

Club Trip to France 2002

The bold eight (Drew, Grant, Sid, James, Phillip, Heika, Iain and Brian) from the club set off to France, for the 10th anniversary paddling the French Alps. This was my first time and I was apprehensive in what was lying ahead. It didn't help with some of the crew winding me up some months before about the huge water and psyching me out with the small boat I was taking over. So much so, that I started to get a shot of other higher volume boats. Big mistake. The crew slagged me even more. I decided to bite the bullet and take the Bid EZ over.

We left Friday morning around 9am, in two motors. Drew, Grant, Sid and James in one and the other four in the Landover. Cars loaded up with the kit we set off to Dover. We had arranged to meet up with the Carlisle crew (eight David, Mark, Tim, Neil, Paul, Tom...) at the ferry. We had paddled before but they never knew that I was in charge and felt that I had to assert myself as the daddy whilst in France. This worked quite well as they were submissive from the start and easy to put in their place. More so the shortly called Tim.

So we surfed over the channel and set off to Brancon. We arrived there earlyish on Saturday. Once we got to the outskirts of the Alps the scenery changed to the most breath taking I have seen. And I've been around. The smell in the car didn't reflect this as the others were most inconsiderate and blew air as and when they wished. I was quite disgusted at this and thought it was childish.

Once we dumped the stuff off at the apartment we went to do a small river. A warm up. Grade three. Would the Big EZ make it? Would I. Does any one care? The following is a brief guide to the rivers paddled or swam in some cases.

Saturday (pm)

Guisance/Durance

We set off to do this warm up river. A taste of Alpine water. It was great. Very fast and continuous. The water was icy cold but the weather, compared to the weather here, was fine and to get better as the week continued.

Sunday

Claree (am) Heika swam

Onde (pm) The Onde was empty and was subsequently very scrappy. I never enjoyed it much and have declared it as the worst river in the week's calendar. Just my thoughts on it.

Slalom Site. This was a bit of a cool down after the previous rivers we had done that day and had time to do a short run. The Slalom site was similar to Grandtully But wider and more cumecs (water) going through. Typically there were various types of upstream and down stream V's, waves and holes that made up the site. We had a shot on the small wave to begin with. Nay bother. Surfing well mixing a shudder rudder. We then looked or egged others in to the black hole next to the wave. Sid was to take the bull by the horns and get ragged dolled first. Boy did he ever. The 220 and him went in to be tossed around and churned upside down at the rivers amusement. When he eventually came out his glasses were sucked off his face and lost to the river. Did I go in to reap the same punishment? No, I didn't think so. So we played the site and came down for a second run, as it was only about 300m long. When we went floating down the second time Tim, Sid and I agreed that we would drop in to one of the smaller holes and play about. It looked stickyish and as this was the last for the day it didn't matter what happened. Tim went down first. Side surfed and came out. My turn next. For some reason I couldn't quite manoeuvre myself free of

the holes grip. I went this way and that way to find that my buddy decided to come down, clattering on top of me. Nice manoeuvre Sid. The concussion was brief but never lasted long. I would get revenge.

Monday

Durance Gorge Grade 6 (NO JOKE)

Those of you that know me, know that I am not one for exaggerating stories and those that really know me know that heights and me don't go.

The Durance Gorge has not been paddled on a regular basis up until about 6/7 years ago (so I'm told). Why? This quote from the river book might give us a clue ...

“Hanging on by your finger nails in the last little micro eddy before the **entrance to hell**”



The portage was on a par with shooting the entrance from hell. You get the drift..... We set off into two groups. I was in the first group and paddled about 3 / 4 Km to the entrance to hell. Once there we thought it would be a good idea to leave something so the next group would recognise the get out. I left my **BDH bottle** with my first aid kit in it. Yes I know What was I thinking of? But there were other first aid kits circulating in the group. Any way, leaving that behind, we set off for the portage of hell. This was about 500/700m long with near sheer

vertical drops and walking along a scrap in the ground that a mountain goat wouldn't go near without mountaineer back up. Was I upset YES, was I crying... YES... I was close to 'emotional breakdown' carrying my boat on a V-Diff portage. Dehydrated, hallucinating and trembling I eventually made the end. Never again. We congregated at the get in and had a sip of water or Valium. So we went on to come to 'slot and drop'. Just as it says in the guidebook. A long narrow shoot, shaving the rock face and drop. Again the drop on river (normal conditions) left was very close to rocks and looked like people would get the first aids kit out. So the run in along the slot and forced to take the river right drop. I walked but some guys did it. Nothing to exciting. By this time the groups had all merged together. We finished the river, probably more pumped up from the portage. Believe me, your worst nightmare! Needless to say I asked the other group if they picked up the BDH bottle. Nop, but I was determined to get the bottle back. The epic would continue.....

After the Durance Gorge we went off to paddle a nice little river called the Guil..... Ah, did anyone bring their flippers????

Over the years of hearing what some of the guys were saying about the rivers like the speed and steepness, or the Latin name 'steeposity' I was a bit sceptical. For those of you that have drove up to the Tay from Stirling. The steep hill about 7 miles from the Perth roundabout. The one when you have five boats on the roof and same in car, still struggling in third gear. Again you get the drift. Imagine filling that with water, boulders, bigger boulders and even boulders the size of a small cottages..... you get the drift. It's like that!

We had a bit of chat at the top, as it was a bit of a tricky section. We again split the group up. Not just because there was Stirling and Carlisle, by now we were intermingling. Groups of three and four are big enough. Any way, we set of in our merry groups. Its times like on that river, that every nerve ending and sense

is 'full on'. The technicality, steepness and volume were on a par with the adrenalin flowing through the veins. As I set off the holes, tow-backs and line reading were big, strong and must do. We eddied out of the roller coaster about 1Km from get in, taking stock of what we done and what was to come. After a few mins and a re-shuffling of the groups we were on the rails of the roller coaster again. It was a short run but 'full on' (the term of the trip). Another 2-3 Km saw what I thought was the rush of the trip. Ian and myself were leading. Ian, determined and reliable, and I pushed on. The gratification on running that short 'full on' stint especially with Ian was unlike most experiences, and for me, probably the all time high of 14 years paddling. Okay, enough of the mushy stuff. Once we negotiated the last bit we eddied out. Fully pumped up and realising the difficulty of the last part I tried to pass a sign for the group to stop and take stock and have a look. As this was happening the inevitable bits of kit came floating down. With the group stopped we started to ensure the two swimmers (Sid and Phillip) were safe whilst rescuing kit once the bodies were fine. Sid swam higher up, losing the boat and Phillip swam slightly lower down. They were both fine. Phillip slightly stranded on the river right. Sid came wading down river left. Ian and Mike went and chased the boats. With the group halted we went through the lengthy make your mind up phase. Shoot it or walk. A mixture of the aforementioned took place. The get out was a tad further down. Once out, the usual slagging and rubbing went on. My elation was evident for all and French to see what I felt was the best river of the trip.

And you thought that was fun.....read on.....after that we went to get the BDH bottle. Remember where it was something to do with fingernails, entrance to hell.....Drew, Grant, Sid and Moi went off to rescue the BDH bottle. We looked at a map to find best where to ditch the car and walk in to get it. Remember how steep the portage was. Well we parked the car the wrong side of the river where the bottle was. I took my shorts, B'Aid, booties, helmet and towel to dry. Oh and the sunglasses. Some one had to swim the river and get it. Seeing how it was mine it was only fair for me to get wet. From the car it was about 20mins to the river, crossing fields and scrambling down steep, steep, steep banks. When we got to the river we had eyeball on the BDH bottle. Remember it's parked about 30m prior to the entrance to hell. I got changed and thought it was better to get up stream a bitty and swim with the flow. Drew and Grant were ready with ropes just in case..... what was I thinking..... it was only a BDH bottle!.....Any way rather than nose dive into the river, as an appetiser to the entrance of hell, I kind of, in a fashion, waded over. Well this lasted about five steps, as those of you know that the volume made it difficult to wade any river. I saw the line for the swim and gingerly went for it. Do or die..... it was only a first aid kit.....Icy cold water hit me taking my breath away, but not my judgment. I swam with the river and made it across the other side faster than Johnny Wiesmuller with a croc after him. Got the bottle and went back up stream for the return journey. Doh..... how was I going to carry it.....its only a first aid kit, something I might need. Same procedure high up, pick the spot and went like Tarzan (that's who the Johnny Wiesmuller boy was). I saw the boys ready with throw ropes. Nay bother. But I slipped on a rock, lost my footing and got carried further to the jaws of hell. I saw the boys getting ready to throw the bags. God I was heading right to hell. Drew threw the first rope, as I went to get it I hit a rock and got took down. I missed the rope! Grant had started to run down with the second rope, whilst Drew was realling his one in. I shouted to Grant to "for gods sake hurry!" He threw the rope. I grabbed. I saw grant getting dragged in and he let go of the rope. Jesus. This was it. Two Km of grade SIX, "FULL ON SWIM" "DEATH ON A

STICK". Drew shouted SWIM. I couldn't. I was drained. All I could think of was to throw the BDH bottle to the bank. This was what we came for. The BDH bottle had to make it. I threw it and it landed safely. As I was hitting the first hole all I could think of was the lies of this part of the story and where it's going. Your reading this and getting sucked in the hole with me. Hee hee he. Seriously I made the return journey fine. Was that bad of me..... Na, that's jock for no. Any ways I made the return cross and met up with Drew and Grant. Sid had gone off to get the car. Once I had changed out of the wet gear we started heading for the car. Just along the Alpes (as the French would say), rather than going up the steep stuff again. We strolled through and admired some breathtaking scenery around us. With the sun slowly dropping off in the sky. It was great.

Tuesday
Guisane

Romanch

Wednesday

Of course the World cup was on when we were there. The Carlisle crew went down to one of the coffee shops/BAR to watch the English game. Of course us Jocks were in support of our fellow countrymen and rooting them on as far as they could go in the tournament..... But we weren't there for the football but the paddling and went off to the infamous Rabiox wave. I had read the guidebook and listened to the guys and their memories of the wave. I was sort of expecting something big, bank-to-bank, loads of boaters wave wheeling down it, blunting and getting a good thrashing. But it was like the fish that got away.....it was huge.....bit of a disappointment.....just my thoughts. What was better than that was the wave/hole upstream river left. I didn't know it was there but some of the others did. We got in whilst the shuttle was going on. We were doing the whole river, grade 2 and about 4 hours in da boat. Anyways, hit the wave. Grant, Sid, Ian and Moi. We took turns in surfing then moved on to 180's and the odd 360. Good fun that wee play spot. Moving on to the 'Rabiox'. We played for a wee while and went on to the first eddy on river left and caught up with Drew, and two others. Sid stopped to empty his boat. Took the bung out. He must have had a bit of Mayo on his hand cause that little bung of his 220 went for its own wee swim. Yes for the next 20min we spent looking for the bung that was never to be found. Sid made a little cork out of some foam to plug that little hole up. We set off down the river at a leisurely pace. Cutting the eddy lines up with the odd tail dips and the like. We pushed on till we had a nice little eddy line with a suitable eddy for the group to park up in. We were cartwheeling on the line and tail dipping, the usual stuff. The river, of course and was being used by rafts. Away in the horizon we could see through the shimmer the outline of the 'buses' coming down. We had ages and still went on carving up the eddy. Closer and closer they were coming, without falter we played and played. By now the buses were closer and could spit at us. Drew shouted, "Grant!". But Grant missed his time management class and was headed nose to nose with da bus. "Watch out for the BUS!", Someone shouted. His head was underwater at this time the bow of his boat standing proud of the water with the tail in deep. Kersplash, as the bow crashed on to the water the bus drove right over the top of the 220. Seconds turned into nano seconds. Grant went through the process of setting up for a roll.....not knowing there was a bus parked on top of him. The guide in the raft craned his head to see what we were all animating at. Grant tried to execute his roll, but the 220, did not budge one inch. Grant lost his grip

of the paddle and knew something was on top. To be fair it would be common for Grant, whilst being inverted thinking that it was Sid or Moi stopping him from getting up. That's what we are like. But on this occasion it was the bus. So Grant went to crank up the wheetabix on the next roll and the Raft Guide went to back paddle the bus. Grant came up to the usual laughter and jeering at him. This was when he realised it was da bus and not bill and ben. We left the eddy with a snigger and floated on down the river. To be fair, it was long and tiring but F-U-N. It took a fair time to the get out. We had the company of the rafts most of the way down. There was one last play hole to come. It was probably about 15/20 min's from the get out. Its vital stats were, on river right, two holes about 18 foot in length (bearing in mind I had left the measuring tape in da car), separated slightly by a break, nice safe eddy on river right to get in it, grippy enough to hold but not lethal and most importantly loads of water beyond it to roll or swim in safety. As we approached it we could see a couple of guys strutting their stuff. As we were coming down on top of them they gave way and once we were safely tucked in the eddy out of their way, it begun. These guys were gobsmackingly full on the business. It was evident that one in particular was like the add says. Eat, sleep drink play boating.....he was, what we found out latter the worlds number two. Mice and men came to mind. These guys were here with their vanload of sponsor boats, dancing in this hole effortless spinning, cartwheeling and things I've never seen or heard of. One of us had to go in and do something. To be honest I don't remember who it was first. But, good on them. We had a laugh and did what we did and some did quite well as I remember. But I think we spent most of the time watching these guys in awe at some of the multiple complex tricks. 'Full on play boating'. And then to the end of the river.

Thursday
Upper Guil
Gyr very steep

Friday
Guisane to apartments

In the Morning we did the Guisane for about the third time. Not that it was getting boring. The level was dropping every time and different routes were experienced every time. By now I was absolutely tired and exhausted. Not that I'm setting this up as an excuse. Up until today I had not rolled. The closest thing I had come to it was a severe high support stroke. I didn't appreciate the stories of how shallow and rocky the riverbed was. Okay so the time came. I was hitting most of what was to hit, to tired to manoeuvre da boat. Inversion came at breakneck speed. 'Don't swim' was going through my mind.....'don't SWIM!' I was conscious of the shallowness and steeposity of the section I was in. Good grief, I thought. 'Roll' 'roll'.....'don't swim'... my opportunity came as I was setting up the feel of the roll and execution bitty thingy came. As I rolled I made the fatal mistake of popping the head up first. I put it back in and with every last exhausted fibre of my body I flipped those hips and heaved myself up. Gasping for air and trying to navigate the river. I was so exhausted at this stage I was only fit for defence strokes and nothing else. I decided that I would not carry on in the afternoon. But, as we got off the river and I announced I was finished Drew and Grant managed to twist my arm. After all, it was the last river and we were home word bound.

Town gorge

We went to paddle the town gorge. Probably an easy three as I remember. The last river was great. Not too demanding and as scenic as all the others before.

This being my first trip to the French Alps, I thoroughly enjoyed it, and would recommend any competent paddler to go. Some of the Highs, Lows and laughs:

Highs

Crack. The crack being in the car and on the river with the guys and girls. It started when we left Stirling and all the way down in the car in France and all the way back it was good fun. The scenery was breath taking beyond believe. I thought that the Scottish Highlands was spectacular. But just driving and paddling through the countryside was awesome.

The rivers: Volume and steeposity were full on Grrr...owl. Iain spawned a new river grading system that is spot on. It was modified as the days went on and the laughs that went with it were grrrrreat.

Leading various parts of rivers especially teaming up with Sid, Iain and Tim.

Lows

I'm sorry to say that the Onde was the pants. I almost holed my boat it was that scrappy. Yes I'm sure its good when there's water in it, but on this occasion it was dry as a stick. The Durance portage. Not one for those, like me that suffer from a tad of vertigo.

Laughs

Far too many, to mention. Between the swims, the BDH event and Sids bung.

I had the paddling trip of my life. Looking forward to going again.