

The South of France has been a regular venue for British climbers at Easter for many years now. I've been there myself a few times – the Calanques being a particular favourite of mine. However, this year Phil Canning and I determined to try Corsica: further south but with higher altitude than normal venues. We were not sure how this would work out. Would we need ice axes etc.? Would the rock be clean and dry? It might even be warm? The trip gelled when Steve Bennett and Graham Cooper agreed to join us. The plan was to fly to Nice on Thursday 28th March, the day before Good Friday, hire a car & journey by fast ferry to Corsica the next day. We would return on Sunday 7th April – giving us eight days climbing on the Island.

We flew to Nice as planned, collected our hire car and drove to St. Jeannet, where we booked into the Gîte d'Étape. This was a beautiful medieval stone house in the narrow labyrinth of streets that constituted the village. We were all impressed – Steve particularly so. The next morning we snatched some climbing on the local limestone crag - then made our way to the ferry.

It was obvious from first sight that the ferry boat was built for speed, and not built for comfort - to paraphrase Howlin' Wolf. The sea was slightly choppy. I could be in for a rough ride! We boarded the boat. Conversation with Steve centred on a boat trip to Lundy some years earlier. Steve reminded me that on that occasion I was the primary source of entertainment for the other Oreads aboard: folded double over the rail for most of the journey. This time it might be easier – the ship was much bigger, albeit designed for speed and not comfort.

We settled in the bar – a beer apiece. The ship turned slowly and cruised from the shelter of the port into open water, where it gathered speed – presumably to the 38 knots quoted in the brochure. After about an hour the constant pitching was beginning to have an effect on me. Steve and Phil watched me with wry smiles. Up and down, up and down, up and

down. The ship was not yawing much, but the pitching was only to be expected for this overgrown speedboat and the sea conditions. Eventually my stomach muscles began to tighten. I had to leave the bar and head for the open deck at the rear. As I walked towards the door the urgency grew, and the pitching cause me to stagger. If I fell at this point I would be an embarrassing spectacle! I reached the door and the open deck, which was cold, draughty and almost deserted; almost but not entirely deserted. I hurried to the rail on my left – but didn't quite make it. I lurched forward and thrust my head over the rail. As I did so, the contents of my stomach left me at high velocity. It was at this point that I realised just how fast the ship was moving. The air streamed across my face from left to right, like a Cairngorm gale.

The man to my right: he was not too pleased! I caught in the briefest instant, a glimpse of him. He seemed in one movement to be thrusting himself back from the rail, running backwards and looking at me with open-mouthed disbelief. The open mouth was probably a mistake! I felt acutely embarrassed and simultaneously sorry for him, but had to return immediately to the business in hand, and the demands of my straining stomach. After what seemed like about 10 minutes the worst of my ordeal was over and I could retreat from the rail and the buffeting wind and sea spray. The deck was clear, save for one other dispirited soul sitting on the deck – back to the wall. She seemed to have had a similar experience to my own. I adopted the same position, about 20 feet from her. I now felt very cold and uncomfortable. There was no sign of my acquaintance from the rail. I would have liked to apologise. He was probably cleaning himself up!

I spent the next hour or so sat in the cold fresh air. Graham joined me for a while, offering a cheerful remark or two. It grew dark. We eventually docked in Bastia, and headed for Corti, arriving at the campsite quite late.

The next morning the weather was bright, and the campsite bathed in yellow light and long shadows from the early morning sun. Steve and I were happy with an introduction to the area by

way of some sport climbing on a nearby low-level crag. Graham on the other hand is a young and driven man! He and Phil chose 'Candella di l'Oro', a D+ 5+ on a remote crag about eight miles up the Restonica valley. After the necessary shopping, we all set off quite late. Our day on Secteur Stella / Luna of the 'Premiere Ecole' was comfortable, and Steve and I walked back to the campsite, arriving about 6 p.m. After waiting in vain for an hour or so in the cool air, for the 'A' Team to return, we walked into town and the comfort of the bars. Phil and Graham joined us there, and after a couple of beers we ate out-doors; standing at the local pizza van, before a late return to the campsite.

Over night Steve and I acquired some of the ambition of the 'A Team' and set off for 'Candella di l'Oro'. However, this was not before driving to the top of the Restonica valley, where we dropped Phil and Graham who were bent on doing 'Symphonie d'Automne' a TD located above Lac du Capitellu. We parked the car at the end of a very rough track and set off into the woods in search of the 'Candella'. After about forty minutes of plodding up a 'land rover track' we reached a bridge. From here we set off left into the tightly packed trees, following occasional cairns, but no real path. After another hour we reached the base of the route. Steve won the toss and set off up the first pitch, a blunt arete with the crux moves on a short steep wall where precarious balance moves were protected by a well-positioned bolt. The next two pitches gave exposed but easier climbing up a narrow arete, reminiscent of that on the Rocher de Saint-Julien at Buis les Baronnies.

When I joined Steve at the top of the third pitch, his broad grin rose to a hearty laugh. "Your pitch looks exiting" he said. Beyond the breche immediately behind him, the rock rose vertically for perhaps two hundred feet. However the wall was not blank, but cut with by a thousand scoops, all as deep as they were high, and some big enough to stand in! The rock that delineated these cavities was often thin, sharp and curved like the skin of an orange. Loops of rope hung as natural threaders, tied through holes in these wafers of granite. There were no bolts to be seen.

I set off down into the breche and onto the wall. The climbing was very steep from the outset, with overhangs to negotiate immediately. However, it was not hard. The handholds were the shape and size of buckets or dustbins, so that even on moves that were well out of balance, there was no strain on the fingers – even for the fattest and weakest of men! I placed my first runner at about thirty feet, using an in-situ thread backed up with a sling of my own. The climbing continued in this vein for another hundred feet or so – leaning back, reaching up, pulling and bridging off spikes to left and to right. Each short exertion ended with a standing position, well in balance in a scoop or ‘coffin’. At about 120 feet I met a single bolt in the back of a cave, but this was not the belay. The ‘A Team’ had told us that the two bolt belay was some way above. I eventually reached the said bolts, immediately beneath a line of roofs. Any progress upwards would be through very steep climbing. It was 5.00 pm, and it would be dark by 7.30. We would need three to four long abseils to reach the base of the route from the summit. Steve joined me and we decided to go on. He quickly climbed through a weakness in the roof to my left, and immediately found easier ground that led to the top of the Candella. I joined him and we took a few minutes to enjoy the late evening perspective from the summit, before beginning the first steep abseil.

Care was required to avoid abrasion of the rope on the sharp fins of rock. Just before reaching the end of the rope I negotiated the roof above my last belay. Hanging free below the roof, I could see the bolts a couple of feet out of reach at the back of the cave. I began swinging and made the clip. Steve joined me and we continued our descent, first to the breche and then down the easier angled ridge beyond. At the end of this abseil, the rope jammed, after we recovered only about thirty feet of it. We tried subtly; sending sine waves up the rope, wagging it from side to side, pulling alternately on each end but to no avail. We considered prusiking back up, but it would be dark by the time we had achieved this, and besides, there would be no guarantee that it would not jam again. We knew there were no deep cracks to jam the knot or the line of the rope. It must just be accumulation of grip at the many points of contact on the rough ridge. We tried once more – with the full force of our combined weight on the rope. It started to move, and after about twenty feet began to ease. When we reached the rucksacks it was dark. We had one torch between us, and the descent to the ‘land rover track’ was tortuous and complex through tightly packed pine trees. Progress was slow, and at each point of uncertainty a debate resulted in further descent and another cairn. Eventually we saw lights on the ‘land rover track’, by now about a hundred feet below. Graham and Phil had come up to find us! We trudged back to the car and drove to Corti for another Pizza, this time eaten in the comfort of our hire car.

The next day Steve and I did 'Arete de Corte' a grade 5 D inf. route that is easily visible and easily accessible from the lower Restonica valley. This has a couple of short steep pitches, but is generally 'happy' and at an easy angle. Nonetheless the summit was exposed and (according to the guidebook) a 'jolly' abseil of 100 m was required to reach the ground. Graham and Phil climbed another TD route in the upper Restonica and returned late to the campsite. For dinner we enjoyed our third pizza, bought from the van in the street just before it closed for the night – again!

The following morning – Tuesday – we drank coffees on the sunny side of the street in Corti. An easy drive and café stop on an east coast beach brought us to Bavella. The approach to the col up a narrow winding road revealed a vast array of peaks, pinnacles, ridges and open faces, interspersed with a myriad of smaller crags. The number of routes around here could be huge, and the scope for new routes must be enormous. Graham thumbed through the guidebooks and identified features on the mountains, from his vantage point in the back seat of the car. This was a luxury the driver could not afford. Departure from the road in this area would allow ample time to apply for, and probably receive by post, a pilot's licence before 'coming in to land'! We stopped about a mile short of the col, to take in the detail and the enormity of the mountain scene. Unfortunately the weather was deteriorating rapidly. We checked into the Gîte d'Étape at the col.

Heavy rain and strong winds at the col persuaded us to move to lower ground for the day. We set off for Roccapina on the west coast. Here a group of low-level crags are perched on a peninsular above two bays. Semi-circular beaches were apparent from the tower that caps the end of the ridge. The arrangement of the crags reminded me of Brimham. It was dry, but there was a fair wind. When I reached the rocks Graham had already set off up 'Libecciu' – a grade 5 route. Phil followed, and then myself. Steve chose a spectator's role. When I joined the others on the top of the huge boulder that constituted the crag, I discovered that, unlike those at Brimham, this boulder was hollow! Graham and Phil were effectively sat on the 'eggshell' of granite, and the last few holds of the route were the perforations in the shell.

The wind was becoming stronger, so we curtailed our climbing and wound our way through the maquis and boulders to the crest of the ridge, where we examined the tower and the views below, before returning to our hire car, to Steve and eventually Bavella.

Thursday offered no improvement in the weather, so we packed the car with all our belongings in very heavy rain, and set off to Ajaccio, which is the island capital, and on the coast. Our objective was Gozzi, a major crag offering a multitude of routes over 200 m in length, and easily visible from the capital. We arrived in the early afternoon and after some difficulties in identifying the approach path and finding a place to park, we set off for the crag. The 'A Team' chose 'Voie du CAF' a 220 m grade 5+ on the main buttress. The 'B Team' mindful of the hour decided just to explore a route for the following day. We climbed the first two (slab) pitches of 'Les Hurluberlus' a grade 4 on Saga Corsica, a slightly lower buttress than the main one. Conditions were very wet under foot. The objective of the climbing was to keep our feet mud-free for the clean holds between the sods. Having 'sussed' the route, we abseiled off, descended and reached the car with some daylight to spare. The 'A Team' was engaged in more formidable climbing and took longer. Their torches became visible at the base of the route just as the last natural light faded. All was well!

The next day the weather improved a lot and we climbed our route. Several slab pitches led to a ramp and then a short arete. At this point Graham came into view on a short but steep route on a buttress above us. He was negotiating his way from a cave through an overhang to the arete above, and achieved this through wide bridging and long reaches – moves he is well equipped for. Our own route headed up a shallow groove to the Grande Vire – a major break at the base of Graham's route. From here the descent gully, of almost alpine proportions, provided a secure retreat to our 'sacs.

Saturday was our last full day and the traditional finale meal had been booked – at least in our minds. We chose ‘A Capra’ a small crag just behind Ajaccio, and spent the day on one/two-pitch slab routes. In the late afternoon we retired in clear sunlight – a fitting end to a week of magnificent climbing.

Our ferry left Ajaccio harbour at 8.15 the following morning. The crossing was uneventful and provided good views of the mountains as the ship sailed northwards up the west coast of the island. In Nice we transferred to our flight, and were back at East Midlands airport by 6.00 pm!

All in all this was a magical trip – with superlative rock routes, beautiful Corsican mountain and coastal scenery, and sunshine for the most part. I can't wait to go back!