

FINDING COMMUNITY AT THE CHOSSPILES OF EUROPE

PART ONE – KALYMNOS AND FRANCE

I'm writing this sitting by the ocean at Pembroke, the best sea cliff in Britain. I call it 'Spooky Town', referring to the greasy, damp rock encountered on the first 5m of most routes, making it as slippery as the proverbial butchers donger. 'The best sea cliff in Britain, possibly the world,' extols the guidebook. The climbing is superb, the atmosphere in the zawns is exhilarating, the rock is spooky and the guidebook author has obviously not been to Freycinet, Mt Brown, Cape Raoul or Killiecrankie in Tasmania.

I've been on the road in Europe for ten weeks now with three months still to go. It's my long service leave as a school teacher, and this trip has been ten years in the planning, the ultimate climbing road trip. After a ton of research, I decided on Kalymnos in Greece, sport climbing in France, the classic trad routes of the UK, and then some alpine climbing in Chamonix, Switzerland and the Dolomites.

Reflecting on the last ten weeks, I've discovered four things: 1. There is some brilliant world class climbing here. 2. There is a lot of choss, hype and very ordinary climbing here. 3. My home state of Tasmania has a lot of world class climbing that we take for granted and 4. There are many wonderful people who climb, who have revived my faith in climbing community.

KALYM-CHOSS



Kalymnos, a Greek island paradise with several thousand friendly bolted routes by the sea, the perfect place for me to wind down after another busy school term. I also deliberately chose Kalymnos because I was feeling a bit burnt out from climbing a scary grade 24 trad first ascent on Ben Lomond. The potential 20m fall from the crux onto a wire was the stuff of nightmares, so some cruisy bolt clipping was in order. Plus I've done nothing but drink beer and eat crap since then, so I'm a 97kg fat git at the moment.

It is a great place for a holiday with cheap studio accommodation for 25 euro a night, fun and accessible climbing till beer o'clock when it gets too hot, then multiple restaurant options at night with delicious local food and reasonably priced.



Rocking up to a crag with no climbing partner on the first day, I experienced my first sense of community. Three old codgers were doddling up the hill, British climbers in their 60's and 70's, the coffin dodgers climbing club. They invited me to climb and I thought I was going to bumble up easy climbs all day, but they were absolute crushers. 6c+ onsight (grade 23) was not a problem, especially for legendary female climber Geraldine Taylor, the first woman in Britain to lead E5 (grade 25). Chris Boulton, 72 years of age, was floating up 6c (grade 22) and the same for John Myers, who became my partner for the next ten days. We climbed and ate out in restaurants every day and was introduced to other British climbers who became very helpful to me in the weeks ahead with hospitality. Chris was to host me for a week later on in Sheffield when I climbed in the Peak District, and Pete Brown put me up for a few nights and showed me round the crags in North Yorkshire.



If you are expecting awesome climbing under grade 20 at Kalymnos, then you will be disappointed. You would find more quality at Hillwood in Tasmania at that grade. In fact, you could save thousands in airfares by just going to Hillwood, pretend the Tamar River is the Mediterranean Sea, buy a souvlaki from the Sidmouth take away and you'd swear you were in Kalymnos. Most stuff below 6b is a sharp limestone slab, and grid bolted within 2m of the next sharp slab, which will most likely have plants growing all over it. Maybe that's why the goats can climb so well here; they are after the plants on the crag. One climb I did involved climbing 10m of grade 12 up to a ledge, then branching off to a steep grade 21. There was goat poop all over the ledge, showing that Kalymnos goats can climb harder than some climbers I know.

Chris, Geraldine and John, the coffin dodgers climbing club



One crag called Arginonta was hyped as having some of the best routes up to 6b on the island. Aesthetically, the cliff looked ugly and loose with lots of vegetation. If I'd discovered this crag in Tassie, I would not have invested a single bolt in it, and yet there were 50 climbers on it that day. One British lad was raving about the 3 star routes, but my guess is that he doesn't know any better because he is used to mediocre sport routes in England. To him, Kalymnos is an outdoor gym, a consumer friendly paradise, but to me it was Kalym-choss, mass bolting to cater for climbing tourism. One day as I was complaining about Kalym-choss, John Myers quipped, 'Well why don't you just fuck off back to Tasmania then?' Good point John. But above 6b (grade 20) then it starts to get very classy. The rock gets steeper, the pockets and tufas come into play and despite some polished routes, its world-wide reputation as a sport climbing mecca is justly deserved.



There's hope for me yet!



Me on Wadi-Rum (21), great route



Arginonta, Kalym-choss at its worst.



Action in the Grande Grotta



The Grande Grotta, the showpiece of Kalymnos..not choss!

NASTY POCKETSES AND THE HANGING GARDENS OF VERDON

My next community experience came from spending three weeks climbing with Will Skea, a terrific young climber from Australia who was also on a European trip. He contacted me via the UK Climbing website, I picked him up in Nice, and we climbed at some of the best sport crags in Southern France. Will was recovering from a 200m fall in an avalanche in the Canadian Rockies, so he was after some relaxing sunny bolt clipping as well. Before the trip I was worried about the potential danger of climbing with random partners from the internet or from campgrounds, but Will proved to be very competent, safe and good company.



Chateauvert, polish, pockets and people



Will Skea at Chateauvert, excellent roadside crag

A good idea if you are planning a long road trip in Europe is to lease a car from Citroen. I was going to buy a car in the UK but there is a lot of set up costs with insurance and rego, plus one can't be sure if it will break down. I've got a brand new vehicle registered in my name, fully insured and with roadside assistance, which is big enough to sleep in, for about \$30 Aussie dollars a day, and I just hand the keys back at the end. It's done through a broker in Sydney and you have to pay up front before the trip, but its worth it for hassle free travel.

The first minor epic came from the French custom where most shops close on Sundays, and the following day was a public holiday. So after finding an open bakery, I bought enough chocolate croissants to live on for the next two days. Chateauvert was the first crag, literally a roadside cliff in a stunning gorge. Like most French sport crags it had three things in common; pockets, polish and people. In the words of Gollum from Lord of the Rings, 'What has it got in its pocketeses precious?' The answer is polished rock with boot rubber all over it, and usually most routes were occupied with dozens of climbers. The climbing was great fun, steep yarding between pockets with an ever increasing pump.

I found the climbs in France very stiff for the grade, but then Kalymnos is known for its holiday grades. There is no point consulting the international grade table except for getting a rough idea of difficulty. 6b can mean grade 19 in some parts of Europe and also feel like grade 22, especially in France. Maybe the old school French grades should be the benchmark, and we've gone soft over the years.

Next stop was Verdon Gorge, a mecca I'd been dreaming of for thirty years. The views of the Gorge did not disappoint, gobsmacking in its scale and beauty. What did let me down was the weather which only allowed two days climbing in the week, the miserable muddy municipal campsite in La Palud with its squat toilets, and the hanging gardens of Verdon. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon evoked a romantic picture of lush greenery and colorful flowers cascading from the sky. Many of the climbs at Verdon resembled the same. We decided to ease into the Gorge with Arete Belvedere, a fully bolted 9 pitch grade 18, given 3 stars. After an epic abseil descent from old tat around bushes in a wet gully, we climbed a pleasant enough route of wide cracks, gullies and runnels with its own botanical garden. People reckon I've bolted some shit, but even I wouldn't have bothered with this one.



The magnificent Verdon Gorge



Tat in the gully going down to Arete Belvedere



The entrance to the Verdon Gorge



Belay on Voie ULA

We went down to do the classic La Demande, but there were two groups ahead of us, so we opted for a similar, but harder route, the Voie ULA. This time it was Welcome To The Jungle, for the first 3 pitches at least. After some scrappy offwidths, loose rock, gravel and scrub bashing, we arrived at the business, 6 more pitches of superb unrelenting, steep grade 20 crack climbing. We topped out after 9 hours, but on the way up I was marveling at the bolted faces to the side of the crack, the routes which Verdon is world famous for. Unfortunately we were denied these great routes by the weather, and the Verdon is definitely one place I'll go back to. Another example of community...some young French climbers in the campsite drove us to the start of the track, enabling us to leave our car at the top of the cliff, saving a two hour hike at the end of the day.



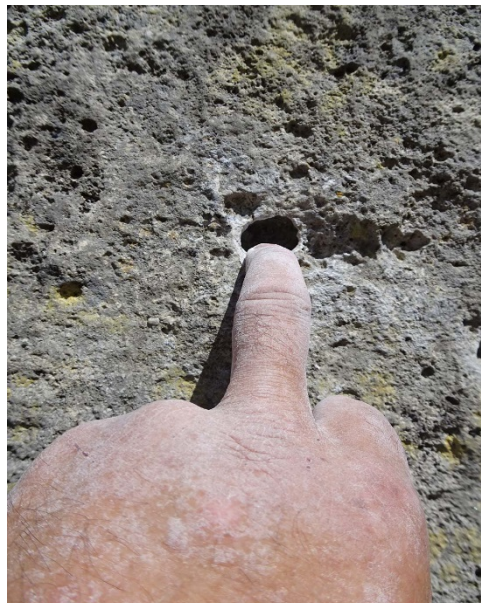
GORGE DU TARN AND BUOUX



After a 400km drive it was Gorge du Tarn, by far the best sport crag we visited. Stunning crags lined both sides of the Gorge for kilometres, but the main area is roadside. My guess is that most of the rock on the other side of the river was undeveloped. The amount of exposed rock in France is staggering. As a climber who has spent most of my climbing career developing new routes, I found the sheer number of crags overwhelming, even to the point of feeling meaningless about the whole exercise of new routing, maybe because in Tasmania, the number of accessible new crags is a rapidly dwindling resource. I've heard that French and Spanish climbers won't walk more than an hour to a crag, so there is several lifetimes of new climbs still waiting to be done.



Gorge du Tarn was pocket pulling on immaculate, unpolished steep rock. They even bolt the cracks here, absolutely taboo in Australia, but great fun. When I get home, I might start bolting all the cracks on Ben Lomond to keep the consumer friendly softies happy. The nearby Gorge de la Jonte had one of the best grade 19's I've ever done in my life, the magnificent Arete de Quest, 3 pitches of steep pocket pulling up a huge arête.



The crag I enjoyed climbing on the most was Buoux, one of the original and oldest sport crags in France. It felt old school with lots of variety in corners, cracks, slabs, faces, roofs and pockets, and generally in good nick as far as polish goes. The campsite at Bonnieux is recommended as a quiet spot in a lovely medieval village.

Photo far left: *Arete de Quest (19) at Gorge de la Jonte, best route of the trip so far*

Photo Left: Nasty pocketsets at Buoux

SLIPPERY CEUSE

Reputed to be the best sport crag in the world, it's easy to see why as it is visually one of the most spectacular cliffs I've ever seen, an immaculate shield of limestone stretching for several kilometres, and situated on top of a high mountain. This necessitates a grueling one hour walk each morning, and with the summer heat, most climbers don't arrive till after lunch. One of the most keenly anticipated crags of the trip turned out to be disappointing for me, probably because I'm a fat old git and I'm not good enough to climb here. There are very few routes below 6c that are of good quality, and even the 6b's felt like solid 22, and the 6c's felt like 24. The routes were polished to buggery, sandbagged and sparsely bolted. I only lasted two days, but for the climber operating above grade 23, there are hundreds of world class climbs here. Should have stayed in Kalym-choss. I went sightseeing to the spectacular alpine climbing area of the Ecrins instead.



Me at the base of Ceuse, too hard for a fat old git



The beautiful Ecrin mountains.

ORPIERRE

Orpierre was far more amenable to the fat bumbly set, and I enjoyed it very much. It was more akin to Australian face climbing, with long reaches between flat holds and not many pockets. It is one village that is trying to emulate Kalymnos, in trying to bolt as many crags near the town as possible to create climbing tourism. As a consequence, there is the inevitable polish and they have bolted many crappy looking faces and multi-pitches which link the best climbable rock on vegetated cliffs. Hillwood is a better crag.



Beers in the village of Orpierre



Crags above Orpierre, one of the most popular cliffs in France

FONTAINEBLEAU

Surprisingly, the most enjoyable climbing I experienced in the last 5 weeks was in Fontainebleau, the bouldering mecca of the world. I am not a boulderer, apart from some training in the Cataract Gorge, but to visit a world class bouldering venue was a revelation. Perfect rock, incredible geology with thousands of sandstone boulders in a beautiful forest and nice sandy landings. They have created circuits whereby climbs of similar difficulty are colour co-ordinated and numbered in sequence around a boulder field. I did a 50 problem blue circuit which took 9 hours, nearly 200m of climbing and pulling move after move of grade 18-22, a fantastic endurance workout and very addictive.

Climbing community helped me again through Andrew Mellor, a Pommie who I met sheltering under a rock in the rain. He moved here six years ago and started a hostel for climbers. Within minutes he was offering to loan me a bouldering mat, guidebook, and to climb with him for the next three days. He was very helpful, as Fontainebleau is a very confusing place to negotiate when you arrive. Look up Roo at his hostel in Tousson called 'The House.' Now its off to the UK, to the land of old school trad climbing and specialists in choss. Stay tune for part two.



