

# DMC FRENCH ROCK ROAD TRIP EASTER 2014

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*April 19<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> 2014*

By Edward James



At the last minute I decided to join Mike and Dave on their Easter road trip to France, resurrecting what used to be an annual DMC meet to the south of France. They'd both got everything in order, leaving me little to do other than booking onto the ferry and getting some Euros.

Mike had drawn together a loose plan of possible climbing objectives and venues we were to visit on the trip, some of which he's visited previously on family and DMC trips. Dave had bought the latest Rockfax guide books for the area which he'd been busy reading for inspiration.

We set off from Derbyshire early in Mike's car which was crammed full of gear and headed for Dover for our crossing to Calais. The weather for the week ahead was forecast to be a little unsettled which would keep us on our toes for the coming week.

## Mortain

### Ed's attempt at La Fissure Gobbi 5c



After the long drive and ferry crossing from the UK we arrived at our first destination (Mortain) – a large village on the western edge of Normandy's Natural Park.

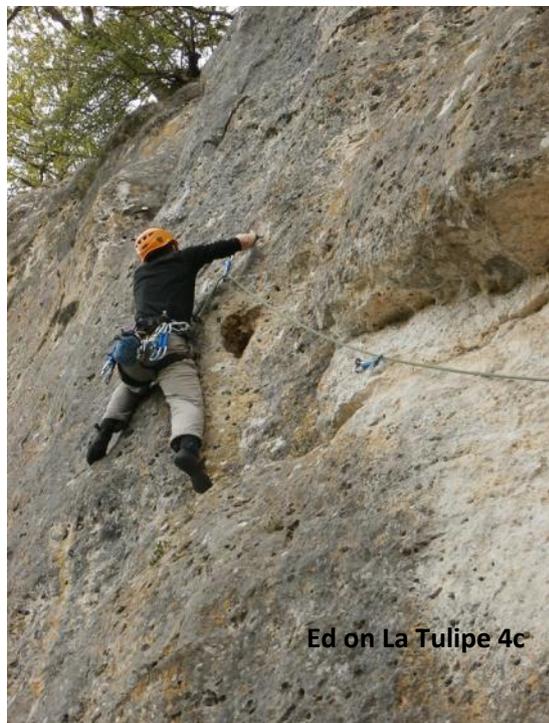
We located the well-kept municipal campsite, positioned right within the village centre and quickly pitched the tent before heading to the crags located a few metres away in the gorge beneath.

The daylight was beginning to fade so we opted to climb the Bill Birket classic **La Fissure Gobbi 5c**. I stepped up to the mark and offered to lead the gneiss tower. What I hadn't realised (until being handed a bunch of large cams) was that the route was sparsely bolted and also just how hard French 5c was, especially after a long journey with cold arms. Anyhow, I pressed on and made it up about two thirds before the arms began to pump just above the crux. Time to call in the tag team! I was lowered

off for Dave to step up and complete the route and summit just before the onset of darkness. We returned via the short walk back to the campsite for pizza and to consult the Meteo (French weather service) for a steer on our plans for the next few days.

## La Guignoterie

With rain forecast for Normandie, we packed up the tent and headed to the Poitou-Charentes region, south of the Loire valley with the intention to climb at La Guignoterie - site d'escalade de



Ed on La Tulipe 4c

Puygirault in the afternoon. On arrival the weather was great, dry sunny and much warmer than the cooler north so we set up camp at Camping le Grand Pre. Saint Pierre de Maille (municipal of course) before heading to the crag a short drive away.

Apparently the crag is a well-known stop over for climbers heading for southern France / northern Spain. Advice warns of the clouds of mosquitoes in warm still summer conditions, though this was Easter and so there wasn't a mosquito in sight!

The 30 metre highly pocketed limestone crag, is positioned alongside the River Angles which makes for a very pleasant venue. Imagine a friendly bolted Willersley setting without the nettles. The rock is very solid and not polished with grades ranging from 3 to 8b with plenty in the mid ranges.

After reconciling our inadequate Anglais internet topo print-outs with the much better French equivalents we located the 'Ecole' sector.

Dave selected and embarked on the classic traversing line of **La Tulipe 4c** to be thwarted at the exposed step across on polished holds calling for a reversal of the previous day's tag team arrangement. I (referred to as 'le garçon' by the locals) continued from where Dave had left off and successfully finished the route, eagerly followed by Mike.

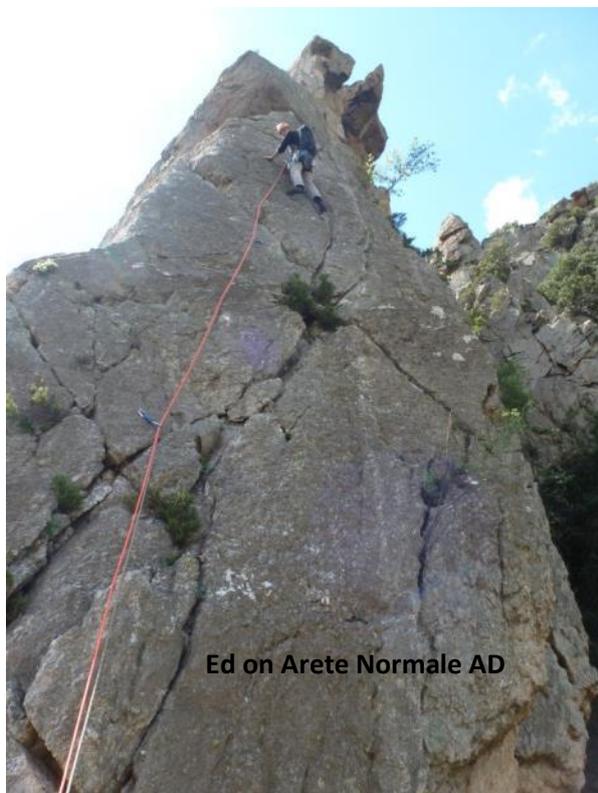
We had a fantastic afternoon climbing a number of routes up to 5c (**Le Mesange 4c**, **La Cricri 4c**, **Le Colvert 4c** and **Les Restos du Coeur 5c**) leaving just before dark. We arrived back at the campsite for one of Mike's pot luck suppers – chicken and mushroom pasta before once again consulting the Meteo for the



Mike on La Mesange 4c

next day which was forecast wet everywhere so we decided to spend the day driving further south to relocate ourselves at a campsite in St Martin de Londres, around 30k north of Montpellier.

## Gorges D'Heric



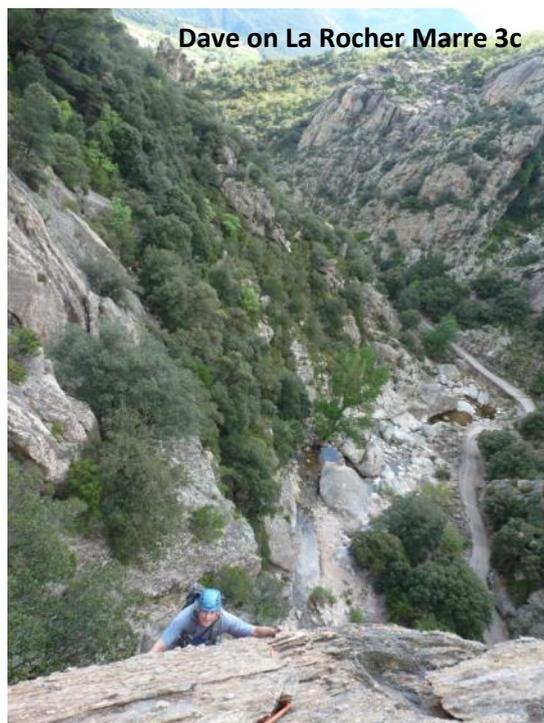
Ed on Arete Normale AD

About an hour's drive from St Martin this venue (for me) was one of the highlights of the trip. A beautiful deep gorge with fantastic climbing of all grades on perfect (gneiss) rock with rock pools below for cooling off. We were now positioned in the deep south of France in sight of the Pyrenees, the weather resembling a warm summers day if back home and could just imagine how inviting the rock pools would be in the heat of the summer.

Here we climbed two long multi-pitch sports routes, however it literally only scratched the surface. This place would be worthy of a week's visit alone, and is somewhere I will definitely return to climb, if only to do the upper arête which dominates the valley.

We climbed two fantastic routes (**Voie Arête Normale AD on the Tete de Braque** and **Le Rocher Marre 3c**) that were well equipped on immaculate rock – the latter 5 pitch route had a stunning crux pitch climbing over an overhanging cioch like block to pull onto the wall above and is described in Bill Birket's "French Rock". The upper wall pitches on the Arête were also notable pitches of superb quality.

Mike had visited the gorge to climb Rocher Marre and other routes some time ago on a previous DMC trip with George – as 'le garçon', so decided to sit it out this time in favour of relaxing by the pools.



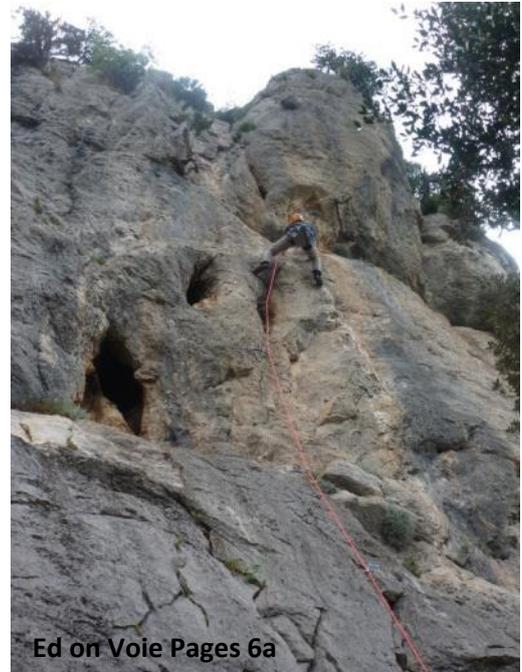
Dave on La Rocher Marre 3c

## **Thaurac**

The next morning was wet so we had a late start. I went for a run returning with the staple baguette, jambon and tomatoes whilst the others slept in. It began to dry up around midday so we headed the short distance to Thaurac – a huge limestone crag fronting a vast hidden cave system (Grotte des Demoiselles) behind. We climbed various (8) single pitch sports routes up to 6a in the drizzle before the sun finally broke through. The best route (lead) for me was **Voie Pagès 6a**.



**Ed on first (Mike's) pitch Super Rognos 4+**



**Ed on Voie Pages 6a**

Later we decided to climb a three pitch classic route Rognos Directe 5a but somehow ended up on **Super Rognos 6a**. Mike led the first 4+ pitch, Dave led the second (6a) and then I followed with the top pitch (5). Well done to Dave successfully climbing his exciting (unexpected) 6a pitch with full rucksack!

Mike later announced that last time he'd climbed at Thaurac he'd also encountered a snake on a crucial hold.

That evening at the campsite, we watched a huge active thunder cloud and lightning light up the sky and also found some interesting wildlife at the toilet block, including huge toads and moths. We managed to get a picture with the moth (Peacock) – apparently Europe's largest! Just Google for a picture of the caterpillar!

The following day was forecast to be wet so we decided to strike camp and head a short distance north to base ourselves at a secure campsite just outside Beaumes de Venise, to climb at the Dentelles the following day.



**Peacock Moth. Mike's hand!**

## Dentelles

The Dentelles de Montmirail (teeth) is the name given to the linear chain of limestone that has been tilted vertically over the years to form a vertical ridge perfect for climbing. The photogenic, kilometre long section we visited (Chaine de Gigondas) was just a short drive from Beaumes and had excellent climbs on both sides. It is also possible to traverse the length of the ridge via its crest at an amenable grade. The walk-in to the rock was around 15 minutes up-hill and was well worth it.

We did a number of multi-pitch routes starting with **Arête Lagarde 5a**, followed by the stunning three pitch **Morizot Parat 5c** which tops out on the highest tooth before abbing down the other (shorter) side. Mike and I then climbed the three pitch **Petite Emeline 5a** which interestingly finishes directly through one of the 'eyes' of the face to gain the descent on the reverse side.

A return visit to this area (also close to the Ardeche) is definitely required to climb the Diedre des Parisiens 5c – a super line of three star quality.



## Vieux-Chateau

The next day with rain forecast again and the fact that we were approaching the end of the trip, we decided to head further north to the Bourgogne region and the town of Semur en Auxois - a short distance north west of Dijon.



Dave at Vieux Chateau

Mike and Dave, along with Dean had visited the area the previous year on their way out to Chamonix, however as it was early in the season we had some difficulty in finding a campsite that was open.

After pitching the tent, we headed to the pleasant Vieux-Chateau in the Serein valley - a granite crag, apparently reminiscent of Dewerstone. Apparently it also gets a lot of sun, however the daylight had already begun fading by the time we'd arrived and was (fortunately) getting chilly so there were no frolics in the river reminiscent of the previous year's visit.

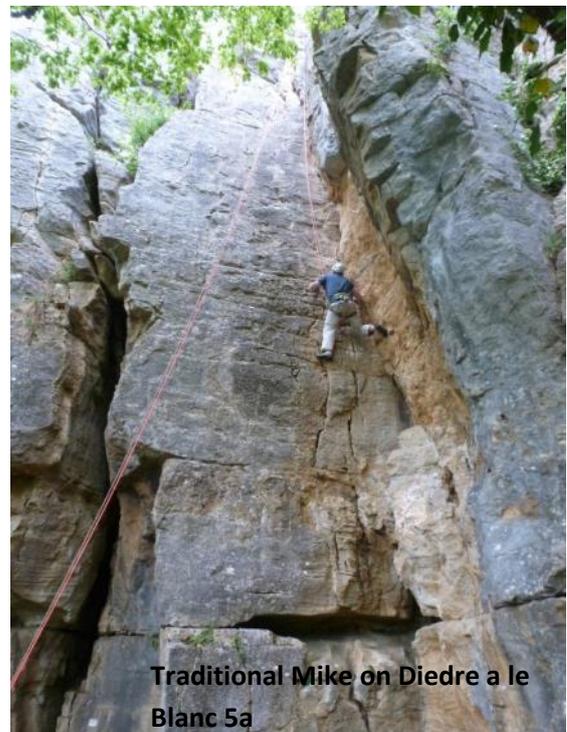
The crag has about 80 routes up to 40m with a wide spread of grades and is well bolted. We climbed 4 or 5 routes up to 5b before heading back to the campsite where Mike treated us to a culinary omelette master class which was very much

appreciated.

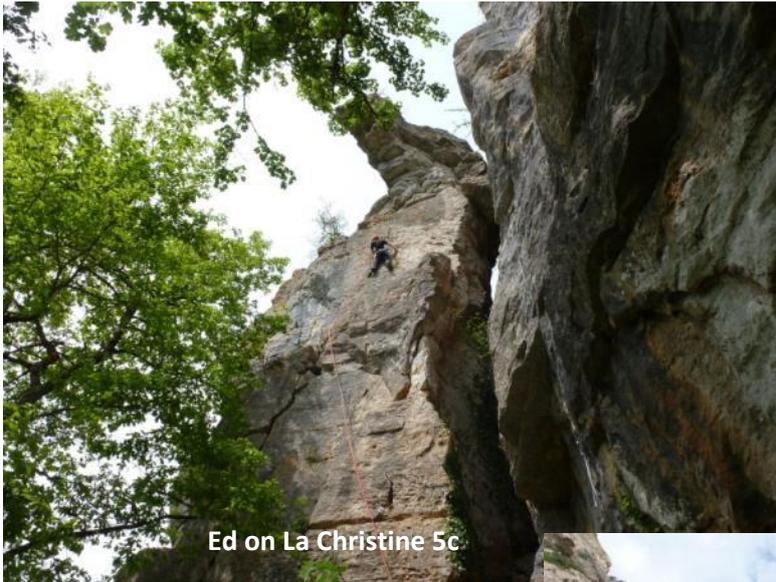
## Saffres

The next day we travelled the short distance to Saffres - a long established crag situated in beautiful countryside just outside Vitteaux and is well worth a visit. Being an older crag, the bolting varies considerably between the climbs with many having very high or difficult first bolts, however the sector/s we climbed at appeared to have been recently re-equipped and also had impressive lower-offs which didn't require you to untie.

We climbed around 6 routes (avoiding the abeilles) employing the tag team for the final time before the rain arrived late afternoon. The most enjoyable (for me) being **L'Eclair 5c**, with Mike favouring the more traditional corner climb **Diedre a le Blanc 5a**.

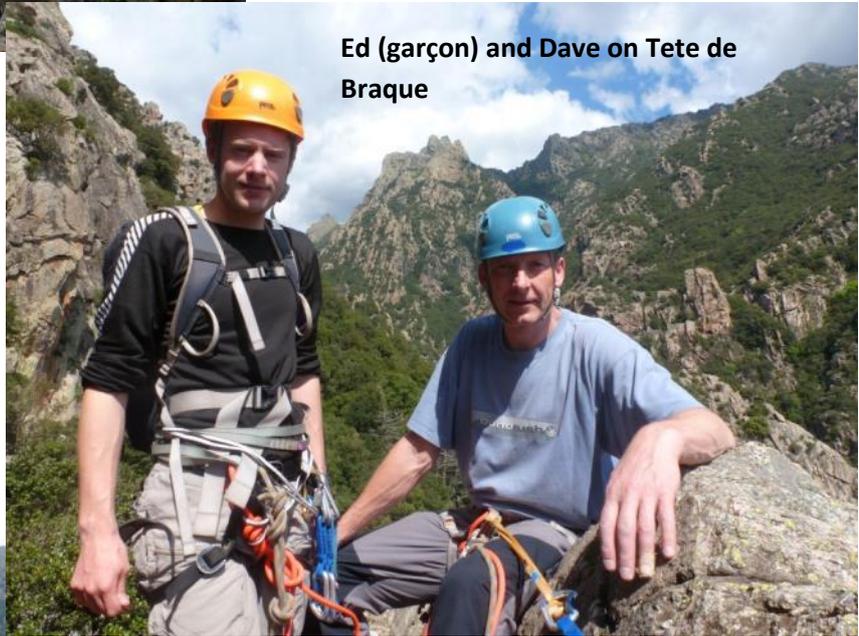


Traditional Mike on Diedre a le Blanc 5a

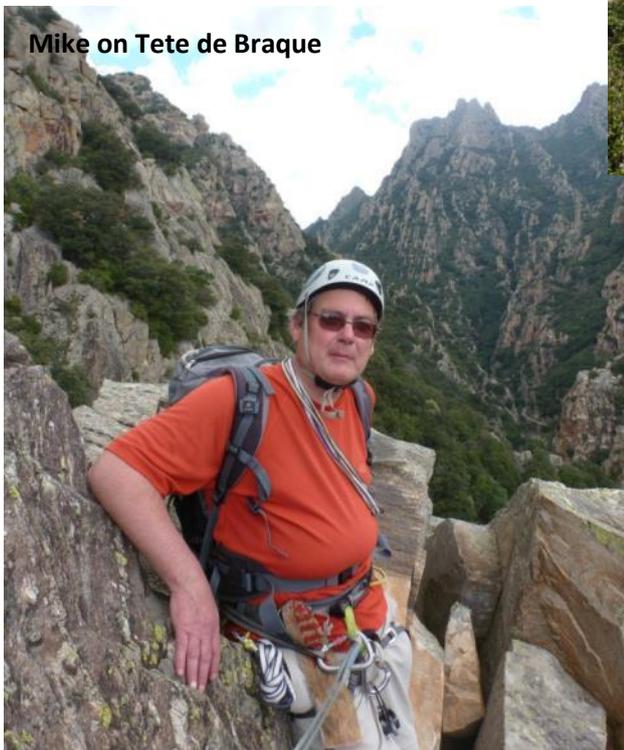


Ed on La Christine 5c

All in all it was a fantastic trip with great company, some early spring sunshine and visiting some beautiful French countryside. It was also great insight into (for me) previously unheard of climbing venues, all of which were unique excellent and well worthy of a return visit in their own right (Easter 2015?).



Ed (garçon) and Dave on Tete de Braque



Mike on Tete de Braque