

# Injuries, Ceuse and the Fight Back to 8a

How an inspiring venue, sun rock and determination saw **Natalie Berry** become one of the few Scottish Women to climb 8a

PHOTOS: LWImages & Robbie Phillips

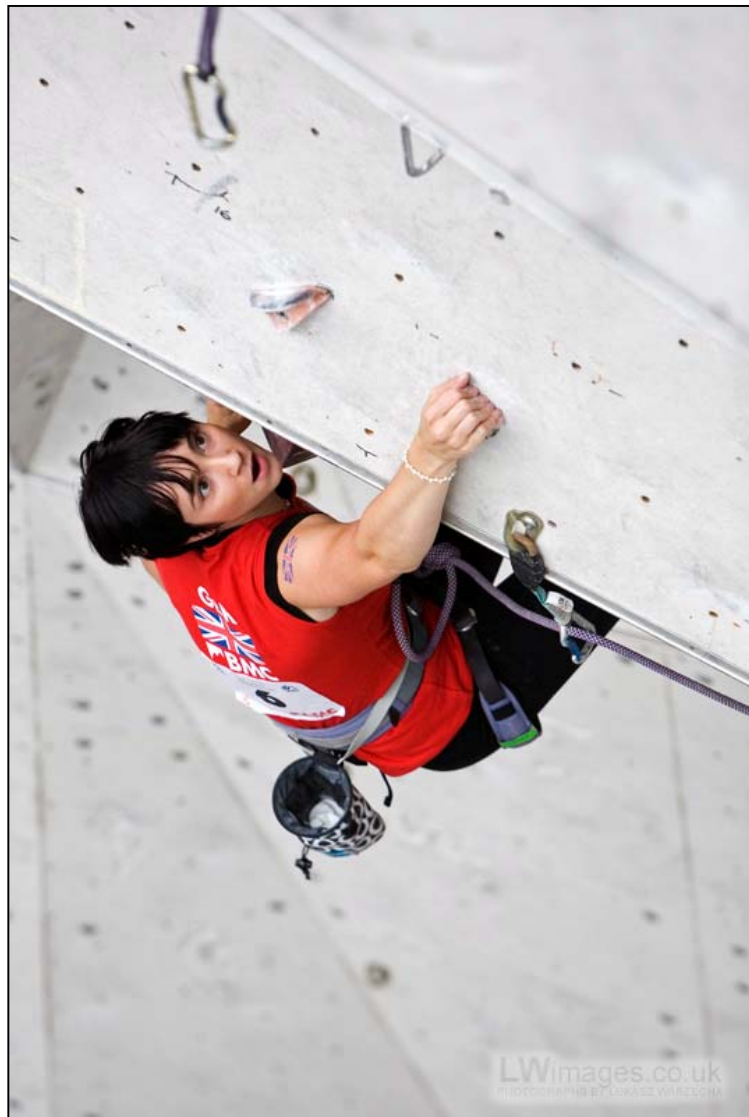
After returning from my first trip to Ceuse last year, almost immediately I made the decision to go back for more in 2011! Last year I only had 12 days to experience the world-class limestone that the cliff has to offer – but it was enough to whet my appetite for climbing hard sport routes in Europe!

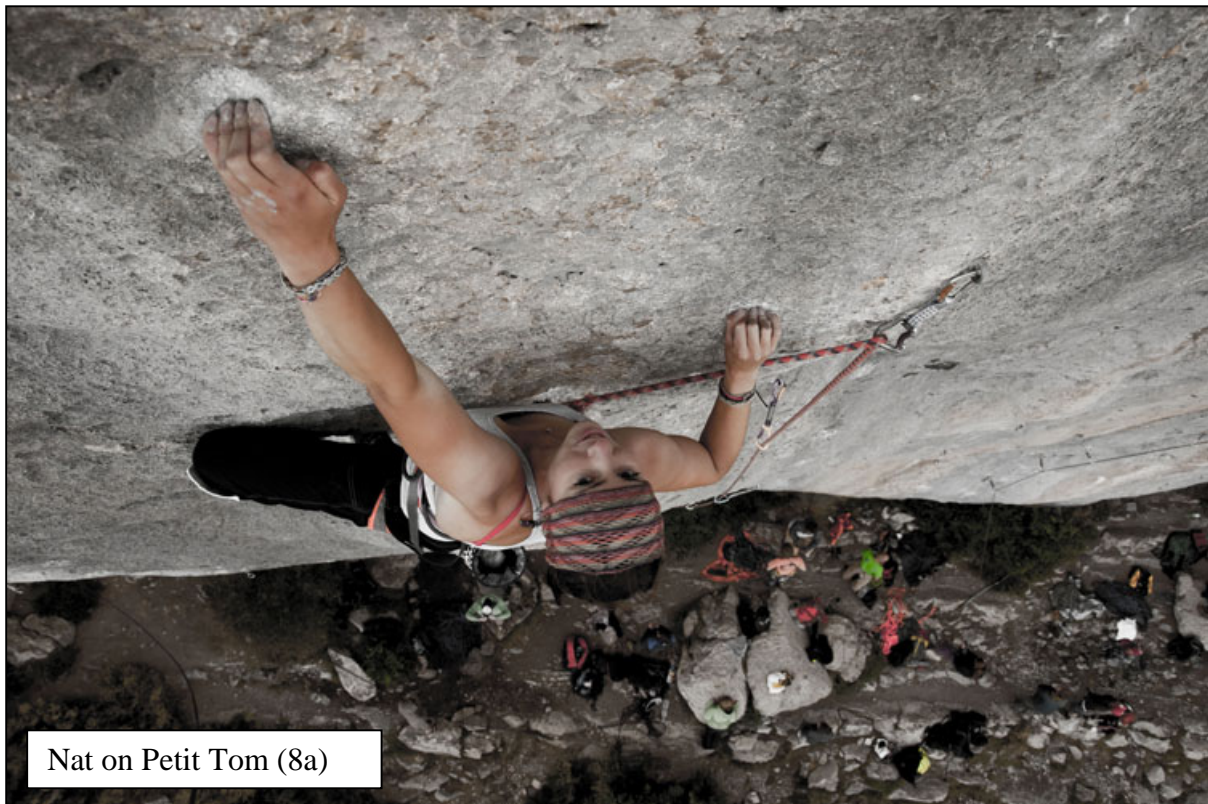
Unfortunately, a suntan and improved endurance were not the only things I came home with after climbing in Ceuse last year – I incurred a minor pulley tear in my left ring-finger which forced me to change my plans and training whilst I recovered. I continued to climb with caution and bouldered in order to build my power up to compete in the BBC's.

I could feel the injury getting better, yet in February I felt some pain in the ring-finger on my right hand – the same injury had appeared, this time on my other hand. This was a huge blow to my confidence as I knew I had improved a lot and was reluctant to take it easy – I wanted to go to Spain and Ceuse and climb hard routes, this was the last thing I needed!

In the end I had to ease off the gas and listen to my body (and Robbie!). I focused on slopey holds and big dynamic moves between jugs, avoiding crimps and pinches or any move/hold which could hurt.

I had a great trip in Spain - it was a real learning curve as I had to step back a fair bit and do lots of mileage to build confidence and movement skills on the rock. I ended up ticking my first 8a by working my way through the grades and picking an appropriate route. I learned ways of climbing without over-straining my fingers on rock and overcame a massive hurdle in doing the 8a. I hoped I could learn from this experience and give it my best in Ceuse.....





Nat on Petit Tom (8a)

The first few days in Ceuse were all about mileage (and getting used to the walk-in!) - my fingers were slightly tweaky in the beginning but seemed to improve after two or three days of climbing. I have no idea how or why my fingers healed so suddenly, but I reckon a combination of hot weather, Tiger Balm and the magical rock of Ceuse had something to do with it!

It is slightly creepy that my first injury appeared the day after I got home from Ceuse last year, and upon my return both disappear! Despite the lack of pain, I was sceptical and still wary of pushing myself too hard too soon. I also felt relatively unfit on the rock, which was frustrating! Eight months of no route-climbing meant I was getting pumped quick, something I hadn't experienced since returning to climbing after my operation last February (and that was only 10 weeks off!) As a result I lacked confidence – I was strong enough to do moves but felt pumped and unnerved by big run-outs on vertical/slabby ground (for which Ceuse is notorious!).

I found it hard to get psyched when all I was worrying about was falling and hurting myself – it really detracted from the climbing and irritated me. Being on a rope again high up felt really unnatural after bouldering for so long and I seemed to have acquired some kind of injury paranoia after dealing with two of them for a year. It took about 2 weeks to be fully comfortable with falling. I overcame it by warming up on tricky 7a/+ slabs and realising that the determination I had to do the route was more than the chance I had of hurting myself by falling.

Meanwhile, Robbie was having an excellent trip in the first few weeks – crushing nearly everything he put his mind to! His focus and determination when projecting amazed me, and I was really inspired by watching him climb. Ticking *Violent Illusion (8b)* 3<sup>rd</sup> go more or less on the first day of arriving in France and the 70m long *Black Bean (8b+)*, also 3<sup>rd</sup> go, and the longest belay of my life! not long after, this showed how on form he was after training so specifically and really focusing on weaknesses.

What I admired most about Robbie's approach to redpointing routes was his confidence; I reckon his method of gradually building up to the next grade through consolidating the last has been a major source of this confidence – something I really needed to work on. Another highpoint of his trip was ticking *L'ami de Tout le Monde (8b)* – a classic of the crag which I know has been on his tick list for a long time.

Unfortunately, with just about a week and a bit to go, Robbie cut his finger badly whilst attempting *Radote Jolie Pepere (8b)*, which put him out of action for the remainder of the trip, a pity since he was making excellent progress on what may have been his first 8c: *Dures Limites*. He's determined to do it (amongst others) next year. He resorted instead to climbing up ropes that is – Lights, Camera, Action! He filmed me and some of our friends climbing on our projects and has made some fantastic videos of the trip – cheers!

After the first two weeks, I ticked *Petit Tom (8a)*, it had been a case of getting redpoint stress and having a lack of confidence which made it take a lot longer to do than it should have. I was also still building up my endurance and quite often I would just pump out and fall off.

The major turning point of the trip was the day that I almost did *Carte Blanche 8a* second go. I don't really know what came over me, or at what point I changed my outlook on redpointing, I just remember feeling really angry with myself for not going for moves previously on routes. I wanted to show what I was capable of if I put my mind to it.

There was a good gathering of people at Demi-Lune, and I remember being a bit



put-off by the noise and activity at the crag. I think this encouraged me more than anything to get psyched and really go for it – it was just like in competitions where there is noise and lots of distractions, but you have to zone-in to the climb and use the atmosphere to your advantage - feel the adrenaline! This was what I'd been doing for years and it had never fazed me – for some reason I'd had difficulty transferring it onto the rock. I think I had always doubted myself when it came to outdoors, believing that I was just a competition climber and would never be able to do hard routes on rock.



Nat on Carte Blanche (8a)

I got on the route and made it to the rest before the crux. This was it, a massive move that required full commitment. I looked at the pocket and went for it – power-screaming and latching it. The next moves also required a lot of gutsiness. I did the same and roared as I caught the next holds. I was being aggressive and it was working!

I made it near the top before falling after getting my hand sequence wrong. I was annoyed at falling but satisfied with the way I had climbed. Everyone down below was quite taken-aback by my performance, as was I! I had always been a very cautious and considerate climber in competitions and in general, but this new style of climbing seemed to work well for

me outdoors. The power-screaming seemed to remind me how much I wanted the route, and prevented any insecurity or reluctance from taking hold of me. Now more confident in my abilities, “Carte Blanche” and the next two 8a’s came quick and fast – I did the same on *Bourinator (8a)* and *Colonettes (8a)* and climbed with sheer aggression and determination. *Colonettes* was probably the hardest route for me, more so because I had had a nightmare on it on my first attempt! After failing on the boulder problem at the start, which has a very big move to a poor side-pull, I was slightly demotivated for trying the rest of the route - graded at 7c+ if you can’t free the start..

I hadn't climbed much on tufas before and found them quite intimidating, I didn't like the massive run-outs and found knee-barring a very alien concept, and after getting completely boxed on the tufas the top section was still quite tricky on sharp holds! This first attempt involved lots of "I can't"s, but after doing *Carte Blanche* I was determined to get it done.

I struggled to do the first section, but eventually summoned up the power to get through it and completed the route! In the space of one week I had ticked 3 8a's in a row, a feat I never thought I could achieve when at the start I was struggling to get to grips with 7a's and run-outs!

It was time to work on something slightly harder – I had an attempt at *Dolce Vita* (8a+) and *Radote Jolie Pepere* (8b). Both routes felt tickable, but with the time I had left I wanted to focus on *Dolce Vita*.

On my second attempt I reworked the crux, and by the third I came off halfway through the crux! It was getting late and my skin was sore, I was tired but wanted to do this route on my next go. I had a long rest, and then went for a small run before my fourth and final attempt. I certainly did not feel as comfortable as before, but my determination won through – my sequence worked and I roared through the crux. Once again, mind had won over matter!

Watching the footage of me climbing this route taken by Robbie really inspired me, I had never seen myself climb like that before, and looking on as a spectator gave me a different perspective on my climbing. I had surprised myself and my foot was now in the door for climbing a harder grade! Robbie regularly uses video analysis as part of his coaching courses and I really feel that it can make a huge difference to how you view your own climbing, I highly recommend using it as an assessment of your technique if you get the chance.

Our last week was frustrating in that Robbie's finger was split open on his project and I fell ill with suspected food poisoning – resulting in little to no climbing in the last week.

In all I realised what I am capable of if I put my mind to it – as someone once said to me, I reckon I climb about 3 grades harder in competition than I do in training - purely because of my determination to succeed and the way my mind has adapted to competitive environments.

I have had to learn to be competitive with myself and the routes I try outdoors, and to believe in my abilities. I was also forced to learn how to deal with injury - coping with an injury is frustrating and has an effect on the mind which can be almost as distressing as (if not more) than the physical pain. I had never really had a serious injury through climbing in 10 years before this (apart from two hernias, not necessarily due to climbing!) and always tried my best to avoid getting injured, so when the first one arrived I found it difficult to accept.

The last two years have been the most frustrating of my climbing career with the hernias and pulley tears, but equally the most educational and rewarding. I now feel fitter and stronger than before I went out, and can't wait to get back on a trip with friends and meet more new people. I would like to thank everyone on the trip who gave support in some way – whether it was a quiet "Allez Nat!" or a full-on "PUSH IT OUT!" We had a great team spirit at the crag!

Thanks in particular to Robbie for his patience and support when I was finding my feet on the rock, and for looking after me over the last few days when I was vomiting and generally not being very pleasant to be around!

We also met loads of new and interesting people from all around the world, as well as learning about ourselves as climbers and what we need to work on for next year. In fact, Robbie and me were so psyched about our goals for next year that we listed them in a document at Lyon airport and made a training programme in order to achieve them!

Now that my fingers seem to have healed up, I am psyched to get into training for next year and all the trips I have coming up – Yorkshire, Kalymnos and Spain! My aims for the next year are to consolidate 8a/+ and climb some 8b's, bring it on!