

A Long Weekend in the Northern Vosges

A good turnout was rewarded by four days of almost ideal climbing weather (unlike in Belgium apparently). No rain, enough sun to give that 'weathered' appearance (at least to those of fairer complexion), and invigorating temperatures.

A reservation had been made at a campsite in Niederbronn; rendezvous was set for early afternoon following the mad dash from Brussels on the Thursday morning. It was satisfying to be able to leave the wet weather behind by the time the Luxembourg border had been reached - the only worry was that said weather might catch us up later.

The afternoon's activities began badly! Jon tried juggling with the mountain bike as he detached it from the car - first wound of the weekend (puncture, forearm, deep). Later during the weekend he reverted to using juggling balls, with much greater success. Then Peter discovered his brand new GSM had somehow been damaged 'in transit' - second wound of the weekend (bereavement, v. deep).

After some rather imprecise direction finding, various cars eventually found their way to one of the local crags, Waldeck, where siege tactics resulted in the ascent of most of the 4's and 5's, a few of the 6's and one 7a+. However, this first day, as with all visits to new areas, was more one of familiarisation; i.e. getting used to the rock, the grades and the objective dangers (mainly mosquitoes).

Of the 16 present, three were non-climbers, though only because they were under-age. However, the youngest does have a very cute pair of rock shoes...now that's what I call a good start in life - to think, what I could have achieved if I'd had my own gear at the age of 2½! That evening saw the full team in the very convivial local restaurant. I was especially lucky, managing to select a 'menu' with profiteroles as the only choice for dessert, and being seated between two very charming ladies.

Friday dawned. I was woken by some very loud noises. Birds. Well, it makes a pleasant change from the wailing of sirens in the vicinity of the hospital in Ixelles. Strange, after three days I'd got used to the birds, but I've still not got used to the sirens even after several months. Still, we did have something to thank our feathered friends for. Apparently, the two female falcons that usually nest on another of the local crags, Windstein, had decided to take a year off from motherhood, so no 'bird ban' this year. This crag has some 80 routes, most of which are equipped, and many are of very good quality. OK, there is a shortage of 4's and 5's, but that's only because the rock is so steep!

Most of the outcrops in this part of the world featured some form of castle or fortification in medieval times; at Windstein this 'fortification' was almost totally integrated into the rock itself: rooms hewn out of solid sandstone, bottomless wells, passageways and steps cut into the walls, even a little turret room on the very top of the crag. All this is but a ruin nowadays, but it does add interest to the climbing; there are some pretty big chipped holds on the crag! (or was that where the roof beams went?) Even better, the crag comes with its own restaurant, where the local speciality is tarte flambée (really just a thin, square pizza with burnt edges...but very nice).

On Saturday the plan was to visit the largest crag in the region, Kronthal, on the main road between Strasbourg and Saverne. This is in fact an old quarry, with some very impressive wall routes and even more impressive routes through huge horizontal overhangs. But so much for the grade 8's! A buttress at the far right of the crag was more to the liking of the majority of the team, with a very pleasant long grade 5 corner even featuring in the list of recommended routes.

The team gained in confidence during the day and started making forays into grade 6 territory. Robert, alias the Flying Dutchman, went further...a lot further. Not content with his minor lobs on day one, he went for the big whipper (back flip with half twist) from (beyond) the top of some 6a. Equilibrium was re-established with him some 15 metres lower and Isabelle, the unlucky belayer, at the first bolt. Third wound of the weekend (graze, Isabelle's elbow, quite sore). Oh yes, and Robert head-butted the cliff on the way down and ended up spending a night in hospital (what these Dutch will do to avoid paying for one night in a campsite!). At first we all thought it was more serious, since he didn't seem to know what country he was in - but that was simply because we were in Alsace, where even the locals seem unsure.

Eventually, after the pompiers, SAMU etc. had left, calm returned to the crag (or at least as far as possible considering the RN4 runs just in front) and I returned to my 'project', on which I'd been literally about to start the crux sequence when all the commotion started. Now how did it go again? Ah yes, three slaps to rounded side-pulls, an egyptian, a dyno for a pocket, a thin crimp with a difficult clip, a high step with rock-over and a long reach for a pinch; c'est du gâteau! [Glossary available on request.]

And back at the local restaurant I ate somebody else's profiteroles.

And so to the final day. The obvious choice of crag was the Grotte de Brotsch near Saverne, since this enabled Robert to be conveniently collected from the local hospital en route. We arrived just as he was tucking into his Sunday roast - so that's a free lunch as well as a free night! Still, I shouldn't complain, since I ended up eating the dessert (no, it wasn't profiteroles). The crag itself was well hidden in the woods, and sported a rather large 'grotte', as indeed it's name would suggest. The easier routes were apparent on the more manageably angled rock to the sides, so these were well exploited. Even one of the main cave routes proved to be very enjoyable, with plenty of 'inverted' moves, leg hooks etc. all at quite a reasonable grade.

Well, all that remained was to consume another dose of tarte flambée and then to set the cruise control for the flight back to Brussels.

I would certainly visit the area again, especially the impressive red Vosgian sandstone walls at Kronthal. And there are always those profiteroles...

Simon

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