

OVERSEAS MEET

ALPS MEET, BERNEX HAUTE SAVOIE, FRANCE

29 July – 8 August 2011

This highly sociable chalet-based meet managed to top all ten of the 2000m peaks in the area and provided ample challenges for walkers and climbers alike.

Photos unless otherwise stated are by Michael Smith

The Bernex mountain area is defined by Lake Geneva to the north, the Swiss border to the east, the Abondance valley to the south and the Thollon, Bernex and Chevenoz villages to the west. It is comprehensively covered by the Morzine, Massif du Chablais 1:25000 map. After 11 active days in the area those attending still had plenty of other routes and peaks they would have liked to visit.

Tony Dunford lives in Bernex and generously organised and supported this meet.

Though easy to get to from Geneva airport, being just south of Lake Geneva, Tony made it easier for those likely to arrive late by collecting them from the lakeside. Throughout the meet Tony was tirelessly ferrying around those without cars, offering advice and dealing with any problems that arose. This must have been especially frustrating for him as a recently deteriorated knee condition severely limited his own participation in activities – indeed he was heading to the hospital for an operation as the meet closed.

Those attending the meet are grateful for his help and wish him a complete and speedy recovery from the surgery.

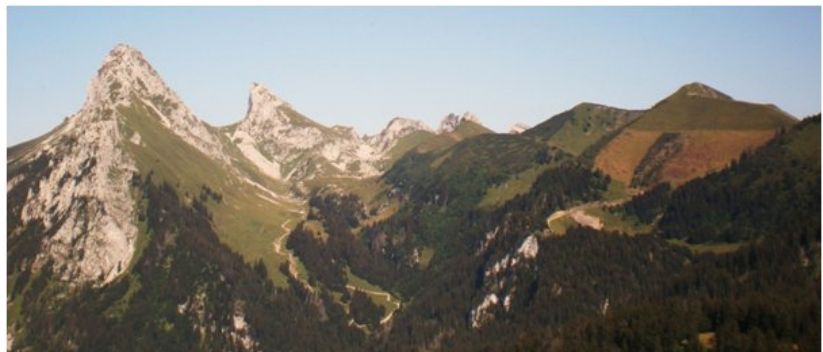
Richard Smith had been the first to arrive and had a day in the Creusaz hills including **Mont Cesar**, 1574m 5164ft, nearest Lake Geneva before the others arrived. Work commitments prevented his climbing partner, Chris Kirby, attending but Chris honoured his booking paying his share of the chalet costs. As all but the Norwegians and the President assembled Tony and his nephew, Will Dunford, shepherded us up to a gentle ridge where we split east and west to reach modest peaks giving inspiring overviews of the range from atop steep crags. On the descent a viper was almost trodden on – the first of three snakes spotted that week. Later, as the last three arrived, Tony and Nicole hosted an evening buffet and briefed us on the area's walking, climbing, shopping and gastronomic possibilities.

Who went where with whom on which day is too complicated to relate here. Instead outings on the main peaks are described in turn roughly from north of Bernex in an arc clockwise round to the southeast.

Mont Bénard, 1284m 4213ft, was included in a circuit by the two most longstanding members.

The **Pic des Memise**, 1674m 5492ft, gave a relatively gentle first day from Bernex and had the added interest on the ascent of a long ladder to bypass a cliff. This peak's popular grassy ridge gave grand views of Lake Geneva and the Dent d'Oche before a descent could be made traversing the flank through woodland. Some extended the walk by adding additional loops and another used the ski lift at the northern end to gain height quickly.

The **Dent d'Oche**, 2222m 7290ft, lies immediately above Bernex village, a tower of grey limestone. The usual route was taken first, ascending through forest to a high alp with cheese-making chalet, then up an increasingly rocky and exposed rib to the spectacularly perched CAF Refuge de Dent d'Oche. Below and above the hut are chains and cables to assist the ascent. From the satisfyingly small summit an airy traverse was made along the crest and flank eventually to a grassy col. Later two reversed the route but inadvertently in the cloud took more of a crest line than was strictly necessary and (intentionally) spent the night at the hut before descending to Bernex by a balcon route crossing below the northwest face from the Col de Rebollion to the Col de Nueva. Once back in the grazing alps, they found recent farm track improvements had left some kilometres of the path a quagmire of clay. It is a popular and impressive peak.



From left to right - The Dent D'Oche, Chateau D'Oche, Aiguilles Darbon and Pointe de Pelluz

The neighbouring **Château d'Oche**, 2197m 7208ft, is well protected by crags. To wind a way to the top from the Dent d'Oche first requires a traverse under the crags towards a col. A rake leads to a sloping plateau and eventually the summit. Some members added this to their day on the Dent.



Peter Chadwick on the Pic de Memise's ladder

Mont Baron, 1566m 5137ft, was the right-most of the tops visited on the first evening of the meet. It and the other one, **Pointe de Pelluz**, 1908m 6260ft, were visited a number of times by various individuals either tackling a part of the GR5 or filling in the extra hour or two before descending to the valley at the end of a day. Starting from near Chevenox a long gradual ascent could be made following a ridge of alps and woodland over both these peaks before descending to Bernex. Solo, a determined member made an inventive descent towards the chalet which proved awkward and trackless.

Several parts of the GR5 were encountered above Bernex. While the path in its entirety runs from Menton on the Mediterranean to the Hooke of Holland, it is the early section in this area which appears to be most popular. One couple on the way to the meet attempted part of the GR5 further north at the Ballon D'Alsace and found a deviation, the map-marked GR5F, was not signed on the ground and the path soon faded out in woodland. However, they did find Joan of Arc *en route*.



West Peak of the Aiguilles Darbon from the north – traversed left to right – with Mont Blanc in the distance

On the **Aiguilles Darbon**, 2043m 6702ft, the traverse of the West Peak, 2030m 6660ft, provided the last climbing day for a threesome.

Michael Smith on the second abseil off the West Peak of the Aiguilles Darbon (photo Richard Smith)



By then the way up past the cheesery was familiar and continuing along the valley bottom the paths were forsaken at the Lacs de la Case to reach the grassy col marking the eastern end of this rocky fin. Being now in thick cloud, a few drops of rain made each of the three momentarily question the sense of embarking on a climb of several hours but none wanted to be the one to press the point.

The first pitch is one of the hardest; a 3c crack, and the young member was pleased to find old pegs ready to be clipped.

The next two pitches were followed through until they could walk and scramble roped. There were a couple of down climbs, one followed by a peg-protected traverse above a large wall then a descent of a slab with a large step down to a lower slab. A couple of short walls and a chimney added interest to the general scene of views of the larger peaks and wild country all around.

After almost 6 hours on the ridge the **Pointe de Darbon** was reached at the western end and an abrupt descent had to be made without delay if they were to make the final night's booked meal out.

After a short steep grassy slope, a 25m abseil reached a ledge by an overhang where started the two-rope 45m abseil to a nettle-covered ridge. After a short refreshment stop it was along to the **Col de la Case d'Oche** and straight down to Bernex.

The **Point de Benevent**, 2069m 6788ft, and the **Pointes des Pavis**, 2075m 6808ft, and the **Dent du Velan**, 2059m 6755ft, were combined with other nearby peaks in a 'mopping up' day by the President and entourage. The round gave them good viewpoints and varied walking. On a plateau they came across over a hundred contented bouquetin in a single herd.

Les Arêtes du **Mont Chauffé**, 2093m 6867ft, above Abondance were circumnavigated clockwise by two while four left that pair at the first col and traversed the partly wooded dramatically narrow crenelated ridge to the east. The climbing the route was not well protected but neither was it especially difficult.

There was an abseil which we complicated by straying to the wrong side of a rib so initially missing the landing ledge. Regaining the route, a second abseil avoided a steep down-climb.

The route was scattered with edelweiss in full flower to the extent that it was impossible to avoid standing on some of them.

There were a number of notches in the ridge especially towards the summit end and these slowed our progress. The traverse took the rope of four about six hours to complete but that was not the end of the difficulties. A couple of steep drops and a short walk led to a shallow couloir or groove on the flank - a long scree of variable quality and depth.

All were glad to quit the scree and reach forest track.



Peter Chadwick ascending **Mont Chauffé**
with Kjetil Tveranger partly hidden



The far end of Mont Chauffé with the descent being
first left to the col then away from the viewpoint

The **Cornette de Bise**, 2432m 7900ft, forms part of the border with Switzerland and is the highest in the area. It was left until the end of the meet when most had departed and the Smiths started a three-day traverse of the area first crossing this peak and descending a complicated but well-marked route to the simple CAF Refuge de Bise. The final half-hour down to this hut saw the only day-time rain of the meet – a short sharp shower. Voles were spotted *en route*.

The **Pointe d'Arvouin**, 2021m 6630ft, and **Le Linlue**, 2093m 6867ft, lie fairly close together but with an impregnable crag blocking the frontier ridge joining them. From Abondance a fairly short and easy walk took five of us to a pretty lake and farm then a less distinct path gained the ridge at a col with a large cross. Mild scrambling was needed to reach the rocky top and grand views of the vertiginous north face of the next peak. It was back to the lake and a short cut up a very steep grass slope for a few hundred metres which led to a ridge with family groups of bouquetin playing

on rock pinnacles close to the path. The airy summit again gave good views before completing the round back to the car.

There is more to an alpine meet than the efforts on the hills. The spacious chalet just outside Bernexat Les Faverges, would have slept twelve and had ample room for us to cook or barbecue, eat then sit in comfort together. All the catering was communal and it worked out well. We each contributed 128€ (£1≈1.2€) for the accommodation and 45€ for the food including drinks.

Les Gorges du Pont du Diable (collapsed but suspended boulders across a deep narrow gorge) was a popular outing for a half day perhaps an hour away on the road to Morzine.

Nearer, at Chatel d'Abondance, a relatively new crag-crossing roadside *via ferrata* kept the Smiths amused for a few hours.

On the last evening we were all together, Tony and Nicole had organised a grand buffet meal at a local restaurant within walking distance of the chalet and thoughtfully downhill on the return leg. It was their music night and as the evening progressed with the other clients we were all clapping, dancing and joining in the choruses of I know not what. After a long day on the hill, a large meal with endless wine included, the energetic dances in particular were a challenge.

Alpine meets were camping meets for many years though sites were generally busy and facilities overstretched. Two years ago the meet was mainly hut-to-hut with only occasional use of a valley base and that arrangement worked for traversing an area of high peaks. This year the meet was chalet-based and that worked well as all the peaks were achievable as day trips from the roadheads. The chalet made the meet more sociable, cooperative and comfortable besides making the domestic side of things so much easier. Having two (three including Tony's) cars available helped everyone get to sensible starting points and made shopping easier – seven people eating well need a lot of supplies. Finding the right style of accommodation for the particular area and activities is important for a successful meet.

Attending were:

The President, Peter Chadwick

Tony Dunford

and Will Dunford (day visitor)

Jack Short

Michael

and Helen Smith

Richard Smith

Kjetil

and Ann-Karin Tveranger



A well exercised and well fed party on the last evening: Peter Chadwick and Jack Short in the front and behind, Tony Dunford, Helen and Michael Smith, Kjetil and Ann-Karin Tveranger, Nicole Mainaud and Richard Smith (standing)
(Photo Tony Dunford)



The chalet, inside photographed by Jack Short



A portable distillery recently outlawed but used for a long time on local farms to avoid the prohibition on distilling on private premises
(Jack Short)



Above - Via ferrata busy with a children's group – the 'pont' under the overhang is about 20m up

Right - Bouquetin

Edelweiss on Mont Chauffé

