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La Petite Epic

Learning the ropes, French style

BY MAJKA BURHARDT

It all began with an overhanging limestone pocket at Wild Iris. Actually there were two of them, and, due to their distance apart and the lack of other features surrounding them, I was supposed to be holding onto one and heel hooking in the other. The problem was, however, that I am unfamiliar with the art of heel hooking. The concept seemed simple enough but each time I tried to lift my left leg into the pocket, I felt like I was beginning an upside-down cartwheel.

"Try the Gaston!" yelled my partner Charlie.

"Who?" I screamed as my arms gave way and I launched into the space below.

While I hung on the rope trying to catch my breath, I looked up at the route that had suddenly taken on the equivalent appeal of a high-school calculus test. I envisioned a bright red "C-" spray-painted on the cliff as I was lowered to the ground. While Charlie untied my welded knot I looked up and counted the seven additional bolts that stood between my high point and the chains, and decided it was time to learn how to sport climb.

It did not take long for me to conclude that learning to sport climb would best be accomplished in France. Where better to perfect my skills than the modern Mecca of overhanging limestone, pain au chocolat, and merlot rolled all into one glorious pastoral scene? Plus, I

explained to Charlie, I spoke French, or at least I took French classes in high school and a trip to France might finally be a way to make something of my illustrious education.

Two months later we flew over the Atlantic with our luggage nestled below. Packing had been easy: a rack of draws, two ropes and plenty of extra halter tops thrown in to take up the extra space. In the spirit of vacation we'd outlawed any prior planning, guidebook purchasing, or worrying. *This is the way to travel*, I thought to myself as I emptied my three-ounce bottle of gin into a plastic glass.

By the time we were an hour outside of Marseilles I began to question our lack of foresight and absence of a map beyond the small sheet from

Hertz signifying its branch locations in Southern France. Though we'd located our destination (the Verdon) on the map, Hertz apparently had a need to place its logo directly over the space which represented our highway exit. Seeing this as an opportunity to showcase my verbal acumen, I suggested a quick stop for directions. As we decelerated on the exit I began to clear my throat and gargle my "r's," warming up for my first foray into the French language in more than a decade.

But, five minutes later, when I was face to face with a real live French person, my entire speech vanished from my brain and all that I could recall of my extensive studies was a nursery rhyme about three elephants.

"I thought you said you spoke French," Charlie said when he noticed the blank stare on the attendant's face.

This comment, coming from the man whose only French vocabulary came from the chorus of "*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir*," only served to make me try harder.

"Por favor, nous neccitez vamos a climbing," I said with authority.

"Nice Spanish," Charlie said as he took out our map and used the international language of finger pointing to get us on our way.

By the time we arrived in the little town of La Palud outside of the Verdon I had my communication down to a science. Charlie, for his part, pretended not to notice when I returned from the local bakery with a baguette instead of directions to the climbing shop.

By nightfall we had procured a guidebook, and were splitting a bottle of red wine and picking out the next day's route. Tradsters at heart, Charlie and I chose the Verdon for its famous long routes. After my second glass of wine, though, I began to get confused as I flipped through glossy pages and saw the multitudes of routes that had a funny looking icon next to them that looked suspiciously like a nut. I poured Charlie another glass of wine and hoped he would not remember it was me who suggested we should leave the nuts at home. "Nuts," I'd said, "They don't even have a word for nuts in French."

By 11 a.m. the next day I cursed my stupidity. While I'd expected long runouts, I did not anticipate trying to keep my head together and hyperventilating while staring at a perfect placement for a #6 Stopper. In an attempt to assuage my growing anxiety, I hung off my right arm and traded out my wire-gate biner for a locker on my lightweight quickdraw to use at the next bolt, whose existence I had yet to visually confirm.

That evening Charlie and I sat in the campground trying to fashion jammed knots with any extra cord. Any hopes of making friends with local climbers began to disappear as they walked by and shook their heads. "Vous-etes Americains?" asked one woman with forearms bigger than my calves.

"How'd you guess?" I muttered, not even bothering to try it in French.

The next morning, while our European counterparts were sleeping in their tents or performing their morning constitutionals of cigarettes, Charlie and I were the first to arrive at the bakery. When Charlie ordered a Café Americano, I shoved my elbow into his side and covered up his yelp with a request for a cappuccino. "We're in France for Christ sake," I said.

"Actually," the woman behind the counter replied, "what would be most appropriate is a café au lait."

I stared at her, taking in her jet-black hair arranged in a casual twist and knee-length A-line skirt. She went on to describe the difference between each drink in impeccable English.

"Now that's a woman with a knack for languages," Charlie said when we walked out of the bakery. I nodded, wondering who in the world bakes in a skirt and wishing we'd started our day with Clif Bars instead.

By the third day at the Verdon, Charlie and I decided to take the plunge on a classic long route. At 7 a.m. I watched as he jotted down route notes on a napkin, noting the powdered sugar cascading from his pastry onto our plan for the day. A Xerox machine would have



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been impossible to find, and I had my doubts about the resiliency of a cotton napkin.

"It's sport climbing," Charlie replied when I asked if he wanted a piece of paper, "You just go up."

Two more pastries and another café au lait later, we were standing on the edge of the Verdon, strapping into our harnesses, and looking into the void. Though many of the routes are labeled with delicate red paint, ours was not, and we'd resorted to a highly refined anchor-counting system to arrive at what we thought was our line. The morning's approach took approximately four-and-a-half minutes, and by the third rappel the sugar and caffeine burning through my bloodstream caused my heart to flutter and hands to shake. By the time I was perched on the two-foot-wide grass ledge, my bloated belly began to mount a revolt. I looked between my feet at the river several thousand feet below, in front of me at the small painted arrow pointing upwards, and above me at the myriad bolted lines. Our napkin topo showed only one climb. Its features were limited to one roof on pitch four and the approximate lengths of each pitch.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I announced, grabbing the topo from Charlie's hands, figuring I'd at least found a use for it.

After three pitches and several pendulums, I decided maybe we were not ready for the Verdon. The top of the cliff was hours away and we'd already left four bail biners as we swung from line to line. "I can see a roof!" Charlie shouted triumphantly from above as I fed out more rope and wondered if I should point out that every pitch in the Verdon has a roof.

By the fifth pitch we had settled on a line, chosen for the plethora of chalk and big holds. It took me fifteen feet of climbing to realize the obvious downsides of the easiest route on the cliff as I tunneled through yet another French version of a scrub oak on my way to the next bolt. When we finally topped out my arms and legs looked worse than they did after a week at Indian Creek. *Sport climbing*, I thought to myself as I wondered how to say Neosporin in French, *is supposed to be easier than this*.

The next morning we waved goodbye to the Verdon in the rearview mirror and drove the winding roads north to Ceüse. Two hours into the journey our gas tank was hovering on empty and we pulled into the nearest station to fuel up. As Charlie fit the nozzle into the car, I noticed that the dispenser next to ours looked suspiciously like diesel. “Are you sure that’s not diesel?” I asked as he contracted the lever.

“Nah, this is the regular stuff.” The Euro counter started to spiral upward. I looked again at the machine next to ours, saw its yellow label reading “*Disele, Gazole 97*” and noticed our tank had *gazole* written on it as well. Never having learned this word in my high-school French class, I decided to cast my faith in Charlie’s innate car knowledge. After paying the equivalent of forty dollars for eight liters of *gazole*, we sped away in our blue box.

The road soon began climbing upwards and I casually asked what would happen should a person put diesel in a regular car.

“Can’t be that bad,” Charlie answered, as the car suddenly lurched forward with a groan and a creak unlike any vehicular noise either of us had previously heard. Within a hundred yards, Charlie had to put the car in neutral to turn it around and go back to town. I made a mental note to double-check his mechanical expertise at a later time.

Ten minutes later we spotted the gas station and I got out of the car to practice a whole new set of French words. “J’avais une petite problem,” I said to the attendant, feeling momentarily impressed with myself until I realized I would have to continue.

“La yellow, ici es diesel, oui?” I tried, wishing I was wearing the bakery woman’s skirt instead of being four days into my current pair of shorts. “Es un problemo, oui? Nous car n’aime pas la diesel, oui?”

The attendant looked at me in confused disbelief and proceeded to rattle off a string of words that I interpreted as one big, “why?”

I shrugged my shoulders and rolled my eyes. “Je ne sais pas, ce n’est pas le fault de moi,” I added, happy that Charlie decided to stay in the car while I talked to the attendant.

Four hours and \$160 dollars later we were back on the road. The diesel was siphoned, fuel injectors cleaned and both of us chastised (or maybe cursed at, since I am still not that up on French swearing) about the difference between *gazole* and *sans plomb*.

“Apparently yellow is always diesel,” I said as the gas station faded from the rear-view mirror.

“Glad to see your French is improving,” Charlie replied as he depressed the accelerator.

After the four-hour diesel detour, we arrived at Ceüse in the dark and pitched the tent by car headlight. The next morning we headed up the hill to the cliff, thankful for the forty-five-minute approach that many Europeans claim is reason enough not to climb at Ceüse. When we got to the

cliff, sans guidebook, we used the time-honored European tradition of finding the most popular routes by looking for the ones with the most cigarette butts at the base. Once we found a route that was not completely overhanging, I cleared the rain-sodden butts away with my shoe and flaked the rope. I was up for the first lead of the day and as I cried for a take at the second bolt, Charlie backed up to hold me and promptly stepped into the other sign of a popular route, toilet paper and all.

By the end of our day we had attempted eight routes and finished three — I decided we needed a new strategy. Since being in France did not seem to be the solution to sport climbing, than perhaps being



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French might. That night we drove into town to buy cigarettes and muesli, and promised each other there would be no more pastries until the end of the trip. By 11 a.m. the next day I had picked a worthy objective and stood at its base, smoking my first cigarette in twelve years as I tightly cinched the Velcro on my shoes and tied into the rope.

“Au revoir,” I said to Charlie as I wrapped my fingers around the first holds.

“Hasta luego,” he replied, scanning his surroundings for possible hazards.

Three bolts up, I wondered if my lightheadedness was cause for concern when I saw the pocket to my left. This was my chance. I threw up my foot and caught the edge with the back of my heel and tried not to yelp as I rocked my weight onto the stance. I swung my butt down, took a breath, and launched upwards, missing my hold by a mile and flying into the space below. That afternoon we hiked down to camp leaving our quickdraws hanging on the cliff above, glimmering in the evening sun. Three days, thirteen tries, and a new nicotine addiction later, I finally reached the chains.

As we drove back to the airport I took a mental tally of my vacation. By my count, I onsighted two climbs and redpointed four during two weeks in France. The sixteen biners we’d left behind twinkled in my mind, and I wondered if it was a fair trade. As I mulled it over I massaged my heel and watched the French countryside whirl by, thinking I might even feel a callous. ©