

The walk varied between 33 and 37 miles.

David Smith

Attending:

Mick Borroff, Roger Dix, John Jenkin, Michael Smith, Derek Bush, Ged Campion, Graham Dootson, Harvey Lomas, Mike Godden, Tim Josephy, Derek Smithson, Frank Wilkinson, Albert Chapman, Iain Hawkes (PM) Arthur Salmon, Ian Crowther, Chris Hilton, David Smith

CORSICA - GR20

June 20-July 7

Preparation & Planning.

The story begins about a decade ago when Alan first wondered whether he "might do the GR20 one day". Time passed and more recently he decided to "have a look" and booked onto a guided trek on part of the Northern section. This done he decided it was a feasible trek for a party from the YRC to attempt and following a discussion with Stuart, a Fell & Rock Club member and guest at the 2005 Christmas meet, he realised that by combining several of the stages and using the refuges and Bergeries (shepherd/goatherd summer quarters) where conveniently placed, so that descent to the villages every evening for a gite or hotel would be avoided, it ought to be possible to do in about a fortnight.

The other principal question was whether to go N - S (by far the most frequently attempted way), or S - N? In deference to our average age and lack of proper "alpine fitness" we decided the latter would be wise. Our Corsican agent and advisor, Sarah, told us that the "commercial" tours rarely do the full length, Calenzana in the NE of Corsica to Conca in the SE, because it is very difficult for the average group to be able spend 14 days "on the hills" and do it on a normal 2 week break from work. They thus do not include one or more of the initial and later stages. Many people starting in the North and walking south, as most guide books are written that way, encounter tough stages early on, leading to high "fall-out". By combining some stages, to make our "long" days and having a couple of "light" ones, (it's all relative!) we could still have a "spare" day in case of bad weather delay; and still keep to our budget airline, homeward departure schedule.

Our individual preparation was varied and quite tricky for the rigours to be experienced, even on

our first "low land" walks. Alan had tried his best walking across Scotland with a heavier rucksack! Nothing can fully prepare one for the incessant steep up and downs; the rough paths of scree, small granite and shale-like "aggregate"; extensive boulder fields and "interesting" slabs and scrambling. Someone said it was nearest to the most precipitous part of the Welsh Rhinogs - but continuous for a fortnight! Availability of water replenishment "sources" was another critical factor. On occasions we needed to set out with 3 litres at least. We all had problems with ageing joints at one time or another and secret remedies and prophylactics were used unobtrusively to aid our daily deficiencies. We certainly acknowledged the wisdom of the S - N decision giving us a (relatively!) modest introduction to these "hills"; but we were unanimous that that first ascent from Conca between 0630 and 0830 on Day 1 was the most uncomfortable ascent of the lot.

We have detailed the itinerary in the table attached, for information and possible use for anyone doing all or part in the future.

The first week.

We had traversed the island from Ajaccio (pronounced "A-jacks-io") airport, by taxi and bus to St. Lucce on days minus 2 and minus 1; not without some excitements. The trip from airport to the city central was probably the hairiest taxi ride ever. From breakneck to pedestrian speed - "the photographs" our jovial driver remarked (he meant speed cameras) as we suddenly went at one third speed; and after 200 metres back to 80mph to swing round the corners of nether Ajaccio. The next day on the cross-island bus we were delayed almost an hour by a real "pantomime" of a hold up in a narrow mountain village street with passers by and our driver attempting (largely failing) to sort out impetuous "Latin" motorists: and later our passengers getting off the bus to "bounce" a badly parked vehicle blocking our passage, onto the pavement.

The first "gite night" at Conca was hot and sticky and "enlivened" by a fire alarm (false), shortly before midnight. Breakfasting at 0545 on Day 1 we were slightly surprised to find people already departing. Following shortly afterwards we were soon in a "muck sweat", and "blooded", as we tackled the narrow stony path up through the sharp-thorned "maquis" covered slopes, on our ascent to the first landmark; the Bocca (col)

D'Usciolu. Mist was swirling around and we donned waterproofs in a vain attempt to keep dry. Vain because the humidity at a mere 600 metres was so oppressive we were wet through either way. The "Maquis" is the self same as the French Resistance of WWII fame. The Corsican rebels never gave in to the Axis forces and bred their sister organisation in mainland France in about 1941. That day improved with some magnificent scenery and shady forest paths and a little bit of what was to become familiar - the incredibly mixed and often treacherously unstable footholds on "terra firma". We all had subsequent slips, slides and tumbles; fortunately all in recoverable places and with no permanent damage; but the continuous concentration required added to the fatigue factor throughout the trek.

Our overnight stay at Bavella was comfortable and we were (mainly) able to dry things off - very necessary but not always possible subsequently. We were tired, as expected, as this was a "2 stage day". So Day 2 was in marked contrast; a later departure and an "easy" walk to the Bergerie d'Asinou was expected. Well we selected the alternative, "alpine" route, "to give Rob some experience to slabs, scrambling and exposure". As we negotiated the Aiguilles, coming off the highest point of this route, at about 1800m, we lost the way-marks (properly called "Balisees") but continued on down the corrie following a clear line of cairns. We stopped for lunch during which we decided we must return to the path we'd erroneously left - thus obeying rule 1 of Corsican walking. Meanwhile two young French women who had followed us down the line of cairns sat down and got out their lunch, only to re-pack it as we started off. "You led us down so you can lead us back please". Sophie and Emily were good companions, worked in London and were heading for the same Bergerie. We left them having a late lunch and dawdled our way to Asinou. But not before cooling our feet in the stream just below it. We did contemplate a swim but tacitly decided that a first summer dip in water at about 4 deg. C was not advisable for hot "pensioners".

At the end of the trip this Bergerie was a unanimous favourite. Not, it has to be confirmed because of Emily, on her first big walk, and Sophie. We were offered a warm shower. This we gratefully accepted but not knowing it was to be "al fresco" behind a rock with a magnificent view down the valley. We all shared a meal together, either side of the table of Angeline and Pierre-Doh

(PD), the Bergerie keepers; with PD at the end and Angeline serving. The meal was enhanced by the young women's instantaneous translation. This not only gave us valuable information about Corsican food in general and that menu in particular, but allowed us to make and understand comments and enjoy repartee, otherwise very difficult. We sat closely packed on benches at the table in flickering candle light. We enjoyed local ham, fresh pasta, a tasty gruel containing chestnuts, fennel and a hint of aniseed, followed by home made cheese with fig jam and finally a coarse oat (?) biscuit. These are mentioned as being typical Corsican fare but not repeated necessarily subsequently. We were rather late to our bunks at 2215.

Next morning was cool as we did our ablutions wherever we could find a bit of privacy. The French women, though originally included in our space, had been allotted another, next door, but joined us for breakfast outside the bunkrooms in the cool of dawn. Angeline embraced us all and we were soon climbing the Monte Alcludina, some 700m above us which we reached, somewhat breathlessly, in less than 3 hours. This included a bit of scrambling and slabs - more good practice for later. The descent and walk on the lower valleys towards Bassetta included some very different and attractive meadows and forest on this alternative (to the GR20) "liaison" route so as to include the gite at Bassetta. This was quite different to Asinou, being on a dirt road, and more accessible. It was a granite cabin and café with some camping, chalets and a bunkroom. A more sophisticated solar heated shower than Asinou was enjoyed and we washed clothes and generally relaxed having had a shorter day. We were fed early and two of us in our bags by 2030: soon followed by the others.

We were half awakened by some more people entering with torches and faint whispers about 2330. As we crept about silently departing the following morning the two shapes on the upper bunks woke up and said - "Good morning, we hope we didn't make too much noise as we came in to share a bunkroom with 4 old men after all". We were surprised! Sophie and Emily were supposed to be at another place on a different route - but there had been no-one there when they arrived about 1800. They'd set off walking to somewhere else and a "very old man" in a vehicle had pitied their plight and assisted them; bringing them to Bassetta at about 2300 where Madame had given them a welcome hot meal before they'd turned in. We wished them a good rest of their trek,

and were off by soon after 0700 on a beautiful morning; though we had a bit of difficulty finding the start of this "Liaison" route back to GR20 at Bocca di L'Agnone which we reached within the "designated/book" time of 2 hours.

Then followed one of those spectacular ridge walks for which the route is famous; memorable for us all. We could see the Mediterranean in the distance on both sides of the island. It was up to 35 deg. C and "too hot" for us really in the direct sun, but a cool wind when high up and in the shade of rocks. We arrived at the Refuge d' Uscoli about 1430. It seemed crowded but all was well and we, as "Tour Aventure" (TA) clients, were allocated the first four lower bunks with the warning it might reduce to 3 later. We were fed (pasta, vegetable and some meat), with TA preferential treatment on the, by now distinctly cool, terrace, and so in anticipation of an early start next a.m., we were soon abed. The bunkroom was full and the top layer all chattering away. But at some secret signal there was instant "hush" and the only sound the howling of the wind and occasional snore. Setting off at 0630 we had a good, but long, two stage walk to the Gite at Col de Verde, skipping the Capanelle refuge: probably the best meal, shower and bunk-room (except the outer shutters which broke loose in the high wind. Here, next morning, after a hurried breakfast at 0705 we soon appreciated this was going to be a windy and longer day than perhaps we'd hoped. The wind roared though a lattice tele-communication tower beneath an invisible col in the trees - and sounding like some moaning monster. Further on, on that long walk, the wind was very strong and we were almost lifted off our feet when it rose to a (reported) 120 k.p.h. Just over the col at Palmente, we came across a young French woman bandaging her damaged knee. She had been lifted bodily and "landed" heavily on it. Her husband had called for a helicopter: we halted to help in any way we could, which in the end was David, staying behind to help the helicopter land and assist the woman and the medic in their hazardous evacuation. We remaining three then descended through the pleasant woodland to a made dirt road, where David caught us up an hour or so later as we approached our destination - the gite at the Col de Vizzavona.

During this first week Derek who had been feeling under-nourished, not being able to cope with the cold pasta/rice picnic lunches, became over-tired and was contemplating leaving us on day 8 at Grotelle. Alan advised that the nearest route to a

railhead to re-connect to Ajaccio was to stay with us only until Ref. L'Onda and walk out from there, as the rest of us left for Grotelle. He reluctantly decided to do this. L'Onda had been very crowded on the previous windy day but (apart from the rubbish bins and single "squat" toilet) served us well. There were even 2 grab handles on the inside of the door at strategic heights.

(Derek adds:- After leaving the other three (at 0640), I followed the GR20 down towards the Bergeries de Tolla and then a big track to the roadheads at Canaglia/ Apart from being short of food there were reasons why I should get home. A walk of 4 km. on the road: a wait in Tattone; a train to Ajaccio; some angst at the airport and then Nice and Leeds by midnight). He had had a long day!

The Second week

Many more spectacular and beautiful views, "stiff" ascents and "loose underfoot" descents punctuated our progress over the next few days. We saw Mountain Swifts, Eagles, Kites, lizards galore and Choughs. The sun shone and the wind blew. We got stronger and nearer to the predicted "walking" times (see table attached); we looked forward with a tri-partite "melange" of masochistic glee, fervent desire for more rocks, and faint apprehension - to the last few days' challenges. We were blessed with good conditions for these final adventures and looking back on them, we were perhaps justifiably a bit smug; the "Cirque de Solitude"; the French-man jovially claiming up-hill right of way passage on account of his "great age" being deflated by David responding, indicating that our average age was in excess of his alone; the camaraderie with our fellow north-going travellers whom we regularly came across in refuges etc: and that long, final descent, punctuated by joviality (de-mob happy?) and tuneful singing of whatever we could remember words for, on the path to Calenzana. We watched our footing diligently but still had a few inadvertent "sit-downs" and slides on that descent.

After such a trip there is inevitably much more that could be recorded in detail. We are left with indelible memories of a great experience. We think we are the first YRC group to have attempted the whole GR20 though many YRC people have been there. Corsica is a wonderful mountaineering, rock climbing, trekking, or just walking area and beckons again. It is difficult to envisage a large YRC meet, (official, open or closed) on account of the logistics and distances.

But plans are being hatched for a "private" YRC outing in 2008 (or beyond) whilst "people are fit enough to cope"! This would probably not be a long distance trek but a more concentrated, perhaps rock climbing; or a "top-bagging" venture? The rewards are for the taking and it's only about 4 hours flying time from LBA and a bit less from MAN.

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Attending

Derek Collins; David Hick; Rob Ibberson; Alan Kay



Photographs

- Derek, David & Rob surveying the route
- David on the lookout point
- Ascending the Cirque de Solitude
- Alan & Rob, on way down to Calenzana

GR20 June-July 2007. Details of daily Itinerary

Day	From	Dep time	Ht(m)	To	Arr time	Ht (m)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	Book time (hr.m)	Our time * (hr.m)	Remarks
-2	LBA	1230		Ajaccio	2145						Jet 2 & AirFrance
-1	Ajaccio	0834		Conca	1540	230					Bus
1	Conca	0635	230	Bavella	1640	1218	1300	300	8.00	10.05	2 stages
2	Bavella	0810	1218	Berg. Asinau	1545	1442	500	200	5.10	7.35	
3	Berg. Asinau	0735	1442	Gite Basseta	1520	1300	730	930	5.30	7.45	
4	Gite Basseta	0720	1300	Ref. Usciolu	1430	1820	400	90	4.30	7.10	Part off track
5	Ref. Usciolu	0635	1820	Col de Verde	1445		700	1177	7.35	8.10	
6	Col de Verde	0725		Gite Vizzavona	1750	1163	350	760	9.10	9.25	2 stages skipping Capanelle
7	Gite Vizzavona	0730	1163	Ref. L'Onda	1500	1385	1100	600	6.10	7.30	DC left for rail head a.m. day 8
8	Ref. L'Onda	0640	1385	Berg. Grotelle	1505	1360	800	800	9.45	8.25	Skipped Ref. Petrapiana
9	Berg. Grotelle	0710	1360	Berg. de Vaccaghia	1500	1620	935	685	6.00	6.50	
10	Berg. De Vaccaghia	0705	1620	Ref. Ciottolu	1700	1990	750	300	9.00	11.55	2 stages skipping Castellu de Bergio
11	Ref. Ciottolu	0735	1990	Berg. Vallone	1100	1430		550	4.30	3.25	
12	Berg. Vallone	0625	1430	Gite Haut Asco	1320	1480	1000	1000	6.30	6.55	
13	Gite Haut Asco	0605	1480	Ref. Ortu de Pubbiu	1610	1400	1218	1090	9.35	10.05	Skipped Carrozu
14	Ref. Ortu de Pubbio	0705	1400	Calenzana then Calvi	1201	270		1295	5.00	4.56	Taxi to Calvi
+1	Calvi	0834		Ajaccio	1320						2 trains changing Ponte-Leccia
+2	Ajaccio	1510		LBA	2030						

* Note "book" time is "walking time" only; our time includes all stops