

ULULA ACCOUNTS OF FOREIGN TREKS 1982 - 1997

2021 Note.

This file has accounts of just the Foreign Treks during this period when I was organising them. There was a parallel series of Scottish Treks organised by Keith Hamflett (1982 - 1988) and Paul Shufflebottom (from 1989).

Allan Witton 2021.

1982 FOREIGN TREK - PYRENEES

John Willson

THE COACH radiator was boiling as we rounded the final hairpin at Superbagnères, six thousand feet above sea level. At last the thousand mile journey was over and we were keen to stretch our cramped limbs on the Pyrenean heights. Dormant muscles were toned up on a misty walk to the Espingo hut; they were to be more severely tested on the ascent of Pic Perdiguère the following day. Stoves were lit before dawn and after breakfasting on tea and muesli in semi-darkness the 37 boys and six staff set off to climb out of the blanket of cloud towards the peaks highlighted in the morning sun. Only seven boys actually reached the 3222 m summit; the rest were content to stop on the 3000 m col and enjoy a leisurely lunch in sunny Spain. Back in France we practised ice-axe braking and then wearing our low-friction waterproofs, we glissaded raucously down to the snowline.

A morning stroll past the idyllic Lac d'Oô and its thundering waterfall led on to a sultry treadmill up to dew-spangled Alpine pastures full of purple irises and giant grasshoppers. By now two of the party felt unable to continue and so for the remaining eight miles to the rendezvous with the coach, staff took turns to carry an extra pack as well as their own—a total load of about 70 pounds! A journey through rustic villages brought us to our campsite at Guchen where we were to spend a free day. In the evening we shared in the celebration of the annual carnival which culminated in a spectacular firework display and it was here that Adrian Newby inspired the more courageous to have their first taste of snails.

Mountain climbing became effortless as a cable-car whisked us high above the sun-baked St. Lary ski slopes, but later we toiled through steep dense forest to our campsite on a dried-up lake bed in the heart of the Néouvielle Nature Reserve. The glorious weather continued as we climbed Pic de Néouvielle, a splendid direct ascent over snowfields and granite boulders with the 3091 m summit always in view. On returning to camp we met the first of a series of thunderstorms which was to envelop the area for the next two days. Dressed in day-glo orange, crimson neoprene and sky blue Goretex the multi-coloured regiment paddled down the flooded tracks. With heads bowed against the torrential rain our effective horizon was the yellow Karrimat on the rucksack in front.

At Gavarnie the tempest continued furiously into the night but the morning brought clear blue skies as we walked into the spectacular Cirque and climbed the Echelle des Sarradets. The Grande Cascade was captured on film innumerable times but only the more observant spotted the occasional clumps of edelweiss as we headed towards the Brèche de Roland. On the Spanish side of this legendary gap vegetation was completely absent, so we camped on patches of gravel or snow just below the massive rock walls of the frontier ridge. Even at this altitude (9000 feet) there was warmth in the late afternoon sun so we relaxed in our majestic surroundings. From this barren, almost lunar landscape we made the easy ascent of Le Taillon (3144 m) and then returned to the earthiness of Gavarnie with its trinket shops and all-pervading smell of horse.

Trek reached a memorable climax at the final high level camp just below the Vignemale glacier. It was exactly 14 days since we had seen a solar eclipse in Amiens and now a stunning full moon hung in the crystal clear night sky. The ice field seemed phosphorescent, and the surrounding peaks were silhouetted against a velvet back-cloth studded with stars and two brilliant planets. Leaving soon after dawn while the valleys 4000 feet below still blanketed in cloud, we crossed the terminal moraines and climbed the striated bedrock.

In spite of the warm sunshine the streams which would be flooded with melt-water on our return were still crusted with ice. The sugary glacier surface had not yet turned to porridge and although crampons were unnecessary dark glasses were indispensable. The glacier ascent was easy and eventually a tricky scramble over loose rock brought us to the summit of Vignemale at almost 11,000 feet the highest point in the French Pyrenees. The panorama was magnificent; in all directions there were views over snow and rock to peaks and ridges over thirty miles away. L.A.W. couldn't have planned a better finale to this superbly organised Trek.

And so after an easy descent to Pont d'Espagne and a long but uneventful coach journey we arrived home brimming with health and good humour. Although the suntan would be faded within a few months, the memories will last a lifetime.

THE SUN shone. It shone as we stepped from the cable car on the summit of Le Brévent and looked out over Chamonix 5000 feet below to the massive snow dome of Mont Blanc. It shone twelve days later as we left our 9000 feet camp to walk down to the picturesque village of Arolla. And it shone for the whole of the 90 miles we walked between as our route threaded its way from France into Switzerland.

The first night's camp at Lacs Noirs was a surprise and a delight. There was little evidence of the lakes in a landscape still covered with the late spring snowfall, but the sunset over the cliffs of Tête a l'Âne and the early morning panorama of Mont Blanc with its western satellites and glaciers were ample reward for a cold night camped on snow.

The fine weather enabled us to remain high in the mountains with a succession of impressive campsites between 7000 feet and 9000 feet: the snow-rimmed Lac de Charamillon whose water was shallow and warm enough to bathe in; on snow again beside the Glacier d'Orny which at 8900 feet boasted a public convenience (the last remains of the old Orny hut); the spring-interior pastures beside Lac de Tsofeiret with the east wall of Grand Combin as a backdrop. On warmer nights some of the party dispensed with tents altogether to sleep under the star-filled skies.

The scenery, always spectacular and continuously varied, was punctuated by sudden changes as we crossed cols from one valley head to the next; the broad grassy sweep of Col de Balme as we crossed the frontier; the rocky Fenêtre d'Arpette with the path zig-zagging precipitously on both sides; Col de la Brea with its surprise view of Grand Combin; Fenêtre de Durand from where we looked down into Italy; Pas de Chèvres with its 80 foot vertical iron ladder.

But not all the walking was done under the weight of a 40 lb pack. The impromptu excursion to Aiguille Crochues was made possible by the continuous snow cover from its summit down to the Lac Blanc hut. In the hot afternoon sunshine we escaped from the crowds and wearing only boots, shorts and sunhat made the 1600 foot ascent in 45 minutes.

Our walk up lateral moraine to the Albert Premiere hut, perched high on a rock ledge beside the Glacier du Tour, was accompanied by the thundering collapse of séracs in the glacier's shattered snout. The strenuous snow plod to Point d'Orny, Mont Blanc's most northerly 3000 metre peak was rewarded by a fine prospect over the Plateau du Trient.

Grand Combin is one of the lesser-known 4000 metre Alpine peaks but a beautiful mountain nevertheless. In four days we walked halfway round its complex massif with close-up views from two of its outlying summits, Grand Tavé after a tricky scramble over loose rock, and Mont Avril whose superb summit panorama also included much of the western Pennine Alps.

The crossing of the glaciers of Giétro and Cheilon to Arolla was particularly memorable. In perfect weather and amongst magnificent rock and snow architecture we kicked steps up the steep snow of Col de Mont Rouge, crossed two more cols and four miles of ice, negotiated crevasses and a bergschrund, reached the highest point of Trek at 11,200 feet and drank hot chocolate at the Dix hut!

Potential trekkers be warned; Trek is demanding, uncomfortable, exhausting . . . exhilarating and addictive.

I was surprised to discover that Iceland is almost wholly south of the Arctic circle, but it is far enough north of Manchester for the sun's slanting rays to be noticeably weakened, even in August. We landed in Reykjavik, a dull, prefabricated city of heavy skies, and camped by a large open-air swimming pool warmed by the copious hot waters in the local crust.

We were transported to the interior in a coach which lurched and splashed through the many glacial rivers crossing our own dirt road. 'The interior' began at Thorsmork, a small hut perched on one side of the widest, flat, glaciated valley I have ever seen. From here we set out for Landmannalaugar, an oasis of hot springs and warm weather. Four days' walking across windy black deserts of volcanic dust, four nights of cold damp weather and flapping canvas, dried food and dramatic rushing rivers were our introduction to Iceland; an alien, daunting landscape on a shattered island of volcanoes and earthquakes.

Time and again the peculiarly tortured rock formations reminded me of Tolkien's description of the approaches to Mordor. The clouds of sulphurous gases rising from the boiling pools above hot springs, the obscenely belching mud-volcanoes, the parched cracked earth confirmed this impression.

Landmannalaugar is an Icelandic 'resort', two wooden huts and a campsite, where city dwellers come to bathe in the soothing hot water and to drink Brennivin, the national liqueur better known as 'the black death'. We decided to press straight on, hitched a ride on a coach and were dropped at Eldja, a rift valley near the Ofaerufoss waterfall, a cascading torrent passing through the arch of a high, natural, narrow rock bridge. Rain held us hostage for all but two of the next thirty-nine hours and then we embarked on the long walk back to Landmannalaugar.

Here we camped in the teeth of a lava flow and drew water from the clear springs bubbling out of the twisted rock. The following day we bathed in the hot springs, three hours of exquisite delight before moving on refreshed. The weather improved and the coloured scree looked like a vast, panoramic watercolour.

Our final objective was Hekla, a 5000 ft. volcano which last erupted in 1980. We camped a couple of miles from its base, a god-forsaken shelter between jagged new lava and rising from dunes of ash. Water had to be carried from a lake over half a mile away and tents were pitched on top of Karrimats to protect them from the sharp, gritty ground.

We began our ascent in mist, marching on compass bearings to the peak of Little Hekla with its seismological equipment to warn of new eruptions. Ankle-deep ash made the climbing arduous, but at 4500 ft. we broke through the cloud and were rewarded by views of other peaks and the tops of the permanent ice-caps. Trek can have had few more impressive lunch stops than we had inside the summit crater, with hot rocks to sit on and sulphur to add to the aroma of sardines.

Next morning we walked out to a coach which took us back to Reykjavik via the spectacular Gullfoss waterfall, Geysir (the original) and Thingvellir (the site of the world's first parliament). Reykjavic was sunny and colourful on our return, and Trek Dinner united all in what had been a hard but rewarding expedition, owing so much to the organisation of Allan Witton who was unfortunately unable to go.

Ferries, forms and food and finance, Allan Witton planned it all;
Forty three assorted bodies set off to Trek in Zillertal.
Some were fit and hale and hearty, long of limb and broad of back,
Others tiny, tired or timid, one no bigger than his pack.

At Gerlos Pass the coach disgorged us, then we walked for thirteen days
Via Mayrhofen to Dominikus, wandering through this mountain maze.
Gradually the route unfolded - one hundred miles of tracks and trails,
Thirty thousand feet of climbing - our homes upon our backs like snails.

The lower slopes were clothed with flowers, alpen rose and gentian blue;
A hanging tapestry of petals embroidered in each rainbow hue.
Through this scene the thread of trekkers wove its way up zig-zag tracks;
Nature's subtly patterned fabric interlaced with gaudy packs.

Clanging cowbells, clicking crickets filled the valley floor with sound,
But just the muted roar of water broke the calm on higher ground.
There beyond the mirror lake we camped beside a sparkling stream;
A pause for resting and reflection, a time to think, perchance to dream.

The nearby hut provided comforts, a convivial end to a splendid day;
A chance for schnitzel or apfelstrudel, schiwasser or a jagatee.
The 'Hilton' was the Berliner Hütte with its massive pillared dining hall;
Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, portraits on the panelled wall.

On cloudless nights we bivvied out and lay beneath a sequined sky;
Across the spangled sea of stars we watched the satellites float by.
We woke refreshed, the sun beamed down, still not a cloud to bring us rain,
The bags were packed, the site was cleared, the crocodile set off again.

From hut to pass and col to ridge we climbed towards the empty space;
Onwards upwards slowly rising, moving at an easy pace.
Occasionally a problem surfaced - a broad crevasse or sheer ice sheet,
The worst a snow and scree filled gully - four hours to drop four hundred feet!

Three times we reached three thousand meters - that magic metric-munro line,
On Richterspitz, Schonbichlerhorn and the dazzling Schwarzenstein.
Here the burning snowfield scorched us as we scaled the bergschrund wall
And though this was a great achievement, the brilliant sun outshone us all.

Then the final poignant footsteps took us to the summit cross,
Erected there by kindred spirits in memory of a tragic loss.
Nothing else now stood above us - surrounded by just rock and snow
We gazed at distant ice-capped mountains and shimmering lakes a mile below.

Exhilaration! Satisfaction! We'd each achieved a personal goal;
For some the highest point of life, for others one more alpine stroll.
And so we came, we saw, we conquered - these memories we will long recall;
This was truly re-creation - we had lived in Zillertal!

1986 FOREIGN TREK - VANOISE**1987 FOREIGN TREK - PYRENEES**

The Ulula accounts for these two Treks consisted of just a selection of images.
Full details of the Treks are given in the illustrated Trek Logs.

AUGUST 7TH 1988 . . . rucksacks, sleeping-bags, boots, ice-axes and ropes are being unloaded off the coach by twenty-seven tired but excited boys. Parents are eagerly looking out for their sons to welcome them back, and they express surprise (and occasional delight!) at their offspring's obvious healthy glow and loss of weight. For us it had gone past far too quickly and we were now left with the impressions of what seemed to have been a wonderful dream - one that would be treasured for a long time to come.

It had begun three weeks previously with a coach trip from School to Chamonix. Once there, we had crowded into a cable car to be whisked up to the top of Le Brévent. The valley with its incessant traffic and noise was now far below us. Gradually we became aware of the exhilarating stillness that comes only when you are high in the mountains and surrounded by scenery of such magnificence that you have a strange sensation of becoming a part of it.

Our first night was spent at Lac Noir, which was almost entirely snow-filled. Several braved the cold and discomfort to bivvy-out on the snow or on the warmer rocks nearby. The following morning began with ice-axe practice on a ridge above the lake before striking camp and setting off across the snowfield toward Lac Blanc. It wasn't long, however, before a few of us had to put our newly-acquired skill into practice since the route led us straight over a steep, snow-filled col. Some made a slow, dignified descent by cutting footsteps into the packed snow, but others found themselves taking an (unintentional) speedy route on their backsides! Eventually, all had arrived safely at the foot of the col, and after a quick inspection of the damage done (mostly to prides, rather than bodies) we continued on our way.

For the next thirteen days we shouldered our packs and walked in the footsteps of the person in front as we slowly made our 110 mile circuitous route around Europe's highest mountain. Usually the temperature was about 30°C, but the occasional thunderstorm would mean that it would drop dramatically within the space of twenty minutes and we would be left drenched and freezing, looking around us in the hope of finding shelter.

For three or four days at a time we would be up in the mountains, pitching camp wherever there was level ground and a clean water supply. In growing darkness we would crawl into our sleeping-bags and watch the moon slowly rise to throw her eerie light onto the distant glaciers so that they glow in the dark. At the end of this time we would then return to the valley to meet up with the coach and replenish our supplies, before once again beginning the long, slow ascent along the narrow path back into the mountains.

There is no doubt that Trek is demanding, mentally more so than physically, perhaps. It calls for endurance and the self-control to be tolerant, patient and considerate. Above all else it requires a sense of humour; after all, what other response is humanly possible when you climb out of your sleeping-bag, stiff with cold and almost nauseous with hunger, only to discover that breakfast consists of Shreddies - with water?! But the bad things about Trek are outweighed by the good. The magnificence of the scenery, the splendour of the alpine flowers and shrubs, the thrill of sighting a marmot or chamois.... it is these things that become part of the wonderful dream you once had, and that you wish to relive.

EARLY MORNING at School on Monday 10th July 1989—and at last a meeting with Dennis, the legendary MGS long-distance coach driver. With Dennis “t’ bus” always comes first (its needs supplied before its driver’s, even at the end of a long day’s drive), so tender loving care is now applied to the task of removing surplus seats to make room for food and kit which, somehow, are eventually fitted in, together with a party of forty two boys and Staff. Trek ’89 to the Dolomites is under way.

It isn’t a bad idea to have three lazy travelling days, with easy overnight camping at official campsites, at the end of a hectic academic year. There wasn’t much to see from the coach (though the bridge over the Mosel stirred many to get out their cameras) but there were books to be read and tapes to be listened to. Keen minds were brushing up their Italian—I was grateful that German would get me by in the area we were heading for.

Trek really started on a Thursday morning, close to the turquoise waters of Lago di Braies. The reality of carrying kit, including provisions and communal equipment for the next three days, hit home. Thankfully the weather was not as hot as it might have been, for Alan Witton had arranged a first day which, including the afternoon excursion to the spectacular peak of Croda del Becco, involved 1,390 metres of ascent— more than on any day to come. There was a small amount of snow on the summit of Croda del Becco, but most of all we were aware of the sharpness of the neighbouring limestone peaks and the spectacular view back down to the lake we had left in the morning.

Our first mountain campsite by Lago Grande was a beautifully peaceful place where there were only marmots to disturb, but our second (after a long day spent on a dusty Alta Via 1 envying the occupants of the four-wheel drive taxis ferrying lazybones from refuge to refuge) was my favourite of the whole trek, nestling in a little side valley of the Passo Tadege with superbly coloured views in the evening and early morning frosty light. A small pool in a nearby stream provided an invigorating opportunity to immerse the dusty and weary body.

Saturday’s excursion from camp to the summit of La Varella (3055 m) was a delight: bright sunshine, light packs and a first ten-thousand-foot peak for many. From a high col many wonderful photographs were taken of the Marmolada and Sella groups where Trek would end. After descending and collecting our tents, we set off down the valley, past acres of rich yellow poppies growing through the limestone chippings, to the public campsite at the Rifugio Sare, where a new Trek record was set for the highest camping charge for the least amount of space. We showered busily to try to get our money’s worth.

Trek’s outstanding viewpoint was achieved the following day at the Rifugio Lagazuoi, where the photographers’ panning skills were tested by a two hundred and seventy degrees’ vista embracing the highlights of the next ten days’ walking: round Tofana di Rozes, past Cinque Torri, over Nuvolau, round Pelmo, below Civetta and Moiazza, and then to Piz Boè.

It takes about a week for Trek to become a way of life. Ryvitas (“rififers”), digestive biscuits (“digbigs”), muesli and rehydrated food take you over. Simple changes of clothes are pleasurable. The combination of pleasant company and some quiet, private time refreshes. Views, photographs and special moments begin to form as memories: First World War battle sites in the high mountains, wood carvers in Cortina, the Rocchetta echo, the Coldai sunset and dawn, the Forcella del Camp urban peasants, and the last mountain campsite: Trek’s highest ever, on snow by the Piz Boè hut.

Thank you Dennis, thank you Dolomites, thank you trekkers, thank you LAW.

I must admit I was delighted to see the Osttirol again after glimpsing so little of it through the mist and rain of my first Foreign Trek in 1981. And the mountains are different in the sunshine, bigger and brighter and certainly more photogenic. Our route wound an almost unbroken circuit between Austria's two highest peaks, the Großglockner and Großvenediger; a succession of cols, rocky ridges, peaks and mountain camps amongst some of the finest glacial scenery in the Alps. With a record ten summits climbed (three over 10,000 feet) and a six-day section at the end when the main party didn't descend below 7000 feet it was a true high-mountain trek, but it also gave rise to whole new chapters in the mythology of the English abroad.

I assume that Austrian buses are designed so as not to smash the coloured light-bulbs hanging across campsite entrances, nor are Austrian bus passengers obliged to hoist up water from a mountain torrent to douse an overheating engine. Oh Andy where was your dictionary when you ordered a large bowl of Knoblauchsuppe, believing it to be something other than minced garlic?

And in future years when we lie back and think of Austria, how many will remember the cowherd with his iron-tipped staff and Malboro cigarettes. He was a man of few words, and most of them were 'nein'; he was not going to let us camp on his particular patch of mountain pasture, the only flat land for miles around, so forcing us into a compulsory bivvi on a muddy track (or for the really adventurous, on the wooden bridge across a raging torrent).

Trek food provides a welcome change to all those Austrian delicacies; muesli, the true British breakfast, best eaten standing when there's nowhere comfortable to sit; Krackawheats reduced to crumbs again, but easily glued back together with cheese from a tube; chocolate bars on draught, squeezed warm from the wrapper; and corned-beef in a tin with the key mercifully lost. Let us remember too the early-morning sweetie-stop where we scabbled for sherbet lemons and Everton mints whilst contemplating the effects of an avalanche on a certain herdsman's hut far below.

Most Alpine paths are delightful, some memorable, and some are meant only for chamois and ibex, though it escapes me why such agile creatures should require iron cables and wooden ladders. I was not encouraged by seeing the remains of the previous ladder lying smashed on the rocks below me. At moments such as these it occurs to me that lying on flat beaches is also a pleasant way of spending a holiday, though not so challenging.

Mountain huts are the trekkers' beach, fine stone buildings perched on cols with names recalling a different Europe, when the Sudetendeutschen and the mountaineers of Prague set up their own huts. Why was there no Strudel at the Studl hut? At the Glorer hut, though, there was more than Strudel; glasses were being smashed freely in the kitchen. Could we stay a little longer? The hut-warden was 40 today and was due to be flown up by helicopter for tea. Could we provide an instant crowd of waving hands and smiling faces? We sniffed the Schnapps already as the lads lay down in a giant number '40' on the hillside. At six on the dot in flew the helicopter, out stepped a rugged man in a white jacket, thirty Englishmen sang 'Happy Birthday', and a tray of Schnapps glasses came our way in thanks. I wonder if the woman who videoed us there asked herself how it was that these thirty gate-crashers had arrived in the right place at the right time. But then Trek is always like that, isn't it?

It was the first British Open Golf Championship that I had missed for several years, but it was a sacrifice well worth making.

Trek '91 was to visit the beautiful Vanoise massif in the Savoy region of the French Alps. Just a week before departure Mr. Duffy had to withdraw with an unfortunate back injury, and I was honoured to receive a late call up. As I looked down the list of those taking part I noticed that the majority were experienced Foreign trekkers, and I began to fear that my recent walking experience (occasional trips to the post box) might prove to be inadequate.

However, any deficiencies in physical preparation were soon remedied when we reached Paris. My personal preference when crossing this city is to use the Metro - but Trek is not so soft. Using stars for navigation we chased through the streets, and with full rucksacks and ice-axes bobbing on our backs we were clearly the focus of some bemusement. It was during this 'warm-up' walk that I discovered, to my alarm, that half of the lads were members of the school cross-country team. At Gare de Lyon we had sprint training when we were told that our sleeper to Bourg-St-Maurice was due to leave from a different platform at the far side of the station in one minute!

One advantage of the Vanoise is that walkers can make use of the infrastructure serving the high level ski resorts on its northern perimeter. We were thus whisked effortlessly to a sunny Arc 2000 and the start of the walking. Within two hours we were standing on our first peak, Aiguille Grive (2732 m), with the first of many fine panoramas. On the second day we bagged another, though the 'horseshoe' ridge was considered too tricky for the complete traverse. And so our route continued, a succession of high cols, delightfully secluded valleys alive with marmots and ibex, and a record six 10,000 ft snow peaks climbed.

This year saw a change in style for Trek, with a smaller party of 15 making use of mountain refuges ('huts') instead of the traditional camping (which is prohibited within the Vanoise National Park). 'Hutting' is an interesting experience and these unobtrusive buildings permit access to the more remote corners of the National Park. Some huts are in spectacular locations, and one of my abiding memories of Trek is the early morning view from the Arpont hut; snow-clad peaks, wreathed in cloud, and deep, verdant valleys below.

We didn't always stay in mountain huts, but spent two nights in a Gîte in the delightful village of Pralognan. On our free day the 'Krypton Factor' group led by Marek Petecki organised hair-raising mountain bike excursions whilst David Gilpin and Grant Mitchell continued research for their forthcoming volume 'Two Thousand Recipes from the Vanoise', and the rest just rested.

The weather was unkind on just two occasions. The first was a long, 1500 m climb to Col d'Aussois in cold, driving rain, relieved only by a brief respite in a herdsman's hut and freshly made cheese for lunch. The second was one of Nature's great displays; an alpine electric storm, with hail the size of marbles rattling from the roof of the byre where we had taken shelter.

Not all the challenges were physical. Planning, buying and cooking sufficient quantities of varied and edible food consumed much mental energy, and some recipes lasted for several miles. 'Tin Man' Higginson resorted to a seemingly endless supply of tinned delicacies, while others were more inventive and adventurous.

It was a thoroughly memorable Trek, not just because of the superb scenery (who will forget the walk below the snout of the Arpont glacier, or the snow climb to Pointe de la Sana (3436 m) and the sheer drop from its summit), but also because of the characters and camaraderie which make Foreign Trek such a marvellous experience.

Thanks and appreciation must go to L.A.W. for his organisational talent and enthusiasm.

BEFORE WE travelled to Norway the majority of us had only met on a practice weekend in Scotland. After spending three weeks sleeping among each other's unwashed socks and sharing the culinary delights of pilchard curry, we had all made long-lasting friendships.

Following a twenty-four hour ferry journey, the sweltering sun that beat down on the port of Bergen was much appreciated. Throughout our three-week "holiday" the weather tended to be either very sunny or very rainy, with little in between. Having travelled for three days, we pitched camp twenty yards from a no-camping sign, and our first walk was an arduous slog to the top of the highest peak in northern Europe, Galdhopiggen. Despite watching ten-year-olds coming down in shorts, as we struggled up with ice-axes strapped to our packs, I'm sure that I am not the only member of our party who swore he would not make it to the top, but seven hours later we all perched on the summit in our newly-purchased Galdhopiggen summiteer tourist T-shirts.

The following two weeks were divided between travelling and walking, but there was always one unfortunate consistency—the midges. Pain reached new heights as we abandoned our compulsory nightly game of "keepie-uppie" (record, incidentally, fifty-four) to run from the swarms of blood-suckers from hell. There was no escape.

Of the seven walks we did, two were overnight. On one we walked through fairly uninteresting scenery to reach the Finland-Norway-Sweden border, and slept in an army hut. The following day improved as we stood bare-backed in the sun under the weight of a fifty-foot waterfall. The other two-day walk led us through remote scenery to a mountain lake complete with ice. We pitched camp on a short snowfield and one of the party insisted on swimming in the lake, at midnight, proclaiming afterwards that it wasn't that cold!

However, the most memorable walk for me was ascending the back of the Trolltind Wall, a one-mile high sheer rock face. We crossed fields of boulders and snow to reach its summit, but lying on your belly and staring one mile directly downwards is an unforgettable experience.

Mountains plunging into crystal-blue fjords; lying sunbathing beneath the Troll Wall; sleeping on pure white snow; swimming in ice-cold lakes in the Arctic Circle; not quite seeing the midnight sun; having my nose broken; and, of course, eating pilchard curry—all these memories will remain for a long while yet.

1992 FOREIGN TREK - MOROCCO

In July 1992 a party of twenty boys and four staff went on the first MGS Trek to Africa, to Marrakech and the Atlas mountains of Morocco. We flew to Agadir then travelled overland to Marrakech where we spent a day at each end of our 11-day Trek through the High Atlas.

MARRAKECH

Adrian Dobson

We arrived at the hotel at 2 a.m. and fell asleep to unfamiliar sounds drifting on the warm night air: the clip-clop of hooves, the whine of mopeds and the wail of prayers from the nearby 12th century Koutoubia Mosque.

Our first day began with a mule-drawn carriage ride through the Medina, the old city, during which we began to see for ourselves what a fascinating city of contrasts Marrakech is: the tiny shops and workshops; the bustle of traffic ranging from hand-drawn carts, pack-mules and bicycles to modern Mercedes cars; the immense range of clothing, smart western dress, women in veils, youths in jeans, colourful Berber women wrapped in bright skirts, scarves and blouses, men in jellabas and turbans, squatting beggars in rags with outstretched hands. The whole of life seems to dwell on the streets, trading, begging, making and mending, living and barely living. The sights, the sounds, the smells are of Africa, so different from anything in Europe.

We drew up at the gateway to the Saadian tombs and within seconds the souvenir-sellers descended on us with their jewellery, blankets, jellabas and curved knives. Inside was a cool and tranquil haven from the rush and bustle outside as we walked amongst the gardens to view the exquisite temples where the Saadian imperial family lie buried, buildings decorated in ornate plaster, carved cedarwood and glittering paint; intricate designs on a huge scale, awe-inspiring with their attention to detail.

Our carriages then took us through arches and gateways, along some of the seven miles of crenellated ramparts, where children ran alongside, turning cartwheels, pleading for Dirhams, and old men squatted in the shade of stunted bushes waiting fatalistically for something to happen.

We left the carriages to follow our guide back through the souks to the hotel, first passing through the open-air tanneries, alongside mounds of hair, then between pits where skins soaked in evil-smelling liquids. Children homed in on us, begging, demanding money and attempting to pick our pockets. All around were little ragged boys with pleading faces, tiny girls with babies on their hips, eyes that pierced, empty palms, hoping and hopeless.

We followed our guide through a maze of alleyways, where we again ran the gauntlet of persistent street traders, to the old Koranic school. Here in the Middle Ages students lived and studied in a network of cells around a central courtyard; a beautiful building of pillars and arches with walls and ceilings finely decorated with intricate carving and flowing Arabic script, while beautiful tiles were set in the floors. The place enveloped us in a sense of serenity, well away from the chaos of the streets, and we drew parallels with Oxbridge Colleges and their own religious origins.

Our next visit was to the apothecary and spice shop, where snake skins hung from the ceiling and dried lizards, sea-urchins, roots and powders were stored in glass jars which covered the shelves from floor to ceiling. We sat on benches while jars were opened, passed round and sniffed: spice-mixes, saffron, aphrodisiacs, amber, musk, mandrake-root, Spanish fly, there really was something for every taste.

Our guide moved swiftly on past blind and crippled beggars, basket sellers, drum-makers, wood-carvers and into a dingy emporium worthy of Charles Dickens' London. We were ushered up a rickety staircase to a landing where a man squatted spinning wool on a contraption made from an old bicycle wheel; in a cramped side-room carpets were being woven on hand-loom. Finally we reached an Aladdin's cave of carpets and rugs, walls of colour designed to induce trance-states and part the unwary tourist from wads of banknotes. Carpets and rugs were rolled out in a growing mound before our eyes. Those of us interested in making a purchase did our haggling, and although some felt they had paid over the odds, most of us came away feeling we had struck a reasonable bargain for our carpets, blankets, woollen jackets and scarves.

We eventually emerged from the souks to cross the main square Djemma el Fna, the heart of traditional Marrakech and teeming with people and traders' stalls, and arrived back at the hotel for lunch followed by our onward journey.

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We returned to Marrakech from the mountains eager to expose skin to running water and thus distinguish between bronzing and ingrained dust. Whilst some staff adopted Arab dress and attempted to explore the souks 'incognito', a minder, a former Moroccan boxing champion, was employed to guide the boys through the maze of markets and help influence over-inflated prices of souvenirs in a downward direction. The wisdom of this became evident when staff in jellabas and sandals required rescuing from the attentions of a persistently over-familiar tout.

Marrakech is both exhausting and seductively irresistible: I for one could not sleep amidst the constant clatter from the street, the chaos of jumbled images and unanswered questions, as well as a sense of warmth still lingering from our contact with the kindly Berbers.

## **ON TREK IN THE ATLAS**

**Allan Witton**

A bumpy two-hour drive south from Marrakech brought us to the road-head village of Imlil, set in a surprisingly green and wooded valley beneath towering, barren brown mountains. The short walk up to the Berber village of Around gave us our first glimpses of the primitive Berber lifestyle that we would find so fascinating for the next eleven days: a man skinning a sheep hanging by its hind leg from the bough of a tree; children tending cattle; women cutting hay between walnut groves.

Around is a bleak looking village of grey stone buildings with flat earth-covered roofs packed together and stepped into the steep, stony hillside above the green irrigated fields in the valley below. Here in a village house we spent a night at each end of our Trek, enjoying a warm welcome, unlimited hot, sweet mint tea, dinner by lantern light, and sleeping on the roof beneath a very black sky. We awoke early, packed quickly, left the muleteers to load the tents and supplies onto the mules, and set off behind our guide Mohammed out into the Atlas.

The first three days took us east, each day crossing to the next valley via a col from which we made a summit ascent: Tanamrout, a short but steep climb; the 10,000-foot peaks of Jbel Oukaimeden, reached after a tricky scramble along an arête, and Jbel Attar, where we saw scorpions and met a herdsman in biblical robes tending his herd of goats.

The mules would leave camp after us, when their burdens had been loaded, and overtake us during the day. On days when we stayed on the main mule trails this would happen at lunchtime, and our cook Brahim took great delight in laying before us a delicious spread consisting of meats, fish and cheese accompanied by a huge mixed salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, red onions, beans and chick-peas, with flat cakes of bread baked over a wood fire, and melon to follow. Though we had no language in common the muleteers were good company, and often entertained us by bursting into rhythmical wailing songs.

This route also took us through the Berber villages of Tamatert, Ouaneskra, Tacheddirt, Timichchi and Tiourdiou, where houses are clustered together on the steep mountainsides to leave the lower slopes and valley floor for cultivation. Water is diverted from the river to flow along a network of irrigation channel which distribute it to successively lower terraces. It was amazing to see what a range of crops could be harvested from such an inherently hostile environment: maize, wheat, barley, potatoes and other root crops; there were even orchards of apples in places, and dotted amongst everything were the walnut trees. The contrast between the vibrant green crops of the irrigated terraces and the bare, arid mountain slopes above is one of the most lasting impressions of the Atlas.

As we approached each village inquiring faces appeared at windows and children scampered down to meet us, some to follow us ("Dirham Monsieur?...Stylo?...Bonbon?"), but some, especially in the more remote villages, just to sit and stare, timid and wide-eyed, at these strangers from outside. At Tiourdiou young children giggled at our white skin as we bathed in the river while their older sisters and mothers scurried down the steep, rocky paths carrying huge bundles of newly-cut hay. Here we bivouacked in preparation for a dawn start up the steep-sided Tifni valley and through the knee-deep waters of the Kassaria Gorge.

We were now amongst the very highest peaks, and half the party spent the most arduous day of Trek (11 miles, with 6,000 feet of ascent) traversing the long ridge of Iferouane, Trek's first 4000-metre peak. There were superb views of the rugged High Atlas peaks and south to the heat haze of the Sahara.

After a 4,500-foot descent to Amsouzart on the Saharan side of the range, and sharing a bag of 'bonbons' from the Ifni Cafe with a delighted group of village children, we began the long 6,000-foot climb towards Toubkal. Refreshed by a bivouac on the rocky shore of the turquoise Lac d'Ifni, and a swim in its cooling waters, we crossed the dramatic 12,000-foot Ouanoums col to set up camp for three nights at the foot of Toubkal.

From this 10,500-foot camp we accomplished ascents of the two highest peaks in the area with relative ease after our long approach walk and acclimatisation. There was a choice of ascents of Toubkal, at 4167 metres (13,700 feet) the highest peak in North Africa. The morning party set off early and returned for lunch in camp and a lazy afternoon bathing in the icy meltwater stream. The afternoon party stayed on the summit to see the sun set and rise again, and were down for breakfast followed by that morning's ascent of Ouanoukrim (4088 metres).

After a steep scramble over the 12,300-foot Tadat col and a bivouac at Tamsoult where we cooked on wood fires, we returned to Aroumd for a Berber feast of roast goat, and to be entertained by village girls singing and dancing in their colourful traditional costume.

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### **1993 FOREIGN TREK - HAUTE ARIÈGE - ANDORRA**

The Ulula account for this Trek consisted of just a collection of images. Full details of the Treks are given in the illustrated Trek Log.

With our thousand mile coach journey behind us, it was nice to spend the first night of Trek in the solitude of the mountains. No other soul was seen, not on the way up, not where we camped for the night in Val Suvretta, and not until just below Piz Nair, our first 3000 m peak the following day. The first of many long descents then took us to swish St. Moritz and on to Punt Muragl, our base in the Upper Engadine.

Piz Ot was sheer delight. The mountain was remote at the end of several subsidiary ridges, misleadingly close with the top invisible until the end. The outcome was uncertain, right until the very top. There were some anciently equipped passages with rusted cables and rails in poor condition; domesticating the mountain had not worked very well, and somehow, made that attempt at equipping it more acceptable. Those who reached the summit were rewarded by a tin box with record book. SJD did some very neat rope-setting work on the way down, and we returned to camp after a 10-hour day.

The cog railway to Muottas Muragl aided the ascent to Piz Languard, at 3262 m our highest summit with a vast panorama over the Upper Engadine. The 6000 ft descent back to camp completed another long, rewarding day, and after dinner spirits and tired muscles revived to enable the MGS contingent to display raw energy and enthusiasm (if no great musical talent) in the Karaoke show that was visiting the campsite that night.

The views from Diavolezza and Munt Pers had the most elegant quality: snow and ice in a continuous drop from Piz Bernina above to the glaciers we were to cross. The guide was met, his beard not combed, and he led us across the Pers glacier, to the rock island of Isla Persa encircled by rock, snow and ice, then past stunning ice-fall and over crevasses down the length of the Morteratsch glacier to its snout.

Val Bregaglia is pleasantly green, with delightful hamlets clinging to their ledges on the steep, forested mountainsides. We approached it following the tracks of the Roman legions, to camp at Pass da Sett, and then on to Val da Cam, a green hanging valley where we camped on platforms lining the steep banks above an unusually pretty lake with a beach of dark shingle, recessed into the mountain.

The next morning, the air resounded with the rhythmic calls of the herdsmen driving a large herd of fawn coloured cows with their bells across the Pass, and then steeply down into Val Bregaglia. A short excursion to Piz Cam took us above the clouds that were soaring up from below us, with tantalising glimpses of the forbidding Badile group above. There followed a long knee-jarring descent, every step hammered down by heavy packs, complete with tents, stoves and billies, which took every opportunity to gain some downwards momentum, a hundred and twenty times per minute for three hours. There were compensations: we saw Edelweiss and passed through forests and delightfully pretty hay-barn hamlets like Tombal, with no access other than footpaths.

Soglio is a delightful Alpine village with narrow alleyways, irregular cobbled streets, fountains and buildings of dark tarry wood with deep weathered grain. We took refreshment at an old inn with four foot thick walls, a paved hall, and dark solid seventeenth-century wood furniture, thick and sturdy. The ice cream was good; the walk to Vicosoprano mighty.

The ascent to the Sciora hut was hot work, climbing steeply through heavy, humid vegetation to emerge on barren scree slopes above, overshadowed by the towering smooth walls of Piz Badile and its consorts, a dark grey mass of rare severity. The Sciora hut had a bit of everything, like a good college building. A bit of stone, a bit of half-timber and infill, a bit of slate, and a bit of metal. We cooked outside on the solid granite benches and tables. For some it was the first night in an alpine mountain hut. Some did not like it, sleeping seventeen to a bed, and there were women too! Others decided that they might as well get used to both.

We set off early in poor visibility, unfortunately not poor enough for APD to miss the ominous sign at the start of a path. It said Cacciabella pass, no parties without ropes or ice axes, or impressionistic drawings to that effect; with a skull and crossbones, it would have been complete. We disappeared into the mist, kicked steps up the snowfield, crossed a steep, hard-packed snow gully with the aid of SJD's armpit double rope rail, and then scrambled up to the notch on the serrated ridge where we burst into sunshine on the Albigna side. It was then downhill all the way, to civilisation and Trek Dinner, with the usual awards and thanks to LAW for a demanding, but varied and very rewarding route.

Seasoned trekkers who used to enjoy lugging heavy tents and bulky sleeping bags over steep cols will doubtless shake their heads at the news that the 1995 Foreign Trek spent every mountain night in an Alpine Hut (except for a few hardy souls who bivvied by the Sulzenau Hütte; a night of nostalgia for those who could remember sleeping beneath the stars). The rationale behind this switch was in part an increasing intolerance of 'wild' camping in the mountains. Rules and regulations now apply even to the remotest of spots, where once common-sense and respect for the environment were sufficient to ensure that Foreign Trek always left a site exactly as it had found it.

So we slept in the huts, on mattresses in cramped communal dormitories, usually under the roof with few or no windows. Generally we slept badly in too much warmth and too little air, under blankets neatly labelled at one end: Fußende (foot-end). One consolation for the lack of sleep was to lie listening to the thunderstorm outside and to reflect that this way at least it was possible to remain dry through the heaviest downpour.

The planned route was a high one, and all the better for beginning with a chair-lift from Kühtai. We were to walk in a continuous loop, first through the northern part of the range before dropping down from the Franz Senn hut to Neustift for a rest day, followed by a 6-day high-level traverse, and an excursion to Gamsspitzl, set high amongst the glaciers of the Wilder Freiger.

However, a surfeit of snow was to ensure that our plans would need revision. Ostensibly our third day was straightforward enough, a long ascent to a col, the Zischgenscharte, at nearly 3000 metres, then a steep descent to the Westfalenhaus. We trudged across moraine and scree, then kicked steps in the snow up to the col, where exhilaration at being high in the snowy mountains became frustration as it became evident that we could not descend the steep snow-filled gully in safety. We could look down upon the Westfalenhaus some 2000 ft below, but we were never to reach it, being forced to retrace our steps to the Pforzheimer Hütte and a splendid meal of semolina soup, pasta and mince.

Hut food was always an adventure. Even once the hurdle of understanding the Austrian menu had been overcome, there was still considerable potential for flexibility in flavour, quantity and ingredients. Sauerkraut and dumplings might emerge to replace more familiar foodstuffs, particularly as part of the Bergsteigeressen, a mountaineer's meal guaranteed only to contain a certain number of calories.

The longest day of Trek, from the Regensburger Hütte to the Dresdner Hütte, began at 5.30 a.m. and included an exciting snow ascent to the Grabagrubenneider from where there was a superb panorama of the main Stubai peaks rising above the cloud-filled Stubaital, and brilliantly highlighted by the early morning sun's oblique rays.

Mountains there were many, snowy ones, spiky ones, crumbly ones and curvaceous ones, mostly just to look at, but occasionally to ascend and there enjoy the airy views. There are those who contend that a mountain is best admired from below. The converse view, namely that below is best admired from above, is also worth considering. Whatever the merit of either argument, few of us will quickly forget the Großer Trögler (2902 m) where there was plenty of below on both sides and nothing between us and the huge glaciers of the Zuckerhüt. The descent was by a narrow ridge requiring care and sureness of foot, but providing a very real sense of adventure.

No Trek report is complete without a mention of the camaraderie and personalities involved. LAW's meticulous planning made it all possible. ECFC's Gallic sangfroid inspired confidence at difficult moments. JSW and RLH provided experience, good humour and good judgment. SGT knew what to do when the nocturnal vomiting started, whilst APD somehow managed to smooth over most local difficulties by speaking Austrian with a Swabian accent. Our thanks too go to Dennis who drove the bus, walked with us and was never short of an anecdote when an ascent was going slowly.

I will never forget either the words of an elderly German who encountered a small group of us one sweltering afternoon labouring under enormously heavy loads. We had descended to the valley-bottom to collect provisions and equipment from the coach for the rest of the party. He stared at us in admiration as we trudged through the crowds of tourists. "Hitler would have given up much earlier", he told us, "if only he had known what you English do for fun".

Even if you haven't read the Lonely Planet Guide to North Africa the evocative names of Marrakech and Casablanca conjure up images of exotic distant locations. We expect buildings to be of mud-coloured brick or sand-coloured plaster, with towns and scenery resembling those of Biblical times rather than the 20th century. Houses, looking like giant cardboard boxes, will have flat roofs so that you can sleep out in the cool night air. Dining out will mean going up to the top floor for an al fresco buffet beneath a canopy of shimmering stars. We imagine narrow, twisting alleyways bustling with curiously-dressed tribesmen babbling away in strange non-European languages and we can picture ourselves haggling for carpets in spice-filled bazaars.

Our expectations are of intense African sunshine and a Beau Geste landscape in which there will be desert and wilderness and possibly scorpions. But there will also be valley oases where streams and irrigation give rise to terraced fields and olive groves. We look forward to experiencing a culture which is completely different from that of Manchester, Majorca or Miami. We are less eager in our anticipation of primitive transport, primitive hygiene and primitive plumbing.

All of this we found to be true - except for the word distant, for Morocco is less than three hours flying time from the UK and is closer to Manchester than Athens, Moscow or the Canary Islands. For his fifteenth Trek as leader, Allan Witton had decided to abandon the picturesque chocolate box scenery found on recent Alpine expeditions and return to the itinerary he pioneered in 1992.

Starting from Aroumd, the party of five staff and twenty five pupils followed a circular route linking isolated Berber villages and climbed some of the nearby peaks of the Atlas Mountains. The climax was the ascent of Toubkal (13,670 feet) which is the highest mountain in North Africa. The total walk of about eighty miles involved a gradual increase in height over eleven days, so that we steadily acclimatised to the altitude. We eventually spent several nights camping at over 10,000 feet but on most nights we did not bother with tents as it was simpler just to bivvy out in the open air.

Although the altitude and climate made this expedition more extreme than the Alpine excursions, there is one significant feature of a Moroccan Trek which is uniquely different from all other MGS back-packing escapades. Quite simply, it's not your back which carries your pack, it's a mule's back which takes the load. The muleteers who owned these twelve beasts of burden did much more than simply lead the animals along the steep and winding tracks. Each day when they had completed their tasks of feeding and occasionally re-shoeing their mules, they prepared and cooked all our meals for us. They also produced daily supplies of superb flat-bread, baked each evening on open wood fires. In addition they provided us with an almost unending supply of bottled Coke and Fanta. For the trekkers the normal fag duties such as potato peeling, fetching water or washing up were non-existent.

Another novel feature was that we had the services of a local Berber guide who knew that part of the Atlas like the back of his hand. Ibrahim was as fit as a flea and could run up slopes in his worn-out trainers while we huffed and puffed behind in our top-of-the-range leather Scarpas. He spoke little English and so to complement his limited phrases and his mixture of shrugs and smiles we were accompanied by a third leader, Mike, who was fluent in the Berber language. He had already climbed Toubkal at least forty times in his role as a professional expedition guide and his knowledge and expertise in the planning stages and throughout the trip made the whole expedition highly successful and virtually problem free.

So now almost a year later what do we remember? Not a chronological diary like a video film but more a jumble of snapshots as if a box of photographs had been dropped on the floor. In Marrakech there were sight-seeing rides in a pony and trap, a herbalist's shop where we were persuaded to buy ginseng and Spanish flies, a deserted ancient Koranic school with intricately carved plaster-work and a maze of crowded souks where we were pestered to buy anything we so much as glanced at. It was always for "A very, very good price - student price - just for you sir!" A few trekkers succumbed and actually bought a carpet. They were obviously convinced by "The more you wash it, the better the colours and the more you will like it!"

On the Trek itself our senses were overloaded with new experiences, hearing the distant songs of the muleteers as they wound their way up the zig-zag tracks a mile below us, the electric buzz of trees full of cicada insects, the lilting tones of APD playing his penny whistle and the rhythmic chanting of the Berber dancing girls on our last night in Aroumd.

Although our taste buds were numbed by the iodine disinfectant that we added to our water supplies, they were revived by the sweet Berber mint tea and revelled in the flavour of tandoori roast sheep at the Berber feast. Haute cuisine was a sardine, cheese and salad lunch on the summit of Toubkal. Another epic meal was goat stew, the protein component having been purchased alive and kicking from a local herdsman just a few hours earlier. Ben Taylor was in his element watching the transformation. There was the wonderful aroma of burning juniper wood when on the last evening of Trek each tent-group cooked their own dinner on open fires. That was the only occasion on which it rained - a brief thunderstorm which sent everyone scurrying into their bivvy bags.

There was a feeling of exhilaration in completing the greatest amount of ascent ever done in one day of MGS Trek - almost 7,000 feet of climbing. On the first occasion that we reached a height of 13,000 feet some of us experienced altitude sickness in the form of headaches or dizziness. Some had waterlogged feet after a seven hour traverse of the spectacular Kassaria Gorge where, due to the almost vertical rock walls, we spent much of our time wading knee-deep in the Tifni river. At Lac d'Ifni (7,600 feet) we washed the dust from our bodies by total immersion in the ice-cold water and extended the masochism by sleeping out on the pebble beach. The discomfort didn't last too long as next morning we needed to rise before dawn so that we could be on our way by 6 a.m.

However, it was what we saw which had the most lasting impression. The aquamarine lake surrounded by mountains of iron-red rock and patches of winter snow. The jet black crystal clear night skies which provided an endless display of shooting stars as we drifted off to sleep. The hundreds of different Alpine flowers, all displayed superbly against a background of blue sky or barren rock. The surprisingly fertile valleys dotted with vivid green walnut trees and straw-coloured threshing circles. The tiny Berber women almost engulfed under an enormous load of cut grass, scuttling along the paths looking like self-propelled haystacks. The shy but smiling, Berber children who were amazed that a tourist (ECFC) not only dressed like an Arab but could also talk, and even joke with them, in their own language. The impromptu riverbank magic show of AM using nothing more than a few pebbles when a crowd of bright-eyed youngsters gathered round our campsite. The twenty-one dish banquet on the roof of our hotel on the last night, the gifts to the staff and the gratitude shown to LAW for everything he had accomplished as Trek Leader. These are the images we can now conjure up and these will be the memories we will fondly recall in our retirement.

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Any old fool can pay his money, turn up on the day with a suitcase of spare clothes and some sunscreen and be ferried from one hotel to another, ambling round museums, castles, art galleries and ancient antiquities on the way, with meals served in restaurants by waiters, and beds to sleep in at night. I know, because this old fool and his wife did that in Turkey at Easter.

But Foreign Trek is so much more than a package holiday; it is an adventurous expedition for those with some get-up-and-go, some physical determination and stamina, for good team members who work well with others and show some initiative and organisational skills! Could you conjure up a 3-course meal for five people at an 8,200 ft campsite using just two small gaz burners as daylight fades and the temperature falls below zero? MGS trekkers can - though it was probably as well it was dark and we couldn't see the results! Could you climb 4,100 feet from Pralognan to Petit Mont Blanc carrying tent, ice-axe, cooking equipment and supplies for four days in the mountains *before lunch*? MGS trekkers can. Could you walk continuously for 11 days covering over 100 miles of steep mountain paths, snow and rock with over 30,000 feet of ascent and the same down again? MGS trekkers can. And is all this effort worth it? The trekkers certainly think so!

The venue for this return to a 'traditional' back-packing Trek was the Vanoise massif in the French Alps, an region of big peaks and glaciers with wild and secluded valleys whose importance as an area of unspoiled natural beauty and wildlife habitat was recognised 30 years ago by the designation of the first National Park in France.

Our route began at the ski resort of Arc 2000 and wound its way in a long loop around and through most of the National Park. The first four days walking and three mountain camps took us south past the northernmost Mont Pourri group and round Sommet de Bellecôte and Grand Bec to Pralognan, a picturesque alpine village where we spent a free day and from where we made a whole-day excursion to Col de la Vanoise, dramatically situated below the glaciers of Grande Casse.

Just by the col there was a sufficiently steep and extensive snowfield (with a safe run-out) to practise ice-axe braking, the art of throwing oneself down a near-vertical wall of snow and using the ice-axe to bring accelerating body to rest without piercing anything other than the surface of the snow beneath the shoulder - great fun, but hot work repeatedly climbing the snow wall in the blazing sun wearing full waterproofs and gloves.

From Pralognan we bagged Petit Mont Blanc, camped on uneven slopes at Ritort (where AM and SJW spent the evening constructing a sculpture from the wreckage of The Péclet-Polset hut burned down earlier in the year), crossed snowy Col d'Aussois with the easy ascent of Pointe de l'Observatoire (3015 m) on the way, and set up camp for two nights at la Fournache. From this idyllic mountain campsite - soft, level pastures speckled with flowers - we made a whole-day excursion to Rateau d'Aussois (3131 m); an exciting ascent over snow to Col de la Masse, a scramble to the summit with its superb panorama, then a galloping glissade down the snow back to camp.

The final section of the route through the heart of the national park was a disappointment: the storm arrived at the Entre Deux Eaux hut before we did and it was a wild and rainy night as we cooked dinner in relays in the cramped kitchen and slept fitfully, ten to a bunk in the 'black hole' of the basement dormitory.

Dawn brought no respite, so the planned finalé of an ascent of Pointe de la Sana (3436 m) was replaced by a long trudge over Col de la Leisse, but at least it was on our backs that the rain and hail were beating, and there was a warm coffee shop (in the form of the Refuge de la Leisse) on the way.

More freestyle glissading speeded our descent to Val Claret, to the coach and to clean, dry clothes! With the walking over it was off to the delightful town of Annecy for a sunny free day, with a superb, and well deserved, Trek Dinner in the evening.

Of course there would be no Foreign Trek if there weren't boys at MGS with some get-up-and-go, some physical determination and stamina ... These fine qualities and more were displayed in abundance by this year's 18 keen and fit trekkers, which together with the help, support and good humour of my colleagues NTB, SJW, ECR, AM and ECFC made it one of the most enjoyable of my 20 MGS Treks.