

# Climbing the learning curve in the Pyrenees, Écrins and Saas

by Clare Cummings



*Andrew reaches the summit of the north spur of Petit Vignemale (Pyrenees) - Clare Cummings*

I consider myself a newcomer to alpine mountaineering. Confident hill walker, keen trad climber, very familiar with long days out, unpleasant weather and coming home in the dark. But the Alps are something else. A couple of years ago, I attended an Alpine Club Aspirants' Meet where I had my first taste of the excitement of 4000m peaks. The following summer, I returned to the Alps for more adventure, steeper snow, longer rock routes and a growing love for mountaineering. Conscious, however, that there is so much to learn (and so many potential mistakes to make), this year I took a winter climbing course at Glenmore Lodge, generously supported by the AAC(UK) training grant. It was a fantastic course and left me excited to test my skills this summer. Was I ready for some harder routes?

Eager to find out, this July some friends and I set out for the French Pyrenees. We had just over a week to explore and climb. Starting near Bagnères de Luchon, we decided to 'warm up' on the South-East ridge of the Pic de Spijeoules (AD+). Andrew, thankfully, is much better at route finding than me so we did at least start in the right place. The climbing went well until perhaps the fourth pitch when it felt distinctly like E1. What is there to do but focus and climb

on, looking for an easier route which must be there somewhere? It was a good start, if slow, and we returned to the hut feeling satisfied but wondering why it had taken so long.

Eager for more, we returned to the valley and drove on to the beautiful spa town of Cauterets. This time we set our sights on a harder route, the north spur of the Petit Vignemale (D). The walk in felt long, carrying our tent as well as our gear but the camping spot was sublime. Setting off early, I was confident, excited even if my climbing partner was looking decidedly worried. We found the route and started well. The rock was far from solid and I approached the 40m slab section with some trepidation. However, the climbing was easy and we made our way steadily up on to a fantastically exposed ridge line to the summit. Andrew flopped over the cairn and declared it the best route of his life to date. It definitely felt like an achievement and a rather long day out. Still, we were well over guidebook time and I wondered what we were doing wrong.

A few more satisfying routes in the Pyrenees and I waved goodbye to my friends and made my way to France to meet another climbing partner, Richard. Chasing the sunshine, Richard and I drove down to Ailefroide in the Écrins national park. Seizing a small window of sunny weather, we walked up to Sélé Hut to try Super Pilou (TD) on the Aiguille de Sialouze. This was a bit of a step up the grade ladder for me so I was excited and curious to see how I would cope.



*Richard descending from Super Pilou, Aiguille de Sialouze (Ecrins) - Clare Cummings*

Aiming for guidebook time, we climbed efficiently, allowing ourselves 30 minutes at most per pitch. Much quicker than I'd been climbing in the Pyrenees. There was no time for missing belay points or wavering over which route to take. Good rock and a pleasing line helped of course! Six hours after leaving our crampons on the glacier, we were on top of the Aiguille, revelling in the spectacular Écrins skyline. We happily located the well-bolted abseil point and down we went. After a few exasperated comments from Richard, I learnt how to speed up my descent, make smoother change overs and, nine abseils later, we were back on the glacier.

After a few more days in the Écrins, Richard and I travelled to Switzerland to join a BMC Meet in the Saas Valley. We ticked off the Weissmies traverse (D) and a lesser climbed pinnacle, the Grande Gendarme on the Jegigrat (D). These two taught me more lessons in how to move more quickly over challenging ground and not let the exposure take hold of my head. At times, I felt rushed, annoyed that there wasn't more time to take in the Alpenglow but the prospect of descending slushy snow pushed me on. I was getting a sense of what it feels like, physically and mentally, to complete harder alpine routes.



It was a valuable and, of course, enjoyable summer season. I was disappointed to discover how much more room for improvement there is but, on reflection, this seems silly. Of course, I'm still slowly climbing up a steep learning curve and, with one trip to the Alps per year, progress might not be so fast. I have gained lots of experience since my first alpine climbing trip. This is thanks in particular to the AAC(UK) and AC for training opportunities and meets where I've met great climbing partners and had the privilege to explore beautiful mountains.



*Early morning on the west ridge of the Weissmies (Saas) - Clare Cummings*