

Changes of mind

The next day we again packed up camp and headed for the Anza. This was day twelve of our adventure and some of us had not had a shower since leaving Ireland; while this is not unusual for me it was an experience for the others but I can tell you we were great friends with the facility by night time. Morning came and brought sunshine but before the factor four suncream had time to settle it was teeming with rain again so we went for a run on the Anza which was a lovely river with good rapids along the way with the most interesting part not far from the finish. Two large pipes appeared on the river and it was a question of left or right so we said that we would get out and have a look; there was a digger on one side of the river with an Italian construction worker directing the whole *operation* with an umbrella in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He pointed to the right side. Marcus and Dave went first and had a terrible ride in low water and then '*my friend*' changed his mind and told us to go left, that he had made a mistake which turned out to be all right, a good river all the same.

The lowest water levels since 1943

Over dinner we talked about the low water levels and that wasn't enough in Piemonte to keep us there so we, through the powers of democracy, decided to head back to Switzerland and for the Rhone in particular. The weather was picking up again and on the way our German contingent informed us of the constant water on the Rhone so, with enthusiasm and excitement, we arrived in Brig which is on the Rhone and to our shock and disappointment it was not an oasis for us but merely a spit. Spiderman went to investigate and came back, amazed, with the information that it was the lowest water levels since 1943. *Hm*, people talk about the luck of the Irish. Next trip will be hillwalking, I reckon, at this rate.

Someone mentioned Embrun, the home of many gems, and we all knew the area well as we were all there before. We decided that six hours of travelling was a bit much while taking a chance on the water level so we decided on ringing the kayak shop there and asking them about the levels and, believe or not, a bit of luck fell upon us as Larry had had the telephone number on the back of his van since the previous year. The news from there was favourable so we headed off. Down we went through Chamonix and a great scenic view of Mount Blanc. We arrived in Briançon at 23.30, which wasn't bad going, and we set up camp and fell asleep.

Like a box of chocolate

We awoke next morning and headed for the Guil to paddle from the steps to the dam which felt strange as we had been here before and had no intention of doing it this year but, as Forrest Gump would say, 'Life is like a box of chocolate... you never know what you're gonna get'. After the Guil we headed up to camp on the banks of the Onde. Before camp was set up, though, we had a run on the Gyr, a great river which was full of action all the way. We then set up camp and made dinner. It had been raining for a while and we went to have a look at the River Onde which was rising but also turning a nasty grey brown type of colour, after which we went back to the tents for the night.

Flashing through the tent

Morning came and we awoke to the sound of thunder and the sight of lightning flashing through the tent. Breakfast today was a very slow affair; we were blessed that Claus had brought a big canopy with which to cover the kitchen. When the time had come for us to go out paddling, the skies were clearing and the rains had stopped but this did not affect the river rising by a half a metre from when we had looked the previous night. Our paddle got underway explosively with no eddies, just continuous fast water which led to a quick descent of the Onde. This was most enjoyable. We then decided to go to look at the water level in the Durance gorge. It looked fine so we gave it a go. In fact, it was probably a little low but still a great paddle, nevertheless, after which we headed back to camp. Our plan was to finish paddling the valley and then to cross over to the Guil. We chose to do a second run on the Onde and then the Gyr and from there onto the Guisane. When we got to the Gyr we were becoming aggravated while waiting for the exhilarating run which was awaiting us to begin. As we paddled down the torrent Mike found a killer eddy; enough said, I reckon. We got off the Gyr and onto the Guisane which was a good paddle but had changed somewhat since the previous year. We then found a campsite in Briançon which just happened to be the social centre of the ant population in France who very kindly found the time to chew on my back and left some lovely marks on it to this day.

She gave me a thumbs up

We had a chat about our plans for the next day and decided on doing the Guil, Château-Queyras, and then onto the Ange Gardien. Morning came (funnily enough) and off we went to the Guil and the château which provided us with a fine paddle due to its isolation, beauty and difficulty, which we all came through grandly with Larry adding his usual piece of spice by making sure our rescue techniques were up to scratch and they were. What lay ahead was an enthralling paddle, as some of us knew. We had a great trip hopping from eddy to eddy and negotiating the rapids.

We came to one drop near the end of the gorge which is usually a portage but ahead we saw some paddlers having a look at it and I caught a glimpse of a green Corsica dropping over. As we walked up to the drop we met an English paddler who told us the line that his friends took. There was a line and it looked very doable but, if missed, the right did not look too kayak friendly and the lead into the drop had a number of rocks just under the surface of the water which would cause a tad of a problem I'd reckon! Decisions, decisions... I saw the green Corsica and she gave me a thumbs up and pointed to the mentioned line. I decided to give it a shot and after a few adjustments my line was fine and I arrived safely through to the eddy below. On a big high now after finishing this run, we decided to continue on down to the dam which was a long paddle and we arrived tired but happy.

The Ubaye was very high

We left the Guil and headed for the Ubaye and it was very high as a lot of rain had fallen. We set up camp on the bank of the river and rested right through the next day as well. The following day the river had dropped and we got on and did the race course section which was a good trip; when we finished this we headed for the Bachelard which was a relaxing paddle compared with the race course. The sun was shining now and with the river weaving its way down the valley it made our paddle most enjoyable.

Hello again to the Ubaye

For the next day we decided to do the section of the Ubaye from La Fresquièrre to Le Martinet. This was a very tricky section but it was what a paddler wants, a few hard tests. It is very tough. On the main rapid, the Horseshoe, there were three lines down it and they all worked fine. The trip was to end our paddling on the Ubaye. We headed back down the valley next and to the Rabioux. From here we drove to the Baisse for a look as none of us had paddled it before. Marcus, Spiderman, Dave and Mike camped on the bank on the Baisse while the rest of us returned to the Rabioux to socialize with friends we had staying there.

What excitement and paddling are about

We returned in the morning and just Mike, Spiderman, Marcus and I had a run on the river. It turned out to be the best paddle we had had so far, the highlight being when we arrived at the lower main fall, a serious piece of water. We took a long hard look at the different angles and lines we could take and when we decided on our line I went first with a very interesting line on the right but made it safely down to the bottom. Spiderman came next and he had a better line and, last, Marcus started on my line and finished on Spiderman's. This river was what excitement and paddling are all about. We returned to the Rabioux to relax in the sun. Over dinner we discussed our trip for the next day and decided on the Romanche and again it was to be a first for everybody.

Grade 7

Morning came and we headed for the Grave, a good river with its main rapids coming at the start, middle and end. The first, just like the rest, were enjoyable as we made our way through them. We finished at the dam and it was both a suitable and an enjoyable river on which to finish our trip. It was here that we packed our gear and said our farewells to our German friends who had been so good to us and for which we thank them enormously. Off we headed on the last leg of our successful journey, a grade 7 drive up to Calais, across to Britain and then into Rosslare.

Well, I'm glad to say we made it home safely and to normality or as near as I have ever been to it, no more rivers until October, only surfing. Already there had been a few places mentioned for the next year such as the notorious and exciting... well, you will have to wait to find out. **Ciaran Maguire** (*Kipper*) paddled with Larry Higgins, Justin Murphy, Mike Ryan, Noel O'Dee, Dave MaGillaway, Marcus Starringer, Claus Brummer, Alexandra Stomer, Andrea and Marcus Herbste. He would like to add a special thanks to the Outdoor Adventure store in Dublin for the canoeing accessories.