

Mendip Caving Group

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CHARTREUSE EXPEDITION - THE OTHER BITS

by Yvonne Rowe

Expedition members: Julie Hesketh, Tim Francis, Joan Goddard, Martin Rowe, Lee Hawkswell, Yvonne Rowe, Charlie Alison, Marcus Ward, Zoe Hammersley, James Allen, Reggie Pain.

On the evening of Friday August 18th, ten of us met up at the Royal Holloway and Bedford New Colledge to load the minibus with tackle and personal gear. Charlie and Martin had earlier picked up the minibus and found the roofrack had been vandalised. There was no way we could get all the gear plus 11 people inside the bus so they lashed the roofrack to a ski rack that they had fitted to the roof and hoped it would survive the journey!

We set off for Dover, picking Reggie up at "Royal" (as he insists) Tunbridge Wells on the way (plus Chinese and Indian takeaways). The journey to the Alps was quicker than last year due to us having more drivers which meant we didn't need to stop so often, or for as long, for rest breaks. The only thing that caused a bit of concern now and then was the roofrack which would shift from side to side and hang over the edge of the roof when the minibus took a bend a bit sharpish, but it and its contents survived the journey.

When we arrived in Chartreuse we set off in search of a campsite in or near St Pierre de Chartreuse. Three were marked on the map and the road we needed was up the beautiful Gorge Guiers Mort which in one place was a single track road hanging off the side of a cliff, with blind bends, low rock overhangs to go under, and the river below. There were no traffic lights and little in the way of passing places - certainly not for minibuses or lorries! Two of the three campsites had long since closed but the third, Camp Martiniere above St Pierre de Chartreuse, was able to take us even though it was pretty full. There were large parties of Paragliders camping near us and it was quite impressive watching them descend from the mountains around us and landing in the field opposite with such accuracy and grace.

At the end of the weekend the campsite almost cleared and we had much of it to ourselves - was it the end of the French holidays or the arrival of the MCG that did

it?!! We all managed to pitch our tents together and were fairly close to water and toilets (useful for the females at least!) The roofrack was upended on the ground and became our washing line as we weren't allowed to tie washing lines to the trees.

Most mornings there was a bread run into St Pierre de Chartreuse where there was also a useful little food shop. Occasionally we went to St Laurent, 11km away, to do a bigger, 2 or 3-day shop. We cooked on site most nights but had four or five trips out to eat in local restaurants, trying a different place each time. The local food was very good and reasonably priced for France. One of my favourites was a traditional Chartreuse salad starter which was just French-dressed lettuce with small triangles of (local) cheese on toast on top - far nicer than it sounds. One way and another we all ate very well but, surprisingly, we drank very little in the way of alcohol compared to usual MCG expeditions!

Days were mostly spent either caving or walking. The caving is described thoroughly in the Special Publication due shortly - suffice to say it was both successful and enjoyable. The walking was also enjoyable and was mostly spent looking for other cave entrances up in the mountains. So steep were some of the paths that handrails or chains were provided to help you up the more exposed routes. Needless to say the scenery was breathtaking. One route to find two cave entrances (Grottes Annette and Chevalier) involved a long wire traverse along the edge of a sheer drop - Joan and I decided that this was too exposed for us so we turned back at this point!

We had one truly tourist day where we went to the famous Chartreuse distillery (well, you have to don't you?). Chartreuse has been made in the mountains for hundreds of years by monks who have taken the vow of silence. Only three monks at any one time know the secret recipe, and only they are allowed to talk. The liqueur is made from 150 different plants and flowers and was originally medicinal, believed to cure all ills and guarantee long life (although one of the three monks who held the secret recipe died in his early 70s after a long illness!). The liqueur is kept in enormous oak barrels in a vast cellar for at least ten years. At the end of the tour around this underground distillery you are given a free glass of Chartreuse or a choice of another of their liqueurs - and the only way out is through the shop!

A walking day was spent by some of us looking for Guiers Vif - a river cave with a huge entrance arch. It was high in a huge curved cliff near the village of St Pierre d'Entremont and could in fact be seen from quite a distance away. The route up took us past some beautiful waterfalls and we managed to persuade Lee and Reggie to make the treacherous crossing over the river to go behind one for a photo - trouble was you couldn't see them once they were there! As we neared the cave there were handrails and chains along the route with steep drops all around and a narrow, unguarded bridge to cross by the entrance. The climb wasn't nearly as bad as it first appeared and was well worth the effort as we were rewarded with lovely views and what turned out to be more than one spectacular arch before we even reached the cave entrance. On the return to the campsite we drove up Gorge Vif which was quite spectacular - bigger and more open than Cheddar Gorge. It had an old section of road like at Gorge Guiers Mort that went round the edge of a cliff, but this is now a footpath and photo/view point with the new, safer road going through a mined tunnel next to it.

The weather was quite hot at the start of the two weeks but got steadily colder as time went by. It was particularly cold at night causing a problem with dripping condensation inside some of the nylon tents. No such problem on the last couple of nights as it was so cold that the drips froze into icicles! Sometimes there was thunder with torrential rain and we'd end up eating (on one occasion cooking!) and sheltering inside the minibus - more sociable than retreating to our own tents. There was one rest day when we were all a bit tired, with no plans to do anything exciting and just sitting around the camp trying hard not to give in to domesticities like washing etc. Good old Reggie, after quite a bit of a persuasion, managed to get us all up (except Julie) to play rounders. We used Lee's fold-up camping stool for a bat and found a rather deflated ball. We found a large grassy area with four conveniently placed trees and a bin for the bases. I'm sure you can imagine the antics that followed but it did the trick - it was great fun and it warmed us up as well.

All too soon it was time to pack up and head for home. We went via the Vercors and some of us visited the Choranche show cave which was very good with live Proteus in tanks to see and amazing straws and other formations. The others went for a walk to look in a nearby cave entrance. We arrived back in Calaise after another quick and trouble-free journey across France, caught an earlier ferry back to England, dropped Reggie off in Royal Tunbridge Wells, got onto the M25 and - STOPPED!