

SECTION 12:

“Somewhere Over There”: Adventures Overseas



In his book John Huxley records that the Club’s first overseas trip to the Alps took place in 1969, and in this century we’ve continued the tradition of going for it overseas. Only a couple of lines into John’s account, though, one is disturbed to read “took all our food in tins...squalor...the Gendarmerie came...”. How things post 1999 compare I’ll leave to you, dear reader, to deduce from this survey of selected adventures overseas! We cover both Club meets and members’ own journeys...and focus in this section on Europe.

Our account opens right at start of the period with the Swiss meet of summer 1999. In “The Gwydyr 16” magazine Mike Dagley tells of the bivouac below the Rimpfischorn:

“It was pretty much a perfect site. We had all we needed: rushing meltwater...a blue sky fading towards dusk, a fantastic arena of rocky giants...The sun was dazzling the skies beyond the colossal triangle of the Weisshorn... 9,200’ in Switzerland”

Their party – Mike, Richard and Melinda Kinsman and Melinda’s Munro partner Julie attempted the summit (4,199m), reaching its forepeak just below the top. Here the passage of time and the effects of sun on the snows below counselled retreat. The (PD grade) ascent had sharp teeth:

“With shortened coils we approached the steep but innocent looking snow gully...a descending Englishman warned us to escape the gully early on to avoid...’really tricky ground’. So we traversed out onto a broken buttress, on good scrambling rock. The mixed nature of the ascent proved awkward in bending, scraping crampons...

Higher up we reached an exposed rock arete, Richard whooped with delight at the prospect of such an airy position. The rock was excellent...below my creaking spikes I could see the end of the slabby arete and then nothing except the crinkled surface of the Adlergletscher somewhat further down. Richard topped out as I was halfway up the slab.”



Miroir d’Argentine near Villars (see next page)

Melting snow wasn’t a problem for our climbers on the other 1999 trip, to the Costa Blanca, organised by Chris and Ronnie Harvey. The other members there were Mal Bonner, John Huxley, Boo Jemmett-Stone, Richard and Melinda, and Ann Swift. They climbed at Toix, Sella and on the Penon de Calpe. They did a number of routes the hardest being a three pitcher called Marion at 5+ (HVS,) and the longest Via Valencianos on the Penon de Ifach at Calpe, an all day affair at the same grade. I would guess on the 1969 trip everyone went overland; in 1999 cheaper flights made climbing abroad an easier proposition.

Over 2005/2006 there were further overseas climbing ventures driven by the Richard and Melinda duo. At Tom and Louise Brodie's wedding in Switzerland in August 2005, Richard and Tom took time out with two other guests, to climb on the slabs of the Miroir d'Argentine near Villars. The internet reveals climbs here *start* at the HVS level. Richard's 40th birthday celebrations were at Calpe, and included more climbs at the 1999 venues. Tony and Keren Lamberton were there, plus Boo and Alan Jemmett, Helen Brady and Bryan Gilbert, Nuala, Chris and Patrick Dunn, Paul and Lin Jensen, Mike and Linda Gavin. Considerably colder conditions greeted Richard and Tony in February 2006 at Rjukan in Norway – they had two full days ice climbing including a grade 3 climb called "Lettvan" just below the famous WW2 Heavy Water Hydro plant.

Ironically, snow or at least hail was on the menu too for the first of our featured walking trips, that of Maurice and June Ewing back in September 2000. They began in Spain's Picos de Europa and in "The Gwydyr 22" magazine Maurice writes up their ascent of Pico de la Padierna:

"From Fuente De the cable car to El Cable [sic – author!] provides a soft option to the higher pastures...to permit us to claim an ascent of a 2,319m peak in less than two hours. A full gale with driving hailstones on the summit reminded us of the serious side of any peak this high. It was however a delightful walk despite the rough squalls passing through. Rugged complicated craggy features everywhere but a fairly obvious route through them."

Due to poor weather forecasts, they headed south to the Sierra de Gredos in the Sistema Central. Some meticulous planning followed:



Sierra de Gredos contrasts – plateau



Sierra de Gredos contrasts – pinnacles

"We were fortunate to purchase an outdoor guide to the Gredos...another stroke of luck occurred. When opened back at the campsite a 1:40,000 map of the area fell from a sleeve in the back cover. Deciphering a foreign language guidebook by headtorch when half way down a second bottle of rioja comes easily to deep GMC members... we...selected a route to provide the best insight to the area.

It was cold and clear the following morning...we set off for the Plataforma car park in the northern side. [There] after a couple of gentle uphill miles we reached the main ridge at the Puerto de Candeleda and turned westwards towards the higher and more imposing central section, with tremendous views on both sides of the Spanish plains. Shortly after passing the ruins of the Refugio del Rey at 2,100m we encountered an abrupt change in the terrain. The ridge narrowed to a verglassed knife edge..."



Buoux cliffs and fort in Provence

The magic map proved helpful and they were able to descend over easy ground to a new path and complete their walk.

More wine and gentler walking conditions characterised a meet of thirteen members in the Luberon area of Provence in 2005. In "The Gwydyr 22" magazine John Huxley takes over from Peter Mayle:

"Provence is beguiling in the extreme from its...vineyards to delightful hilltop towns such as Rousillon and Gordes. A number of good walks were done mainly taken from the

reliable Sunflower book...and some of the party visited the Verdon gorge... By far the most spectacular walk I did was to the Pont du Gard from Vers...We also did the circuit around Buoux which was again extremely pleasant.”

In 2007 the Club was forty years old and Mike and Linda Gavin grasped the task of organising a big trip that would be worthwhile and also widely accessible across the Club. Research showed that to get a week away at an affordable price Majorca was a good bet, and Mike organised the hire of four villas near Alcudia, located in close proximity to each other, over a three week period. The parties effectively spread out over that time.

Mike summarised the meet in “The Gwydyr 24” magazine the next year:

“I think that we achieved a lot in the weeks that we were there, especially taking into account the bad weather we encountered. With the aid of Cicerone, Sunflower guides and various maps we managed to guide ourselves successfully up numerous mountains and on various walks. In fact I would go as far as to say that had the weather been hot and sunny we would not have got as much done.”



Descending from Tomir

Mike and Linda during the first week put a lot of work in rectifying things like car parks and routes. A week one highlight was a walk to

“Atalaya de Alcudia. There was a very good path up to the top with magnificent coastal views at all times.”

Forty members and friends in total were on the meet and the biggest day out was the first day of week two, with ten people doing the circuit of Lluc and seventeen on...

“Tomir (1,103m): We started off from the bottling plant and the path wound up through the woodland and then later above some steep scree slopes, quite exposed, a little scramble with some steel loops and a hand chain and a good walk along a rocky ridge to the Summit. After a good

stop on the summit we made our way down...a steep rocky path to a col (with some bits of scrambling). Here some of the hardy walkers decided to do Puig de Ca, as it was so close to the path. Then we had a long leisurely walk off. The route finding was difficult at times but the committee... (Mike Gilbert, Maurice Ewing and co) did well. We arrived back at the cars and within minutes the other group came into sight - what planning.

This is a very good walk and quite demanding especially if you do the Puig de Ca as well. We had a good clear day and the views were fantastic. The meet had got off to a good start.”

Other summits ascended over the trip were Massanella (1,367m, third highest on Majorca), Puig Sa Rafeta (1,124m), L'Ofre (1,098m), Puig Franquera (1,067m), Teix (1,062m) and the hill top fortress of Castell d'Alora (825m).



Janet Coates on the Rafeta – Lofre ridge

Mike and myself plus Paul and Christine Smyth, did the old tobacco smuggler's path from Mortix to the sea across a very wild area, as I wrote in the same magazine:

“Around us the ground rose into towers and crazy tottering pinnacles, some a couple of hundred feet high. The whole area was a vast plateau, eroded into a maze of rocks and gulleys. On a smaller scale, almost all the rocks around had themselves been carved into flutings like the surfaces of a medieval knight's armour. Some resembled cloaked and hooded figures carved in rock, lurking in the usual Mallorca mix of thorny scrub, aromatic plants and spiky tussocks. To the south, the main mountains formed a black backdrop, capped with cloud...”



On the Mortix smugglers path

Those clouds turned into a nasty thunderstorm with flash floods that caught us on our furthest point out. After it stopped the return was quite scary and the going got tough...and I should *not* have been in blue jeans!

“Our first barrier was a river crossing of what had been a 9 inch-wide stream. I was last over and Mike reckoned it rose three inches in the time it took me to cross on the few boulders that still emerged. Next came a confusion of massive tussocks through which we stumbled, the path and cairns buried amongst them. It took us 20 minutes to work out from the position of the great pinnacle where the path must be, and then we managed to retrace our

steps up to the mule trail, simply because the torrents had calmed down enough for us to see where it was. It was much to my relief that there were no more rivers blocking the scrambly section back on to the plateau. I’m convinced had the storm continued we’d have been pinned down by the floods below the cliffs - benighted, cold, wet and very uncomfortable, a passage of the plateau in darkness being impossible.

As it was the plateau was hard enough...all colour and contrast had been drained from the land and the cairns and waymarks were hard to spot. The white rock was now dark grey and there seemed to be no light at all in sky or landscape. We each took turns in the lead for 10 minutes or so at a time, sharing the job of staring out for the marks, with those behind checking out for the leader.”

Metalwork comes in handy when the going gets tough overseas, and Via Ferrata have featured right across our period. Chains and ladders etc first make their appearance in the “The Gwydyr 20” magazine in Bryan Gilbert’s account of his and Helen Brady’s 2002 holiday in and across the Tatra, starting off in Poprad on the south side of the range:

“We were accompanied by half the population of eastern Europe. The Slovaks are all speed walkers, very slim and fit and have nothing to say...not because we’re foreigners...they don’t even speak to each other! The routes were long and often steep, aided with chains and step irons like...in the Dolomites; though this was barren rolling granite country rising to over 2,500m.

To get away from the crowds we decided to head for the border and Poland. The next few days were spent on day trips into the White Tatras, which like the High Tatras rise to over 2,500m. The limestone landscape is much more rugged and picturesque than the granite mounds of Slovakia...The Poles were very different to the Slovaks as they came in all shapes and sizes, did not speed walk, and were keen to speak even though *you* do not speak the language...”

They succeeded in climbing Mt Rysy in the High Tatras on the border, which at 2,499m is the highest peak that one is allowed to climb unguided. Poland has the harder ascent. After a path leading to lakes...



Rysy peak

“The rest of the morning was an unrelenting climb out of the shadow-covered amphitheatre using fixed chains... the last section was especially steep and exposed, like Crib Goch but with a gradient.”

Next up for using chains are Kev McEvoy and Andy Odger who went with a Colletts Mountain Holidays tour to Corvara in the Dolomites in June 2011. In terms of the grades Andy mentions in his account in the July 2011 Newsletter the BMC website comments “As a rough guide most confident scramblers should be happy jumping in on a 3B and above”. On their first day, having encountered a party of fifty trainee guides in their way:

“We decided to try another route called Col de Bois in nearby Falzarago. This was also a 3B graded Via Ferrata and after an initial 10 -15 metre fight up a smooth as silk rock chimney, the route eased out into a truly enjoyable

climb."On day three...



Kev on the Col de Bois

"We set off to do the Highly Recommended and beautifully crafted and exposed Sandro Pertini at Grade 4C. Having been forced to lead the route as I set off up I was enthralled immediately by the rock and the simply stunning scenery of the national park..."

We stopped midway for lunch and also due to Kev feeling a little uneasy: the [second] pitch was a slight scramble albeit at 2,080 metres and led to a four metre bridge with a sheer wall on the other side!!! A mere 800 metre drop opened up beneath your feet - it was entertaining to some members of our party and terrifying to others. Colletts staff tell us the record for pull ups on the bridge is five. We declined the challenge on the grounds of sanity and coaxed

all across. After The Bridge there was a section of approximately 200 metres of fairly sustained climbing and then the summit was reached, and we completed our now legendary pose of success."

They had several further fine days and routes including Brigata Tridentina at grade 3b and Andy summarises the trip:

"I can heartily recommend the Dolomites even if it's just for the walks as the scenery is outstanding and the place is just magnificent."

In October 2012 Doug Florence and Gail Smith also had a successful week doing Dolomite Via Ferrata.



The legendary pose of success



Kev on Tridentina

The Irish Sea is a sea, so Ireland counts as overseas! We went by the massive overnight ferry from Birkenhead to Belfast twice in the early years of our period, on trips organised by Paul Smyth, staying at the very friendly Mourne Lodge outdoor centre in Attical, Co. Down.

This gave access, from the door if you wanted, to the distinctive scenery of the Mourne mountains, with their strange and atmospheric granite tors. We enjoyed decent weather and good views. Our first visit was in August 2003, and we had one day on Slieve Binnian (2,449'). And then another climbing Slieve Commedagh (2,512',) and on to the highest hill in Northern Ireland Slieve Donard (2,796'), on a fine but ominous sounding route via Bloody Bridge and the Bog of Donard. Most of us finished with a tourist day and some short walks on the Giants Causeway (yes Dr Johnson it is worth going to see as is the whole of Northern Ireland!)

On the second trip in August 2005 our walks took us firstly over Slievenalough, Slieve Corragh (2,099'), to Slieve Donard again with a tough descent north. Our second day added Eagle Mountain (2,084') and Shanlieve (2,056').

Highlight though was Paul Smyth's proposal to Christine described by John Huxley in "The Gwydyr 22" magazine:

"Paul knows a thing or two about staging surprises...he produced a suitably impressive engagement ring, sank to his knees...the answer of course was 'Yes'... Lin described it as 'a good kleenex moment'."

Anna Roberts ran a very successful Club meet to Chamonix in the September of 2015. The group stayed in a luxury

chalet with hot tub and sauna, not too far from that original 1969 venue. Glenn Grant recalled:

“Most of us were delayed about 8-9 hours by EasyJet, stuck at John Lennon airport. But because Janet and Chris Harris were driving out, we were able to phone them up on the mobiles and put in our order – including lots of wine - from the French supermarkets direct!

The place had one of those smart island cooking units in the kitchen, and DLJ [David Lane-Joynt] was always banging his head on the cooker hood – quite hard in fact so in the end he put on his climbing helmet to cook his tea...”

DLJ, Melinda Kinsman and Anna got some climbing in at the local crags, and Anna, Geoff Brierley, DLJ, Charlotte McCoy, Kev McEvoy and Sue Taylor, took a trip to ascend Mont Buet (3,096m). They stayed overnight at the hut below the mountain.



The paragliding party with their “pilots”

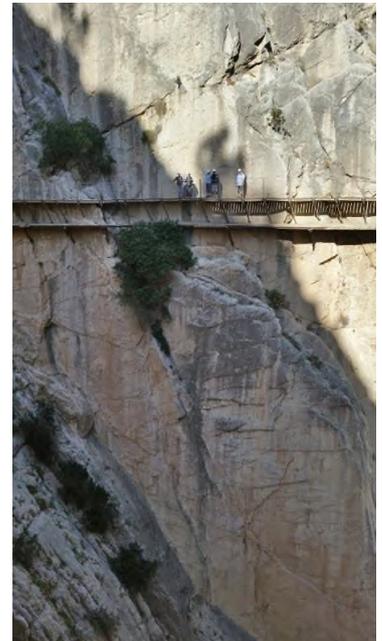
Otherwise, the group’s activity consisted of a number of walks in the Chamonix valley, including the classic Grand Balcon Nord, and Grand Balcon – wait for it – wait for it – Sud: the latter gives magnificent views of Mont Blanc and the surrounding peaks. Helen Grant added:

“We had great weather apart from one day of rain. Hew [Mc Dermott] had forgotten what rain looked like and what his overtrousers looked like as well. He sheltered in a barn with Chris and Janet and Angela [Price] and

had a bit of a struggle to get his legs into his overtrousers – apparently they were Angela’s instead! Anna, DLJ, Geoff, Hew and Kev and had a go at paragliding, and when we went up the Aiguille de Midi cable car the Wing suit guys on top were amazing, we must have spent a good three hours watching.”

Gourmet food eaten included Fondues in a traditional Savoyard restaurant and eggs benedict. The other people on the trip were Janet Coates, Mike Dagley and Vanda McEvoy.

Finally, October 2019 saw a holiday party of fifteen organised by Sue Taylor to Viznar near Granada in Andalusia. There was a mix of local colour and walking based on a very comfortable villa. Margaret Blakeborough particularly enjoyed the group’s traverse of the amazing catwalk of the Camenito del Rey above the El Chorro gorge south of Ronda, which before recent safety improvements was sometimes called “the world’s most dangerous pathway.”



The Camenito del Rey



Flamenco Fiona! (see below)

In terms of mountain walking, Roger Hughes tells me that:

“Seven or eight of us climbed the peak of Trevenque (2,079m) which is not a huge height in Sierra Nevada terms but is a very impressive stand alone peak, a bit like Tryfan but bigger and better (see photo below). There is a bit of a scramble to get to the top. Neil Connolly was great he did most of the navigation as he knows the area well.”

Distances to the mountains were big. Another party consisting of Sue, Roger and Dave Edwards went up to and walked around the Refugio Postero Alto at 1,900m, which is set in a vast area of craggy scrubland “with fabulous views

of the hills”.



Back from Trevenque

The pure local colour side of things featured a Flamenco night in which Fiona gallantly joined in, and a trip to the magnificent Alhambra in Granada. Kev got in touch with his inner Manuel and cooked his mother’s Paella for dinner. Margaret recalled in terms redolent of the heroic age of mountaineering...

“There was a swimming pool and it was *bloody* cold – we all went in I think mainly *because it was there*”

With those famous words, it’s time to put down one’s cocktail, slip off the black tie and head off to Tilbury Docks, to meet up with Tilman and Shipton to take ship for the Greater Ranges...

[Return to Contents page](#) or [Go to next Section](#)