

## Chamois Stew in the French Alps *by Liam Ó Cléirigh (LMC)*

Early one evening in mid-August of 2007 I was sitting on the terrace of the Refuge du Soreiller at the northern edge of Les Ecrins National Park in the French Alps. The hut is perched at 2719 m on the rim of the Combe de la Balme which rises up from the Vénéon valley to the south. Immediately to the north, the Aiguille Dibona – a spectacular pinnacle of rock named after the pioneering Italian alpinist – rises another four-hundred metres directly above the hut.

There was the usual familiar activity about the terrace: people peering at maps and guidebooks, some sipping drinks, others sorting out ropes and gear while climbers of both sexes, in various states of undress, spread out their sweaty clothes to catch the sun. Eric Mossière from Briançon was with me and so too was my youngest son, Cathal. We were in that pleasantly tired and relaxed mood familiar to mountaineers; it had been a successful day, the afternoon sun was still warm and the terrace was a far more pleasant place to be than the chilly interior of the refuge. What's more, we were looking forward to chamois stew for dinner!



*The view south from the Soreiller terrace*

Chamois is a protected species within the Park but a necessary cull had made this unexpected treat possible. Of course, one beast was not going to be sufficient for the thirty or so guests that evening so only a select few were to share in this feast. The rest would have to be satisfied with the ubiquitous pasta. Eric is a well known guide in the region and a frequent visitor to the refuge so he was an obvious insider while Cathal and I, as his clients, might reasonably have expected an invitation to participate; however, I too held the inside track with the hut guardian, Mme Martine Turc, albeit for a very different reason.

As we sat there, the only intrusion was the occasional crackle from the hut radio until, in the background at first and then more distinctly as it came closer, we heard that unique sound which always reminds me of the opening scene from MASH as a helicopter rose up the cymb towards the summit of Pic Gény (3435 m), slightly to the east of us.



*Pic Gény (left) and the Tête du Roget with the landing pad in the foreground (viewed from the Soreiller)*

We watched the tiny figure of a crew member being lowered onto summit and then the aircraft flew on towards us. The hut guardian signalled the pilot in to touch down at the landing platform, a few metres from the terrace, as climbers rushed about retrieving garments scattered by the downdraft. Both Eric and Mme Turc gave me that knowing look of *déjà vu*.

Two years earlier, my wife and I had been holidaying in la Béarde, a small village accessible only in summer, which lies at the head of the Vénéon valley. As I had no climbing partner, I decided to take on a guide from the local Bureau and that's how I first met Eric Mossière. After a day's climbing on the bolted routes of Tête la Maye just north of the village, Eric suggested we should make a three a.m. start the following morning with the intention of climbing Pic Gény via the arête on its eastern side (grade AD+) then dropping down westwards into the Combe de la Balme followed by a traverse across the moraine to the Soreiller refuge where we would overnight, before climbing the Dibona the following morning.

Normally, I like the streets to be well aired before I leave the house and this reluctance to rise early extends to mountaineering as well. So, it was with a somewhat taciturn manner that I greeted Eric on the morning of on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2005 as



*The Vénéon valley from above La Bérarde: looking east towards Glacier du Pilatte*

we set off from la Bérarde (1713 m). We climbed the path that runs northwards for seven kilometres along the left bank of the Torrent des Etançons to the Refuge du Promontoire, just below La Meije (3983 m). My humour improved as I warmed up and, gradually, I began to enjoy the incredible night sky with the planets and stars like bright fruits that might be plucked by hand. We trekked our way in for about three-and-a-half kilometres before leaving the track at around 2,300m and began scrambling towards the base of the arête. By seven we had finished our approach and after a short rest we put on harness and helmet, roped-up and began the ascent in Alpine style.

I don't remember any particular difficulty with the route although the exposure was quite severe and occasionally Eric climbed on one side of the ridge, above the Glacier du Plarêt while I climbed on the other, using the knife-edge of the ridge for hand holds and small but comfortable ledges for my feet, but always with a thousand metre clear drop to the Glacier d'Aréna below. Sadly, both glaciers are now seriously depleted.

I had climbed with a professional guide once before and I was well aware of the maxim that, on a route, *'the best place to be is not here'* and so I was unlikely to be given much time for rest. However, I had also learned that if you keep moving, even if only a few millimetres with each step, the dictum is being obeyed and so the guide does not become too impatient. We had lunch on a wide ledge at about ten o'clock and Eric pointed out features of the surrounding mountains: La Meije, Barre des Ecrins, Pic Coolidge, L'Ailefroide, Glacier du Pilatte and Les Bans. By eleven thirty we reached the summit and could gaze over the vast Combe del la Balme with a clear line-of-sight to the hut which was to be our refuge that night. After a short break to finish off our food we began our descent

on a south-westerly ridge until we reached the couloir between Pic Gény and the Tête du Roget – a peak with some excellent rock climbing on the westerly buttresses. Fatigue and the legacy to both my knees of over a thousand scrums during my rugby-playing days meant that I made very slow progress on the descent through the sharp, loose rock of the couloir, which was in stark contrast to the quality of the rock on our ascent. Occasionally we came across the remains of an abseil belay and I hoped for an opportunity to rope-off but Eric was adamant: the rock could not be trusted so it was not until about two p.m. that we eventually reached the moraine.

With the rope, harnesses and helmets packed away, we began traversing the moraine to the hut; Eric, now changed into his shorts and T-shirt, striding ahead. The traverse, had we completed it, should have taken about forty minutes but, with about a quarter of an hour left and the tantalising sight of climbers sipping beer on the terrace under the Dibona needle, I lost my footing and tumbled headlong into the boulder field. As I felt the warm, sticky fluid filling my eyes and flowing down my face I remember shouting a particular expletive over and over and over; not because of pain but out of the disappointing realisation that, whatever happened next, the Dibona was going to have to wait for another year at least. Although I did not lose consciousness, I had deep gashes to my head, hand and knee and when I tried to stand up, my ankle collapsed under the pain. When Eric saw the head injuries he immediately called in the rescue services and within about twenty minutes I heard the sound that always drags Hawkeye and Trapper away from the bootleg still.



*Aiguille Dibona*

The Gendarme helicopter circled over our heads before heading down to the refuge to drop off the doctor. It then returned to us and lowered the winch-man who gave me a quick check over before I was winched up. On my way up, I remember thinking that I should take a really

good look around so as to be able to savour the moment at some future time but my eyes were too clogged with blood and suddenly I felt myself being yanked onto the step by the co-pilot who jammed his leg across the doorway to prevent me from falling out as the helicopter banked and landed again at the refuge. The doctor's verdict was that I needed hospitalisation and so I was airlifted to Grenoble. This took about forty minutes but, with the bleeding now stopped, it was actually quite a pleasant flight over the mountains.

Having missed the opportunity in 2005 I returned to Les Ecrins this year. There are several routes on the Aiguille Dibona, all of them bolted. The toughest by far are on the south face which is an almost sheer wall. The easiest route is from the west side. A long easy scramble up through the boulder field leads to a gap in the ridge sloping southwards from Aiguille Centrale on main cirque before swooping upwards into the majestic pinnacle of the Dibona. From the gap, it's only a two pitch climb – about 3c (French system) – to the top. We took a somewhat more difficult route on the east face. It's eight pitches long, the toughest being 5a, quite thin in places and with severe exposure and is known as the *Gnome* route because there is a hideous looking garden gnome grouted into the rock at each belay point!



It links up with the western route at the ridge and so the final two pitches to the top were quite easy. After enjoying the spectacular views from the top – which can only safely accommodate two climbers at once – we abseiled to the ridge and followed the western route through the boulder field back to the hut.

However, this time I had remembered two important precautions. One was never to leave my hands in the loops of my trekking poles whenever I'm crossing a boulder field – my inability to quickly get my hands free from the poles to break my fall was a contributing factor to my accident. The second lesson was not to remove my helmet until I was on a good path.

Luckily, in 2005, the stiff, wide peak of the sun-hat I had been wearing had hit the rock at just the correct angle of incidence to act as a shock absorber as the peak doubled over on itself; however, I would not like to bank on getting the geometry of my fall so accurate the next time.



*Eric and Cathal on the summit*

So, that's how I came to be sitting contentedly on the terrace of the Soreiller last August and as a consequence of my adventure in 2005 it was with slightly more than morbid curiosity that I watched this rescue unfold. Happily the climber involved had relatively minor leg injuries.

As for the stew, it was delicious; the flesh had a texture like goat and the overall flavour was somewhere between lamb and venison with a slight hint of bitter chocolate in the sauce. We drank a bottle of ice cold Merlot which, at €12, seemed remarkable value at that altitude.



*Destined for the pot*

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