

The BAD News

July 2004



Baldock faff in the Alps; May 2004

Alps 2004 - trip 1

Early in 2004 Kev (ex Baldock member, friend of Terry's, whom I'd paddled with in the Alps a couple of times before) got in touch about an Alps trip. Of the usual suspects only myself, Kev and Milky (friend of Kev's through polo) could make it, along with their two other halves who drive the shuttles, sunbathe, and shop..... We were due to go to Italy but with Milky's other half Gerry being pregnant we opted for the shorter drive to the usual destination of Briancon.

So on thursday evening Kev & Wes rolled up at my house, loaded the boat, tossed kit in the car - lots of space as we were staying in a chalet so no camping kit required - and drove to Milky's to admire their (sadly static) water feature and get a few hours kip. At 4am we were up again and driving towards Dover (fortunately I slept most of the way) for a nice early hovercraft departure. Parking on the craft - rather smaller than the usual Seafrance ferry - was interesting, especially being an overheight vehicle (ie boats on the roof). It was a little easier for Milky, who was borrowing a boat from Kev and hence left it on Kev's car and left his roofbars off for the journey down.

Rather a lot of hours later we arrived in Vallouise and found the chalet Milky had sorted out for us - a pleasant little chalet not much further from the centre of the village than you end up on the campsite, and considerably closer to any wheelie bins.

On saturday we warmed up with.... the Onde. (The classic warmup stretch if you're staying in Vallouise). We met a British bloke at the get-in who lives in Argentiere (a few km down the road) and hooks up with random people to paddle with whenever he gets the chance, nice life..... Then after inspecting the Gyr, which had a rather nasty looking rapid on it (the bottom half changes considerably from year to year, and last year had a lot of debri and metal work in it) we did the Onde again and carried on down the Gyronde to Argentiere. In the evening we looked for Martin and Andy B on the Vallouise campsite but they weren't there. turns out it had been shut when they turned up so they ended up camped at Argentiere (which is windswept, and has a bit of a theft problem).

On sunday we warmed up with the Briancon gorge, which is also a popular section with people as a warmup run, so there were a lot of Brits there. We were expecting a lot of swimmers. Still, we left them behind as they were a large group and a few of them weren't too impressed to see me and Milky using the very small patch of trees at the getin (which is in Briancon town) as a toilet. The water was quite high, fast and fun. We got out above the weir in town and stood watching, expecting a bit of carnage from the group we'd met at the getin and maybe the group we'd met halfway down (the river at the getout has walls either side with one point where you can actually get out - with one small break in the wall with a small beach area, over the bridge from where we park the cars - so whilst you can see what's going on you can't do a lot to help). One group came through and took the interesting line through the weir, modified after one of their group spent a very long time playing in it, but he came out and managed to roll up after a few attempts, looking shattered! The group we'd seen at the getin never came through despite waiting a long time. Ian and Clare drove past, with the information that they'd

left Martin and Andy to do the shopping the other day and when they got back they wondered if they'd been drinking paintstripper..... sounded like Martin was having a good holiday!

Then we moved on to the Claree which was also at a good level, and admire "Sinky's cavern" (where Milky's friend Sinky dislocated his shoulder last year, this year he's getting married and wasn't allowed out to play). Unfortunately the sharp rocks put a hole in Kev's Creek (typical Pyranha plastic) and whilst he finished the run fine it clearly wasn't good for much more. So, limited to a group of 2, Milky and I did the Onde again. The chalet was just a short walk from the dam by the Gyronde, shame about the steps we had to climb up with boats though... Milky had demonstrated a real obsession with dry kit, drying it out at every opportunity despite having about 5 sets of wetsuit shorts etc.

On Monday Kev went to Argentiere and onto Embrun boat shopping, whilst Milky and I did... the Onde. Then we attempted to go food shopping, but it turned out to be a bank holiday and the shops shut just as we got there. Eventually Kev returned with a red shiny Dagger Nomad. Instructions said to take it out in shallow water and practise exiting the boat, with a friend to help. So the Onde was selected as shallow water (well it was a grade III only 5 minutes up the road from which we could walk back to the chalet) and Milky offered to push Kev in, but in the end opted out of doing the river yet again, so I went with Kev. (Milky was busy jogging; training for some Iron Man competition. Wes was also jogging but claimed to be going rather slower and didn't go with him!) Then Kev had plenty of confidence in his new boat so he and Milky did the Gyr, which I still wasn't sure about so I shuttled. Dinner was a bbq as we seemed to have lots of food left despite not having been shopping. there seemed to be some faffing going on with lighting the bbq but I didn't get involved!

on tuesday we started with the lower Guisane, which I remembered being one of the more challenging runs from previous years, so I made an effort to lead (as it is all too easy to take an eddy and wave Kev past, but it doesn't help me to improve!) I could judge how serious the section coming up was by seeing how closely Kev was following me down! It was at a great level, shame about the used nappy at the getout I selected, I was a little more careful in my selection the next time down! We moved on to picnic by the Claree, except for Milky who went via McDs.... and then did the Claree, and the Briancon gorge, and then got on the Gyr. Unfortunately the Gyr is the only river I'd ever swum on in the French Alps, and when I went over near the top I half-rolled but hit rocks, then went through a stopper, then my back bumped over some rocks, and I baled..... Swam past Milky who was still unclipping his throwline, but Kev caught an eddy, stuck the paddle out in the water, and swung me into an eddy behind him. The boat pinned just round the corner and I was able to haul it up the bank on a rope; once up there's a good footpath and it was only 1km or so to the getout. My nasty cheap ainsworth paddles which I keep thinking of replacing washed up on a gravel bank further down and Kev was able to lobb them onto the bank. (I keep thinking I should replace the paddles and get some splits, but somehow I never get round to it!) At the end Kev and Milky kept telling me how I'd done bits on the Guisane which were much harder.... Still, the bruises I ended up with on my legs were pretty impressive.

On wednesday we did our annual trip to the Ubaye (about 1hr 30 min drive from Vallouise) to do the racecourse section. Again the water level was good; I took a roll in a stopper in the first major rapid and lost a bit of confidence - aware that in a group of 3 on a large volume river the chances of swimming a long way / losing kit were increased. The Ubaye had plenty of large holes that I wouldn't have wanted to swim through. But it was a good fun run - the gorge section at the end which is usually flat was boily. after lunch and a sunbathe by a small lake we went to run the same section again (there aren't any other good options in that area; last year we inspected a side creek which is grade 4, but we met someone at the Claree who'd lost his paddles swimming that creek the previous week, and figured it probably wasn't a good option in a group of 3 as we'd need to set up protection. I regained confidence after successfully completing the first major rapid upright, so took the lead, and then had a rather unintentional play in a hole near the end. Fortunately on my second roll I found myself out of it. Still, Milky wanted to run the river a third time but I felt it might be third time lucky - for the river rather than for me - and Kev wasn't keen, so we went to sunbathe by a larger lake on the way back towards Guillestre, and then into Guillestre for dinner. Never satisfied he's done enough paddling, Milky insisted on inspecting the Guil first, which was high and grey, and the letterbox section had about 10 nasty stoppers in a row, a whirlpool on the far side (ie impossible to inspect) and no getout I was sure I could make (ie if I was on the wrong line I'd be making a mess of the entire rapid). oh well, rivers in the Alps rise during the day as the sun melts the snow, maybe it would drop.....

thursday is market day in Vallouise so we went shopping in the morning - Wes is very keen on buying fleeces and also on buying kiddie clothes for all her friends' kids. Usually I restrain from buying anything but Wes' enthusiasm was catching and I bought a couple of fleeces.

Then we drove back to the Guil, Kev and I half hoping not to see anyone else on it, as that would convince us that it wasn't a sane option. There were paddlers on it, but the minibus at the top had the Gene17 logo - I kayaking company run by Simon Westgarth which sells videos of people paddling crazy stuff most mortals would never touch..... Not a sure sign that the river was a safe option! After much scouting for suitable getouts (you can see the river from the road but it is at the bottom of a cliff and there aren't that many places to get out) we looked for the gauge. Milky saw it, almost submerged, reading 1m = grade V according to the guidebook, but didn't tell us. So we got on, and I got off before the Staircase (usually one of 2 major rapids) as Staircase looked long, continuous and unforgiving. Kev and Milky carried on, and the river didn't let up down to where Letterbox used to be - which is where I'd seen the 10 or so stoppers the previous evening. Fortunately at that point they met another group on the water - who had had a swimmer at Letterbox who fortunately came out just with a few cuts and bruises. Milky took a roll around Letterbox between the many stoppers, but recovered his line fine. I was glad they were able to paddle in a larger group without me needing to get back on as there was nowhere suitable to launch back in, though I thought the rest of the river would be ok - usually the last stretch is a fun 3+ and it didn't look that serious from the road. However it was a good grade V, Milky loved it and Kev was glad to be off it, and also glad that I hadn't got back on.

In the evening we had another quick blast down the Onde, as I hadn't done much paddling that day but the others were too tired to do anything much more.

On Friday we had another run down the lower Guisane, followed by the Claree, then the Briancon gorge, all of which had dropped. We also inspected the grade 6 above the gorge, half expecting to see the Gene17 crew there, and then went into Briancon for crepes.

On Saturday we packed up early, waited for the chalet owner Jerry to turn up to read the electricity meter, tell us what a nightmare his week was, and say 'cool' half a billion times, and then set off to do the Gyr. I stuck firmly to the middle of the group till I accidentally caught a large eddy and got left behind (the river is narrow and twisty with few suitable eddies for stopping and waiting). I was too wary of the risks of pinning or swimming to push my way out of the eddy so got out and walked, but Milky and Kev were waiting round the corner, and persuaded me to get back in. This time I finished the river upright!!!! Then we had a last blast down the lower Guisane, did our shopping in Briancon, and started the long drive home.... Milky was leading with his electronic gadget with the route programmed in, but decided to ignore it when he thought it was wrong, so we ended up in the centre of Lyon.... fortunately it was a mistake fairly easily reversed.

Around Dijon we stopped at a travelodge type place at a motorway services, but surprisingly quiet. To save cash I had the "lit supplementaire" in Kev and Wes's room which turned out to be a cosy little camped which rolled out from under the main bed. The room was spacious enough but every time I rolled over in the bed I hit the partition walls with a clunk. still, it was vastly preferable to sleeping in the car / pitching a tent at midnight at motorway services as we often do on the way back on Alps trips! We had an ensuite bathroom with plenty of hot water. The dinner in the motorway services was surprisingly good though the service left a lot to be desired, and breakfast was a decent buffet style selection, with rolls which could be conveniently pilfered for lunch.

We made it back to Calais with 3 hours to spare but unfortunately, being the Sunday at the end of half term, we couldn't get on an earlier crossing. After failing to find an open supermarket (3pm on a Sunday) and not wanting to join Milky in some horrendous beer and wine warehouse, we ended up parking at the port and sunbathing / reading for while.

Finally - the stretch from Dover always seems to take forever - we made it back to Hitchin where Kev and Wes dropped me off, back to sorting out wet kit, an early night (funnily enough the pool session didn't tempt me), and back to work....

Cheers to Kev and Wes for the lift and a very low hassle trip, to Kev for the rescue on the Gyr, to Milky for sorting out the chalet (which cost around £30 per head more than camping would have but had the major benefits of a fridge and hot water to wash up, whilst still being in Vallouise village which we all like), and to Wes and Gerry for shuttling (they have perfected the art now, deckchairs and books come out as soon as we park up anywhere whilst we wander off to inspect the river / get changed / faff generally). And to Kev for loans of kit - a boat to Milky, various other bits of kit to Milky, and a cag to me after I split my neckseal.

With most of the usual suspects for Alps trips either about to or recently having sprogged (Milky claims he's coming again in 2 years but things may be different once

sprog turns up...), I hope some new faces will be inspired to set aside some leave for next year! Just think about pain au chocolat, wine, decent water levels, good weather, lots of daylight to fit lots of rivers in, virtually no fisherman (Why can't I get a job in Argentiere...?????)

Ros

External Publicity Officer Report

I've been asked to keep you all up-to-date with what I've been doing in my role as External Publicity Officer over the past few months, so here goes...

- Added dates of socials, trips etc onto website calendar (so that any potential new members who visit the site can see what an active club we are).
- Updated club leaflet and distributed into local libraries.
- Produced new colour advert for club and stuck it up in local sports shops (those that would let me!), leisure centres, swimming pools and on community boards in local supermarkets.
- Placed advert at Viking Canoe Club, offering them the chance to come to our pool sessions to practise rolling etc.
- Produced variety of posters advertising club, which have been stuck up at North Herts College and University of Hertfordshire to try and attract some local students.
- Sent details to local papers, advertising the fact that Pete will be assessing for BCU Star Tests on Sat 17th July at Cardington and that people can come and learn/practise the skills at our pool sessions beforehand.
- Organised publicity display for Letchworth Fun-day on Sat 3rd July.
- Wrote to manager of North Herts Leisure Centre, to enquire why they had taken down our publicity board and thrown it away, and why they would not let us have another one on which to advertise the club. Following this, I received a reply, apologising for the loss of our original board and offering us a new one in the corridor leading to the changing rooms.

If anyone knows of a good place to advertise the club and would like an advert/poster/leaflets to stick up there, please feel free to let me know and I'll let you have some.

- Fee.

An unexpected side effect of polo boats.....

We'd like to add a new section to the BAD News regarding bite size bits of info about club members past and present. If anyone has any news from old members living near or far that they think others would be interested in please let the Committee know so we can add it to this section.

We seem to be having rather a productive 2004 for the club!
Congratulations from everyone to the following couples.

Rob and Deb Clough on the arrival of Emily Megan Clough in March

Mark and Deborah Sheldrick (now living in Canada) on the arrival of Robert Fraser Sheldrick in March

Al and Simone Green on the arrival of Matilda Green in April

Jon and Janine Paterson on the arrival of Madeleine Paterson in April

Cathy and Matt Thewlis on the arrival of Amy Rebecca Thewlis in April

Sally and Pete Nixon (all the way over in Switzerland) on the arrival of Aimée Rebecca Nixon in June

And anyone else that we might've missed.

We're also looking forward to more little ones this year from Fee & Bri McCusker, Clare & Nick Cahm, and Mike Jones and Lyn D'Sousa.

Anyone else got anything they want to tell us???

Those that remember Nina Gane will be pleased to hear that she'll be back from Thailand in August for a break, and a drunken surfing trip is planned for then so get hold of Roz Bailey if you're interested.

Slalom Report.. by Terry Griffiths

After an upsurge in interest last year, Slalom seems to be a bit quiet in the club at the moment. To my knowledge, only 3 members have competed so far this year. Their results are as follows:

Nene 12th June

Dave Ling	5 th Div 3 K1 Men
Terry Griffiths	1 st Veteran

Nene 13th June

Dave Ling	13 th Div 3 K1 Men
Terry Griffiths	2nd Veteran

Cardington 26th June

Dave Ling	6 th Div 3 K1 Men
Andy Stewardson	14 th Div 3 K1 Men
Terry Griffiths	1 st Veteran

Cardington 27th June

Dave Ling	15 th Div 3 K1 Men
Terry Griffiths	1 st Veteran

It should be noted that Dave is still competing in his 'Booster', some of his results are therefore quite impressive.

Hopefully a few more members will dust off their boats before the end of the season, perhaps in time for the Inter-Club event?

P.S 2nd Sunday of the month is Slalom night in the pool, anyone can put the gates up if I am not there.

If you are not sure how, ask a committee member for assistance.

Fee and Bri's housewarming

Fee and Bri have moved (to a big house with lots of space for babies.....) and had a massive 80 people (some of them quite little people!) to their housewarming.

We had a great time winding up small kids who were sufficiently foolish to leave ice lollies unattended on the drinks table in the conservatory, and playing with the 'Bop it' toy Rob the plane driver brought along. And of course, eating vodka jelly babies.

The following morning, we dragged ourselves to the boat house for a :

Local paddle in Hertford, by Craig Taylor

The trip started on time for once. I was told that it was unusual for a trip on a Sunday morning [or any day of the week for that matter] to start on time. Especially as there was a house warming party the night before. We first started paddling on a river, the river Lea, and on the river there was a small weir which dropped about 4 feet. It had 2 parts to it. The first part dropped about 3 feet and the 2nd part a foot. On the river I found 2 tennis balls and a pingpong ball, which was great fun to throw around at other people. There was another tennis ball but I could not reach it. We then moved on to a canal which had lots of big fish in it.

Rob the plane driver wasn't looking too happy, especially when vodka jelly babies were mentioned.

For those who don't know Craig, look for the person with the novel boat emptying-technique at the pool which involves wearing the boat as a hat....

A Fishy Tale

They always say the best-laid plans go to waste, so why I even bother is beyond me. It all started the day before; I was like a child all over again (like I ever grew up!!), all my bags were packed, I had finally managed to get a half-day off work. It should have gone something like this, finish work at 1200 hrs followed by a quick journey home on public transport, load the car and grab some food and hit the road for the four hour drive to west Wales by 1400 at the latest. Arriving at the campsite before last orders at the pub, followed by a weekend of top notch surfing, catching all those big gnarly waves, riding them out while putting the whole surfing community to shame.

Well, what happened was.....

I finally managed to sneak out of work at 1250 after completing my manager's last request and side stepping him as I sprinted out the door before he could say, "Just before you leave could you just....". Just as things are looking up, well you can always rely on the London public transport system to fail you when you least need it to. So what should have been a quick journey home became the journey from hell (Why is it that on hot days some women like to empty a bottle of cheap perfume over themselves and hang around in hot tube trains? The net effect of which is that all of what little fresh, well-oxygenated air is sucked out of existence and replaced by a gas that can only be compared to hydrofluoric acid. Anyway I digress).

Moving on, I load the car and decide to skip the food, I could last another four hours without food. So I hit the road at 1600, two hours behind schedule. So on goes the car stereo, a little metal to help me unwind, I should have chosen the traffic reports! I cruise up the slip road on to the M25 only to have to hit the breaks as I see that the countries most expensive practical joke is at a total stand still (Why don't they put some kind of escape route in so that if the road is grid locked you can just slip off the slip road and find another route?). Anyway, close to eight hours later, in the pouring rain, with no pub welcome, I erect my tent and crawl inside my sleeping bag and catch some sleep.

Next morning I wake to find a very busy campsite, a vast improvement in the weather and a group of strange people, well they were still in bed at 0730, but they joined me later. So after some brief introductions and breakfast we started to contemplate the day's activities. Surfing and food seemed to be the main options; having just eaten a quick paddle was the first choice.

I took a quick look at the surf. So much for my big gnarly waves, there was a good amount, but none of those 12 footers I was looking forward to. However as this was my first surf trip and also my first time on moving water it was probably for the best. But nobody had told me that when you

are standing some 100 meters away on a large pebble bank looking at the surf, it looks much smaller than when you are sitting in a boat facing it.

So me being the over ambitious fool that I am paddle straight out to the biggest waves, I catch the first one a treat only to be promptly dumped. Rather unceremoniously I thought. Now comes the first of what was to be many swimming lessons, my rolling is sketchy at best on flat water, not a hope in hell on this stuff. So bail it is then, followed by a reasonable swim back in. The next run was just in the soup, notice the sudden lack of ambition, however the swimming became something of a regular occurrence. I kind of lost count of how many times I did have to swim.

I was having a whale of a time. Everyone was most helpful with advice and tips on how to read the waves and catch the perfect wave, shame there weren't any. I had finally started to ride some waves in with being dumped. After a few hours out on the water food was becoming a definite option.

We took a trip into St. David's to stock up on some essentials for the evening, i.e. beer and food for the BBQ. May I recommend the chocolate and ice cream shop in the town. And also the butcher, they do the best meat I have had anywhere. A quick look round town, as I am told this is a customary task completed not only by initiates but also the veterans.

Back at the campsite much joviality was had, discussing the day's events and the fact that Sunday night would consist of an outing to the pink motel we passed on the way, for a sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi and swim. Followed by a Chinese in the restaurant. Don't panic mind although the owners have chosen to paint the building a suggestive pink colour, they don't charge by the hours and is in fact a classy establishment.

The other hot topic is the Bitches paddle. Due to my ability to make friends with the fish it was mutually agreed that this would not be the best trip for me. So I stayed back at the campsite with those people who are still waiting for the frontal lobotomy. Anyway it seemed a bit more fun to watch the professionals swim (i.e. Hugh). The excuse fielded was something to do with not fitting a spray deck properly.

Anyway, I think it is about time I stop waffling and finish off otherwise I will occupy the entire newsletter single-handed. The point is that I had a superb time and would highly recommend a surf trip, or any other for that matter. It's not all about paddling there is a huge social side to it all too.

Gareth 'Nemo' Roberts

----- [cut out and pass to single female friends] -----

the b4cc Lonely Hearts column.....



Name: Rob the plane driver

Occupation: Glorified bus driver. Only ends up working about 150 days a year. Nice job if you don't mind getting up at 4am some days, and being surrounded by air hostesses. But he doesn't seem to be able to get freebie trips for his mates, so we're not that impressed really...

Lives: Under the flight path (Stansted Mountfitchet). Nice quaint little cottage. Or it will be nice, see hobby 2.

Age: About 31. Scarily mature, really. See hobbies 2, 5 & 7 in particular.

Hobbies:

1. Hassling people for money (in his role as canoe club treasurer)
2. DIY. And yet more DIY. There is gradual progress.
3. Speed-dating. Gets lots of ticks (due to being a plane driver no doubt) but not too many matches. Hence this column....
4. Classical Music. Plays something, pretty well (allegedly). Was a music teacher, but plane driving pays better. (Not so good on pop music; hadn't heard of *Pink*.)
5. Baking cakes (If scrounging a lift to Stansted early evening, turn up an hour early to scrounge cake as well!)

6. Canoeing & swimming (not in that order)
 7. Growing tomatoes [dangerous hobby - we all know what happened to Mike when he bought a greenhouse]. However this hobby reveals the suspicious side of Rob's personality; when moving his tomatoes outside he only moved half at a time in case they died on him. Which they did.
 8. Acting as personal secretary / general dogsbody / appendage to Pete & Helen.
 9. Posing - see photo.
 10. playing 'Bop it' (if you don't know what this is, you shouldn't have missed Fee and Bri's housewarming). Fee is better at it than Rob though, so expect Rob to be putting in lots of practise. He doesn't like being beaten!
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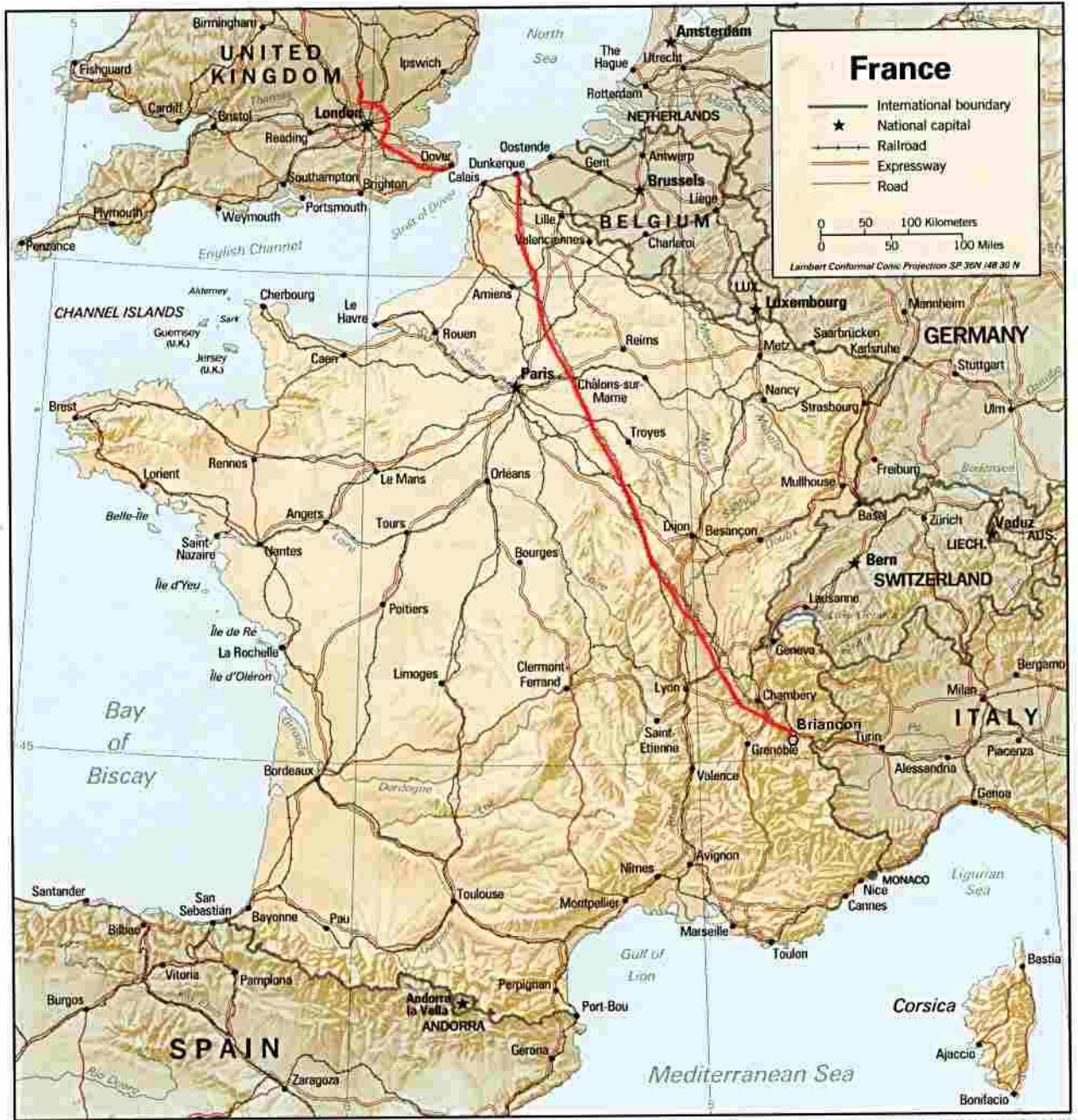
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Alternatively turn up at the pool on a Sunday night.

Or contact Helen who knows exactly where he lives!

FRENCH ALPS Summer 2004

Tuesday 25th May – Monday 31st May



People and Equipment

Car 1- VW Passat Estate

Car 2 – Land Rover Discovery

<i>Name</i>	<i>Kayak</i>	<i>Paddles</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Kayak</i>	<i>Paddles</i>
Martin Home	Riot Grind	Lightning (leftie. Awkward sod)	Ian	Pyranha Sub 6	Werner
Andy Barras	Perception Ultra Clean	Double Dutch	Matt	Pyranha Sub 6	Werner
			Chris	LiquidLogic Session	Robson
			Tom	BlissStick ???	
			Claire	No boat	

Rivers

<i>River</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>Gradient</i>	<i>Start</i>	<i>Finish</i>
Lower Guil	3-	4.5 miles	10 in 1000	Egliers bridge	St Clement
Briancon Gorge	4	0.8 mile	25 in 1000	Fontenil	Briancon
Middle Claree	4	2.5 miles	25 in 1000	Nevache	Plampinet
Upper Guisane	3 (4)	7 miles	15 in 1000	Le Casset	Chantemerle
Lower Guisane	4	4 miles	25 in 1000	Chantemerle	Briancon
Onde	3+	2 miles	27 in 1000	Les Gresourieres	Vallouise
Slalom Site	3			L'Argentiere de La Bessee	

<i>Description</i>	<i>Cost in £</i>
Ferry	110.00
Vehicle recovery	34.00
Extra Driver on Insurance	6.00
Fuel (1,720 miles)	135.00
Motorway TOLLS	75.00
Camping (5 nights)	20.00
Food (1 meal out)	120.00
Wine/Gifts	10.00
TOTAL (for 2 persons)	510.00

COSTS

Preamble

I always said I would never go out to the French Alps in May as the water is too high and the rivers become too pushy. So here I was leaving my house 4.30 a.m. in the morning on Tuesday 25th May to go to Briancon, the highest and sunniest town in the Alps, and the centre of all things good regarding canoeing.

My momentary madness came about because a planned trip to the Verdon in June had been cancelled. I was resigned to not going canoeing this year when I found out that Ian, a new member to the club, had already sorted a trip with some friends of his. I asked if there was room and the answer was yes, all I had to do was book a ferry. And that was how I came to be visiting the Alps far earlier in the season than I had ever intended, with far less preparation than normal and the minimum of time for organisation. Given those parameters the trip turned out to be a surprisingly good one, with little going wrong. For the first time in ages I was not doing the organising and it was so refreshing and relaxing to let somebody else take the strain, even to the point of simply following the other vehicle across Europe because they had SatNav installed. Now read on

Itinerary

Tue 25th

Leave Letchworth 4.30 a.m. drive to Dover

Ian thinks I have booked Andy in my car and I think Ian still has Andy booked into his vehicle. In the end it doesn't matter as the ferry company don't seem to care.

Catch ferry leaving at 8.15 a.m.

Arrive France 10.15 a.m. (11.15 a.m. local time)

Drive for 11 hours (630 miles) from Dunkirk to Briancon in the French Alps at about 10.30 in the evening. The campsite we planned to stay at was closed so we drove to L'Argentiere de La Bessee to the campsite by the slalom course (river is natural but the rocks have been added).

Wed 26th

Paddled at the slalom site next to the campsite. The river is the Durance. The slalom gates are permanently erected and the course is free to use.

Had lunch – French bread cheese salad etc.

Paddled the Lower Guil (class 3) into the Durance found a playwave near the end of the run.

Thu 27th

Paddled the Briancon Gorge got in below the barrage. This was a high speed whiz down the river where you could see the slope and with few eddies in which to stop, pause and catch your breath. As a consequence the group often bunched up. During one of these occasions I got too close to Chris who was quite close to Matt. Matt eddied out river left across the front of a big boulder, Chris a little slower just missed the boulder, I managed to hit the boulder leaning onto it taking the full force on my right hand as I leant onto the rock realising I wasn't going to avoid it.

The river was moving at a breathtaking speed and after 10 minutes or so we arrived at the crux move. The river performed a "S" curve, going first left then

right. The current took you towards the vertical rock face river right which was severely undercut. The wrong move could result in being pinned upside down under the undercut. Last year, apparently, somebody's kayak was pinned there for some time before it was removed using karabiners and ropes. Everybody managed the manoeuvre quite easily albeit nervously as the consequences of getting it wrong were quite serious. Another 10 minutes paddling and we were at the egress point by the rafting centre just outside Briancon. This was a first for me (again breaking one of my golden rules- "never do a gorge because you don't have the option to walk") and I got a real sense of achievement at meeting the challenge.

Lunch then ensued with bread (corn thins for me as I'm coeliac), cheese, nutella chocolate spread, apples - anything really to replace the energy depleted by the run.

Then it was onto the Claree. For this we had to drive through Briancon to the north side.

Andy and I had paddled the Claree before, although never in such high, early season water.

We all inspected the river, in particular the class 4 rapid at the start. There was lots of discussion about using the cushion wave river right to push you around the rock and onto the right line. I wasn't convinced that it was a cushion wave and the prospect of leaning onto something which didn't support you didn't fill me with confidence. Any way we got onto the river and I went last so there were plenty of chase boaters to pick up my bits.

As it turned out that rapid was easy, it was the rest of the river I had underestimated. 400 metres later I was gasping for breath as I hadn't managed to **see** an eddy let alone use one.

If you can imagine running 400 metres flat out on a running track that twisted and turned and then when you hit the finish line found you had to carry on that was how I felt. Eventually I managed to eddy out and sat there sucking in air for all I was worth. The river continued in much the same fashion for the next 2 miles or so. It was unrelenting in speed and the need to concentrate to dodge the rocks. At one point I found myself in the process capsizing and had to decide whether to support or go for a quick roll. I reasoned that if I sculled for support I would be whizzing down the river with my ribs exposed looking for the next rock to do damage, whereas if I rolled my body would act as an anchor slow me down and after rolling I would be upright and would be better able to negotiate the rapids. I rolled and everything, for once, went to plan. At the egress everybody was buzzing saying what a great run it was. I felt pleased with my performance. Luckily I had underestimated the river, based upon previously paddling it in low water, and had paddled a river at the edge of my ability. Had I known how difficult the run was going to be for me I probably would not have got on.

Fri 28th

Upper Guisane – long paddle easy class 3 with one class 4 rapid. There was a classic misunderstanding here following a group briefing about how we were to run the rapid. Matt said “ *We will run the next rapid as a group and will meet up in the large eddy at the bottom* “. I thought this was strange as there were plenty of eddies to catch on the way down but I was a guest and he was

leading so I concurred with his request. What he actually said was “ *We will run the next rapid as a group, catching as many eddies as we can, and will meet up in the large eddy at the bottom* “

I ran the rapid following the instructions misheard from Matt. He thought I was out of control and unable to get the eddies and followed me down. Andy in the middle was torn between following Matt and me or stopping in an eddy to maintain line of sight with Tom and Chris who were at the back. At one stage Chris was on the rapid effectively on his own. He was not a happy bunny when we stopped for a breather. But eventually all was made clear regarding my misunderstanding.

I opted NOT to paddle the Lower Guisane – which was the right decision given my fatigue and standard of paddling so far – but this didn’t mean I didn’t regret not paddling it (I hate to miss out on a river) – but “*Cest la vie*”. Instead, Claire and I walked up a path alongside the river to take some photos.

Sat 29th

Briancon Gorge – Tom got sun screen in his eyes and could barely see !!!!. He paddled most of the gorge with his eyes shut!!

Lunch then the Onde. Tom didn’t paddle as he still found it painful to open his eyes even after washing them with sterile solution and having a shower back at the campsite. We arrived at an empty car park by the Onde, then suddenly 5,000 paddlers descended upon us(slight exaggeration). It was the weekend of the Briancon River Festival. On the river it was mayhem. Wall to wall plastic. One idiot boofed a boulder behind which I had eddied out and nearly landed on my head. I paddled nervously and survived. When we finished the others went back for a second run.

A few years ago this was a 2 hour run with bank support. Now it is a 15 minute blast down the river.

Sun 30th

Plans of paddling the Ubaye evaporated as we got up late and decided that there was too much water on the river and a 2 ½ hour drive there and back was not a good plan prior to an 11 hour drive the next day. So instead we paddled the Slalom site next to the campsite – after 2 runs down I had had enough but Andy stayed on to get some playboat coaching from Chris.

After lunch we paddled the Onde. I paddled brilliantly, confidently and well. A complete transformation from the previous occasion. So good was the run I refused a second as I wanted to finish the holiday on a high note.

Mon 31st

Drove home. Left campsite at 9.00 a.m. arrived at Dunkirk at 9.00 p.m. ferry left at 9.30 p.m. Arrived in Dover 10.30 (local time) got home about 1.00 a.m. Tuesday morning.

Conclusion

- **I thoroughly enjoyed my week in the Alps. I particularly enjoyed the company of new found friends.(I hope they remain so after this article).**

- I would probably not repeat going out so **early in the season**. The decision to go early depends on what you want from your paddling experience. If you want to paddle pushy rivers, with few eddies, and where the rivers are all a ½ a grade higher then go. But it's not for me. I am, however, glad of the experience.
- Early in May the weather is still unsettled whereas going later in the year you are more likely to get guaranteed sunshine all the time.
- Rather than camping (at £20.00 per person per week) I would like to try renting an apartment at £45.00 per person per week.
- I enjoyed paddling with a different group of paddlers with a different approach to river running. I was also pleasantly surprised to find a group more cautious and sensible than me. Initially, when Ian said they normally run 2 or 3 rivers a day, I thought that they would be a group of head banging, hair boating macho nutters. But they weren't (apart from Matt and that's only off the water)

Lesson Learnt

- Some new group signals (OK; you come to this eddy).
- Edge boat onto gravel in shallow eddies to stop sliding backwards.
- Plan route through a rapid from the bottom up (less false starts).
- Narrow gap between two rocks - edge boat over rock with most water flowing over it.
- How to turn around a poor paddling performance - My dramatic turnaround in paddling the Onde was achieved by me deciding to use all the energy wasted in worrying about whether I could cope and divert it into concentrating and focussing on paddling the river. As a consequence I became a calmer and more relaxed individual and paddled much, much better.
- No matter how many good anecdotes and brilliant stories you have, Matt will have one bigger, better and much more interesting. Be humble and listen it will be much more illuminating. I was halfway through some of my stories and I became disinterested myself knowing Matt, the double-decker bus of storytelling (there's another one just behind), would have a much better one.

Saying/Happenings of the week

- Approaching Dover and surveying the Hovercraft departure terminal, I said – *“You know Hoverspeed Andy - I really thought it would take off”*
- Ian was dishing out the evening meal of Pasta Bolognese and was being irritated by Claire who thought it was amusing to tickle his ear with some grass. Ian said “Don't do that or I'll zap you with the spatula”. The tickling and warning were repeated 3 times. Suddenly there was a resounding thwack. Claire's forehead now resembled a Pizza and Ian calmly continued serving up the food. There was a stunned silence as the rest of the assembled personnel struggled to believe the incident they had just witnessed. 1- 0 to Ian. But he was now on a 6 month sex ban.
- The Men's toilets at campsite were closed. I was not aware that the Ladies was open and to be shared by all. I awoke early on the first morning desperate to lighten my load. The only place out of sight was down by the riverbank. So early in the morning I found myself in a very undignified position crouching

over some rocks. I realise, when I had finished that this health hazard would be there ALL summer because the river was at its highest level and was only going drop. There would be no washing away of the evidence.

- Returning from my shower I espied a gaudily decoarated handbag on my camping chair. I asked if anybody knew whose it was but nobody did. I said “it must be Claire’s” only to discover that it was my black bumbag that had been gaily decorated with gold stick-on stars that Claire had purchased earlier. I am now the proud owner of a black bumbag with the EU symbol in gold stars on the back and Mart emblazoned on the front.
- Finishing the Upper Guisane run we were looking for somewhere to lunch. The cars were parked by a shed in the carpark. The shed was unlocked and looking inside we discovered a deck chair and some plastic chairs, which we put to good use. Result!
- Sunday 30th when we paddled at the slolom site by the campsite the villagers had a Fete. Amongst the things it was possible to purchase were:-
 - A horseshoe
 - A stuffed goat
 - A timber frame for a dormer window
- Driving though a village on the way to the Onde and doing an exhilarating 5mph Ian was chastised by an old French woman for dangerous driving and she gesticulated that he should slow down. Ian gesticulated back in English.

Martin Home (author, worrier and bon viveur)

[who will photograph anything, even if it isn't that interesting....]



The Good Pub Guide Part 2.

Hexham - The Heart of all England

Warning: This is a tale of drunkenness and debauchery and cannot be tried at home.

What follows is a historical report, based on drunkenly vivid memories of about 10 years ago. For legal reasons I'll claim that I may have got people's names and events muddled up. Sadly, perhaps, I can remember the layout of the pub. As you enter, it has/had an olde world feel to it with panelled walls. The bar is offset to your right, serving the needs of a large saloon room. A narrow passage way leads on to a back room, and further back are the toilets.

You may recognise this as a standard layout, but each area brings back memories. The event was a Mike Jones rally (the late Mike Jones was a pioneering paddler who had pushed the boundaries of modern paddling. He drowned in tragic circumstances while in Nepal). There were probably over 500 people who had congregated in Hexham in his honour. Lots of university and poly canoe clubs were there. The drinking class that night was young and naïve....

The pub started filling up at 6pm, but we'd got there early to stake our place. Dave Shemmans took up prime position in the back room. It may have been his charisma that caused all these girls to brush past him, or it could be he was blocking the route to the ladies. I don't know when it happened but we came across a student wearing a necklace. It was worthy of comment, a nice bright green pear, carved in wood and suspended on a leather loop. Her boyfriend had bought it for her. That's nice. "If I was your boyfriend", Dave added, "I'd have given you a pearl necklace". I just couldn't believe how quick the one-liner had been delivered. I'm still in awe. The unfortunate girl was totally oblivious. We moved on.

The pub was struggling to cope with the numbers. The landlord couldn't get enough staff so paid some of his local punters to serve and collect glasses. One local punter, a woman in her sixties joined in with dancing on the table. A vision. Singing came through from the front room. The landlord passed the greatest compliment of the night. "This beats New Year". It was that kind of a night.

Mark Sheldrick turned up late, necked a couple, and then set about catching up with a bottle of Vodka that he smuggled in. He caught up, and overtook. He was so, so ill. Bri, who was sharing a two-man tent with Mark and Windy, woke thinking he'd wet himself. He hadn't. Mark was sick more than once that night and didn't really emerge from the tent until the following afternoon.

The Mike Jones Rally was wound-up a year later. The organisers probably decided it was time to move on, but the people of Hexham realised what a money-spinner it was for the area, and so The Tyne Tour was born. This event takes place every November, with a guaranteed release down the North Tyne, and although not as raucous as it's predecessor, it still attracts hundreds.

Tyne Tour: 5th/6th November 2004. (suitable for beginners. No previous drinking experience necessary). Put it in your diary.

Andy B