

JMCS 2017 Contents



A debacle on Am Buachaille Bryan Rynne

Long-standing readers of this newsletter will, no doubt, recall that in 2008 Ruth and I successfully ascended The Old Man of Stoer sea stack, and then followed that up with the Old Man of Hoy in 2009. The obvious follow up to those would have been to then do Am Buachaille, the third of the `big name' triumvirate of Scottish sea stacks. This lies a mile or so west of the famed Sandwood Bay beach in the far north-west, past Kinlochbervie. However, without looking into it too carefully, the general logistics of Am

Buachaille seemed considerably harder, so the idea lapsed.

Then last year, out of the blue, some acquaintances did it, and reported that it wasn't actually as difficult to get to as we had supposed. A modicum of research (somewhat belatedly) confirmed this, so we decided that we would, after all, give it a go.

Unfortunately, as appears to be becoming more common, no suitable weather window opened up at a time

we could go last year, so the attempt got postponed to this year.

This year, at the beginning of July, Ruth's usual break over the Boness fair long-weekend coincided with the necessary weather window. I hasten to add that it wasn't much of a weather window! After long and careful, rose-tinted, scrutiny of the forecast, Ruth concluded that there would be about 3-4 hours of mixed sunshine and cloud on the Friday evening, more or less coinciding with the requisite low-tide

at 7pm. This seemed about as much as you could expect for Scottish mid-summer, and was considerably better than anything we spotted last year, so we rushed off northwards on the Thursday evening.

We spent Thursday night in Dingwall - there is nothing special about Dingwall (there certainly isn't!), but it got us half way there that evening, and it has a cheap hotel that had plenty of rooms available, despite our somewhat impromptu start. Next morning, after an early start, we got to Kinlochbervie about lunch time. We had also managed to phone up and book into a B and B in Kinlochbervie along the way north. We decided to check into this on our way through (given our previous track record with sea stacks, and the late-ish tide time, we anticipated returning fairly late - a wise precaution as it turned out!).

We then drove off to the track leading to Sandwood Bay, at Oldshoremore. The walk in to the beach is about 4 miles, but to get to Am Buachaille you turn off the track about a mile before the beach and head off north westwards across the moors. The

stack sits directly opposite some high and impassable cliffs, from the top of which an excellent view of the stack can be obtained. In fact, this is the place at which you are most likely to arrive if you are not familiar with the route - well, that is where we arrived anyway. Hence, a careful perusal of the guide was then required to find the correct descent route. Fortunately, we had acquired some reliable information (after some bitter past experiences we were not depending on any SMC guides), so we readily found the correct way down - a steep gully several hundred yards to the east of the stack, which we managed to descend safely. After that a short, slippery and bouldery walk along the shore brought us to the base of the stack.

Somewhat to our surprise, given how uninspiring the weather had been to this point (I think it had even drizzled very slightly), the met office prognostication was now vindicated and the sun came, the birds started singing (although, I had hoped that the wretched things would have buggered off somewhere else by this time of year, instead of hanging around on the stack), and it turned

The climb and the swim



into a very nice afternoon/evening. The only fly in the ointment was that we now had to swim across to the stack, somehow convey all our heavy-metal across, and then climb it!

The swim is much less onerous than I had thought before we looked into it properly. In fact, if you get there at the right time a bit before low-tide (as we did) it is only about 8-10 metres. There wasn't even much in the way of waves, just a gentle swell, so even given my well-known dislike of getting cold and wet (let alone both at once), and the fact that I hadn't swum for over a decade, I was bereft of excuses.

Ruth of course had planned ahead for this moment and had brought her wet-suit, so expected to have a warm and comfortable crossing. I was somewhat less well equipped, having picked up a pair of 'swimming-shorts' from a Dingwall charity shop that morning, so I anticipated a cold and miserable 30 seconds. And of course we also had to get all that gear across. This turned out to be much easier than expected. Ruth had also acquired a multitude of dry-bags for this operation, in which



we intended to float all the gear, plus our clothing, across (uncharitable readers may be getting the idea by now that Ruth was the brains of this operation...). We had expected to need several bags, containing lots of air to provide the requisite buoyancy, but after some experimentation in a convenient tide pool it turned out that stuffing everything into a single big bag worked fine. Even with no excess air, the air trapped in the fleeces and in the gaps between stuff was ample. So, combining this with Ruth's washing-line to tow it across, we were home and dry (well, wet obviously, but we were across)!

Now all we had to do was climb the thing! Given that the route we planned to do is HVS 4c (or VS, or 5a, depending on which topo you read), I had anticipated that this would be the easiest part of the whole operation. Unfortunately, this is where it all started to go wrong. The moment I started climbing I realised that the stack was simply a crumbling heap of choss, ready to fall down at any moment. I could break handholds off in my hand, although obviously I didn't want to do that since I needed the handholds to be fixed to the rock so that I could pull on them. If the whole thing had fallen down while I was on it I wouldn't have



The walk back out along the shore

been surprised, although obviously I would have been slightly annoyed that it chose to fall down just when I was on it, after being there for thousands of years.

Ruth felt that the rock resembled a Farley's rusk, although without their structural and load-bearing properties.

At one point I grabbed a nice solid looking bit of rock with a crack next to it, into which I hoped get my first piece of gear - the next moment I was wobbling around, hanging onto the block with one hand trying to stop it falling straight down onto Ruth, while

hanging on with the other hand trying to stop myself falling straight down onto Ruth. Since I was at about 6 metres, with no gear, I neither wanted to fall off, nor to kill Ruth. Eventually I managed to get a nut in, so thereafter I had the reassurance that if I did fall off I would be accompanied to the ground by shards of broken off sandstone and a flailing nut.

Finally, after about 20 metres of this sort of palaver, I had to do the sort of 'airy traverse' across to the belay that is often described as 'exciting' in guide books, but is way too exciting when you are soloing it (my useless

nut was by now nearer to the ground than to me). I also had to cope with a large, disgruntled sea bird, of some description (I am not good on birds, it was big, white and noisy if that pins it down), on the ledge I was traversing across. At this point I managed to wedge one of my fancy new Totem cams into a crack. These boast of being able to work when only two cams are engaged, and indeed that is all I managed to get in. Reassured by the fact that the cam hadn't fallen out under its own weight, I proceeded to 'encourage' the sea bird to bugger off and have a swim, or something, and I then finally made it to the



The climb and the swim

belay. This consisted of a multitude of reassuringly solid looking, although antiquated, pegs, bolts and tat. Given my feelings on reaching this point of safety, I lashed myself to it in what I imagine to be the style that mariners were wont to lash themselves to the mast when things were going badly wrong (or Ulysses did when about to encounter the sirens - which was probably more fun than Am Buachaille was proving to be). This pitch was only about 25 metres, but I felt like it had been an eternity. Ruth came up in about 5 minutes (it didn't take her long to get the protection out...).

So, onto pitch 2! This started by retraversing the exciting ledge, and then commencing to climb a slab with a 'thin crack' (in this context 'thin' means 'too thin for any gear'). Then at about 8 metres up and right of the belay, with no gear yet, I snapped off what had appeared to be one of the more solid looking bits of rock on the stack so far. At this juncture, thoughts such as 'oh dear, most unfortunate' went through my mind, followed rapidly by '**** this, I have had enough!' A prompt retreat back to Ruth ensued, followed by an abseil down off

the reassuring tat at the belay.

So, all that just to fail about 20 metres from the summit! Gallingly, the climbing wasn't even hard. I would have given it 4c, but it seemed to me to be 'unjustifiable', as they used to say. However, we survived to tell the tale, which was, of course, the main goal. We got back to the B and B about 1.00am, as seems to be standard for our sea-stack climbs.

On a slightly more positive note: the setting, in the sunshine, by the sea, a long way from anywhere, was idyllic and overall a good day out was had (at least, in hindsight).

A coda.

Recently Ruth and I were talking to Robert Durran and he informed us that the E1 route round the back of the stack is much better, on sound rock. So, unfortunately, this may mean a return trip, although the guide describes it as 'an exposed and intimidating route, from which retreat would be difficult after pitch 1', so maybe not...



A Norwegian ski tour

David Buchanan

In the company of some friends from Lancashire, Pat and I explored the Huldreheimen area which lies north-west of Lilliehammer and immediately south of the Jotenheim. It is a relatively gentle rolling area, with several unmanned (but provisioned) huts. Ideal country for those wanting an easy time. Especially, since, at that time of year, all the ski trails are marked with birch wands.

We travelled to Huldreheimen from Vinstra by taxi. 40 km of luxurious (and expensive) travel to our trail head at Finnbøl. From here we skied on good snow and in cold bright weather towards our first hut. Jim struggled to get to grips with this different kind of skiing, and fell over quite a bit. However, the eight or so kilometres was a good introduction for everyone.

Mountain huts in Norway are run by The Norwegian Touring (DNT) organization. Essentially there are three kinds: manned which are very similar to Alpine huts; unmanned which have gas cookers, beds with duvets and wood burning stoves with plentiful wood and food - payment is by an honesty system; and a third kind that are unprovisioned. These are usually small and have no food

“Disconcertingly, the marked trail deviated markedly from the one marked on our map – we followed the wands.”



or duvets, but are otherwise similar to the unmanned huts. Usually, unmanned huts are unlocked, but in this area they were all locked with the very substantial DNT padlock. Fortunately, we had a key. (List tickers may be interested to know that if you accumulate visits to 100 DNT huts, you can claim your Golden Key.)

Our first hut, Storholisetar, was not one of the better huts we stayed in. It was unmanned, but the food available was a bit limited, and it was cold.

Next day we skied 14 km to Storkvelvbua. Initially through woodland, and then more open country. We enjoyed good skiing and beautiful countryside. The hut at Storkvelvbua was much nicer than the previous one and we soon had it warm and cosy. In the evening we saw a large herd of Reindeer on the hill above the hut.

We decided to stay a further night at this hut so that we could explore, practice our skiing and rest. It proved to be a very pleasant spot.

Haldorbu was our our next objective. We woke to wind and mist, and so

delayed our departure until 11 to see if it was going to get worse. It didn't so we set off on the 11 km journey. The trail had some quite steep sections, but because it was generally undulating, we herringboned these rather than use skins. The route rises to just over 1200m at the unprovisioned Langsubua hut. At this point the wind was much stronger and it felt much colder, (The hut thermometer at Haldorbu had shown -11° that morning.) and so the hut was a very welcome lunch shelter. Afterwards we had a long gentle descent to Haldorbu.

Although the wind had dropped by the next morning, light snow was falling and visibility was poor so we decide to ski the 7km to Storeskag, since the distance was short and the route was flat. Disconcertingly, the marked trail deviated markedly from the one marked on our map – we followed the wands. The hut at Storeskag was the best furnished of all the huts we stayed at, but we couldn't find the toilet!

Next day the weather started poor but improved as we skied the 12km from Storeskag to Skriurusten.



This route took us past the delightful Plankebau, a small unprovisioned DNT hut, where we had lunch.

We stayed at Skriurusten for two nights allowing Pat to have a rest day while the rest of us followed wands towards the unprovisioned hut at

Hersjobua (according to the map) but in fact the wands took us on a loop to the settlement of Oyvassbua which consisted of hundreds of holiday homes, and a trail signposted Hersjobua. There is supposed to be another unprovisioned hut at Oyvassbua, but we couldn't find it. We returned

to Skriurusten by our outward route. The winter route marked on the ground was very different from the one shown on our map. (I've encountered this twice before, once where the route on the map crossed a frozen lake and warning signs in the huts showed an alternative route and



on another occasion, the normal route was threatened by avalanche and an alternative was signed and marked in the ground.)

On our last full day we skied the 12km from Skriurusten to Storhøliseter in bright sunny weather on good snow with great views.

At the end of our trip we skied out to Finnbøl by a different route from our inbound one, and arrived about midday after just over two hours of skiing. We phoned for our taxis to take us back to Vinstra for a pizza lunch. Then train to Oslo; check in at the Anker hostel and out for a celebratory beer and hamburger. Pat and I had the day

following in Oslo which we spent mainly at the Fram Museum.

Overall a very good trip. We had mixed weather, but most days had some sunshine and some had lots. No real storms and the temperature stayed below freezing ensuring good skiing conditions.

Beautiful
Aberdour!
Chris Morrish
on Saki



In praise of the lowland outcrop

Danny Carden

Six years ago, my partner and I decided to move up to Scotland together, in no small part driven by a desire to be closer to the mountains. When I told fellow climbers that we'd chosen to live in Edinburgh, it was obvious that many thought we'd made a serious mistake. Some would sheepishly bite their lips, some kindly played up the excellent "weekend potential", while others would be more blunt...

"The climbing there's crap."

"You'll be miles from any decent crags."

"Go to Inverness, Stirling, even Glasgow, but not Edinburgh – you're practically in England!"

You'll probably know the sort of thing - and it's a bit disheartening how often I hear versions of the above from people who actually live here themselves! Before Edinburgh, I'd lived in Sheffield for seven years, and for most of that

time I revelled in a commute to work in Matlock that took me past some of the finest crags in the Peak District, with thousands of quality grit routes of all grades. I was spoiled rotten. Faced with such a vast volume of potential climbing, and being naturally impatient and a keen ticker, I fell into a routine of trying to bag as many routes as possible each time I got out. My haul grew rapidly, and I began to set myself little challenges, like doing 100 routes in two evenings after work, or as many VSs as possible in a day. My grade wasn't progressing much, but I enjoyed simply stacking up the mileage, regardless of difficulty.

On moving to Edinburgh, I became a bit obsessed with working my way through the routes in the SMC Lowland Outcrops guide. I'd a fun couple of years racing to climb everything I possibly could, and felt like Edinburgh climbers were surprised by my enthusiasm for the rock round here. Overall, the routes were better than I'd expected and I began to think

that - with a dozen or so cliffs within an hour's drive of Leith - there were certainly much worse places to live as a climber.

But around 2014 I was hit by the disappointing realisation that – without a sudden upturn in my ability - I'd pretty much climbed everything I could locally and that I needed to start travelling further afield more. I wasn't motivated to repeat routes I'd done before, and I began to think the naysayers were maybe right after all.

For a couple of years, almost every spare weekend was spent in the van, nipping off to wonderful, far-flung Highland and island venues – and admittedly, having a hoot. Scotland really does have some of the finest trad climbing in the world.

However, going away climbing all the time is knacker, bad for the environment and can test non-rock-related relationships. While I still love a weekend away in my van, in the last year or so, I've refocused my time and energy slightly, to ensure I make the most of our local crags, and cut down the driving a bit.

I've been amazed by how quiet the crags are considering their proximity to Edinburgh, especially outside the peak summer months - and given the number of people packing out our growing number of climbing walls. It's a shame really, as quite a few venues would actually benefit from more traffic - and it's nice and sociable when there are other climbers about.

Personally, I've found that setting up a Whatsapp group with enthusiastic, easily-persuadable Edinburgh climbers – with a strict ban on any discussion relating to the dreaded plastic – has been a great help in getting more time outside. Perhaps it is just keenness sparked by the threat of looming fatherhood in January, but I've found that by completely discarding any thought of visiting indoor walls from March-September, you end up having a much more memorable, worthwhile climbing year.

I've also come round to the idea of occasionally re-climbing some of the routes I've done before. Rather than think of that as boring, I've tried to relax into the familiarity of returning to old favourites, and embrace the

Chris Morrish leading
Not Easy Contract at
Cambusbarrow





comfort of having memories of the holds, moves and gear.

Maybe I'm going daft, but I honestly think the following routes are among the best single pitches of their grades in Scotland. Could you make a New Year's Resolution to climb all of these ten lowland routes during 2018? That would be a decent year, wouldn't it?

- S: Great Corner, Traprain
- VS: Pain Pillar, Aberdour
- VS: Trundle, Auchinstarry
- HVS: Ordinary Route, The Souter
- E1: Plain Sailing, The Souter
- E1: Schamhorst, North Queenferry Quarry
- E2: Shear Fear, Ratho Quarry
- E2: Elgin's Crack, Limekilns

- E2: Trail Blazer, Thornton's Quarry
- F7a+: Law of Gravity LH, North Berwick Law

Returning to outcrops where I thought I'd climbed every worthwhile route has forced me to dig a little deeper – sometimes literally! – to discover routes I'd previously missed and check out a couple of venues that I'd previously dismissed as too scrappy.

So, if you've also fallen into the trap of thinking you've already done everything a million times, perhaps it might be worth checking out some of these below-the-radar, weird, wonderful diamonds in the rough?!

- HVS: Unnamed Crack (Left), Ladywell Craig (2006 SMC New Routes)
- E1: The Boat, North Queensferry
- F6c+: Heughvenile Antics, Balgone Heughs (7a Max sport guide)
- E1: Stiff Bunnies, The Souter
- E3: Spanking the Rustbucket, Auchinstarry

More importantly, the process of revisiting crags again has also forced me to go up a grade or two sometimes, try a little harder, and fall off occasionally. If you think everything you haven't done is too hard, why not try one of these well-protected, soft(-ish) touches?

- VS: DTs, Limekilns
- HVS: The Waullie, Rosyth Quarry
- E1: Not Easy Contract, Cambusbarron West Quarry
- E2: Gobi Roof, Cambusbarron West Quarry
- E3: Visions of Monaco, Thornton's Quarry

And finally, if you've had enough of the same crag-top views, why not try some lateral thinking?

- VS (solo) The low traverse at Ravenscraig
- The full traverse of the Gellet block, Limekilns
- Black Wall Traverse at Salisbury Crags in both directions

Disclaimer: I can't do these last two, yet!

I have enjoyed some excellent trips further afield this year – including Torridon, the Cairngorms, the Lake District, the Alps and Céüse. But when I look back on 2017, many of my fondest climbing memories are from much closer to home.

Pointless risks in dank dolerite

quarries... sheltering from the rain under a crash mat wedged in a tree... unexpected encounters with badgers.

I've visited more than ten of our local crags, and it's been a wonderful reminder of what I actually enjoy about climbing. Getting sweaty and scared, visiting weird and unlikely places that non-climbers rightly ignore, and having a laugh with mates. We even discovered a good new route, on a very scenic unclimbed cliff, within an hour from home.

I'm clearly not alone in having a soft spot for our local crags, and it's been great to meet some other enthused climbers whose scrubbing, chopping and pruning has breathed new life into the trad routes in Ratho and Thornton's quarries recently.

So, if you decided long ago to never to step foot in another dolerite quarry, or that you've slipped off enough shiny footholds at Limekilns for one lifetime, I hope I might have persuaded you to dust off that SMC Lowland Outcrops guide, pack your secateurs, and get back outdoors on our local cliffs a bit more in 2018. I'll see you there.



Two rad dads in the Lake District

Thomas Beutenmuller

Sometimes I am telling lies. Sometimes. Even when I write little articles for the esteemed Edinburgh JMCS newsletter... In the autumn 2015 edition I claimed that I am fine with going to remote places in the Western Highlands, love getting tormented by monster midges, enjoy the bad weather that stops me from climbing routes I wanted to do for decades and that I find it funny when at the end of a loong day I arrive at a remote bothy only to find it is locked up. After two years of reflecting on this I can honestly say: Not true!

I realised this last year when I was able to convince my 'mystery companion', whom I now officially would like to 'out' as Stewart B, to attend the weekend meet in Buttermere in the Lake District. I had asked Stewart to come along, but was pretty certain he would not want to go. After all, he describes his 'Likes' on a well-known social media website as "French movies, English motorbikes, Scottish climbing". However, he agreed to have a look/see himself what all that talk of Lakeland Climbing is about. We left Fife at 7AM on the Saturday

and were climbing the excellent Classic Rock route Gillercombe Buttress by lunchtime. The weather was stunning and I have photos of Stewart where he shows an incredulous expression on his face as he repeatedly was asking, "where's the rain, where's the midges?" This great climb was followed by a leisurely 20 minute walk to the Honister Pass, which left us with plenty of time (and energy) to 'entertain' everybody in the hut with hours of guitar and banjo music. All this singing made us pretty thirsty, so the next day saw us a bit worse for wear at the Shepherds Crag in Borrowdale, where we rounded off things with an ascent of another Classic Rock route, Little Chamonix. When we drove up the M6 at the end of this glorious weekend and the rain started to lash down just north of Carlisle I knew that Stewart would have to slightly modify his Facebook profile.....

So, this year it was not a question whether we would go to one of the Lake District meets, rather which one. I had to back out of the meet to Borrowdale in early September because my wife and daughter were





“For us newcomers to the world of Lakeland climbing the Classic Rock book gives us a bit of direction as to good places to climb at and worthwhile routes.”

lucky enough to have gotten tickets for walking across the Queensferry Crossing, but on Friday, 15th September after work we were on our way, this time to Great Langdale. The weather forecast was not all that promising, but not desperate either. We found the Raw Head Barn eventually, at about a quarter past eleven, where half a dozen representatives of the Edinburgh JMCS were in residence already. Both Stewart and myself had our heart set on yet another Classic Rock route: Bowfell Buttress. For us newcomers to the world of Lakeland climbing the Classic Rock book gives us a bit of direction as to good places to climb at and worthwhile routes. I cannot say that we got a lot of encouragement from the other JMCS members in the

hut who suggested to us to play it safe and go to one of the lower lying cliffs near the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel, as they were planning to. However, although neither Stewart nor I are born and bred Fifers, we have picked up a certain number of characteristics from the natives of this peninsula. So, we were the dogs, and Bowfell Buttress was our bone, and there was no dissuading us from this objective! And the lengthy walk-in would be “good training for Scottish winter”, as we reassured each other in case we would find the buttress in sodden and unclimbable conditions.

To digress slightly, why have I chosen to call this article Two Rad Dads in...? As a famous Scottish climber once said, you have to go with the times:

Last year at the Shepherds Crag with a lot of climbers in situ who were on the right side of forty I had dared to use some of the terms I have picked up in glossy magazines and the net over the years, such as getting Beta for a route. And after watching more than a few film clips of Alex Honnold, the young upshot of the climbing world, and listening to his 21st century climbing speak I came up with the term Rad Dads. And I was determined more than ever that we would send our project today....!

But first of all we had to undergo a Lakeland ritual that I do not enjoy so much: Pay a lot of money to be allowed to leave the car in a field! But then we were away, past the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel and the Stool End

Farm up the so-called band, which is a spur that runs up towards the summit of the Bowfell. So far the weather was looking pleasant, autumnal but sunny. After an hour we started looking for the right-turn to a path that is called the Climbers Traverse. This junction was easy to find and we followed it below some steep crags. Bowfell Buttress now was in clear view.

Stewart arrived at the bottom of the cliff first. I had the guidebook and was reading the route description out aloud. We had the 2003 edition of the Selected Lake District Rock guidebook with us. In the new version, which we had looked at in the hut, the route has been upgraded from a Very Difficult to the somewhat controversial grade of Hard Severe, on account of "The Slippery Crack", the infamous crux of the entire route....

The lower section of the buttress looked a bit grassy and damp, but the offwidth chimney that is described in the guide as the first difficult part, was clearly visible up on the right. It says in the Classic Rock book, arrive early to avoid queues. We were the first ones there, but shortly after us a group of three other climbers arrived.

When Stewart started the first pitch they commented on every of his move, which was a bit annoying. Stewart looked confident on this wet and broken ground. I am not a fan of this kind of climbing, but it must have reminded him of winter climbing.... The chimney also looked interesting, but he was up it in no time. When I followed this pitch I was glad I had a tight rope from above. At the belay we swapped gear over and I went on. At least I had dry rock to climb. And how great it was! Good holds, a clear line to follow and before I knew it I was belayed on bomber gear and called Stewart to follow. He led through, came to the big grass ledge, turned right and took a belay. I knew what that meant: The infamous crack, the crux of this route would be my lead..... I was called to 'climb when ready' and was on my way. Within a few minutes I was at the next stance and could see "The Slippery Crack" for real for the first time!

The weather had stayed dry, so we would not have the same antics Eddie Gillespie had told us about in the hut last night: He had climbed the route in the rain in the 1970s, the crack was running with water and of course they had not worn rock slippers but big

TB on the slippery crack



"we shook hands on the summit. I am not sure whether Rad Dads are supposed to do this, but it is what mountaineers do..."

boots on VDiff climbs in those days. However, today the crack was dry, it actually looked nice and grippy rock, so what possibly could go wrong? I had spent hours looking at photos of this piece of rock, read quite a few accounts of other climbers who climbed it, and now I was about to climb it myself. I felt a bit like when I was a young lad and met a nice girl and did not know what to do or say. I only knew I did not want to mess things up. It was the same now: I would either climb the Slippery Crack in good style or struggle on it. There would be no going back once

I stepped off the ground and was committed: Which of the two options would it be? It almost felt like I had stage fright! To make it easier for me I took off my rucksack. But to take off my rucksack I had to take the gear bandolier off as well. Without the weight on my shoulders I climbed the crack like a rat up a drainpipe, and felt elated. However, the next thing I realised was that I had forgotten to put the bandolier back on.....oops. Stewart stretched up as far as he could, I stretched down as far as I could and I was just about able to grab the sling with the essential bits of climbing paraphernalia off him. I decided to take a belay at the top of the crack, so I would not have to pull my rucksack up too far.

In order to suppress talk of my faux-pas with forgetting to take the gear on the crux pitch I instigated a discussion about the grade: Hard Severe for this crack? Really?! Stewart agreed that it hadn't been that hard and went on and climbed the next pitch. It was another one of the rather moist ones, the ones I don't like...The pitch after that was marked with quite a few crampon scratches, which reminded me of the fact that this route is as popular in

winter as in summer.

I arrived at a comfortable platform with a block to belay on. Stewart led through and climbed up a wet and unpleasant looking chimney and then went up leftwards. He was out of my sight now, but as the rope ran out pretty quickly I assumed that he was near the top of the buttress. I also got up that last part of the buttress and we shook hands on the summit. I am not sure whether Rad Dads are supposed to do this, but it is what mountaineers do.... After a bite to eat we walked up to the top of Bowfell, descended to the three tarns on the other side of this hill and then walked down the band back to the car park.

The next day on Raven's Crag behind the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel things did not work out quite so well for the JMCS, with us climbing off route and fallen stones hitting others, but that does not distract from the fact that we had had another great weekend in the Lakes. I am glad that we have discovered the joys of Lakeland climbing over the last few years. Better late than never. I am sure we will be back next year. The list of quality climbs is endless. And until we come back, there is more stuff in Scotland to climb than we can shake a stick at.

Reflections on what's been and what's next

Ruairidh Finlayson

Last December and January, my brother and I popped down to Antarctica to climb Mount Vinson, hopefully via a new route. Why? Because my brother is a bit of a list-ticker (Vinson was the last of the Seven Summits we had left to do) and I'm a bit of a climber (hence the interest in the new route). Naturally the reality was a little more complicated...

Background:

We've been climbing mountains with the old man for decades. In 2005, we climbed our first 'big' peak, Stok Kangri (6,153m) in India. Between us we then climbed a number of other 'biggy' peaks including Chachani in Peru (6,057m), Cayambe (5,790m) & Cotopaxi (5,897m) in Ecuador, Iztaccíhuatl (5,230m) & Orizaba (5,636m) in Mexico before turning our attentions to 'slightly bigger' things. We took a year out in 2009/2010 to climb Aconcagua (6,962m) in Argentina, Mt Blanc (4,809m), Kilimanjaro (5,895m), Mt Kenya (5,199m) and Cho Oyu (8,201m) in Tibet before finishing on Mount

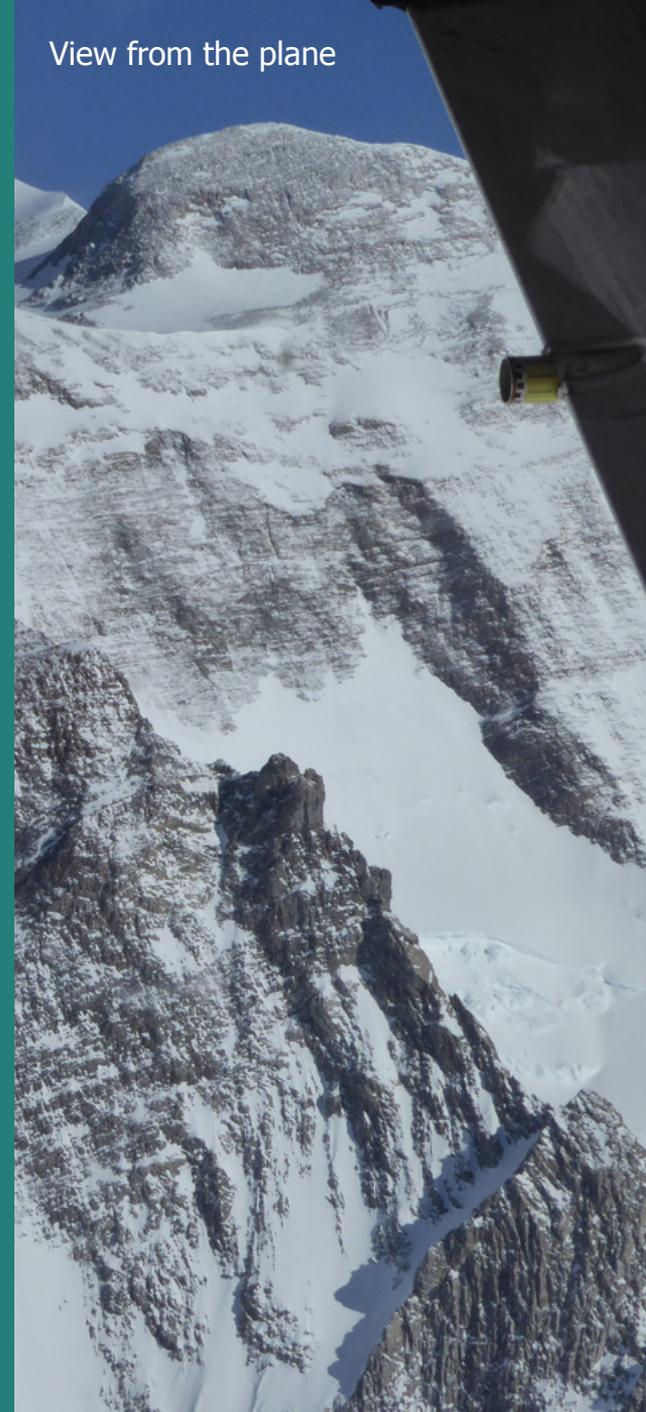
Everest (8,848m) summitting each on the first attempt (very lucky with the weather!) Trip report on Everest here. We took a bit of breather after that and I concentrated on technical climbing at lower altitudes (Scottish winter, trad). We started the cause again in 2014 and 2015 with unguided ascents of Mt Elbrus (5,642m) in Russia and Denali (6,190m) in Alaska before summitting Puncak Jaya (4,884m) in Indonesian Papua in July 2016.

The plan:

I had mentioned our intentions to climbing mates and leaders from prior trips early last year and a super experienced guy (Robert Mads Anderson) got back in touch. He asked how we intended to go about it and whether we would consider putting up a new route. He had loads of experience on Antarctica and was offering to convince ALE (the logistics company) to fly us to the intended route.

The team of six was to be made up of the Finlayson brothers, Robert, two guys Robert knew through the American Alpine Club (David Landman

View from the plane





and Randy Luskey) and an ALE guide for good measure - was meant to be David Hamilton but he unfortunately fell ill at the last minute so Todd Tumolo, a ten year Denali veteran, took his place.

Getting there - an expedition in itself: We met in Punta Arenas in the South of Chile on Boxing Day via Frankfurt, Madrid and Santiago. It was a 30+hrs journey but the only way to have Christmas at home and get to Punta Arenas in plenty of time for our 4.5 hour flight to Antarctica. Two days later, we left for Union Glacier, an ice runway in Antarctica's interior, on an old Soviet Ilyushin Il-76.

Union Glacier camp is quite the operation. The majority of scientists

doing fieldwork on the continent, mountaineers climbing Vinson or people visiting the South Pole by various means, start their visit here. The camp is only in place for about 3 months of the year during the summer (our winter) before being completely dismantled and shipped out/packed under the ice.

Snoozing/not:

Sleeping on Antarctica is a slightly odd experience. The permanent daylight makes the tent glow, with the only dip in light levels occurring when the sun goes behind a mountain. It's at these times when the temperature also drops off (by more than 10°C) making it impossible to layer correctly for a whole night's sleep. Eye patches, several thermorests, multiple pee

bottles and an awesome sleeping bag are absolute musts!

The East Face of Vinson:

We were delayed by plan finalisation, illness and weather for a few days before flying out to the Dater Glacier on a Twin Otter. We had only seen maps and a few distant photos of the intended route, so it was quite an eye-opener to see the ridges and slopes up-close from the plane and then from the glacier itself.

The main ridge we had been considering looked big and technical, with a couple of vertical rock sections which would either have to be climbed directly or by-passed via some very steep snow slopes. In the Alps, this probably wouldn't be an issue but the

“Yes, an uncovered outdoor loo with a real seat!”



fact that you have to keep moving in Antarctica to stay warm, coupled with the ridiculous remoteness, made this a more serious proposition.

After setting up camp and spending our first night on the glacier, we climbed up the ridge for a closer look and to acclimatise. As expected, it looked pretty full-on and, by the time we got to the base of the first rocky section, we knew that further progress was unlikely without a much bigger team, more equipment and more time.

From digging a few pits, we could see that the top layer of snow was made up of very active slab that moved under relatively little loading - pretty much classic avalanche conditions. There were also sections of very hard ice just below a thin layer of snow, which was too hard for our crampons to bite into. We had a bit of difficulty getting back

down as a result and a few ice screws were needed.

The next day, everyone in the team bar me (I was laid out with a cold – pretty grim in Antarctica!) headed up to look at the slopes to the left of the ridge. They moved up for a few hours before coming across some poor snow conditions, probably worse than the day before and across a larger area.

They tried to find a way around the slabs but ultimately ended up being caught in an avalanche, thankfully without injury. They beat a hasty retreat to the base of the slope and made their way further along the slopes to the south. They left a cache of supplies and headed back to camp.

That night we discussed the options. We knew that a route had gone up above the cache previously but also

that snow conditions were terrible and had probably changed drastically in the 15+ years since. Rather than taking some fairly large risks for the chance of a second ascent, we chose to go to the other side of the mountain and flew out the next day for Vinson Base Camp.

The Normal Route:

Having been camped in a spot on the Dater Glacier where no one had ever set foot before, it was odd flying over to the other side and seeing some real, if temporary, infrastructure. Vinson Base Camp (1,200m) consists of tents for the climbers, a mess tent, a storage tent and a 'loo with a view'.

Yes, an uncovered outdoor loo with a real seat! Unfortunately the ice blocks used for the walls are rather low and only cover three sides (no privacy at all really) and you have to use your own personal 'poo bag' which gets

shipped out after it's 'full' – judgement required. Pretty grim experience at the best of times but particularly grim on really cold days - it's best to time these things...if you can.

We sorted out some sleds and messed around with the supplies and gear, then headed off for Camp 1 (2,700m). We made good time and arrived there in reasonable shape. This has pretty much everything Base Camp has but on a smaller scale. We rested here for the night before heading up the steep slopes to High Camp (3,850m) the next morning.

This was much tougher than the day before, partly due to the steeper slopes and having to carry the gear on our backs rather than using sleds, but also due to the higher altitude taking effect. The views, however, were stunning and made the effort worthwhile in itself. We reached High Camp in good time and set up for one last 'night' before summit day.

Summit day:

The sky was clear but the wind had picked up throughout the 'night' and was now blowing quite strongly on top. The forecast said -28°C and 40mph winds so circa -48°C with wind chill. Frankly, if we hadn't sat on the other

side of the mountain for a number of days, eating into our trip, we wouldn't have left the tents. However, we wanted to get up and down it as fast as possible, particularly as the weather was expected to worsen.

Plodding up the main valley to the summit ridge was going OK, until the wind really picked up and started pushing us around. I had to get out a couple of heat pads, put them in my gloves and shove a couple down the front of my boots to stave off the frostbite (this works a treat by the way).

Our faces were the toughest part to keep safe however, particularly when facing directly into the wind. We had to watch each other for signs of white forming (your bits go white, then black, then fall off) and tell each other to re-heat cheeks and noses before recovering them.

We moved up to the base of the main face and decided to take the steeper but less windy face to the West, rather than go up the traditional ridge to the summit. This proved to be a good choice as it was markedly less windy than the valley below.

We struggled to the summit and felt the

Summit from base camp





full force of the wind but also the full feeling of elation/relief, signalling the end of years of hard work, not just on this summit but all the summits to that point. If the weather had been better and we had found it a walk in the park, it may have been an anti-climax; but on that day, in those conditions, it was anything but.

We made it back to camp a good few hours later and spent one last night at High Camp. We descended the next morning, stopping off at Camp 1 for a cup of tea. The weather had really closed in as forecast so we were happy to get out of there. Finding out there was plenty of wine and beer at Base Camp was pretty much the best news I'd heard all expedition.

Future adventures:

Given my brother has officially retired from climbing (so he says) this probably means that my high altitude mountaineering days are over (at least for a while). It also means I can concentrate on more technical climbing at lower altitudes with mates (rather than siblings who whine a lot). So what's next? Well, it was supposed to be big wall. So, we went to Yosemite in May/June this year and got pretty spanked, as expected really, but also got up some epic classics (After Seven Direct, Super Slide and Snake Dike amongst others) and some harder single pitch. Incredible trip, no complaints.

However, the vertical scale of the place was the real eye-opener. The Nose, for example, is supposed to be 5.8 C2 (or

5.14a to free climb) and is probably the easiest way up El Cap for punters, such as ourselves. However, if you were to free climb all the pitches rated 5.10a and below (circa HVS/E1), you would still have to use aid on 24 of the 29 pitches.

I don't know about you guys but as a free trad climber by upbringing, I find this utterly abhorrent. Let's not mess around, aid climbing is cheating by definition and to climb more than 80% of the pitches at least partially in this fashion seems pointless to me.

So, I got home and climbed hard during the summer/autumn in the West Country, Chamonix, Scotland, Pembroke, Northumberland and Japan, cashing in on the base formed over the last couple of years. I now climb about E4 which is useful for the big stuff and should speed things up at least a little bit.

Does this mean the big wall dream is still alive? Honestly I don't know. I do know I'm utterly hooked on multipitch trad in beautiful locations and there's certainly a lot of that on the big walls of the world and on the big crags in the UK.

To hint at the future, we have just booked a trip to Verdon again next Easter and Squamish ('Canadian Yosemite') in September. These might just keep the dream alive...



“I had a great day on and off piste enjoying fresh tracks through knee deep fresh powder. ”

Third time lucky in the Queyras Stuart Buchanan

The Queyras region to the South East of Briancon is fairly well known as a ski touring destination, but one that David, Alasdair and I had failed to ski in due to lack of snow multiple times. Fortunately, it proved third time lucky as there was snow down to the village of Saint Veran (known as the highest permanently occupied village in France) as Alasdair picked us up from Geneva Airport, with more forecast.

David had organized accommodation at La Baita du Loup, just down from the main village. This proved an excellent

choice, with a variety of room options, good filling food, beer on tap and some excellent house wine.

On Saturday it had snowed overnight with more falling. David was still recovering from illness so had a rest day while Alasdair and I had a great day on and off piste enjoying fresh tracks through knee deep fresh powder. The only issue was strong winds high up which meant some of the lifts were closed.

On Sunday the weather was much

improved with a cloudless sky, though more snow was forecast for the afternoon. Still wanting to take it easy for David, we got a ski randonnée ticket for €16 which allowed us to use four uplifts (representing about 50% of the resort!) and make a short skin up a crenelated ridge to the Pic Chateau Renard at just under 3000m.

The feeling of remoteness was rather spoilt by the astronomical observatory with various telescope domes and solar panels, though it was all closed up. Having been warned of particularly

avalanche prone slopes (characteristic of the Querayains who were always keen to provide advice), we skied a lovely bowl of powder before traversing round to the Col Longet (2701m). The Vallon Longet ran down from here for some 3km through open slopes then sparse woodland and was filled to the gunwales with cold, fresh powder. Leaving Dad to descend from the col and have a little rest, Alasdair and I started up the Pic Traversier on the other side hoping to reach the summit before the clouds we could see advancing from the west reduced the visibility. After 15 minutes we reached the end of the good snow and decided to cut our losses, skiing a steepish slope to rejoin David.

The descent down the Vallon Longet was truly superb. The angle was not so shallow that you lost momentum when turning, but not so steep you were expending extra effort keeping speed in check. The snow was extremely flattering - 30cm of powder on a firm and consistent base. As a first days touring it was a perfect descent and extremely confidence-inspiring. Sadly all good things must come to an end and we reached the road at 1330, whereupon Alasdair charmed himself a lift to collect his van just as the skies became grey and snow began to fall once more. A fantastic short day tour.

The snow continued overnight and into Monday, bringing poor visibility and high avalanche risk. Lacking winter tyres, driving was not advisable and we didn't want another day in the resort so we decided to head into the trees and skin up towards the Pic Cascavelier (2605m), which lay opposite the village of Saint Veran.

Skinning from the door of the Gîte we headed past ski du fond tracks (which looked good) and up into the wooded slopes. This was clearly a popular choice for the conditions as there were a number of other ski touring and raquette parties doing the same thing.

Hearing we were Scottish, a group of older German raquetteers expressed great sadness and commiserations over Brexit. My recommendation for anyone heading to Europe is to plaster your kit with Saint Andrew's crosses!

The ski trail wound its way up the wooded hillside from 1900m to 2300m before breaking into open ground. Here for the first time we felt the full blast of the wind, and some 100m further up the crest of the ridge decided we'd had enough and would descend. The first open section was somewhat heavy going, due to the effects of the wind on the snowpack and ourselves, but once we reached the safety of the trees we were

"Hearing we were Scottish, a group of older German raquetteers expressed great sadness and commiserations over Brexit."

treated to some great snow conditions. Alasdair made some particularly impressive tracks down the virgin powder, but all of us were skiing well. In fact, it was so good that Alasdair and I strapped our skins on for another go when we reached the bottom.

Having had some good day tours, and with a positive weather forecast for a couple of days we decided to head up to the Refuge de la Blanche at 2500m which would provide a good base for some higher and more remote tours, including the circuit of the Tête des Toillies, which traverses three high cols around a rocky peak and is considered a classic of the region both in summer and winter.

So on Tuesday morning we once more got our ski randonnée tickets to ascend Pic Chateau-Renard, hoping to traverse

“from the hut we could see plenty of recent avalanche activity on east-facing slopes.”



Descending Pic Chateau-Renard towards the hut

Pic Traversier and descend the other side to the hut. Sadly this did not go to plan, as two of the top lifts were broken.

The delays and additional skinning required meant we had to scale back our plans and traverse the slopes of Pic Chateau-Renard and skip Pic Traversier. This experience proved very Scottish as the strong winds had scoured the slopes creating a mixture of névé and windslab. Still, we reached the hut to a warm welcome at 3pm. While the strong winds weren't to our liking, a group of kite skiers also at the hut were having a great time, ascending incredibly steep slopes by zigzagging across the face

effortlessly, achieving lift off and floating 50ft in the air for hundreds of meters.

The hut itself was well appointed with showers, a stove to dry boots beside, and a bar. Rock and blues were on the stereo and when the kite skiers came in there was an atmosphere that David described as being like a 1970s Creag Dubh "smoke". The kite skiers were clearly the inheritors of the 1960s climbing counter-culture (which some readers may remember) tanned from many days on the hill with long hair, beards, and an enthusiastic consumption of alcohol and locally grown grass. In chatting to them it was clear that these

guys were seriously good and the flying we had witnessed was unique.

Our original plan had been to attempt the Tête de Toillies circuit, but we decided this was too risky - from the hut we could see plenty of recent avalanche activity on east-facing slopes. The disadvantage of the circuit is that we would either ascend or descend every aspect of slope!

Instead we decided on a short tour to the Col Saint Veran, past some lakes and then to the Col Blanche. We took our time going up to the col, to be met with a very strong wind and a view of Monte

Viso. We then traversed on sastrugi and sculpted windslab until we reached the lakes and a good descent on windslab to the hut for lunch. After lunch Alasdair and I skinned up to the shoulder of the Tête de Toillies and skied back down to get some more turns in. From the shoulder it was obvious we had made the right decision, with some very obviously heavily loaded, convex, 40 degree slopes on the other side that we would have had to descend.

The hut atmosphere that evening was quite a contrast with the night before. Replacing the kite skiing hippies were OAP raquetteers, who had brought an accordion with them for a dance and a singalong. We stayed in the corner and played chess.

Our plan for Thursday was to ascend the Pointe des Sagnes Longues and descend the other side via the Vallon se Clausis, which was parallel to the Vallon de Longet but steeper. We hoped this would have held a good amount of snow and perhaps some powder, and had been recommended by a guide at the gîte.

Getting to the bottom of the peak proved more difficult than expected. Between the hut and the bottom of the slope were a couple of kilometres of ancient moraines. The terrain was

impossible to read, and the windblown snow had formed soft cornices on various slopes. It took us about an hour to work our way through this on skins - going up, down and around hillocks with no idea whether there would be a ridge on the other side or a drop down to a stream bed. Eventually we started up the peak proper, zigzagging up a wide open slope. The strong wind had stripped all vestiges of new snow off the ground leaving hard névé and some pockets of hard slab. Alasdair and David donned their harscheisen. Lacking these on my telemark skis I had to pay extra attention to my skin contact and edges.

At the col at the top of the slope the wind hit us full blast and the last 20 minutes up to the summit at 3041m were very cold. Bizarrely, due to the ridge aspect, the summit itself was sheltered and we enjoyed our lunch in the sun looking across to Monte Viso. Skins off, we started tentatively side slipping back down the ridge before swinging down an odd hanging shelf which joined the main valley. The snow ran the full gamut from hard pack in the exposed top slope, hard windslab, "Scottish Powder" (soft windslab) in the wide lower valley, and deep very soft snow in the gullies and woodlands at the bottom. The trick with the latter was to keep some momentum and just let the

Stuart carving a turn





Alasdair descending the Tete de Longet

skis do the work and carry you around the turn. We all skied it very well with nary a fall, though it was three tired boys who reached the road after 1000m of descent. After getting back to the gîte, Alasdair went straight to sleep at 3:30pm in the afternoon!

On Friday the avalanche risk had dropped markedly from a nerve-inducing 4 to a more robust 3 largely due to the fœhn wind and increased temperatures. David decided to have a relatively quiet day doing some ski du fond while Alasdair and I headed up the Tête de Longet, a 3141m peak with a solid 30 degree slope running from the tree line which we had admired from the village.

We left the van at Saint Veran just as the bell on the 18th century church rang for 8am, quickly crossed the river and took a ski du fond track to where a wooded ravine led up to the promised perfect slopes. We noted for later some powder within the forest where the sun hadn't reached.

The slopes were steeper than we had skinned up so far during the holiday and still held deep windslab, so we spread out to reduce the loading and the chance we'd both be buried in the same avalanche. Having now got a good couple of days skinning in our legs we were moving a bit faster and before long reached 2500m where the valley widened and we had a break. To our

right almost all the slopes had triggered, spilling avalanche debris down into the bottom of the valley. Slightly more concerning was a slope high to our left which had also avalanched and which had a similar aspect to the slopes we were about to climb.

We continued up on soft windslab with plenty of space between us. The sun was directly in front of us and we were sheltered from the wind so the going was hot. Eventually the ski trail reached a ridge and I took the opportunity to remove my fleece tights. Above, the slopes steepened still further and the roughened, glazed surface looked icy. Alasdair decided he didn't fancy going any further, and

after a further 50m of so I decided the summit was not really worth the effort - we would have to crampon up and back down the last 150m.

By this time a guided party of eight had reached us, and with harchheisen they headed on up. We drained our water (having only taken 1 litre between us), tightened our boots and Alasdair led off, making it look easy. To my surprise, when I followed, it was easy - the soft snow supporting skis well and making telemarking smoothly almost trivial. Unfortunately, the lack of water and food began to tell, and by the time I reached Alasdair I was knackered. Without water to lubricate our auld-alliance lunch of oatcakes and local cheese we munched on some chocolate while I recovered. The next section was steeper but the snow excellent and we rolled down the valley carving long radius turns. At the end we met the couple from the gîte. Having carved some great tracks above, inevitably I fell over turning to a stop to say hello!

We soon entered the trees, seeking out pockets of powder in the shade. In the lead, my whoop of joy on finding some powder was replaced with a mouthful of snow as I hit the denser snow in the sun, my skis stopped and I toppled head first to discover first-

Looking to Pointe des Sagnes Logues; a purgatory of moraines ahead



hand quite how cold the snow was! Suitably refreshed we worked our way through very heavy snow to the ski du fond track. It was now past midday and the snow was softening rapidly. We found a water fountain covered in ice, and took the opportunity to drink our fill and have some lunch. We then headed down the track back to Saint Veran, well satisfied with our 1200m of descent. We had a wander through the picturesque village and drank an Orangina while admiring our tracks on the mountain opposite.

For our final day of skiing we chose The Crete de la Blavette, another peak we could ascend from the gîte and around 2600m. We were joined

by Jackie, one of the couple from the gîte. Alasdair turned back early having pulled his hamstring, and the three of us had an enjoyable skin up in the sun, and descend on snow that had begun to transform from powder to neve.

Dad and Jackie headed back to the gîte, while I continued up to Saint Veran to take part in a Telemark festival. I joined some 30 other telemarkers half way up the mountain for a well-lubricated lunch of local produce followed by some telemark golf, a mass descent accompanied by accordion (!), a dual-slalom competition and finally some apre-ski drinks. A superb way to end an excellent week's ski touring.



Three days one summer David Small

Our mid-August departure date was attended by the usual Alpine forecast; unsettled in the Mont Blanc area, but a big sun symbolising no chance of rain in the Ecrins. So Bruce and I changed our plans, cancelled our accommodation in Chamonix and made the long drive from Geneva airport to the village of Pelvoux in the Ailefroide valley, where the CAF gite was quiet and gave us a room to ourselves. After

a couple of escapades on mountain rock from the Glacier Blanc hut, we drove round to the La Berarde side of the range and applied ourselves to the walk up to the Soreiller Hut. This walk is a real uphill grind, but it has a magic about it too; leaving the valley, one has no idea of the imminent sudden thrill of turning a corner and seeing the spire of the Aiguille Dibona way up above. That thrill then subsides as the

hairpins of the track inexorably follow one after another, the grind dominant, until at last they come to an end at the door of the hut, hard in by the base of the spire.

It was a weekend evening and the hut was full of climbers from Grenoble; the Dibona seems to be to Grenoble what Caerketton Hill is to Edinburgh (or, maybe more accurately, what

"The route starts up an innocent looking chimney which proves to be more polished and awkward than its official grade would suggest."

Lochnagar is to Aberdeen). The forecast was good and everyone was in high spirits; even the familiar argument during the night about the dormitory window (open or shut?) lacked its usual edge.

The next morning Bruce and I set out in our trainers (no chance of snow surviving into August at the level we were at), heading eastwards across the stony moraine, and climbed a

tottering slope of scree and boulders up the flank of the Tete du Rouget before traversing onto the west face to tackle the Pilier Cheze, a striking feature of red rock which is obvious from a long way off. The climbing on this classic route from 1963 is steep but on big holds (if you can reach them) and has pegs showing the way from time to time.

The technical crux is probably on pitch 3, but the psychological crux is definitely on pitch 2 where the pegs are out of sight and you have to trust your route finding instincts on very steep ground. Higher up the angle lies back and there is some carefree ridge climbing before scrambling leads to the summit at 3418 metres. The descent is marked by cairns, but involves some very loose rock, and I was glad that we had only one other pair of climbers doing it with us.

Back at the hut we learned that the weather forecast was still good. Bruce got his Jet Boil going and, over tea, we planned an ascent of the Aiguile Dibona the next day by the Face Sud Classique, a route taking in the best bits of middle grade climbing

and omitting the hideous thrutch of the Madier Cracks. The crowds went home to Grenoble that evening and we were able to make a relatively relaxed start the next morning, with only a young English couple ahead of us. The route starts up an innocent looking chimney which proves to be more polished and awkward than its official grade would suggest. Then there is a squeeze through a hole and some steeper climbing until the route leads right onto scrambling terrain. So far so good, we were sure of where we were going and were well ahead of the game, thanking our careful study of the guide books the night before, UNTIL we turned a corner out of the sun and suddenly lost the route. Ditto the young English couple; after a lot of uncertainty, one of them had embarked on a very steep rope length above us, which to our eyes was clearly too hard to be the way.

We tried left, we tried right, but nothing fitted. The only alternative was straight up, and almost immediately it all fell into place – a solid peg appeared, which had been invisible from below, with more to follow. We literally and metaphorically emerged



from the shade into the sunlight and we were racing again.

And of course we raced too far. We went several pitches up a couloir before we tried to suss out where we actually were. Trying to make sense of things, I traversed across a steep wall and took comfort from finding a bomber piton, so I kept going to

a big ledge and another peg. Then the reality sank in – we had come far too high and the only way out was to abseil a full fifty metres back to the couloir. Having done that, and thinking we'd been let off lightly for our misjudgment, we tried to pull the rope down and of course it was jammed solid. At this point I was assuming we faced the ignominy of a rescue, but

Bruce never abandons hope and after much trial and error he climbed a long way up the couloir to create a different angle of pull; lo and behold, the rope came down like it was attached to nothing and we had been given another lease of life.

The day was wearing on by now, and getting back to the hut in time

The start of the grind

for dinner was beginning to seem an unlikely prospect. However, we pushed on, sacrificing purity for speed by pulling on the gear where it seemed a good idea (or at least I did), and before too long we emerged onto the neat little summit of Dibona, briefly savouring the sunlit view of the surrounding peaks before getting the hell out of there and back down to the hut, where life was proceeding at its usual leisurely pace, dinner was still pending and nobody even noticed our sweaty and furrowed brows as we cast off our sacks and looked for our assigned places at the dinner table – “Bruce x 2” (“Macrosson” being too much for the gardienne to cope with).

A good forecast came true again the next morning and this time we headed west from the hut to the moraine under the Pointe Centrale de Burlan, 3299m, where we spent half an hour peering upwards trying to detect the first bolt of our route, “Remise a Flo”. At length we gave up looking and I had just to climb up the most likely line and hope for the best. Fortunately the climbing was easy and the first bolt was lurking just where it was needed. Then things steepened up



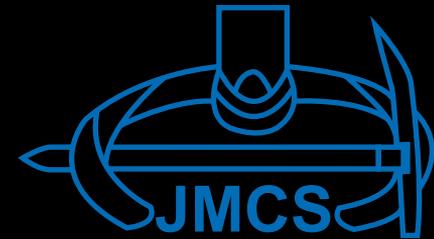
dramatically and Bruce got a bit of a brute of a second pitch, but always on very sound rock.

Another awkward pitch gave way to some scrambling, and a slab pitch, before we reached the headwall. I don't think I've been on anything like it before; it was like several Ratho 6A's, on top of each other, and set in the mountains – very steep, but with jugs galore and comfortable bolting. Soon we were having lunch on the summit, looking around the panorama of the Ecrins and down on the Dibona (which is actually a relatively insignificant peak to look at, if you are anywhere except directly below it).

Our abseil descent was not exactly incident free, but lacked the major issues of the day before, and soon we had got back to the hut, packed up and were making our way back down from the hut to the valley below, and whatever the succeeding days might bring.

Looking back on those three days in the Ecrins sunshine, I see them as among the most enjoyable of my climbing life. Nothing I could write now, at any length, would quite convey how good they were. Thanks, Bruce.

" I don't think I've been on anything like it before; it was like several Ratho 6A's, on top of each other "



2017