

Alpine Meet

Laruns- Pyrenees.

15 - 29 June 2002

A non-committal shrug was offered by the President to the question 'Where would you like the meet to be based?'

Inspiration came from the first chapter 'Short of the Folding Stuff' in Tom Price's book 'Travail So Gladly Spent'. Tom describes a visit to the area and an adventure on a striking mountain Pic du Midi d'Ossau – it seemed just the right place for the YRC. Hard climbing, plenty of walking opportunities, huts abound and the mountains not too high.

The meet was based at Camping du Valentine, an excellent site run by Madame Pelnier who agreed to provide a group area, the only site in the area to offer this facility and essential for a meet.

As the activities developed we soon found parallels with the narrative in 'The Folding Stuff'. Reference is made to a statement by Sir Martin Coway who observed 'That climbers were on the whole too much interested in summits to the neglect of the rest of the mountains'. YRC alpine meets are tending towards neglect of summits! The first group trip out was by car to the Col du Pourtalet, on the Spanish border, and a delightful walk into the gentle meadows of the Cirque d'Aneou. Here, surrounded by vertical towers of limestone but insignificant summits, it was sufficient to enjoy the terrain, the views, animals and the fresh flowers. Derek B and David S could not resist a summit and finished off the day by an ascent of Pic d'Aneou (2364m.) finding a teaspoon on the summit, probably left by the Linfords on a 'recce' trip in 2001.

Open meets by definition, bring a wide range of abilities and aspirations to the area selected which needs to have a wide range of walks, climbs and places of interest to make the meet attractive. Laruns had all the ingredients but only attracted a core of 13 people, insufficient to give a broad mix of parties to exploit the potential. Perhaps after 20 years this style of alpine meet has run its course. All enjoyed the meet and maybe the Club will replace this form of alpine meet with a summer meet, paying a lot of attention to the 'rest of the mountains'

Tom recalls 'at Laruns the noonday sun smote us like a hammer'. The meet had a similar experience, 39 degrees C. on one day, we were melting in the unseasonable weather but it was delightful on the tops. One day of mist on the tops, one hair raising electric storm (which only lasted for 2 hours), some cooling mist in the valley on the whole good weather was had by all.

All members had a trip to Lac d'Artouste via the cable car and the scenic 10km. ride on the Petit Train d'Artouste (Arriving the Lac about 1045). This gives excellent access to a group of high mountains. Two groups attempted Palas 2974m excellent rock but too many distractions to top out and catch the last train back at 1718. Distractions? Well you have all seen them, Gentians, so blue, so fresh, in the most unlikely places and the Lacs d'Arremoulit - icebergs- ice floes blue and green, Sir Martin would have been proud of us. One group walking back to the valley from the Lac had to turn back and catch the last train due to steep soft snow on the Col le Lurien.2342m.

Tom's ascent of the Pi du Midi d'Ossau was assisted by a meeting with soldiers from the Chasseurs Alpins of the French Army camping at Bois-Artiques, now the Lac de Bois-Artiques. The Presidents party, David Smith and Derek Bush, (overnight at the Pombie hut) finding themselves on the mountain without a rope, befriended a young Frenchman David Gerbeaud, who provided protection for these 'adventurous' Englishmen, accompanied them to the summit and later joined the party in camp for a cordial evening. Later in the week the Linfords, at the second attempt, reached the summit but started from the Col du Pourtalet. (4hrs 45m.) Only 11 people on the mountain that day 5 English, 4 French and a Spanish guide and his client. A memorable day with wall to wall sunshine.

On the pretext of visiting the Grottes de Betharran David Smith and John Lovett called in at Lourdes. The caves were well worth a visit and we wait to see the result of visit to the other venue.

Jack Short completed the two-day extended tour of Pic du Midi, finishing in camp and earning a lift to Pau to catch his train home.

Excursions made:- Tour of Pic du Midi and Pic Peyreget (a delightful camp site at Lac de Peyreget), the remainder of the Cirque d'Aneou, the promenade from Eaux-Bonnes, the Valentine valley from Col d'Aubisque and the Ayous Lake Circuit.

Here a note of caution - on the circuit of Lac de Bious-Artiques we watched leeches, tails anchored, trying to catch tadpoles. This did not

deter Dennis from the obligatory swim in the Lac. (In memory of Peter Swindells - the strong advocate of 'skinny bathing'). Tom Price take note: should he return to the spot where he camped many years ago. The Ayous Lakes abound with leeches.

Flies were a pest, the evening swatting cleaned up next morning by fledgling robins, bullfinches and chaffinches, enough, said John Lovett for fledglings to attain Griffin proportions.

The many raptors and flowers noted in the guides were often discussed.

Debate was slightly below par, probably due to the altitude, the most sensible conclusion reached was 'that the Club should spend more money on the quality of printing of the Bulletin'.

It seems Laruns is, and will remain, a remote alpine centre as it was clear that EEC regulations have not reached village, cooked and uncooked meats in the same display and a plentiful supply of much needed sticky fly-catchers banned by Brussels.

The last parallel-At Laruns Tom Price sold coffee to survive, in 1957 at the Grotto Caracas I exchanged coffee for cheese to survive- that's another story.

Alan Linford





Pic du Midi d'Ossau from afar and David, Derek and Albert on the top



Pic du Midi d'Ossau

Each climber has in his mind the mountain which is a symbol of each range. The Matterhorn is to the Alps as Ama Dablam is to the Himalaya, as Mount Assinbourne is to the Rocky Mountains and as Ingleborough is to the Dales. Without doubt Pic du Midi d'Ossau is the symbol of the Pyrennees. So four members David Smith, Derek and Yvonne Bush, John Lovett and I drove towards the Spanish border on a hot afternoon.

It was suggested that we park not at the high car park from where the walking time to the Refuge de Pombie is 1hour 15mins but at the lower one where the first hour of this 2½ hour walk enjoys the shelter of the forest. The logic of this indicates the suggestion came from the accountant in our midst.

The refuge was almost empty so early was the season and our superb evening meal was prepared by the delightful hut guardian.

We sat in the evening in the shelter of the entrance watching the cloud scapes, thunder and lightning and real heavy rain. Our fifth member Alan Linford enjoyed no shelter from the storm and when half way to the refuge turned back and phoned us later from Laruns.

Next morning three set off for the mountain while Lovett and Yvonne returned to the valley. Our view was dominated by the huge bronze south face as we ascended a low pass and followed an easy ridge to the foot of a more serious climb.

We had each been given flawed advice from our friends in the valley: "It's like Striding Edge" or "the Skye ridge." The 25-year-old guide edited by our late member Louise Baume said the route was festooned with

protruding metal spikes. For these reasons we left our rope in the valley. Our group of three, with average age over seventy, sat and pondered our situation. We saw only two metal spikes and one was loose. We regretted leaving our rope behind. We were in two minds whether to abandon our climb when a shining knight appeared with the name of David, a young mountain guide of the French Alpine Club.

He had a rope and was delighted to join a trio of old Brits. The scramble up the warm rocks was a pleasure with the added security of the rope on the hairy bits. A superb day with extensive clear views from the summit that we enjoyed alone save for an odd Spaniard who climbed by.

On our descent I managed to kick the loose metal spike free and it fell with a pleasant ringing sound to the bottom of the last pitch.

Our French friend departed south (to join us for supper at Laruns that night) and we walked north through pleasant meadows and cool woodland to where our friends collected us from the popular car park by the Refuge de Bios Antiques.

Albert Chapman

Attendance:

The President, Albert Chapman
Dennis and Joan Armstrong
George and Vivian Burfitt and friends
Derek and Yvonne Bush
Derek English
Mike and Marcia Godden
David Handley
Alan and Angie Linford
John Lovett
Jack Short
David Smith