

RENDEZVOUS IN THE FRENCH PYRENEES - SEIX TO MT VALIER

A set of somewhat surreal circumstances led my family to decide that 2006 was the year for a family reunion in the French Pyrenees. Weeks of organising resulted in a plan to meet at Refuge les Estragnous - a high mountain refuge (at 2245m and 600m below the summit of Mt Valier) in the midi-Pyrenees. My family (coming from Sydney, Germany and the UK) would walk in to the Refuge from the nearest road end; a climb of about 1200m over 5km. Julien and I would run in from the small village of Seix (28km away and almost 2000m closer to sea level) to meet them. C'est la vie!

JULIEN and I would travel light as we were staying in accommodation where food and woollen blankets were provided. Carrying small backpacks (about 8 - 10kg), we would follow sections of the GR10 (a famous walking trail which crosses the Pyrenees from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea), leaving it behind after about 13km to head south toward the Spanish border. Cutting through high mountain passes speckled with shepherding cabanes, we would drop down from the Col de Pecouch 10km later and 1km above the Refuge. It didn't faze us too much that the last 2 - 3km of our planned route would not be following any marked trail. The man at the tourist office in Aulus-les-Bains assured us that if the weather was clear, we should be able to strike out across the north rock face of Mt Valier without too much trouble and pick out the Cap de Pecouch as a good target point. This would bring us in directly above the Refuge. If the weather was bad, we faced an extra decent from 2110m to 927m and back up again to 2245m.

The morning was bright and clear as we set out from Seix (500m) at about 9:40am. Not so easy navigating your way out of small French villages but we were soon jogging along a rolling path beside le Salat. The warm-up over we started to climb, winding our way around the Bois du Cos and climbing up toward the small village of Aunac (766m). We were now on the GR10 proper following small red and white markings which took some of the challenge out of the navigation but allowed us to settle into a steady pace.

From Aunac we dropped down through beautiful old growth forest to cross d'Esbints (600m), a small tributary to le Salat. Once on the other side we were climbing again, walking some of the steeper sections as we continued on past the Gite detape Esbints at 850m. As we'd been climbing, the day had warmed considerably and sections of the climb were in full sun. We stopped by a small



stream just above the Gite to replenish our water supplies. Refuelled, we powered on for the Col, another 4km away and 500m above us.

As we passed through a field of bracken I wondered what was so exciting and inspirational about doing this in France. There are millions of bracken infested valleys in Australia which I could go and scramble up. Why were we so exhilarated about being here? Was it the wheel of fresh camembert and the two baguettes sticking out of Julien's pack which we would shortly tear apart for lunch? Was it the fact that we could feign complete incomprehension if some knickerbocker-wearing hippy started ranting at us - in French? As we rounded the next corner and crossed a small stream I looked up to



Looking back at the trail already run

see the healthiest blackberry bush I have ever seen, covered in ripe, juicy berries. What a feast? It dawned on me that yes, we have bracken and blackberries in Australia but here, there was something different. There is a feeling that you are exploring the very cradle of life - the blackberry bushes belong here. As we pushed on to the head of the valley our lips and fingers stained purple from the berries, I couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

From the Col de la Core (1395m and 14km into our run) we left the main GR10 and skirted south and west keeping the impressive wall of Tuc d'Eychelle (2315m) to our left. Traversing through cool forest for the first couple of kilometres, we then started climbing up onto the higher plateau and into the sun. Coming out of the trees we were forced to walk again through a steep rocky section and came across a patch of wild raspberries. I was on my hands and knees again filling my mouth and pockets - progress was going to be slow if I kept being distracted by fruit!

From our raspberry stop we headed south, leaving the well formed trails and following a minor one which climbed past Etang d'Eychelle (1894m) where we rested for lunch, refilled our camelbacks again and had a short swim to freshen up. Our vague path continued on through the Col de la Crouzette (2237m) dropping down

// A mountain-runner needs mountains - the wild berries, camembert and cheap wine are just the fringe benefits. //



The last 500m descending from Col de Pecouch

the other side to the Cabane des Espugues at 2110m - the end of our marked trail and our final decision point.

From the Cabane, we could see Mt Valier and the North West face which we were hoping to climb across. From the cabane, we would drop through a valley between us and the face (down to about 1950m) before scrambling up what looked very like an exposed rock face. The angle of the face didn't look too daunting (only about 25 degrees) and we were fairly confident that we could pick out our

cabane. At the bottom we crossed below a small lake and scrambled up a scrubby rise on the other side which brought us onto the face itself. What should we find but a cairn (a small pile of rocks used by walkers to mark a trail route) and a dash of yellow paint on a bare rock! We obviously weren't the first to join these dots.

The cairns and occasional yellow paint mark made picking our way up the face relatively easy but I can well imagine this traverse being quite different

target feature (the Cap de Pecouch) just north of Mt Valier's summit. So far, we'd covered about 23km. The sky was clear, it was only 3pm and the Forerunner boldly stated that our end point was a mere 2.7km due South. Our bad weather detour (another 9km dropping 1100m and then climbing another 1245m) could be avoided.

On a bearing now we dropped into the valley directly below the



Refuge les Estragnous

in bad weather or poor visibility. We were working our way toward a feature which would easily be hidden in cloud or mist. In such circumstances, the Forerunner's slow countdown and sense of direction would have been a life send! When we finally scrambled through the Col de Pecouch and looked down into the valley on the other side, there was the Refuge, nestled in against the rocks as though trying to escape from the wind itself.

As we jogged those last 500m, I looked up at the summit of Mt Valier on our left. We don't have blackberries that tasty, or wild raspberries growing beside the trails, but neither do we have mountains like these in Australia. We are drawn to the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Rockies, the Himalayas, the Andes and closer to home, the snow-clad peaks of New Zealand's south island. A mountain-runner needs mountains - the wild berries, camembert and cheap wine are just the fringe benefits.



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