

Lost in France

Céüse for the uninitiated



Last summer, a group of the most talented young Scottish climbers headed off to France to get some experience of long, hard, steep, limestone sport routes. This was a mini adventure, meeting up with MCofS volunteer Neil McGeachy (Area Youth Coordinator) and fellow Ratho instructor Neil Busby. The two 'Neil's' were accompanied by Ross Kirkland (and his parents Heather and Dave), Jonathan Stocking, Jonathan Field and Paul Williamson (and his parents Tommy and Betty) as part of a 'development' initiative to mentor climbing friends.

Here's what they got up to:



(Thanks to Neil McGeachy for arranging this article and the children for writing up their experiences)

Jonny Field:

When I got my first glimpse of the Massif de Céüse I was just in awe at the sheer size of the crag. It looked truly amazing. I couldn't believe I was going to be climbing there the next day. It was my first real outdoor climbing trip, and what a place to go.

I flew out to Marseille with Ross Kirkland on the 14th of July and after a long drive we arrived at the campsite to meet Neil McGeachy, Neil Busby, Jonny Stocking and Paul Williamson. We then had to put our tent up in pitch dark with head torches which was made extra challenging by Mcgeek stealing bits of our tent, stuffing them up his t-shirt and running away with them (I really don't know how he was allowed to graduate from primary school.)

After a rough night's sleep and a minimal breakfast, the next morning we eagerly rushed up to the crag. But there was one thing standing in our way- the 2000ft walk up the steep hill surrounding the crag. We trudged up the never-ending path in the boiling heat but it was worth it when we finally reached the top. I was blown away by the huge over-hanging limestone faces of Cascade- it was even more impressive at the top than seeing it from the bottom.

The first few days were really just getting used to the rock and doing some mileage on some slabs. Then we could get into the hardcore steep climbing of Céüse. It took some time to get used to the big run outs, especially on the slabs where you could be miles above the last clip and shaking trying to find a suitable hold.

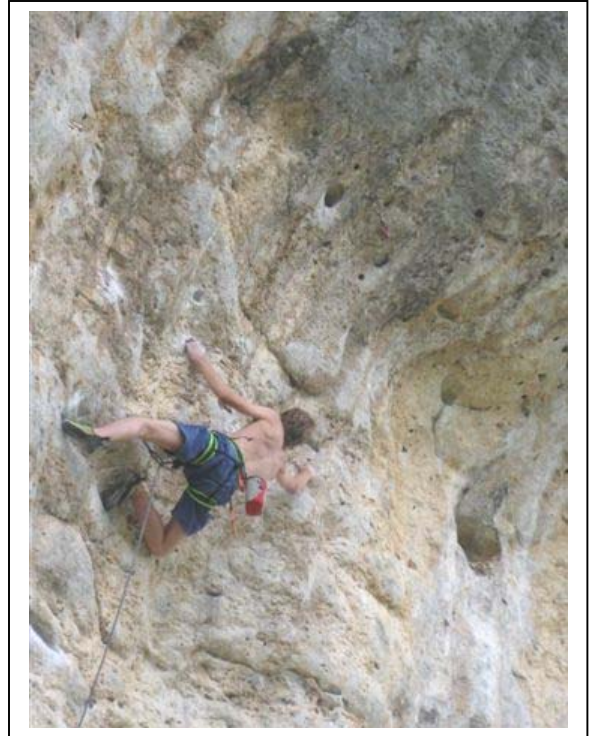
One day having lunch in the shade under Biography sector we went to check out Chris Sharma's famous climb Realization, 9a+. The holds at the start seemed almost non-existent and it started with something like a V10 boulder problem so it wasn't very likely anyone would be doing it any time soon.

A few days into the trip I was really psyched when I managed my first outdoor 7b, Super Mickey. It had a really hard move at the beginning going from a press to a nasty sloper but then it was big moves between massive pockets until a huge dyno at the top. I would have been pleased to go home with a 7b tick for the whole week but as it only a few days into the trip I was determined to get some other hard climbs on the tick list. A few days later I managed Lapinerie 7b, then on the last day I managed my first 7b+, Bibendum after many shots determined to get to the top before sunset.

Just after I Climbed Bibendum, Mcgeek did an amazing 7c called Capitaine Flamme, or otherwise named by himself as Captain Haddock (long story, don't ask), that he said was the best sport route he had ever done in his whole life.

Everyone else on the trip climbed really well too: Ross also climbed a 7b+, Paul climbed 7c and Jonny did his first 8a.

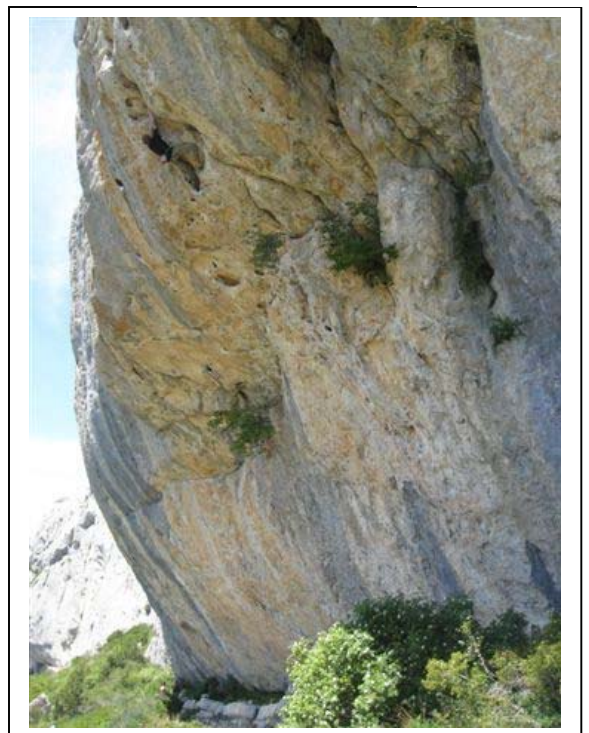
It was a very memorable trip and I will never forget the day sheltering in the tent from the monsoon-like rain playing chess with Ross and Jonny and vowing never to play chess ever again for the rest of my life (especially with Ross.)



Jonathan Field on Lapinerie 7b



Jonathan Field on Bibendum 7b+



Jonathan Stocking:

After having a good day at the 2008 British bouldering championships I headed down to Stanstead to meet up with Neil Mgeachy and Neil Buzby as we were flying out to an amazing crag in the south of France called Ceuse. Ceuse is one of the most beautiful and famous crags in the world. The soaring limestone cliffs are covered in blue streaks that stretch from the top to the bottom of the crag. The crag itself is situated on the top of a hill a couple of thousand of feet up so as you can imagine the walk in is quite intense but after a few days we got used to it. The crag is several kilometres long and is split up into different sectors, on the first day we headed up to Cascade sector a steep wall covered in jugs that are very far apart. It is a burly style of climbing but really enjoyable! I got totally spanked the first day we went there but it was amazing just being at the crag, the atmosphere was like no other crag. People from all over the world would come and talk to you, give you a belay or beta on routes.

On the second day we headed up to cascade again, I managed to flash a 7b called super Mickey so I thought I must be getting some of my strength back. Buzz got the route too. A bit later on in the day we headed over to another sector called Berlin named after the famous classic of the sector Berlin. I jumped on it and got all the moves sussed. It was a crimp stamina rig but with no stopper move another Scottish climber called Paul Williamson was working the route with me neither of us got the route that day. I was syked for the route so we went back up to Berlin after a rest day to finish of the route. Mgeek and the Kirklands were into getting up mega early but me and buzz were more into the lazy starts, every morning we would get up and go into Sigoyer; a small village about five minutes from the Ceuse campsite and stuff our faces with pain aux chocolates and coffee, then we would go and chill up at the camp site for a few hours. Walking up to the crag at 2 in the afternoon is a bad idea as mid day in the south of France is a lot different from walking into a crag in Scotland at mid day. To give you an idea of how hot it was I would normally drink 1.5 litters of water just on the walk-in. By the time we reached the crag we had optimum conditions for a hard redpoint. I warmed up and got straight on the route and topped it first go. Its weird normally when I work a route every redpoint attempt I have the moves always feel desperate but when the magical successful redpoint happens the moves feel easy. Buzz found a spicy project called Blockage Violent a 7b+ well known for its huge run-out so he started working on it.

I would like to thank Neil McGeachy and Neil Buzby for letting me tag along on their trip.

On day 5 of the trip me and Buzz headed up to Berlin again to catch the optimum conditions. I was looking for a hard route to try, I seen a few guys trying a route called Makach Walou a long 7c+ full of crimps and big moves. I shouted over buzz to grab a quick belay and jumped on the route to my surprise I flashed it making it my first 7c+ flash. I didn't try any other routes that day because I was so happy I done the route so I just gave a Buzz a few belays. On one of his redpoint attempts on Blockage he took a massive wiper at the 4th or 5th clip and joined me back at the belay. It put it into perspective of how big the run outs were.

The next day Mgeek had another early start and headed up to cascade to finish off some projects he must have ticked two 7c+s that day. Me and buzz had another late start and headed up to Berlin as I had found an 8a that I really wanted to try called Colour du vent. This route was another long stamina rig with some huge moves in it. I jumped on and fell of at the second clip, it felt desperate but I was so determined to tick my first 8a, so I pushed on and worked the moves over and over. I went back up the next to day to try and finish it took a few goes but the 8a finally fell and I ticked my first 8a, it felt amazing pushing my grade up. Buzz also sent blockage violent. If you get to the last few clips of this route I think its mainly fear that keeps you on as its a long way down to the next bolt!

Next climbing day we headed up to the most famous sector of Ceuse called Biography, where Chris Sharma's route Realization is. I went up with Paul to scout out a project and I spotted an amazing tufa about 25m long. I looked in the guide book the tufa was a part of a route called les Colonettes the clips were already in so I jumped on and got spanked on my first attempt but I powered through and worked the moves. Paul was looking really strong and cruised all the moves on it. I managed to get it on my first redpoint. With tricky technical 7c+ climbing up a huge over hanging tufa, followed by a crux on small two finger pockets, it was probably one of the best routes I have ever done!

It was our last day there so myself, Mgeek and Buzz went on a mission to find a crag and get a few more routes in before we left for rainy Scotland. We drove to Sisteron and found a crazy lime stone crag, it was like two massive sheets of limestone one being a slab and the other an over hang. I was well syked but Mgeek convinced me that there was an amazing crag 30 minutes away called Volx. *"Awww Jonny, Jonny we should go to Volx! It's an amazing venue with top class sport routes!"* After negotiating our way through extremely narrow streets in a baking 40 degree heat we found the crag which turned out to be about 10 ft high and super polished. It was so polished the rock was like glass, but we climbed a few routes anyway. We ticked a 7b that was polished, covered in bird poo and it also had a bat in it, which provided good banter. After our crazy day at Volx we headed back to the airport to catch our flights back it was sad leaving such an amazing place behind but the trip opened my eyes to what France has to offer in the way of climbing and culture.

Ross Kirkland:

I spent two weeks this summer sport climbing at Ceuse in the South of France with friends who climb at Ratho and Neil McGeachy and Neil Busby, climbing instructors from EICA who came along to give lots of great climbing advice.

The climbing varied from technical slab routes to powerful overhangs throughout the various sectors and you could always find part of the crag that was in the shade if you spent the day moving with the sun.

I spent a the first week getting used to the style of climbing before I started searching out possible projects and recommended routes. The two of the routes that I most enjoyed were "Super Mickey" 7b - one of the classic routes in sector Cascades - and "Au sud de nulle part" 7b+ at sector Un pont sur l'infini. Super Mickey was a long, powerful overhanging route with large holds and big dynamic moves and Au sud de nulle part was a long and technical slab with lots of little holds that I spent a time searching out, between a few powerful, technical moves. Both were enjoyable and challenging and were highlights of my trip to Ceuse.

All in all, Ceuse is a brilliant crag and I can't wait to back there next year.

Paul Wiliamson:

I first saw ceuse last year in king lines the climbing movie and since then I have been dying to go! So when Neil McGeachy and Neil Busby offered me the chance to go in July, there was no way I was going to miss out. I arrived on Monday night and met up with all the strong Scottish folk, the campsite was mobbed. We woke early the next morning and began our ascent up the monster walk into the crag, just over an hour up a super steep hill in the baking heat. We began climbing shortly after and spent the day getting used to the climbing and finding our projects for the trip. Within a few days there had been a lot of ticks from the team with grades of up to 8a being red pointed and 7c+ flashed. I myself only managed a few 7b+ and 7c red points and a 7b+ on sight, not bad for a first trip I suppose. The trip was a great success and hopefully I will return next summer!

Footnote:

The trip was organised with the parents understanding that the two Neil's were not acting in an instructional capacity, but on a friendship basis.

Ross in action on Super Mickey 7b

