

This Beating Heart - climbing in the Pyrenees

by Ellie Stewart

Grand Dièdre des Spijeoles from Refuge du Portillon, Haute-Garonne, France



Climbing in the Pyrenees, View from top - Ellie Stewart

I can smell the bread from the oven, and I wonder if this is the highest *boulangerie* in the Pyrenees. We're in the middle of a cirque of mountains over 3000m high, part of the frontier ridge with Spain. To be served hot food at all is remarkable. Tonight's menu is cream of vegetable soup, spaghetti bolognese, local cheese and a milk pudding with finely grated orange peel.

The talk stretches beyond the mountains: education, Europe, Ramadan, honey, literature and septic tanks. There's a man in his seventies who spends all summer in the mountains and a science teacher from Marseilles who takes groups of school children out to the Calanques. It's just at the end of their bus route, but they've never been. The engineering student's boots have burst on the way up and the *gardien* suggests a drill and some wire.

The walking group from Ariège are enjoying their wine but I opt for a clear head and an early bed. That sounds simple, pragmatic even, but it's loaded. I'm learning what I can cope with and what I can't. What's good for me and what isn't. I left some of the cheese at dinner. 'I usually eat too much,' I say. 'I never learn.' 'It's never too late to learn,' replies the teacher.

My dreams are vivid at altitude. I dream about the tiny frogs that surprised me on the wet path. The smell of the wild raspberries in the woods. And I've got a vague headache, the result of accidentally going cold turkey on caffeine. 'Cold turkey' doesn't translate literally into French, but everyone's seen Trainspotting.

Breakfast at six. My guide Julien and I talk about our children; how impossible it can seem and how quickly they grow up. Once, when he came back from an expedition, he didn't recognise his daughter at nursery. I can tell he's missing them already. He's been three days in the mountains, and I hope I climb quickly enough for him to have dinner at home.

The first cairn is illuminated by our head torches. This one might be a hundred years old. Or older. I don't know if it was first placed by *bergers* bringing their 2 sheep up for the summer, or by the workers on the hydro-electric scheme. The dam and tunnels at Portillon were built in 1929. There are crystals in the rock that sparkle.

My mouth is dry. Is it altitude or nerves? Maybe both. Am I fit enough for this? I've been climbing indoors all year, but the guidebook says this is eleven pitches of *difficile*. My boots are a bit worn and my muscles not as elastic as they were. A niggle in my left calf reminds me of an old injury and I stop and stretch.



Lac et Refuge du Portillon - Susie Hillhouse

The point where our route diverges from the main path is marked by a bowl, like a font, hewn into a rock. The path we'll follow is the Sentier des Mineurs, built early last century by miners going every day to the Lac Glacé du Port d'Oô where they were boring a tunnel. I imagine the miners scooping rainwater to drink as they carried their tools and equipment to the lake.



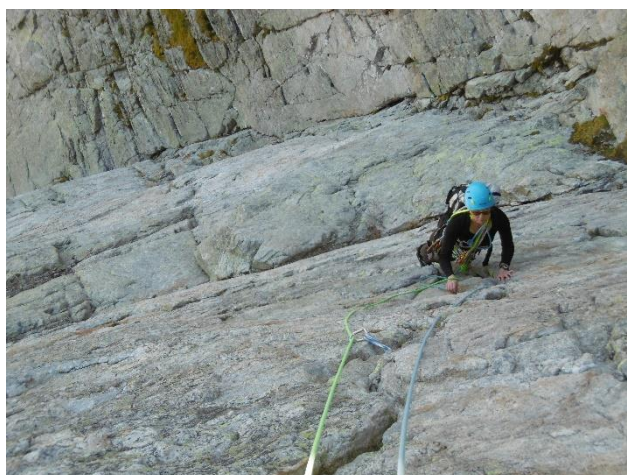
Retour Julien Laporte – Ellie Stewart

karabiner. It bounces off the rock and disappears into the emptiness below. So like me. So embarrassing. I feel clumsy. And old. One bold move out on to the sunny slab and we scuttle to the top. It's a clear September day and the surrounding peaks look close. We can see climbers on the Gourgs Blancs.

Back down at the main path, a stray dog is causing concern. The owner isn't around and it could scare the sheep. Julien is heading home and I go back up to the refuge. The Spaniards have arrived. The refuge team might have a mountain rescue mission to attend. There's a queue for the hot shower (cold

We don't talk much. Happy to be guided by someone who knows the way, I'm concentrating on placing my feet carefully, looking ahead and at the ground beneath my feet. The terrain varies; a narrow ledge carved into a face, a bed of gigantic boulders that Julien crosses in bold leaps. Then a short, heart-pumping slog up some loose scree to the foot of the climb.

And we're there. The Grand Dièdre; the obvious and classic corner in the East face of the Spijeoles (from Gascon for 'little rills'). The sun is already warming the granite when we start and we climb the varied line up the corner; in layback, in opposition, with pleasure, and the occasional inelegant grunt. Then a shadow creeps over the crack. I shiver and drop a



Dalle - Julien Laporte

is available). But there's time for a cup of tea in the kitchen.

Next day, on my way back down to the Granges d'Astau, I cross a woman in her eighties resting on a wall. 'Is it far to the Lac d'Oô?' I answer as honestly as I can. 'You've come a long way already and you've still got a bit to go.' 'I've got all day,' she replies.



Refuge Portillon - Susie Hillhouse



Lac Glacé - Julien Laporte