
A First Look at the Dauphiné Alps

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C'est un paradis sauvage fait pour le bonheur des hommes, des fleurs et des bêtes. That's what Gaston Rebuffat says about the Dauphiné Alps.

I dangled on the end of the abseil ropes and contemplated the gloomy depths of the bergschrund. It was not small, its top lip overhung and I rotated gently above it. As I swung I mused on Rebuffat's words: '*homme*' I certainly was not, '*fleurs*' were happily vegetating elsewhere, no self-respecting '*bête*' would be here.

'So where on earth do I go from here??'

'Let go and jump, you fool.'

The traverse of the Meije had been on my list for years and had proved to be a magnificent day out – then came this sting in the tail! A swing and a bounce (to stretch the ropes a bit more) and my crampons crunched into the icy lower lip, then a backwards tip-toeing movement out of the jaws of the bergschrund and we pulled the ropes down. An easy trot down to the Aigle hut for tea. The party behind was only just emerging from the Zsigmondy couloir. Hours behind. The weather broke and they finally reached the hut at 4.30am. Wonder how they enjoyed that final abseil, by torchlight, in the wind and snow.

It was my first visit to the Dauphiné area of France, and I wouldn't have gone there without the dual incentives of a club meet (the annual AC/CC/ABMSAC meet) and the need to get fit for a first venture in the Himalaya. I've always preferred higher areas of the Alps with more snow and a few 4000m peaks to bag. The Dauphiné offers more rock than snow and has only one 4000er.

I couldn't see much appeal in the area as we drove up the very industrial lower part of the Romanche valley from Grenoble to Le Bourg d'Oisans (which incidentally is the nearest place for banking facilities if you're based at La Bérarde, in the centre of the Ecrins massif.) Most of the summits keep themselves well hidden, the hillsides are barren and stony, and the side-valleys too narrow to see into.

The rough single-track road which rises in spectacular fashion from the Romanche valley into the heart of the area at La Bérarde provided several thrilling moments, because of the imaginative driving of those coming down. But there was still little hint of any interesting mountains; let alone the flowery meadows full of rare plants and wildlife such as the Tourist Office leaflets advertise. Mind you, we were in a hot dry season, and the vegetation which managed to find an insecure foothold on the crumbling roadside cliffs and bouldery banks was pretty brown and burnt. The camp-site up at La Bérarde was just as brown, and a bit rough, as were the facilities – just three very French

loos and a couple of taps, but hosed clean most days, and showers were available in the village. Anyway, it was cheap!

Waking next day to a clear bright morning, after a night dreaming longingly of the Nadelgrat and Monte Rosa, I wandered off on my own across the wide, glacially-grey river and back down the other side of the valley. Immediately I found tall red martagon lilies and striking-looking white-red-and-black Apollo butterflies. Chamois were titupping across a scree just above me, and a marmot whistled its alarm from a boulder-top. This all cheered me up a bit. Exploring a tiny steep woodland trail up a hanging valley, the Vallon des Étages, I began to realize that this was really an area of secret corners and sudden surprises. Even in areas such as the Gran Paradiso National Park, I don't think I've seen such a profusion of flowers and butterflies as greeted my eyes on emerging from the woods into the level valley-meadows.

Choosing to start our real exercise on Mont Gioberney and Les Bans, we headed up next day for the Pilatte hut at 2572m, with its tame marmots (first spotted rear-end-up in the refuse bin). Mont Gioberney (3351m) offers a choice of ridges graded PD and a *Facile* glacier route, all approached most easily by a new cairned path up the rock-band immediately behind the hut. We had an enjoyable day on a direct variant of the NE ridge.

Les Bans (3669m) is a slightly more serious proposition. The route we chose (the ENE ridge, PD) gave us a longish glacier approach to the Col des Bans, followed by a nice (or nasty, depending on conditions) little ice-arête leading to some rock gendarmes at the foot of the ridge. The ridge-climbing is mostly delightful and straightforward scrambling and Grade 2 climbing, with just one little traverse of Grade 3, nearly all on good sound rock. Bright little cushions of blue *eritrichium nanum*, 'The King of the Alps', light the way.

North-west of La Bérarde, and forming the southern ramparts of the Romanche valley, are the nice rocky training peaks of Pic de la Grave and Le Râteau. The E peak of this gives fine views of La Meije dominating the one-time famous climbing centre of La Grave. We climbed the harder W peak of Le Râteau from the Selle hut. The hut is reached by a short drive or bus-ride down to St Christophe-en-Oisans, which is a typical French mountain village, plain and picturesquely ramshackle, with the original hut path meandering up between the cowsheds and the cattle-troughs.

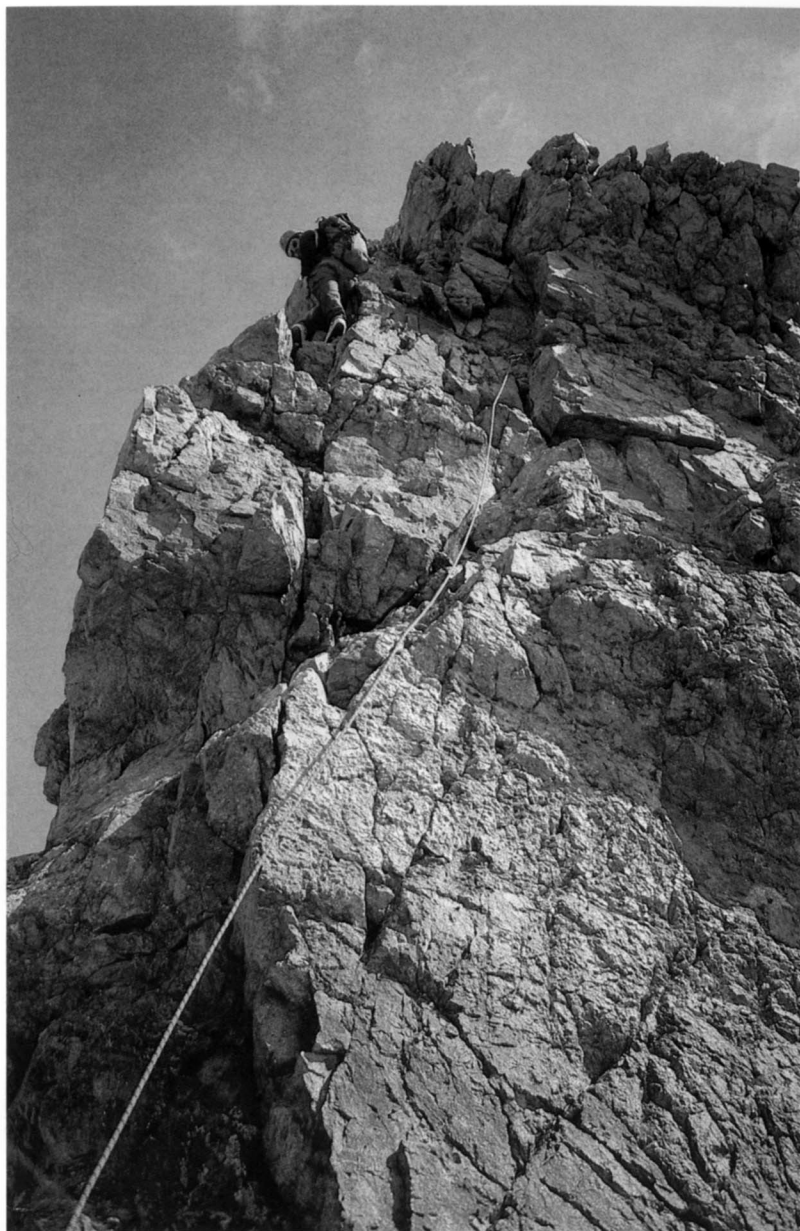
Early next day, an awkward scramble over ice-worn slabs and bits of glacier got us up to the bottom of a steepish snow-couloir, which we climbed to the Col de la Girose. Snow-slopes then led to pleasant climbing at Grade 3 on the fine summit-pinnacles of Râteau Ouest, at a height of 3766m. On the way back down the now soggy snow-couloir, we remarked the presence of abseil-pegs up on the true left wall, quite useful for really bad conditions – if there is enough snow in the couloir to enable one to reach them. Instead of going down to the Selle hut again, we thought it would be fun for a change to traverse the Brèche de Râteau and descend the Étançons valley back to La Bérarde. This route would also give us a good look at the S face of La Meije. It did. It wasn't much fun though – you can keep your mid-afternoon descents of rapidly thawing soggy snow/collapsing crevasses/gravelly slabs/waterfalls. It reminded me of the Buachaille in spring.

The peak-baggers amongst us had the Barre des Ecrins on the list, since this tops the magic 4000m mark. We decided to follow the route by which Whymper first reached the summit in 1864. First a long hot walk from the camp-site over the Col des Ecrins (PD) and down easy glacier-slopes to the Ecrins hut. Then, next day, an early start for the glaciers on the N face, burning off those who had bivouacked outside the hut. Around various serac-bands, then a long traverse right beneath the summit cliffs (mind your head) to the Brèche Lory, a windy gap in the main ridge. We roped up to cross the awkward bergschrund just below the Brèche. We nipped up the easy snow of the Dôme de Neige, a subsidiary summit of 4015m, then back to the Brèche. To reach the main summit of the Barre des Ecrins we climbed a steep little wall leading round left, then up, to the NW arête. An hour's pleasant ridge-climbing ended us up on top, but our summit visit was a brief one – we had been watching storm clouds gathering to the south and were speeded up on the descent by icy gales blowing hail and mist across at us. We were praying it wouldn't thunder, as our descent included re-crossing the Col des Ecrins, where the fixed cables on the W side make splendid lightning conductors.

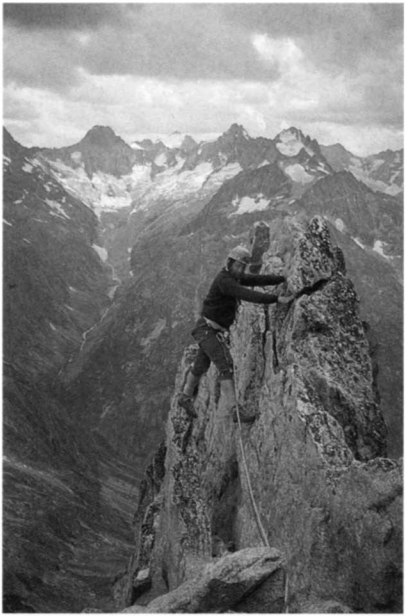
The traverse of the Meije (*difficile*) must be one of the most sought-after expeditions in the Dauphiné, with its great history of repeated attempts and repulses. Its Grand Pic remained unclimbed until 1877, when a 19-year-old youth, Emmanuel Boileau de Castelnau, together with the French guide Pierre Gaspard and his son, left La Bérarde at 11pm, and finally reached the Grand Pic via the Promontoire Arête at 3.30pm the next day. In the course of an epic descent without the benefit of abseiling (not yet invented!), they endured an uncomfortable bivouac as the weather deteriorated; but the lashing rain which accompanied their triumphant return to Le Bérarde can hardly have dampened their spirits after such an achievement. Even so, the traverse from the main peak to the Pic Central, or Doigt de Dieu, and down to La Grave, on the N side, only fell to J M Gibson in 1891.

On arriving at the Promontoire hut to attempt the traverse, we couldn't help being a bit put off by meeting a group of friends, experienced alpinists all, who had just had to bivouac twice, because of sudden storms, in order to climb the Grand Pic. Then I got a tummy bug which kept me up half the night, and despite the ministrations of a kindly doctor friend, I was sick all over the first fixed rope on the buttress behind the hut!

Things can only get better, I thought grimly, as I struggled up the first 500 feet of steep scrambling, rope-coils in one hand and stomach in the other. Only another 2500 feet to the Grand Pic, then the same again to complete the traverse . . . what a lot of rock: towers and walls, ridges and pinnacles rearing up all around. First the easy cracks and chimneys, then you leave the main arête for a long, wide, cold couloir leading up to a great platform. Then – take care. The choice is between lovely delicate climbing at Grade 3 plus, starting on the right of the mighty buttress ahead; or very much harder climbing if you miss the right line, but all on lovely sound granite. Fine positions, and romantic pitch-names: the *Dos d'Âne*, and the *Pas du Chat*. We were probably lucky in a way to get held up for a couple of hours on this section, where everyone starts pitching instead of climbing together: it gave me vital recovery time, and the weather was brilliant.



58. *Râteau Ouest, Grade 3 pitch (climber, Mike Pinney).*



59. *Top of Aiguille Dibona (climber, Mike Pinney).*



60. *Pena Santa de Castilla (Picos de Europa).*

Higher up, we shot past our rivals on the Glacier Carré where it became clear that some of them had never worn crampons before. One girl, who tried to race me up the final steep ice to the shoulder below the Grand Pic itself, fell off, and only self-arrested after a fall of about 20 feet.

The 700-foot spire of the Grand Pic now loomed over us, and we took the rather loose shallow grooves just in from the left-hand edge, until the final summit wall pushed us left to the arête. Here there is a little red slab with an open corner on its right, and you go up this for a ride on the *Cheval Rouge* – a stance *à cheval* with your left boot dangling several thousand feet above La Grave. A move or two up and left, and you're on the top at 3983m, wondering if the rest of the crenellated ridge is as awkward as it looks.

No time to rest – we abseiled quickly down to some more uncomfortable *à cheval* moves on the sharp ridge crest, to the peg-belays at the start of the fixed cables. These cables lead you down and round the icy N side of the Dent Zsigmondy, and up a long and strenuous ice-couloir to rejoin the arête. I was going fine up this couloir, hauling myself up on the cable, till near the top a loose end of cable hung down just where the way tightened into a little chimney. Murphy's law prevailed as always, the loose end caught round my rucksack, and it took all the rest of my puny strength to disentangle it whilst falling out of this chimney with crampons scrabbling ineffectually on the steep glassy ice.

On we plugged over the two intermediate peaks, back in the warmth of the afternoon sun, then finally up snow and easy rocks to the Doigt de Dieu (3975m), God's finger indeed, an amazing leaning tower pointing threateningly over the hidden abysses of the S face. At last, a rest! And my first food of the day – a bourbon cream biscuit; thanks, Mike. The abseil points on the E side were easily located. Once down to the lowest part of the ridge we ignored the first lot of abseil-slings, which looked as though they would dump us inconveniently right on the steepest part of the glacier above the bergschrund. We went along, instead, to the foot of the next riser; then down to some snowy rocks from which an abseil of 45m will (just!) carry you over the bergschrund; then to the Aigle hut – a brilliant little traditional hut well run by a very friendly young couple, who lose their sleep most nights because they are watching out for torchlights along the crest of the Meije, so that they can have a brew on ready for the latecomers.

The Brèche de la Meije should have provided us with a quick way back over to the Promonteire hut, but unfortunately this was out of condition, and we were forced to spend a whole day wandering (and drinking) our way back round the valleys from La Grave, using various buses, none of which connect.

South-west of La Meije, and reached by a steep little valley cutting up north from Les Etages near La Béarde, stands the extraordinary granite blade of the Aiguille Dibona. A real cragrat's playground, this one, with nothing 'alpine' about it except its height, at 3130m. Festooned on a fine day with multi-coloured ropes of many nationalities, it doesn't even require an early start. You can leave the Soreiller hut, already clad in your stickyboots, as late as you like.

We climbed a varied and interesting Grade 4 plus, a hybrid line which began with the Berthet route, giving us a nice logical direct start right behind the

hut. We finished on the Boell route, with its splendid exposed positions out on the S and E faces. There are so many routes criss-crossing all over the place that it would be easy to get lost, but at least every route has peg-belays *in situ* on the stances, so you can tell if you are still on something. Edelweiss and little pink androsaces growing in crevices add to the interest, and give a point of focus when one's nose is jammed against the rock by eager continentals climbing all over one.

We still had enough holiday left for a quick look at the NE side of L'Olan (3560m). As the Lavey hut we started from is very low down, we thought we'd better set out extra early. This led to four members of the Alpine Club getting hopelessly lost in the dark only about 10 minutes after leaving the hut. Everyone else in the hut stayed in bed, knowing no doubt that people generally climb the Olan from a different hut on the other side of the mountain. Anyway, by the time we had regained the path and reached the Glacier des Sellettes it was too late to bother continuing very far. But it certainly looked a fine big rocky peak, and I'll be back for another go some day. We missed lots of others too: Pelvoux, Ailefroide, Les Rouies, La Grande Ruine – now there's an off-putting name!

As the variety of people on the camp-site proved, from families to botanists to rock-freaks, there's something to please everyone in the Dauphiné, and without too much hassle in the way of overcrowded huts and queuing for routes. And, while Chamonix and the Oberland are suffering in storms and rain, the Dauphiné generally basks in sunshine.

APPENDIX

MAPS

IGN (Purple) 1:25,000 Nos 241 Meije, Pelvoux; 242 Olan, Muzelle; 243 Champsaur.

New Blue series will replace these: Nos 3436, 3336, 3437 Est.

Didier & Richard 1:50,000 No 6 Ecrins.

GUIDEBOOKS

John Brailsford, ed Les Swindin, *Ecrins Massif, Selected Climbs* (Alpine Club, 1987).

Gaston Rébuffat, *Le Massif des Ecrins* (Denoel, 1974).

ACCOMMODATION

La Grave to the north (many hotels but busy valley road).

La Bérarde in centre (camping, hotel, restaurants, hut, no bank).

Ailefroide to the east (similar to above, no bank).

Many *gîtes* and huts throughout the region.