

FRANCE 2004 :DIX MUINET EDDY

A group of guys from Stirling Canoe Club went off to paddle some of the rivers in and around Briancon, in the French Alps. The story goes like this.

4.6.04 09.10 hrs

Drew (D), Craig (C) and Grant (G) had met at my house, James (J) after nine o'clock. The boats were already on the roof it was only my baggage to be loaded up and we were off to meet Ali (A), Scott (S) and Phill (P) at the Granada service station. I took notes this year as Ian (I) had done this 2 years ago and I thought it was an excellent way of recording the events. After we met at the Granada service station the drive to Dover begun. Two cars going down and we were due to meet Ian and Simon (Si) In Briancon.

I had asked what might be some of the rivers we might be paddling. The answer was Guisane, Claree, Onde, Gyr, Gyronde, Durance, Fornel, Romanche, Guil and Veneon.

20.15hrs

Arrive at Dover, straight onto an early ferry. We had managed to get there before A S and P. However, we were not aware of this at the time and thought they might be on the ferry first. The clocks went one hour forward and we arrived in France 22.45 hrs.

05.38 hrs

Because we there was only A, S and P in the car it meant that J had to share the driving between the two cars as C and S did not drive. The two cars had been separated in France and trying to see who was where became a tad difficult as J had the wrong number for the other car. However, A had managed to phone J and we caught each other up and managed to change drivers.

5.6.04 12.19hrs

About 10/15 min from Briancon. We had passed the river Gusane and stopped in a lay-by. We saw 2 Brits there one was a man the other a girl sitting on a rock with the 100,000 mile stare. She had come a cropper and swam at a difficult bit. To let the unaware know about most of the French rivers we were to paddle they go like this: Whhhooooooooooooooooosssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh Argggggh...

The speed is breath taking the gradient can be frightening the water is icy cold and rescue... well your on your own for the next few kilometres and if your looking for an eddy to hop into, there scarcer than scarce. You might start to get an idea of a hard river. As for the difficult grade 4 rivers well, bring determination, skill, attitude, brute strength, great teamwork, people that know the river and a sprinkling of fresh under ware and an understanding if you do cock it up you will be exceedingly cold after your swim, could be hurt, might put your rescuers at risk, could loose your kit and be psychologically scared after the white fluffy bunny¹ giving you a humping of your life. That's typically a taste of some of the rivers we ran.

Arrived Briancon 12.35hrs!

After a brief wee sight seeing run round the town we went off for a paddle. We went to paddle the lower Guisane and Durance down to Prelles. The get out was before the barrage signs. The water was a lovely colour of greenish, blue and aquamarine. We had met up with I and Si before hitting the water. It was a smallish grade 3 run. A warm up. Playtime before hitting the big stuff. Wave wheels were a plenty along with cartwheels and tail dips. When we got on the river it was an initial buzz to the system of how fast the rivers actually go. A world away from the rivers in Scotland.

6.6.04

08.28 hrs

We awoke to a beautiful and glorious morning set deep within the heart of the French Alps. The mountains engulfed the area of Briancon making this the scene every morning we awoke. The scenery is truly breathtaking, houses set so high in the mountains and sunshine dominating every available space. The morning routine had begun. D, G and C went off to buy the freshly made croissants and baguettes. After the long day of travelling I slept soundly and was looking forward to a good days paddling.

18.32hrs

After some messing around this morning we set off and did the upper Guisane (from the village above the lake) to Chamenal. It was a very long stretch of river with the latter few kilometres being grade 4. There was a stop for those who didn't want to do it. We set off initially in two groups; J, C, G, Si, and A. The first stretch was a good grade 3. Ian in the second group had a boat-mounted camera. At the mid waypoint we checked and there was some good footage. However because it was boat mounted there was a lot of underwater footage. We later changed it to a head mounted camera. But this was not to work for a few days because of technical difficulties....we never had the gaffer tape in the right place. Okay, so down the river we go for the grade 4 stuff. C, A, J, G, P and I as tail end Charlie were off. There was one thing for me, as this was day 2 and we were still getting accustomed to the water and other peripherals, I had trouble keeping the old breathing in check for this part of the river. My heart was beating out the chest. Just after we started we ran a weir and shot it RR (River Right) between two rocks. C had mentioned that after a quieter stretch the horizon of the river would nose dive and the fun would begin. It did! For me, the long stretch was absolute in concentration. The river squeezed and compressed the water as the gradient increased. Day 2 required full on concentration and awareness of individuals and there needs surrounding you. If you swam it was, as mentioned earlier on, a self-rescue. After a while C had eddied out and I passed him. He shouted "that's the worst done". Aye, right then. It was still coming. He got mixed up where he was on the river. The volume was relentless along with the huge waves and holes that were verging on the white fluffy bunny¹ (WFB) size. After some time we arrived at the apartments where we were staying and had lunch.

After lunch we went on to paddle Briancon town gorge. It was a solid grade 2/3 with absolutely spectacular scenery. It was a short run with huge volumes of water rushing through narrow sections. The town gorge would demonstrate later on in the week the nature of the assumed sport we do in kayaking, an almost ultimate price was to be paid. The head cam was passed over to me at this time and I tried to get a good picture of Ian going over the weir as I paddled it backwards. It went well but alas more technical difficulties ended the filming.

That night we went to P pals house. A chap call Bernard. He lived high up in the mountain; in fact he was as high in France as Ben Nevis is here. We went there sat out for most of the night and had dinner. He was a good old chap along with his good lady and pal that came along. We had some of their homemade wine to start with. If we thought that was strong the kit he came with at the end could have put the space shuttle up, it was rocket fuel!

7.6.04

We did the Onde, grade 3 and Gyronde grade 4. As I recall the last time in the French Alps when we did the Onde, I kind of made the statement I would never paddle that river again. It was because it was so low it was a SCRAP. This time was different. It was quiet pleasant. The river was quiet short to run. We had lunch at the get out. It was really warm. The afternoon saw us going to paddle the Gyronde. It starts as a grade 6 and frizzles out as grade 1. The grade 6 was not 6 but more of a full on grade 5. Craig and I had a good look at it. It was run able with only one line down. However the rapid was about 800meters long and about $\frac{3}{4}$'s down there was a massive white fluffy bunny. After that, directly after, was a point where, if the bunny had you and your line was not on, severe consequences would be paid. We decided to have a look later on in the week in the morning when there might be a change in the water level. So we all got in further down a we bit at the grade 4 bit. However, when I pulled my cag on a muscle running along the top of my spin had popped. Boy, did it give me so much pain for the days and nights to come.

8.6.04

Spent all day at a play wave at Serre Chervalia. It was great fun swapping each other boats and Ian was doing a lot of filming.

9.6.04

Me, G, D, and P went off to paddle the Durance. We got in at Suint Chlements and paddled down to Embrum stopping at the Rabioux play wave. Simon, I and C went off to do some mountain biking. Scott and Ali went of to do some shopping. The paddle on the Durance was brill'. It's similar to the Tay, wide and loads of water running down it with ample slack bits to pick up the pieces if things went wrong. Not a typical pocket rocket French river. Again like 2 years ago the wave RL of the island prior to the Rabioux saw a rather large hole. We played there and got some good pictures. Down to the Rabioux and like 2 years ago very disappointing. I did manage to do a killer wave wheel on it keeping the

stern vertical going through a trough or 2. We had lunch and after some time continued down. The waves further down were HUGH! I think, D was in front of me leading down a stage. Going through the waves he had vanished. Lost in the troughs. They were MASSIVE. Good fun though. The boys doing the mountain biking saw them doing Les Duex Alpes, a decent of 1300m in an hour with stops for filming and pictures.

On the way back to the apartments two ambulances and a police car went past us with lights and tones on. We found out later on that night, that a paddler had gotten into the most terminal of accidents. A group from the Cambridge area had paddled Briancon town gorge, mentioned earlier. One of the group, a man, had negotiated the gorge and had become inverted at some stage. Another paddler went to his assistance and bravely helped the person in the water. Other paddlers in the group also helped. Heroic first aid attempts were administered at the side of the river. Medical intervention soon arrived and the person was taken to hospital. At the time of leaving Briancon the gentleman's situation was not good. Our thoughts are with his family and friends.

10.11.04

A sombre morning followed.

We went off to paddle the River Guil. In the morning we ran the upper section and in the afternoon the middle from Trois Shoots, staircase, slot and drop and down to the flat bit. Or so that was the plan. In the morning we all paddled. The first group was Me, Scott, Phill and Craig. It was a solid grade 3+. The rest of the group eventually caught up with us and they had the head cam for that section. We got out at Chateau Quearas. A gorge section, full on grade 5! Again Craig and James looked at it but decided not to.

In the afternoon James, Ian and Craig ran the middle section. The whole run taken into account staircase and slot and drop was a heaving grade 5! However take these out and it's a heaving grade 4, read and run! Where did this read and run come from? Anyways as I remember it's a whopping 8Km stretch of near relentless read and run white fluffy bunny's¹ that are looking for someone to play with. We got in at Trios Shoots. Prior to this we had another brief. Safety, actions on swimming, first aid, throw lines leading, hand signals and where the change of underwear is. For me personally, this was the cream of paddling. Leading Craig and Ian working as one unit. Its times like this that one has to read not only the river but also the people that are on it. We ran the river as one unit. Stopping in micro eddy's where possible. Communication was second to none. As I left an eddy I knew none of the other two would follow till a signal came. And if a signal didn't come they wouldn't follow. Read and run at its best. Leaving the sanctuary of Trios Shoots we followed the down stream vees. Drew, Grant and some locals got a snap shot or two. We eventually eddied out after about 2/3Km of relentless grade four. We had a 10sec breather a thumbs up was given all round and I broke in again. As we were all suitably briefed I knew Craig wouldn't follow without a signal. As I negotiated the current the river carved out a dogleg bend to the left. All of the water was funnelling round the bend. And there it was...the biggest hole on the planet. It was the mother of all

white fluffy bunny's¹! Now I know people that know me know I am not one for exaggerating but this hole would have consumed; 1 long wheeled land rover (expedition style) loaded with trailer and bull bars. And I mean CONSUME, as a snack. And here's me in a wee 7foot boat with all the trim characters of a cork! I had to turn butch and manly. This WFB was not getting me. I went mega aggressive and heaved the humoungest hanging draw come draw stroke on my left hand side. As I hit the hole I then turned it into a forward paddling stroke reaching as far as I could stretch my hamstrings for an extended catch beyond the hole. My body groaned as the power was warp factor 9. Scotty couldn't give any more. I was going through. But the back deck was being dragged back and sinking at the same time!! God!!!! Who had the change of underwear? I knew if I couldn't get through I was bunny fodder. I switched from the left to a right power stroke. My forearms were bulging like Popeye's I had to do a supper human effort in getting out. Aggrrrrh.....I was through! It wasn't over, I gave a STOP!! Sign to the others. I negotiated mammoth standing waves and squeezed into an eddy. Leaped out of ma boat. Where's yer mummy when you need her! After a scramble up the bank I managed to get the others to skirt round the mother of all holes on the planet. Phew. A further stretch took us to a picnic like eddy. Sanctuary. A safe haven. But, beyond the solitude and safety of the eddy the horizon nose-dived away into 800/950m of carnage as we came to the staircase. We arrived there pushing the clock, as we had to be off the river for 6pm. I was conscious that a large amount of time was being consumed inspecting this monstrosity of a rapid. The last 200/300m had a chicken shoot on it. We decided to walk the main part of the rapid and run the chicken shoot. But it was no chicken shoot. There were wolfs lurking around as you hit the main current you had to ferry glide ferociously across to river right and then tip toe round the remnants of the staircase.

DIX MINUET EDDY

At some stage we eddied out and Craig took over on the point. For those of you who don't know much of Craig and Ian, they are both exceptional paddlers, whom I trust explicitly, at this level you had to. Craig took us to a bend that went right. We were all staggered about 50m apart in our own wee eddy's. Craig in front looking at what lay round the bend. I was about 30/40 meters away from him and Ian was about 15m away from me. Normally we would only spend a few minutes looking from an eddy and an informed decision, right or wrong, would be made. Craig had his few minutes and a few minutes and a few minutes....this was not looking good. What could Craig see or not that we couldn't see!!?? I looked at Ian, who was behind me then back at Craig. Craig was still looking! What was round this bend that was taking so long? No communication was being passed back. I looked at Ian again. I shouted to him looks like were in trouble (or words to that effect). I knew Ian wouldn't here me cause of the water noise. I looked at Craig again; he was still looking at what was to come. This was not in the game plan! I again looked at Ian then at Craig. Craig at this stage gave me a clear-cut signal for me to come to him. I saw the signal and fully understood it. But the eddy that he was in was only pea size and he was plum size. My boat and his boat were two plums. Two plums in a pea size eddy didn't

work. I knew that. But why didn't he. But he called me over. Why? I looked at Ian and thought why does he want me there....why doesn't he want YOU...he's looked at this monster for DIX minuet. Craig's a really good paddler. What was he seeing round this bend that he didn't shoot it? He wanted me to leave my eddy and grab some of his, that clearly wasn't big enough for one boat.....but he wanted me over. Ma MA!! I looked at Ian, gave him a signal to stay.

I broke in...

The river was going so fast, so, so fast and unimaginable things were lurking round the corner. I was so tired at this stage. I was at absolute, everything, no reserves left, the full enchilada, drained. Craig wanted me in the pea size eddy.....

..... I never made it.

I knew that if Craig had spent ten minutes looking at this and I never made the critical eddy, you wont live to tell the tale AND I was almost at my tether I was due for the best seat in the house at no cost whatsoever.

As I broke in my mind was in the safety of Craigs eddy and I knew that I was not going to make it. I shouted something to Craig like...I've missed it. When I did this I was fully aware of the situation. Adrenalin surged through my body and all my wee endorphins were buzzing, my first fix of the trip and I was enjoying it!!!! Every fibre of my body was bristling with energy. I actually said to myself "LETS RIDE THIS". As I passed Craig in the eddy I was almost convinced he said I am following you. This was reassuring. But what he actually said was RIVER LEFT!

In the blink of an eye I passed Craig with him shouting RIVER LEFT!!!! But to my ear it was I am following...Yes, I know there as far apart as both poles.

As I passed Craig I had taken into account the whole rapid in a nano second and knew I had to go river right. I did this and went through waves and holes and thought in my own wee mind, what was all the mind games for. Once I had a full view of the rapid and knew it was safe (ish) I gave a signal back to follow me. And they did.

If any paddler has had a fix of endorphins then I overdosed at this stage, almost at burnout level. I made an eddy and the other two dropped in at this stage.

For the first time as long as I can remember I was disgusted with myself. I missed a critical eddy, at that time. I was so tired and exhausted that any more and I was putting the group at critical risk. After six days on the water I was almost off the dial. I knew slot and drop was coming up, a grade five minus. And another solid few kilometres grade four after that. It was too much. I was too tired

I broke out and called time out. I was too tired to go on any more. I was so disappointed with myself. But to go on would put myself at risk along with Ian and Craig and I couldn't do that. I jumped out the boat and Ian and Craig came along. After a hard scramble and some nifty rope work

we were back on the main road. The safety drill, if any of us were walking was to walk to in the direction of slot and drop for a pick up as Drew and Grant were there waiting to take pictures. I walked down to tell Grant and Drew we were off the river and needed a lift.

As trips highs and lows go I was down in the black abyss. I knew to go on for me was wrong, but desperately wanted to finish the river. The last few kilometres could have resulted in a serious swim and rescue. I have never been more gutted and disappointed in myself.

We loaded the cars up, got changed and headed back to the apartments. We caught up with everyone else and shared various stories of what we all did. It was our penultimate night in Briancon so we all went back to the French restaurant where we have been frequenting for so long. After some more under the table drink we headed back to the apartments. Little did I know that whilst reciting the story of Dix muinet eddy Ian was filming me. I swear, I never knew. The whole group sat and listened to my tale. You might be lucky or not and catch it on the web at some stage.

11.6.04

Our last day paddling. We went off to do the Claree. A nice grade 4. Ali and Scott went off to see friends and paddle elsewhere. Ian and Simon took pictures and video footage of the rest of us. We got in at the top at some slack water. Went down about 200/300 meters and took on this nice grade 4 section. A twist in the river to the left saw a naughty little hole with cushion waves. I shot it and capsized. Rolled pretty damn quickly to make the eddy at the bridge. Went on to go pass the most severe undercut section. About 6-8 foot of undercut. If you went in there it wasn't going to be good. As the river went on the grade lessened from 4 to grade 2. Once we were at the get out we called it a day. It was a fabby river to finish on not too long or difficult the grade 4 quickly eased to a more sedate 3 and 2.

In the afternoon we headed off to the town to do some shopping for the folks back home.

As trips go this was a blast. Rivers are graded 1 through to 6. 1 being flat, calm with a bit of current. Grade 6 is generally hazardous to life. We paddled rivers from grade 2-4. And had a good look at some nasty grade 5's. The teamwork was second to none both on and off the river. A huge thanks to Drew and Ali for driving. Simons van was invaluable shuttling the boats from river to river. On a personal note this trip

¹ A White Fluffy Bunny was the descriptive name for a MAJOR meaty hole. Indeed, this hole typically lured all those to it as it appeared to be fluffy, sweet, innocent and angelic. If caught in it, it would maul, bite, gouge, rip and eventually let you of its grip.

I look forward to the next time we are off paddling the French Alps.

James Fleming