



**Massif des Ecrins
Climbing and Mountaineering
September 2021**

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Summary

In brief, we planned to travel to ~~Madagascar~~ the Dolomites les Ecrins in the French Alps to tackle mountaineering and multipitch rock objectives. Our goals were to improve our ropework, climbing and route finding, increase our experience of Alpine weather and exposure and experience a different and special natural and cultural environment.

Our suggested route objectives were: Palavar les Flots (5c, 400m), Fissure d'Ailefroide (VS, 290m), Face S Directe, Aiguille Dibona (TD, 400m) and Voie Allain Leininger, La Meije (TD, 800m).

Between us, we climbed all of the objectives apart from the Voie Allain Leininger. Anna and Stu simulated Palavar in an hour and a half, Stu, Ciaran climbed the Fissure, then Olly and Ed went back to simul it and Ciaran, Stu and Ollie climbed the Face S route.

For Sam, Ed and Anna, the highlight of the trip was ascending the 4100m Barre des Ecrins, the highest peak in the national park, on a 3 day bivy mission with Ollie, who made it to about 100m from the summit! For Sam and Ed, a close second was their 16 hour traverse of the Soreiller ridge.

Every team member except Anna climbed to the summit of the Dibona at 3131m, but Anna redeemed herself and her injured knee by travelling to the Dolomites at the end of the trip to tick Comici (550m, E2), which was one of our initial trip objectives, along with onsighting Hasse Brandler (550m, E5).

During the trip, we shared knowledge about climbing techniques, such as simuling and taking coils, and mountaineering skills, like glacier rescue and mixed climbing. We all hope this will prepare us for bigger and more technical future objectives. We learnt to be mindful of the weather, which unfortunately was not in our favour for most of the trip. We took advantage of a clear weather window to summit La Barre, but poor forecasts and shortening daylight hours meant we did not feel it would be safe to attempt our suggested objective on La Meije.

We took every opportunity to practice our French, and Richard's trip highlight was being complimented for his in the Creperie in La Berarde.

Ollie Stu and Ciaran plan to be back to summit La Barre, and Ed has his eyes set on climbing the South Face of La Meije next year, earlier in the season. Sam would like to climb more technical and remote faces, now he has the skills needed for glacial approaches, and Anna would like to have some more type 2 fun climbing long, cold trad on big walls in Greenland. Richard especially is excited for remote summits and has sworn to begin a cardio training regime now he is back in the UK, so he suffers less on the long approaches.

Logistically the trip happened almost as planned in our proposal. Contrary to what we had initially planned, the 3 groups arrived a few days apart from each other, due to having to plan the trip dates around work constraints relatively last minute, and also in part due to injury. Izzie (graduated Imperial 2021) and Anahita (4th year Aero) also joined the group for part of the trip.



Trip Diary

Day 1

Ed, Sam, Richard and Stu set off on the early ferry, fresh-faced and psyched to get back into the mountains (after several years break for some). 9 hours later they pulled into the La Berarde campsite, somewhat less full of energy, and set up camp.

Day 2

The Aiguille Dibona was decided on as a suitable objective to prepare for bigger and higher objectives later in the trip, so the group headed into town to buy food and an essential carabiner, because Sam needed to hit the minimum card spend for his coffee. After lunch, the team hiked to the Dibona hut, 1300m above La Berarde. The sharp point of the Aiguille soaring directly above the hut was mind blowing and the team couldn't wait to grapple it.

Day 3

Richard was battling some mental demons from a major accident a few years ago, so he and Stu climbed 2 shorter multipitches on the face opposite the spire as a warm up. Ed and Sam set off on the classic 12 pitch "Visite Obligatoire" at 6.30 am, and were the first party to reach the summit, meaning they managed to avoid the traffic jams on the Aiguille's many wandering routes and shared belay stances. The pair definitely felt the altitude as they climbed the upper pitches, which reached 3100m.

That evening, both pairs set their sights on bigger objectives for the next day. Ed and Sam decided to climb the East to West Soreiller Ridge Traverse, taking in the East (3380m) and Central (3338m) summits of the Soreiller range as well as the Pointe d'Amont (3338m). Richard and Stu aimed to summit the Dibona via the East face.

Day 4

Despite a mishap with Sam's alarm, Sam and Ed managed to set off at 4 am. They were delayed reaching the East Summit, because of loose rock which meant they chose to pitch several hundred meters of the ridge, rather than risking moving together. However, the rest of the traverse provided (as promised) excellent quality rock and mind-bending stances and exposure: climbing, abseiling, balancing and crawling over and ridges and spires along the way. Highlights included abseiling onto a blank, knife edge ridge to be then traversed "a cheval" - which translated to saddling up, and shuffling along in a straddle position. With little in the way of rock protection available, there was no chance of a more elegant solution! The pair got back to the hut 16 hours later, and descended to the valley in the dark, reaching the campsite at midnight.

Stu and Richard had a somewhat more 'relaxed' day, successfully summiting the Dibona and only getting lost once on the way. Unfortunately, Stu sprained his ankle on the descent to La Berarde, so Richard got to practice his newly acquired bandaging skills. The pair continued somewhat more slowly down to the valley, and attempted to ease the pain that Stu might not be climbing for a while with a large portion of crepes in the village.





Day 5

Whilst the Dibona heroes enjoyed a much-deserved rest day, the next group of arrivals (Olly, Izzy and Anna) wanted to stretch their legs after the drive from London. With a poor forecast for the next day, only single day objectives were viable. This led them to a 100m crag near the roadside of La Berrade, where they did a 6b and a 6c+ multipitch. These were both high quality routes with amazing views of the valley and offered a good introduction to climbing on granite. On the 6c+, Anna linked the two crux pitches together without a rest, giving 70m of sustained technical climbing. Meanwhile in the campsite, the others were recovering with the aid of campsite cricket, boules, French toast, and in Stu's case, co-codamol.

Day 6

With a poor forecast for the whole of Les Ecrins, the team decided to dedicate the day to relocating to Ailefroide. After a slow start in the campsite, the team drove to a Lidl in Briancon to stock up on supplies. It was decided that the next major objective would be to summit the Barre des Ecrins via the North Flank and to bivvy for two nights instead of using the hut. This led to a lot of calorie counting at Lidl, with tortellini and crepes coming out as the most calories per gram. After this they drove up and checked into the campsite in Ailefroide. That evening, they tried to sneak glimpses of crag through the low hanging cloud, attempting to gauge what routes they should set their sights on in the coming week. They then ate something wonderful Sam and Richard cooked up and went to bed.

Day 7

The team woke to clear blue skies and damp cliffs from the overnight rain. However, they dried in less than an hour allowing a day of multipitch climbing. Olly and Izzy did a 220m 6b called Snoopy Direct, which had phenomenal climbing and an adventurous feel to it, all whilst being less than 500m from the campsite. Stu was still recovering from his ankle injury and Anna managed to reinjure her knee on the approach to a climb that morning, so the two took forced rest days. Richard and Sam went on a short multipitch adventure to get some footage for a family wedding, which was incidentally Richard's hardest ever multipitch. At the top, he decided it would be fun to learn a new abseiling technique and (accidentally!) threw his belay plate over the edge of the cliff. Once everyone was down, the team sampled some of Ailefroide's finest and most polished bouldering. Only Sam and Richard did anything hard (V6), but at least the others got some good pictures of them trying hard. That evening, latecomers Ciaran and Anahita arrived.



Days 8-10

With the forecast finally predicting stable weather, Ed, Sam, Anna, Ollie and Izzie set off for the 5 hour hike to the Glacier Blanc, where they would bivy before attempting the North Face and West Ridge of the Barre des Ecrins, the highest peak in the Ecrins range. Ed demonstrated crevasse rescue and glacier walking techniques, before the group crossed the glacier to their bivy spot at around 3200m. Jumping straight on the Barre was a bit much for Ciaran and Anahita on the first day, so they remained in camp instead (alongside Richard and Stu with his still swollen ankle).

After a short night (which Anna spent shivering and wishing she had put a new sleeping bag and mat on the kit list), the group set off on the glacier at 4am in two groups. Ed, Sam and Anna made fast progress, reaching the Dome des Ecrins, just over 4000m, not long after the sun rose. Izzie and Ollie were following closely behind, but unfortunately had to turn back a few hundred meters from the summit, because of altitude sickness.

Ed, Sam and Anna continued up the mixed summit ridge, to reach Ed and Sam's first technical 4000m peak. On the descent back to the bivy spot, the group scouted out the South ridge of Pointe Louise - a potential objective for the next day. Unfortunately, the conditions for the descent from the summit of Pointe Louise looked steep and dangerous, due to the lack of consolidated snow covering the otherwise loose and dry scree - a common problem late in the season.

After another night bivvying, the group walked down to Ailefroide. Sam showed himself as a true gentleman, and gave Anna his poles to take some weight off her knee.

Meanwhile back down in the valley, Ciaran and Anahita tackled Snoopy Directe (6b), La Course de Recree (6b), and had a semi rest day after struggling up Two Hot Men (6a). Richard waited on Stu's every need, bringing him fresh pain-au-chocolat each morning and providing endless supplies of ibuprofen. In between his chores, he squeezed in some bouldering and managed to make his hardest boulder ascent of the trip (Compote du bloc, 7a+). Stu convinced both himself and Richard his ankle was ready for a multipitch, so they tried La Course de Recree (6b) on Ciaran and Anahita's suggestion. A finicky first pitch led to some fine climbing but the highlight of the route was the 40m free space abseil on the descent.





Day 11

After many days of resting their fingers and testing their legs, Olly and Izzy decided to have a day of hard single pitch sport climbing. This decision was supported by the weather forecast, which predicted a clear morning, but potential rain in the afternoon. Olly and Izzy both did Superflux, a 7a slab, which was Izzy's hardest ever sport lead.

Wanting to get a larger route in before the rain, Stu suggested the idea of simul-climbing Palavar-les-flots, a classic 400m 5c usually climbed over 12 pitches, to Anna. After teaching Stu how to take coils of rope, Anna set off and led to the top of the 8th pitch before her 20 quickdraws ran out, then Stu took over to lead the final 4 pitches. They climbed the entire route in an hour and a half, despite stopping half way up to have a chat with a friendly French couple they overtook. Not a bad first simul-climbing experience for Stu!

Ciaran and Anahita climbed La Fissure D'Ailefroide (VS) - a striking chimney crack climbed on trad gear with bolted anchors. Great fun but a tight squeeze in places!

Day 12

With another poor forecast, the team was restricted to single pitch sport and bouldering. Sam, Ed, and Richard went to the Face Bouc sector to get on some hard lines, and Sam ticked a 7c+ in just 3 tries. The others went back to La Draye to continue testing themselves on the hard slabs. Ciaran also ticked the fantastic Superflux slab.

Day 13

After a brief bit of bouldering in the morning the team's luck ran out once again with the weather, meaning there was no chance of climbing for the rest of the day. Instead, they introduced the French climbers at the campsite to French cricket.

Day 14

A day of clear weather meant the team were psyched to put their enforced rest to good use. Sam and Richard went to the Face Bouc Sector again for hard single pitch sport, meeting Ethan Pringle and Johnathon Siegrest in the process. Sam burnt them both off their 9a project (or at least imagined himself doing so), meaning he was too tired to do the 7c he had targeted for the session. Richard had a sore arm but managed to squeak himself up the gorgeous arete Ed had done a couple of days prior.

Ed and Anahita did a route called "Riviere Kwai", which was the longest route in the valley at 500m. Stu and Ciaran attempted to climb one of the hardest multipitches in the valley, La Voie de Maitres, which tackles the 400m Palavar face via a line with a 6c+ crux pitch and 3 more 6c pitches for good measure. Mixing up the pitch descriptions, the pair fell on what they initially thought was the crux pitch and had to aid on through in the interest of time. However, it turned out that the following pitch was the crux, which until rereading the guidebook at the top they had assumed was a bizarrely tough 6b! Despite not quite getting it all clean they did well to get up it and back to the campsite before dark.

Day 15

Inspired by Stu and Anna's simul-climbing adventures a few days earlier, Olly and Ed decided to move together over La Fissure D'Ailefroide (VS). The rest of the group made sure to tell Ed to take a rucksack so he would get full value from the squeeze chimneys, which he much appreciated.

With some bad weather inbound and the trip coming towards an end, part of the team relocated to La Berarde for Ciaran, Anahita and Ollie to have a crack at La Dibona (alongside Stu, whose ankle had now mostly recovered). Following a windy drive around the Parc des Ecrins, the team arrived at the trailhead and kitted up for the hike. A long few hours later, the four arrived at the hut ready for a hot meal.

Meanwhile, back in Ailefroide, Sam, Ed, and Richard were making the most of the last good weather by climbing the famous Cascade Bleu. A stunning climbing experience, involving a waterfall crossing for mid-climb rehydration.





Day 16

Both Dibona teams chose to tackle La Voie Madier. This was a 13 pitch, 350m, (TD+/6a+/E1). Anchors were equipped and many pitches had the odd bolt but the majority of the climb was on trad gear. Stu and Ollie began first and Anahita and Ciaran initially kept close behind, sharing the first few belays. Stu and Ollie moved quickly and were surely the first to top the Dibona that day, choosing to finish via the top few pitches of Visite Obligatoire having beaten the queues. Ciaran and Anahita managed to get stuck in the busy bottleneck where the various routes meet at the top of the spire. For the last 3 pitches they shared belays with three other teams and were probably the last to get down from the Dibona that day!

The Ailefroide team decided that the best way to spend the last day of sun would be to go and sit in the shade all day at a single pitch sport crag. Sam was the only one to send anything but plenty of fun was had trying anti-styles.

Day 17

Whilst resting in the campsite, Olly and Stu realised they had 50 quickdraws between them. This prompted them to wonder if they could simul-climb the Tete de la Maye, a 450m cliff facing the campsite, in one pitch. They set off up the hillside on the deceptively long approach and were (not so) soon at the base of the route. After the first 300m of climbing, Olly started to have a migraine which caused his vision to blur. He brought Stu up to him and they discussed their options. With abseiling not being a feasible option and some slight rain in the air, they decided to keep on going as planned since Olly could just about see the holds and bolts and it would be the fastest way off the rock. To keep it safe, Olly clipped more of the bolts to limit the distance he would fall. The last 150m passed by relatively quickly and the two made it to the top in under 2 hours. The descent involved losing nearly 1000m of altitude, on slow and difficult terrain. The two reached the campsite just before it started to rain.

Day 18

With the forecast predicting solid rain for the foreseeable future the decision was made to start travelling back to the UK a few days early. Clearly the group's psych for climbing is insatiable, because we ended up stopping in at a bouldering gym in Grenoble.

A final test match was played in perfect swing bowling conditions (rain) with the now famous French birch, massage ball combo bringing an end to a wonderful cricket tour, featuring cameos from some French stars, turn that would astonish Shane Warne and shots that would make Joe Root ashamed to be British.

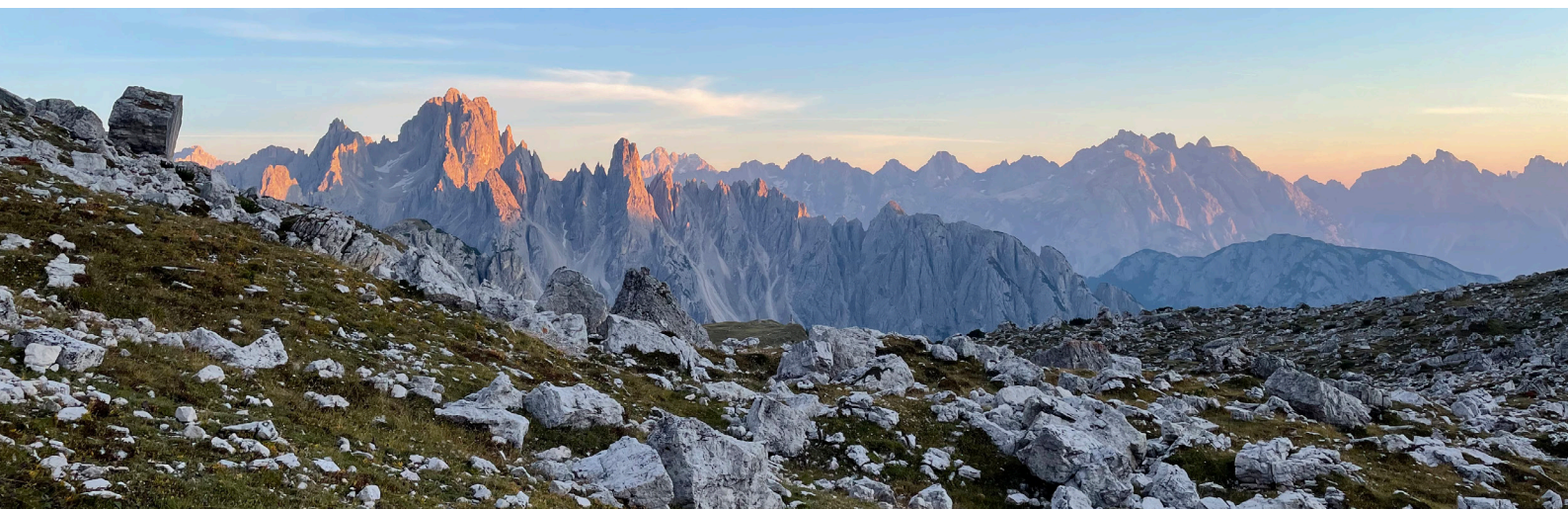


The Dolomites



At the start of September, FCO advice and Italian travel regulations changed, making travel to Italy possible again. Unfortunately, this was too late to revert to our initial trip plan. However, towards the end of September, weather was looking bad in les Ecrins and Anna's knee was not in a good enough condition to attempt any more long approaches. She took trains to the Dolomites to meet a climbing friend Felix, and attempt some of the objectives the team had initially proposed, with shorter walk-ins.

While there, the pair climbed Comici (VII+/E2, 550m), Cassin (VIII/E3, 450m) and Hasse Brandler (VIII+/E5, 550m) on the Tre Cime. Anna onsighted every pitch on all 3 routes. As a 'rest day' they climbed all three of the Tre Cime normal routes in a single 5 hour push, 3 times faster than the guidebook time!



Finances

Item	Cost	Notes
Gear	1669.95	2 cat 4 sunglasses, 3 B1 crampons, 2 water bladders, 1 backpack, 1 pair gloves, 2 sleeping bag liners, 1 roll mat, 5 multipitching shoes, camera film, 1 axe, camping gas, carabiners, freeze dried food, energy gels
Covid Tests	479.40	Lateral flow test in French Pharamcy and PCR on returning to the UK
Camping	759.65	
Huts	566.89	
Food	944.44	
Trains	256.74	
Fuel	1039.58	
Tolls	400.59	
Ferries	751.18	
First Aid Kit	103	
Parking	6.83	
Guidebook/maps	43.93	
Inddor Climbing	78.76	
Car Breakdown Cover	348.44	
Insurance Costs	616	7*88 BMC insurance
First Aid Training	840	7* 120 2 day outdoor first aid
Total	8905.38	

Many thanks to the Imperial College Exploration board for making this trip possible!