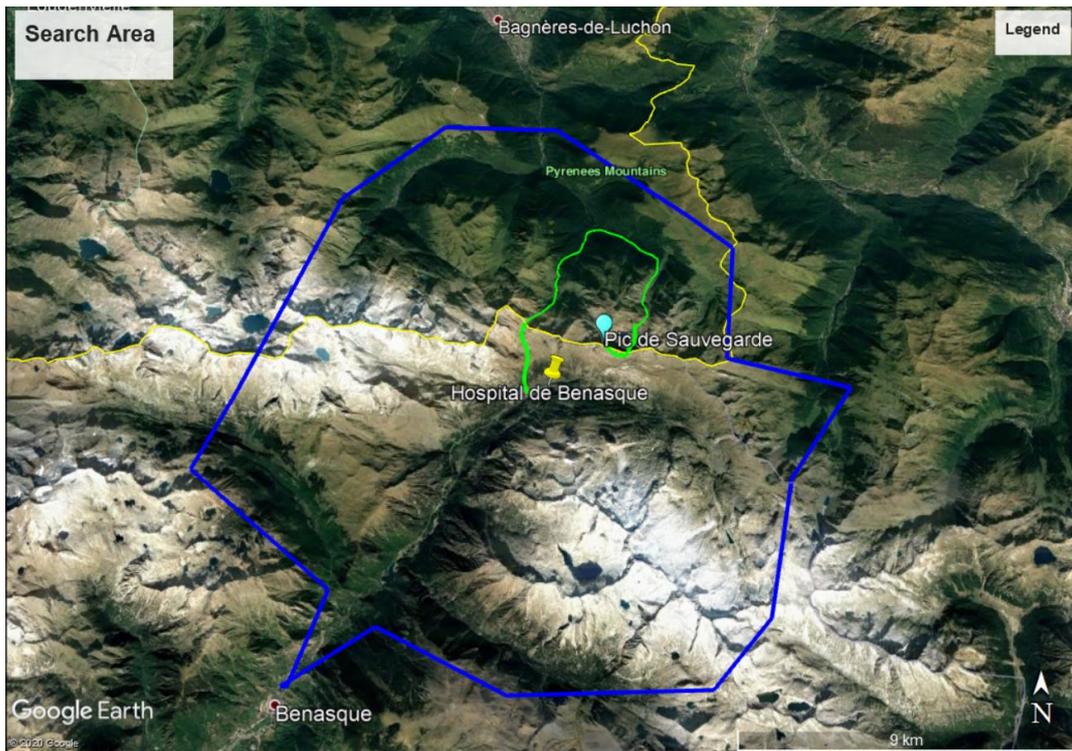
The Spanish police also spent a day scanning the slopes of Pic de Sauvegarde with high powered telescopes from the opposite side of the valley. At times literally dozens of search and rescue personnel were walking the trails looking for any trace of Esther or her equipment.

The focus of the search was Esther's last known location, planned route and nearby alternatives, with searchers sweeping back and forth over the hillside away from the trails, literally looking under large rocks and descending into crevices in the landscape.

In addition to this immediate area, as the map below indicates, trails in a very wide surrounding area were also walked. For more distant trails, search teams on the ground were flown in with helicopters. Water bottles and a pair of gloves were found, indicating the closeness of the search, but nothing belonging to Esther.

Esther's partner Dan, was in close communication with both the French and Spanish search teams on a daily basis, providing information on Esther's preferences, ability, hiking pace and communication habits. He also walked and searched the hillsides around all of the trails in the immediate area of Esther's last known location on the French side (walking alone so he could continue outside of standard SAR hours).

On Wednesday 2nd December heavy snow began to fall in the area, hampering search efforts. Over the next few days the search was wound down on both sides of the border. The Guardia Civil said they would plan their winter training activities with Esther's route in mind, but that targeted search activities would be increasingly futile after such an effort and with increasing snow coverage.



The blue line is intended to roughly indicate the scope of the search area as shown to Dan Colegate by the search coordinators at the time of the search. It is not an official report from the police teams responsible for the search.

Consideration Of Possible Causes Of Esther's Disappearance

Esther and Dan last communicated by WhatsApp video call from Pic Sauvegarde at 16:07 local time on 22nd November. It was Esther's habit to put her phone on aeroplane mode when she walked in the mountains in order to save battery. Her last messages. ("...Keep you posted when can xx" and "Love you XXX") did not indicate an abrupt end to the conversation but that she had signed off as normal.

Earlier in the same series of chat messages she had also said "Not much signal in the area sorry" and "Maybe have signal but not sure. Sorry". Esther's plan was to be back at the motorhome by Wednesday 25th November at the latest, which is when she was reported missing.

As the police have already said publicly, causes of Esther's disappearance fall into 3 categories:

- (1) Accident
- (2) Voluntary Disappearance
- (3) Somebody else involved.

Considering each in turn....

Option (1) – Accident

Regardless of experience and conditions, any hiker in the mountains can have an accident. Also, as the Search and Rescue Teams have pointed out, occasionally it is just not possible to find somebody. That said, the following must also be considered.

- a) No trace of Esther was found in the relatively small area *without a phone signal*. Although Esther believed and told family that signal was poor in the area (based on the coverage on the Spanish side of Pic de Sauvegarde where she had spent most of Saturday and Sunday), the region Esther planned to enter in France has quite good mobile coverage. Based on all of Esther's previous behaviour, if she had left the no-signal area unhindered (following her plan), she could and would have sent an update to Dan and her parents at some time on Monday 23rd November. She might not have checked for signal all the time, but she would definitely have checked during her proposed loop through France, probably in the morning and quite soon after setting out.
- b) If she had changed her plan, a route change would have passed through a different signal area at some point and she would have let somebody know. Nearby alternative routes in France were also intensively searched and had good signal coverage for much of the distance.
- c) This was not difficult terrain for Esther and Esther's normal hiking speed is above average. Reaching the refuge before dark was not a challenge, nor was her onward route. Also, this region is not that remote. If a hiker goes missing on Everest an accident is the only possible reason. Here, as shown above, there are access roads on either side of the summit of Pic de Sauvegarde within 2 hours of descent (as the crow flies these roadheads are just 3 miles apart).
- d) Esther IS NOT in the habit of walking 'off path' by choice, especially when a perfectly good path is available. In more than a decade of serious hiking together, Dan reports that they hardly ever leave marked paths, and only then for short distances on flat ground to correct

minor route errors. If they miss a turning, they double back. There was no need for Esther to leave a marked trail as the paths are well maintained and easy to follow, not only on her planned route but in the wider area.

- e) Accidents can happen to anyone of course, but these paths are all well within Esther's capabilities. She had successfully gone up and down the same peak the previous day. If she had found it hard, she wouldn't have gone back alone. Esther is adventurous but not a gratuitous risk taker. This hike was about being outdoors and going slowly for her, as opposed to the 1000-mile hike in summer which was about going a long way.
- f) Some people have questioned why she returned to the same peak twice. The simple answer was that she liked it up there and this hike wasn't about 'peak-bagging' for her.
- g) The terrain (the no-signal area in particular) is not that complex. Apart from the lakes, it is almost totally visible and was searched for 6 days in good to excellent weather, plus more days beyond that as the snow began to fall. Esther has to be somewhere. Several water bottles and pairs of gloves were found (indicating the closeness of the search) – but nothing belonging to Esther was found.
- h) Esther had all the necessary equipment to stay warm and sheltered, and knows how to use it from extensive experience. She had completed a Mountain Leader Training course in the UK, which she undertook solely to increase her own knowledge of mountain safety.
- i) If Esther did have an accident, it must have been instantly incapacitating, preventing her from deploying any form of shelter (which would have absolutely been visible to the search teams – Esther knows how to make herself visible in the mountains). This further narrows the possibilities of places she might have fallen. There simply aren't that many places where an individual can fall a significant distance from the trail and become both incapacitated and invisible instantly. Obviously such places were the focus of the search already and no sign of Esther was found.
- j) The only real possibility for a long fall is from the peak itself, but the helicopter went up and down the slopes many times and saw nothing whatsoever, and nor did searchers with high-powered telescopes looking from a distance.
- k) The idea Esther sheltered anywhere other than the Refuge de Venasque makes no sense. She had stayed in dozens of such buildings and this one was unlocked and available. She could see almost the entire route from the summit and had told people she planned to go there.
- l) It has been suggested that the sudden change in temperature could have caught Esther out. However, Esther had been hiking all summer long and was well aware of how it could feel when the sun dipped below the horizon. She'd also hiked in the Pyrenees before in October 2019 and had camped many times in much colder weather. She had ample clothes to stay warm and the weather was good.
- m) Regarding Esther asking for fruit during her ascent to Pic de Sauvegarde (reported in some articles) and subsequent suggestions she did not have enough food or water, asking for fruit is simply part of Esther's commitment to healthy eating. All through the Alps during summer she had bought apples and oranges from refuges even though she had ample dry food and fuel. If Esther feels she has a good rapport with someone, she sometimes asks for fruit. This is not abnormal behaviour for Esther.
- n) Another individual has also recently been reported as giving Esther food and questioning why she was wearing shorts. According to Spanish police this contact with Esther actually took place on 30th October (at the start of a successful 4 day hike). The individual who made the statement has been contacted by LBT Global but has not yet responded.

- o) Regarding the references to Luchon that Esther apparently made to a gentleman who gave her a lift on 21st November, the town of Luchon is a place Esther and Dan have visited many times over the years, including as recently February 2020. The suggestion she specifically planned to go there is far less likely than her mentioning it as place she knew in the region and in the general direction she was going, while speaking in a second language and trying to make conversation. Esther does not speak perfect French.

Option (2) - Voluntary Disappearance

This is totally out of character, in every way.

Also, Esther has no motive or means to do so. She hasn't accessed any funds. There were no large cash withdrawals in the weeks/months leading up to her trip. Finally, she was already doing her own thing as part of her usual relationship with Dan. She didn't need to vanish to get time to herself.

At the same time, missing persons reports have been circulated in both Spain and France, including significant early media coverage and there has been no reported sighting of Esther.

Option (3) – Someone else involved

As an active police investigation is ongoing, it is not the purpose of this document to comment on activities already undertaken or being undertaken by the police forces investigating Esther's disappearance. Esther's partner and family have been in close contact with all the relevant police forces since this became a criminal investigation and throughout the Christmas and New Year holiday period. The family trust the police forces are doing all they can and have provided them with all of the information and access to electronic files that they have requested.

A few comments on the possibility of somebody else being involved are as follows:

It is not known whether Esther spent the night of the 22nd November in Refuge Venasque (as planned) or not. Dan stayed there himself for 2 nights while searching the area and reported that there is no sign of anybody having been there - it's a bland/bare room with eight rough bunks/mattresses, a table and no sign-in book.

Dan did offer to give clothes / samples to the French police so they could do a forensic search or send in sniffer dogs, but they said they didn't have that type of dog and/or it was too long afterwards.

However, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

On the Spanish side of the border hiking was permitted under local COVID regulations, which is why there are so many other hikers who reported meeting Esther, both on 22nd November and in the days leading up to her disappearance.

In France the country was in a national lockdown and exercise was supposed to be undertaken within 1km of an individual's home for a maximum duration of 1 hour. As such, there were not supposed to be any hikers in France at the time of Esther's disappearance and nobody has come forward to say they saw her.

However, that doesn't mean that nobody could have been up there, and that somebody who was breaking the rules didn't see an opportunity when encountering a lone female hiker. With the

additional knowledge that nobody else should be nearby and so close to a road, an individual with a weapon could feasibly force somebody back to their vehicle.

At the time of Esther's disappearance it was supposed to be hunting season, with certain forms of hunting still permitted under French lockdown rules.

In such a mountainous location, there is no practical way to police the lockdown restrictions and anybody choosing to ignore the COVID restrictions would be highly unlikely to be sanctioned. A week after Esther disappeared, Dan Colegate reports seeing many hunters in the area and several hikers (although by this point COVID restrictions had eased and hiking was again possible for anybody living locally).

This is not to say Esther was harmed by a hunter or anybody local, just that the possibility of Esther encountering an individual with a weapon remains. Given that the intensive search found no trace of her, this is why the criminal investigation is absolutely necessary.

Current Situation:

- The accident theory cannot be further investigated at the moment due to the weather.
- The voluntary disappearance theory makes no sense due to lack of both motive and means.
- The idea somebody else was involved, known or unknown remains possible but physical evidence is lacking due to the remote location.
- The police need individuals with information to come forward.

Personal Statement by Esther's Partner, Dan Colegate

Esther is simply the best person I've ever met. She is kind, generous, compassionate, intelligent and creative. She wears her heart on her sleeve and always sees the best in others.

There is a reason Esther has a first class Oxford degree and represented Great Britain as a junior rower, among her many other material achievements that came from her determination and resourcefulness. Yet none of those achievements are the reason I love her so much. The real reason, the one that drew me in almost 19 years ago and sustained us both through the ups and downs of any normal relationship, is her unwavering goodness and commitment to doing what she feels is right.

It is true that once Esther sets her mind to a goal she will move mountains to make it happen, but that has always remained secondary to her commitment to helping those in need and leaving the world she touches a better place. We can never finish a hike without her pockets bulging with litter she's picked up, she won't pass a stranger without smiling, and every decision Esther makes is governed by a powerful moral code.

Since Esther went missing I have been lost in a world that no longer makes sense to me. Every aspect of my life and the future I dream of includes Esther. We have built a life that focuses on being a team, where 'home' is wherever we are together, and where nothing matters as long as we have each other. Spending occasional times apart, to pursue separate goals, recharge and intensify the pleasure of being together, is part of that for us. Seeing Esther happy in the mountains, expanding her boundaries and discovering more about herself makes me happier than I can describe.

I never imagined that one day she would not come home. Many times we had discussed how we would grow old together and take slow walks reflecting on the adventures of our youth. The pain of her disappearance is excruciating, but even that pales into insignificance against the pain of not knowing what's happened to her. It's crippling. The nightmares. The constant questioning. The helplessness.

Until Esther is found I have to continue to hold on to the hope that she can come home safely.

If anybody has any information, no matter how insignificant it might seem, or if they know anybody who was in the area at the time, who may have been working outdoors, hunting, walking, hiking or cycling, please, please contact the LBT Global Hotline. Information can be provided anonymously and passed on to the police in this way.

LBT Global Hotline: +44 (0) 800 098 8485

WhatsApp: +44 (0) 7545 826 497

Email: delta.ops@lbt.global