



The Gwydyr Mountain Club Newsletter

January 2021

Editorial by David Lane-Joynt

Sadly there are no recent meets to report on, and so I have had to dig into the archives for this newsletter.

The Grand Randonnee (GR) 20 is considered to be Europe's most challenging long-distance walking trail, and there is interest in the club for doing this. A Gwydyr party had booked to do it last June, but this was cancelled, so in this magazine I am including two accounts from previous years. The first is from Chris Harris of his 2011 trip with Janet which they organised themselves. An account of this was first published in the July 2011 Newsletter, but a lot of members have joined since then and it is worth a rerun.

The second account is of Helen and Glenn Grants' trip in 2019, when they joined an organised group so we have two different approaches described.

Gail and Doug are regular visitors to Europe in their van, and Gail has given me an article on a five week "trundle" round Spain.

This will be my last newsletter, as Chris Harris has volunteered to take over as editor. So thank you to everybody who has contributed articles. I trust that you will support Chris, and hopefully with the help of

the vaccination programme there will be some future Club meets to report on.

Certainly without past newsletters, Dave Gray would have found it much more difficult to write his recent update on the Club history.

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Corsica - The GR20, (Le J-Air Van) in 2011 by Chris Harris

Having "done" the Inca Trail a few years earlier, I decided we needed to do a proper trail. The GR20 kept cropping up in conversations and so I investigated. It is a Grand Randonee and our experience of GRs was that most are like bridleways so it should not be too bad. Janet was not entirely convinced but as long as we stopped at a couple of Hotels on the way to "freshen up" she reluctantly agreed. As it happened the dates chosen meant that we would have celebrated our wedding anniversary in the Cirque de Solitude so we stopped an extra night in a hotel before the descent into the Cirque. The downside of stopping at hotels is that you need to carry a bit of extra clothing to blend in but having the clothing, meant that we could also spend a few nights in Porta Vecchio at the end of the walk.

The route: From the NW to the SE of Corsica, starting and finishing a couple of miles inland. Navigation no problem, just follow the stripes of signal toothpaste. We used the Cicerone guide (Paddy Dillon) and really only needed a map of the whole of Corsica for transport around the island. We did it as 15 days walking, following the guide fairly closely. We did not have the energy to double up on sections or climb the odd extra mountain en-route. Most people found it necessary to include one or two rest days. North versus South: The North (9 days) is amazingly tough walking, very remote and a lot of bare rock. The South (6 days) still includes some tough walking but is much greener with cool shade in the forests with dramatic rock formations. Most of the route is between 5,000 and 7,000 ft and the refuges are at 5,000 to 6,000ft, distance 118 miles and 44,000 ft of ascent and descent.



Stage 7



Stage 15

The Equipment: With our superlite Terra Nova tent I was carrying 10.5kg (plus water) and Janet 8.5kg (plus water). Our only food was Muesli for about 5 breakfasts and emergencies. Wherever possible we intended to enjoy the luxury of hotels – there are only 3 available out of the 15 nights. The light weight was essential. With so much scrambling with exposure, the rucksack just wants to pull you over the edge. The 44L Osprey talons are about as comfortable as you can get.

The Paths: When I say navigation no problem, that is only if you can work out a way over the boulders, slabs and rocks between the markers. The angle of ascent and descent makes both hard work and daily average is 3,000ft up and 3,000ft down. Most people we met agreed it was the toughest walking they had ever done.



Stage 1 path



Another easy path on the 1st day !

The Cirque de la Solitude (stage 4) Up at 5am, on the trail for 6am we arrived at the rim after a 2,500 ft climb in the cool light of dawn, on what could actually be recognised as a path. It was amazing, 1,000ft of almost vertical scrambling and sliding down on chains. A man in a French group managed to get nearly to the bottom of Cirque then stumbled, bounced a bit and twisted his ankle. A British Army guide checked him over, nothing broken but ankle swelling fast. Next thing we know a rescue helicopter comes in, drops paramedics, and then airlifts him out. Climbing out was hard work and a few more chains would have been nice. There is a lot of exposure. After a massive storm in 2015 and 7 deaths, the Cirque de Solitude was deemed unstable and the chains removed and route closed. A diversion over Monte Cinto is now the official route. This is not an easy option as it requires extra ascent to an altitude where snow lies late into the season and the weather can be nasty. I understand that the Cirque is now geologically safe but the absence of chains means that it is a pure climbing route. This [youtube video](#) shows how bad a "normal day" could be in 2011, before the big storm caused massive rock falls



Going down



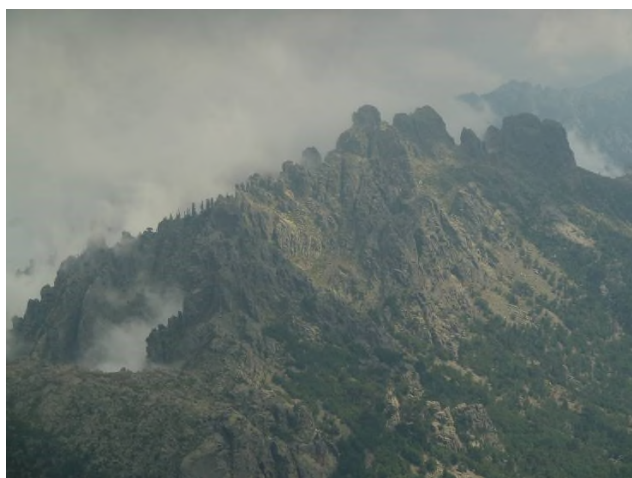
And coming out

The Refuges Most people reckon the refuges are noisy, crowded and smelly in the dormitories. We took our trusty new tent, thermarests and down sleeping bags and slept very well most nights. This also means that you don't have to book in ahead at the refuges as the new rules state – they are, however, French rules and I believe flexible. The cooking and washing facilities are excellent with free gas so if we were to do it again we would probably take a couple of titanium pots and some emergency food. You can buy meals at all the refuges varying from 9€ to 20€. They can get a bit repetitive ie Pasta and sauce. The food for sale for cooking can be a bit basic – pasta, rice, tuna, sardines etc. oh and shrivelled sausages of course. The showers and toilets are grim – a nail to hang your clothes on would have been a luxury! Some refuges only have one shower and one toilet and we were in low season with about 50 people at most refuges, you can get 300 in high season. You cannot camp anywhere on the trail apart from at the refuges. Worst food: a large plastic bowl full of spaghetti and potato in water, between two of us – we did get a spoon each though and the wine was 50 cents for a plastic cupful. Best food: Goats cheese and spinach lasagne baked by the Gardien's wife at l'Onda – pity Janet couldn't eat any.

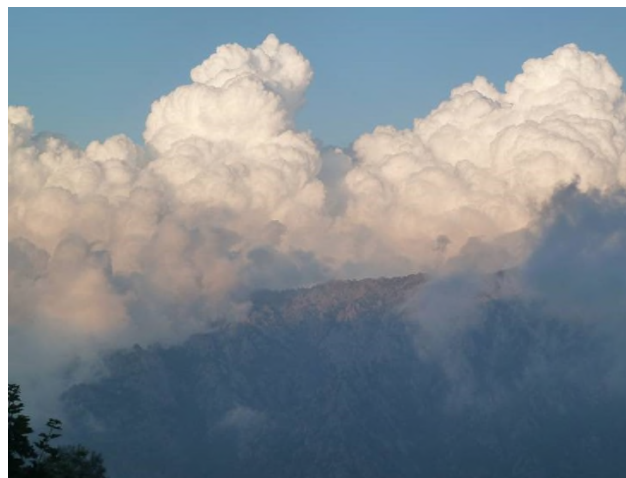


The People: Mostly French but a good range of other nationalities. There was a good percentage of couples and on the southern section probably 50:50 male:female and quite a few lone females usually wearing lederhosen and plaited blonde hair. There were quite a few late arrivals at the first refuge, most with massive rucksacks. Two solidly built Brits were equipped for Alpine weather and were looking to dump stuff like heavy North Face Jackets. Quite a few decided to take a day off to rest the next day. We felt we were doing lot better than some. Two British army groups fell by the wayside early into the trek. One group of squaddies said they were there “to take them out of their comfort zone” - most of them had been in Afghanistan!! They had to shorten their trip after one of the group slipped on day two whilst cooling off in the pools by the Spasimata slabs. He slipped, injured his back and damaged his arm – apparently he was lucky to be alive. They followed us through the Cirque de la Solitude, some were complaining of “disco legs”. The other group were more officer material, also there “to take them out of their comfort zone”, last seen in the hotel at Castel di Vergio (stage 5), knocking back large volumes of wine. One of the group had damaged an ankle and needed treatment. There is a lot to be said for slow and careful. On the 12th stage we met a French couple we had got friendly with over the past few days, they were returning to base – she had damaged her knee and could not carry on, he looked absolutely gutted.

The Weather: We were lucky, the first 10 stages were hot and sunny, perhaps a bit too hot 30C+ but when we finished climbing and got on the ridges there was usually a cooling breeze. First day we started at 9am, second day 8am but by the 3rd day we did as recommended, as did most people – up at 5am, walking at 6am and bed by 8pm (on holiday??) This was essential as most days started with a long climb and by 9am it was pretty hot. On the 12th night we had the mother of all thunderstorms! 10pm to 4am the rain was like a jet wash on the tent, the lightning was flashing like a faulty fluorescent fitting. Lots of people were flooded out; we were absolutely watertight – well done Terra Nova. As the ground was rocky I hadn't even pegged the tent down, just had the two side guy ropes with rocks on. We could feel an inch or more of water flowing under the groundsheet and were more concerned we'd float away rather than blow away. Apparently, the guy who wrote the Cicerone guide was the second choice as the original choice was struck by lightning on the GR20. Over 21 days we had 2 cloudy days, we were very lucky.



Stage 13



Evening E Campanelle

Hotels: We needed a rest after 3 days and spent 2 luxury nights in the ski hotel at Haut Asco. After the 5th stage we managed to stay the night in a hotel at Castel di Vergio (excellent food) We wanted to get the train to Corte after the 9th stage and so we stayed 2 nights in a hotel in Vizzivona. En-suite was a plywood cubicle with plastic folding doors but half board was only an extra 5.5€ each, including ¼ litre of wine per person. By extending the penultimate day's walk we were able to get into Conca early enough to grab a pint and get the bus to Porto Vecchio. The Tourist office sent us to an excellent hotel with view to neighbouring hotel with a lady stripping off to have a bath. So out of 15 days walking we managed to get some luxury on 4 nights, essential for washing the kit.



Stage 15



The End

Us: This was our first ever backpacking/camping trip. We did the complete trail and it went very much to plan but there were a couple of problems. By day 8 Janet was shivering and couldn't eat, not a good sign. If she could just complete the next day then we could stop for 2 nights in Vizzivona (as planned). I dragged her up the steep rocky ascent taking as much stuff from her bag as possible. Two Brits., Dave and Dave, came to our rescue and carried her rucksack up the second half of the mountain – they were having a day off to climb Monte d'Oro. At times I thought Janet would collapse but we had to do the journey as there was no shelter or facilities at the refuge whereas Vizzivona had hotels and shops. As soon as I got a signal I phoned the hotel Larici and booked us in for 2 nights. Janet couldn't drink the free wine or eat much so I ate and drank well. We took the next day off and visited Corte and bought some powerful medicine – I told the pharmacist my horse had diarrhoea. Two days later it was my turn for the Corsican trots but I had the magic tablets from the pharmacy and decided to eat and drink my way out of sickness – it worked.

We both lost about half a stone, Janet had a couple of small blisters on her toes, I had none. Strangely, afterwards we both suffered cramp in the calves at night, presumably our muscles were craving more exercise.

Summary: An amazing journey and the fact that it is not easy makes it that bit special.

Heatwave on GR 20 in 2019 by Helen Grant

Janet and Chris had told me (well maybe Chris more than Janet) that we would enjoy the mountainous terrain on GR20 in Corsica. So in the last week of June and first week of July 2019 we decided to give it a go with an organised trip with KE Adventure. The guide books suggest June is the time when it is not too warm but little did we know that Corsica would experience extreme temperatures of 30 degrees C plus! On the positive side we only had one afternoon of rain showers and a thunderstorm that fortunately missed the ridge we were on and no slippery wet rock to contend with. GR20 is considered one of the toughest of all Europe's long-distance trails. Our tour covered the route from North to South with the hardest stages in the first week.

We met up with our French guide Martin and 9 others in our group at Bastia airport. Four of them worked in the medical profession which proved very useful in the heat with their expertise in looking after us. All our accommodation and food was pre-booked with KE which was really useful as on arrival at campsites our tents and tables for dinner would be set up and reserved for us.

Day 1 - Monday 24 June - Calenzana to Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu

After an overnight stay in Calvi hotel we set off at 6.30am after a minibus ride to the start at Calenzana. We had sleeping bags and kit for 2 nights camping plus 3 litres of water. The rucksacks felt heavy already. We were also carrying my food between us given my food allergy. This is when I remembered Chris' advice on travelling light! The scenery was amazing right from the start and we saw a Lammergeier circling overhead as we approached the first refuge which had been burnt down a month before! This did not affect us as the campsite and facilities were still there and we ate our meals alfresco rather than inside a hut! Our first night under canvas in our pop-up Quetchua tent wasn't too bad with thermarests provided.



Day 1 - approaching our first campsite

Day 2 - Tues 25 June - Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu to Carrozu refuge

We started early to avoid the worst of the heat and today's stage involved a rocky scramble into



The view from Cirque de Bonifatu of the mountains that lie ahead

Cirque de Bonifatu. We had great views of the mountain range ahead us on the trip. Our routine soon included dipping our headgear, buffs, and ourselves in any streams or lakes we passed on route in an attempt to cool down as the temperatures soared. Picnic lunches of cheese, fruit, pasta, bread, biscuits and pate became the norm with carrying them shared between us.

Today we also started practising slab walking with our guide who we nicknamed a slab addict as he enjoyed them so much! It really helped developing the

shuffle technique of small steps on the slabs of rocks. At our refuge that afternoon we had a refreshing dip in river pools nearby.

Day 3 - Wed 26 June

Refuge de Carrozu to Haut Asco

Today we crossed the Spasimata steps that lead to Bocca a Stagnu (2,010m) which involved scrambling up a series of slabs. Chain handholds were available if the ground had been wet but fortunately it was very dry and sweltering again by midday. It was a relief to arrive at our hotel Le Chalet at the Haut Asco ski station where a nice meal and beers on the terrace were welcome.



The Spasimata Slabs

Day 4 - Thurs 27 June - Haut Asco to Bergeries de Vallon



On the way up Ponta Crucetta on Martin's route

As the Cirque de Solitude was now closed an alternative route was now followed over the slopes to the north of Monte Cinto and climbs to Bocca Crucetta (2,450m). Our guide had done the GR over 40 times and treated us to a real mountaineering day out on his alternative route over scree, boulders and even snow patches via Punta Crucetta (2,499m) where we lunched on the summit with butterflies and choughs flying around us. This was a long 10.5 hour day in heat so we were glad to arrive at the refuge for the night.

Day 5 - Friday 28 June - Bergeries de Vallon to Castell di Verghio

We left at 7.15am and the path was level or as we called it Corsican flat (nothing is flat in Corsica!) for a while until we began to climb to the col at Bocca do Foggiale (1,962m). There our guide had to call for a helicopter evacuation for one of our group who was suffering heat exhaustion. It was pretty dramatic seeing the helicopter swoop in creating a cloud of dust while we all sat on our rucksacks a safe distance away. After that we stopped for a brief water refill at the highest refuge on route at Ciottoli di Mori before the long descent to Radule waterfall where a swim was required. Another 10 hour day in heat!

Day 6 - Saturday 29 June - Castell di Verghio to Refuge de Manganu

An easier but longer distance day today walking from 8am through woodland and then eventually green upland pastures with horses grazing and lunch by the river.

Day 7 - Sunday 30 June - Manganu to Refuge de L'Onda

Very early start today at 5am with head torches on to climb steeply to the spectacular scenic and narrow Breche de Capitello (2,225m) and then on along the edge of Pinzi Corbini (2,021m). Today a group of French foreign legion recruits passed us with their heavy rucksacs and rifles looking exhausted. After

a long day the speciality goats cheese lasagne was welcome made from the owners goats milk. We had seen the goats perched high on the hillside on our descent to the campsite.



The view from Muratello pass on route L'Onda to Col d Vizzavona on Day 8

Day 8 - Monday 1 July - L'Onda to Col de Vizzavona

The route today crossed the Muratello pass with lots of slabs and amazing views on the descent to rockpools where we had lunch. Eventually we arrived at our hotel Monte d'Ora where we were reunited with our luggage again.

Day 9 - Tuesday 2 July - Vizzavona to Col de Verde

Our rucksacks were lighter today as we didn't need to carry our sleeping bags and overnight gear and the route was flatter with undulating woodland walking.

Our home for the night was a wooden cabin with bunk

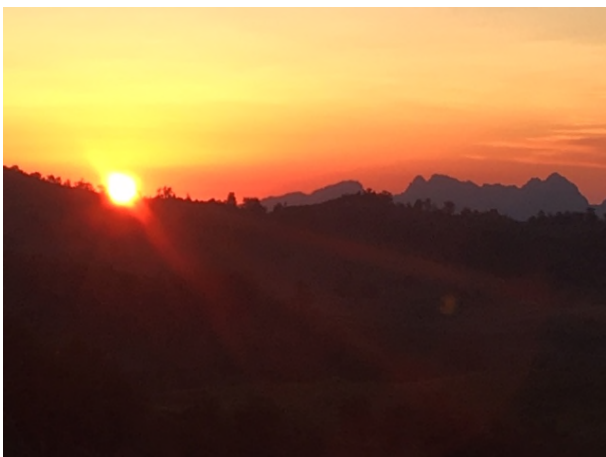
beds although some chose to camp out under the stars.

Day 10 - Wednesday 3 July - Col de Verde to Refuge d'Usciolu

Today started with a long ascent to Bocca d'Oro (1840m) with stunning views and clouds of butterflies and foxglove filled valleys. We crossed a plateau to Refuge de Prati where we refilled our water bottles and then continued along a scrambly ridge to Col Bocca di Laparo (1,525m). This was the afternoon of rain and thunder where we pushed on to our refuge at 1,750m with the most basic amenities, a hessian sack forming the door to the shower! We could see work had started on a new shower and toilet block which was much needed. The site did have an amazing tuckshop selling beer and watermelon.



Starting the ascent to Bocca d Ora



Sunset at Crocci Gite on Day 11

Day 11 - Thursday 4 July - Usciolu to Crocci Gite

A late start today at 8am to climb onto the rocky ridge then descend through beech woods to Bocca di L'Agonua at 1,570m and across the moorland plateau. Our lunch spot by the river saw us surrounded by damsel flies and ancient woodland.

Day 12 - Friday 5 July - Crocci to Col de Bavello

Amazing scenery again today with gentle uphill to the summit of Monte Alcludina (2,134m) followed by a steep slab ascent with chain handrails and descent to our Gite.

Day 13 - Saturday 6 July - Col de Bavello to Conca

We ate breakfast by head torch with an amazing sunrise on the terrace of the Gite before leaving at 5.30am. Our route took us through pine forest and climbed up to Refuge de Palin where we stopped for a water top up. We needed the water for the ascent to Boca d'Usciolu (557m) while still in the heat and a stray dog joined us for part of the route.

We arrived at the finish sign in Conca early afternoon where we had celebration drinks in a local bar before being bused back to our Bastia airport hotel for further drinks and a celebratory meal.



The chain handrails on Day 12



The Group photo at Cova at the end of Day 13

Trundling Around The Minor Mountains Of Spain - “it’s so easy” by Gail Smith

For two successive years we spent 5 week travelling between the more obscure bits of mountainous Spain in the van . One took in the “northern” areas, and the second trundled around the centre as far South as Seville. A van enables you to be much more spontaneous as you can stay or go depending on the weather or if you really like an area, but any of these areas are accessible by car and there is a lot of

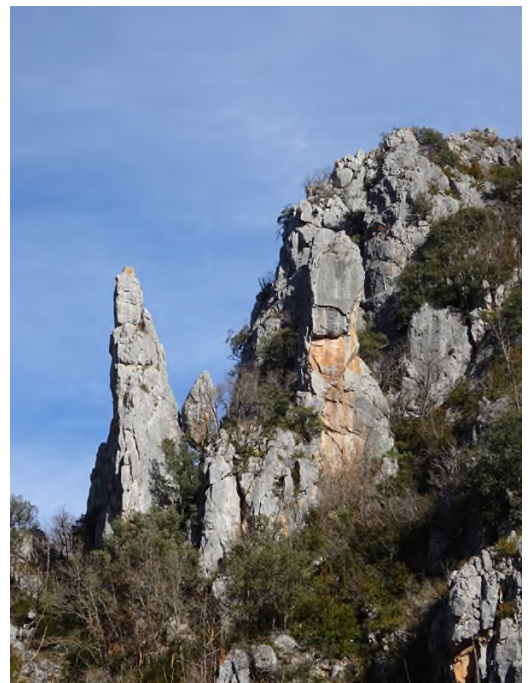


The van parked in a stunning location

accommodation (and discreet camping) around. You can wake up to stunning views. You can eat food from supermarkets, or eat tapas in bars when it suits. If living together in a tin box gets to be too much for weeks on end, than you can always book an occasional night in a hotel; we enjoyed a couple of nights in Parador hotels which are all in wonderful historical buildings and have restaurants serving the local speciality food.

March/April has been a good time of year for us to see the country. It's usually warm during the day but not so hot that walking is problematical, it doesn't rain much, the spring flowers are lovely, most of the tourist sights are open but have few visitors, and it's very easy to find places to park up for the night. We made a few mistakes with the weather – on one occasion we were in a very complex area of limestone country where routefinding was difficult because you couldn't tell from the map whether the paths were above or below the cliffs and you had to continually weave through big karst features. However, there were small signposts on rocks at ground level, which really helped. Until it snowed. Then we were lost.

We chose where to go mainly by looking a big [map](#) of Spain and drawing a loop to join up the National and Regional Parks – easily identified because they were green blobs on the map. These Parks are often absolutely stunning, with well way-marked paths. A quick look on the internet will give a good overview of picnic (i.e. off-season overnight parking) spots and recommended walks including overnight stays in mountain huts where appropriate. Footpaths to The Source of the River X or to ancient hermitages with a spring can be found all over Spain – they like their water-sources. We found that the local tourist board information shops were only good for the immediate area, so if you had arrived from an unexpected direction you only get to the official tourist information when you are about to leave. Climbing guides can be good sources



Rock pinnacles in the Sierra de Cebolleria

of info as well, as the climbs are generally in spectacular locations and there will be somewhere to park locally. You may even see your hero on some 9a (or, in my case, manage to struggle up a few 5cs). There are some long-distance GR footpaths and also several Caminos crossing Spain/Portugal to end up in Santiago de Compostella and the websites for these can also be great for information.

Here are a few places we explored going South on our 2019 trip. We had booked the ferry to Santander, but it was cancelled due to bad weather and we drove down through France , skirting the Pyrenees to the east in the Basque country and Rioja regions. Our first day of mountain walking included poking around in tunnels and other border fortifications. The first “green blob” stop was the Sierra de Cebolleria (aka onions/ leeks/ mountains). Lots of rocky pinnacles forcing their way upwards through Mediterranean scrub and a fantastic walk to a lake. There’s got to be some good climbing round here. We then did some castles, Roman remains, a Roman mine and river walking in the Serrania de Cuenca followed by a couple of days of good rugged mountain walking (where there were no paths and we didn’t always make the best decisions about descent routes) in the same area, and visited commercial area with impossibly-eroded limestone cliffs and pillars, art galleries, cathedrals and castles.



Strange rock landscape near Cuenca



Serrania de Cuenca

Then on to the Parque Nacional de los Calares del Mundo y de la Sima and the Sierra de la Sigura for a few days. In the Sierra de Cazorla, we actually paid for a campsite and walked a long trail beside a stunning river with waterfalls up through an artificial tunnel beside a levada to a large tranquil reservoir high in the hills. Seville was as far as we got before continuing clockwise to go home .



Rio Borosa in the Sierra de Cazorla



The old mosque at Cordoba, now made into a Christian church

I will write about the second half another time if people are interested. We have lots of maps you are welcome to borrow