Welcome to the Winter 2016/17 IMC Newsletter

A quick look through the Club's Events pages shows what a healthy state we are in. Since the last newsletter we've had meets at Ireland's Eye, The Burren, Kerry, Snowdonia, The Galtees and Connemara, together with regular events & workshops organised our Training Officer, Jon, plus Noel's Winter Walks and other weekend events organised by the membership. It's great to see.

In addition there's been an excellent season of talks in our indoor Winter Meets this year. If you missed them, check out the IMC's video page where you will find some recorded.

A few week's back we heard the encouraging news regarding the Wicklow Way Judgement, the initial ruling being overturned by the High Court and the question now being raised as to whether the claimant should be pursued for costs.

In similar news, the IMC together with MI have raised its objections to proposed development at Bullock Harbour which would likely impinge on access to the climbing areas on that stretch of coast.

Finally, apologies for the later publishing of this newsletter. We were struggling for articles, so many thanks for those that responded to the call for content and, as ever, if you do go away on a trip, don't forget to write :)

Gary Smith, IMC Publicity Officer

Approaching the Ireland's Eye stack [Photo: John Mansfield]
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This Newsletter would be nothing without you, the writers & photographers, as well as the organisers of all the IMC trips & events, so many thanks to everyone for their contributions.

Newsletter complied & edited by Gary Smith.
Novices On The Nose
by Sínead Rickerby

What's a bucket list if some of those dreams aren't large enough to never get ticked?

I'm about a sixty percent success rate girl. A girl who also lives in 'La La land' and whose plans often get swept away by a flight of ideas to do this and that, go here and there - all at the same time - and with limited funds. I spend a lot of thinking time wrapped up in thoughts of planning, hoping and even regret.

I must admit that El Capitan was not on my list.

This magical piece of rock was too big even for my bucket list! I remember the first time seeing El Cap with Andy, Vanessa and Sinead P last summer, necks arched back in amazement seeking out the summit. Vanessa, aw struck, announced she would climb it one day. I knew it would be true for her but didn't think in my wildest dreams I'd get the opportunity! So firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank Andy "Polar Bear" Kirkpatrick for giving me this crazy, wild and spontaneous opportunity to summit this strikingly beautiful piece of granite that so many desire. His desire, for us 3 'Crazy Irish' people to lead all the pitches of The Nose between us, not only demonstrated his generosity but his parallel desires for his own success and the
success for others. Unfortunately, his overly generous estimation and expectation of our novice capabilities resulted in him having to take leadership of climbing just about halfway up. We probably would have run out of resources and missed our flight home had he not. I felt partly sad, as I was just about getting the hang of aid climbing, and I can’t help but feel we let our Guru down.

On day one Vanessa, as usual, bravely lead the first pitch, allowing me time to get a feel for the rock. I then lead the second pitch. At first, aid climbing felt so alien. The chest harness laden with gear, some of which I had never seen before, let alone used. My daisy chains and aids (ladders) constantly intertwining; at times a wind blown chaotic mess. Placing gear, usually cams, then attaching my aid. This followed by a dramatic inhale and concentration while stepping up and carefully ensuring my balance (Thank G for Naomi & yoga :-) ). Success always erupted as an enormous smile and an exhale of relief!!! There were only brief moments you loosened your concentration as the next step was searching the granite for the next potential gear placement above. It was a balancing act from all sides.

The plan was to climb five pitches that day. Funny how things change. It took V and I five hours to complete the two pitches.

Being novice aid climbers, it was very much learning on the job. On day two, I remember coming to a crack that was too small for any cam. My high spirits instantly deflated due to the worry of having to retreat on my pitch and of failing. Looking back down at the trio huddled on the ledge metres below I shouted “Andy, the cracks too small for gear”
Andy: “Try a cam hook”
Me: "What's a cam hook?"
Andy: “It's on your harness....it's looks like ......”

As I searched my harness and found the small r-shaped piece of metal I remember thinking “Oh Lord, what am I at??? Why aren't I into knitting or some sensible leisurely activity?”
Me: “I think I found it”

At first I attempted to place it, placed it upside down, couldn't see the logic in how this was gonna function, then decided advice was required.  
Me: “Andy, how do I use it?”

After Andy shouted up instructions, I placed the cam hook into this tiny vertical crack, attached the aid, placed my foot on the strap and looked back in anguish at my team.
Andy shouted “Trust and step up!”

Inhales and exhales, Hail Mary's and Amens. And up I stepped. It's amazing how religion brings comfort at times when you're nervous. I'm naturally quite a spiritual person but always after these kind of trips, I'm truly religious!!!

The sense of satisfaction is immense when you start to master your new skills and your confidence increases at aid climbing and all that it involves. Perfecting the frog leaping technique was in far, far away lands but I was getting from A to B. Also, practicing setting up fixed lines, tying butterfly knots, releasing, hauling & tying off the weighty haul bags, jumaring up vertical rope lines, etc felt great as danger lurked in the background and mistakes cost prices.

I was being trusted with responsibilities that made me fearful but skilful! Thankfully the mistakes I made, such as getting a very important yellow link cam wedged in a crack, were ones with non-serious consequences.

Eight nights sleeping on a portaledge, hanging off a single bolt plugged into a vertical rock face hundreds of meters high are nights to remember. I must admit I slept like a baby. Daily goals were set to reach our ledges before nightfall and enjoy the setting sun over a cup of wine but were rarely met. Actually they were never met. One evening I started climbing about two to three hours before dark. I remember Vanessa's encouragement when I questioned my capability of getting the pitch finished in a reasonable time. On I climbed, and as predicted I was sent up a head torch to finish
the pitch.

Setting up our sleeping arrangements under the starry conditions illuminated by our head torches became the norm. You can imagine a game of twister in the dark on a tiny ledge. One night it was closing in on 4am as we were settling into our sleeping bags.

The higher we got, the more open and exposed it became. Exciting unexpected swings around corners into open air with a 700m vertical drop below, jumaring up to high roofs in darkness with a full moon in the backdrop were just some of the adrenaline pulsing experiences that felt unbelievable and overwhelming at times.

Happily as time went on there was a reduction in the amount of complications caused by knotted ropes, especially when Andy was leading at speed. Nearing the end, we had all almost perfected our jobs. Cian cleaning the pitches behind Andy, while Vanessa and I, aka Team Mutton Head, got down with releasing, hauling and tying off those three enormously heavy haul bags, inclusive of a box of wine, 2 portaledges and, last but not least, the ever increasing weight of the poop bag.
Our initial snail’s pace became more accelerated with Andy leading. It became a race to the summit and we were all working hard as a team. No time for breaks.

One the last day, our aim was to keep the ropes and haul bags flowing to match Andy’s strong determination and lead. Andy pushed forward, climbing hard to reach the summit. Cian followed with me close behind him after a final steep exhausting jumar. And then, finally we were all sitting up top under that famous tree when ViVi’s cheers joined ours. We shared a strong sense of mixed feelings. Relief, excitement, exhilaration, uncertainty....... We had achieved our goal but now it was over! We would not be waking up on the beautiful El Cap’s rock face tomorrow. Stepping out of my
harness for the first time in over a week was amazing. It gave me a sense that all our hard work was over but little did I know what the gruelling descent the next day would involve. You can ask Cian about that!

The bivvy under the tree our last night was really special. I barely slept as the bright large moon demanded my attention waking me numerous times. My thought were racing.....

"Had we just summited El Capitan?????"....... "WOW!!!!"....... "We did it!!!!!!".......
"We actually did it?!?!?!?!".

Our celebratory breakfast the next morning, compliment of a cheese, beanie beans and porridge concoction was topped off with Andy and Vanessa announcement of their engagement. It was a very perfect ending to this chapter.
The Burren - ‘An Bhoireann’ - meaning place of stone, can only be good news for us climbers.

Offering 75% of all Ireland flower species, vast areas of karst punctuated by over 90 megalithic tombs it is special. You can turn one way and see the Atlantic, the limestone and the sky making ethereal purples and reds depending on the sun and the moon. It’s a mecca for outdoors sports, caving, hiking, watersports but, of course, we were here for climbing.

The well organised trip had been in the making since Derek Hendricks’ inception at the start of the summer. With the usual hullabaloo and accommodation swaps there was a big turn out of 30 IMC climbers.

A crowd with Derek had taken the Friday off work and climbed routes around Ballyryan and there was a good crowd of IMC folk in Doolin on the Friday night for drinks.

On Saturday the larger group met again on the Ballyryan crag. The moderate climbs and great gear allowed many people to strengthen their skills. Keith kindly put a top
rope on the E1 5b ‘Slave Labour’ climb which many then climbed successfully.

It was a good start for most, to realise the true nature of the brittle rock and that gear does pop.

This is not exhaustive but some nice climbing and leading by: Dave, Matthew, Thierry, Dermot, Gina, Pam, Conn, Petra, Stefan, Paulina, Derek and Aine. The HS 4b ‘Left Crack’ got a lot of attention and I noticed was led by Conn, Dave and Derek.

The chimneys in Ballyryan were most agreeable and safe for a solo - if you shuffled, grunted, puffed out and held your breath.

Another group with Conor O’Connor set up climbs on Ailladie (The Blind Man’s Cliff) and many people got to lead and second some hard, atmospheric sea climbs, minus the birds and guano of the Ireland’s Eye meet.

However, in addition to Conor’s group it’s worth noting that many got to lead and second the starred route ‘Jug City’ VS 4c, the abseil rope in situ and other experienced climbers gave many the confidence to do their first ‘abseil’ in sea cliff.
There could be many more climbs, but of note there was beginners leads and ‘on sites’ at ‘Jug City’ with Keith, Conn, Dave, Carol, Anni. One group received invaluable technical help from Dermot whilst Karen Jennings got a bird’s eye view of it all.

Back at Ballyryan, Derek gave the shout to join Barry over at Oughtdarra.

A slab aka “grikes” walk-in took ones breath away as the whole view of the inland Burren and the Atlantic came full circle. One crossed glens where the cattle were sheltered in winter and there could be no doubt this was the realm of the fairies!

The Oughtdarra crag is absolutely a must visit spot, dispel any reservation about not being ‘road side’ and set about it.

The pavement and gikes open into large slightly curved tiers of limestone, giving a massive amount of climbing and very interesting pinnacles with some free standing structures (some descent only).
The group were lucky enough to be given a tour of the escarpments by Barry Watts. After this everyone paired off and tackled a few routes. Everyone successfully got to grips with the different holds, crevices and rock anchors that vary from crag to crag in the Burren.

Barry, Gerry G, and Paul McCabe climbed 6 short but worthwhile new lines near the Fear Bréige Pillar area of Oughtdarra.

Barry and others had put many man hours into cleaning routes and had the joy of setting new routes themselves with many still to put up!!

There would be no way that one would get the same volume and variety of routes done if this has not been an IMC meet with experienced climbers really making an effort.

The day ended by Gina & Pam expertly and unbelievably securing a food table for 25 – some feat given the popularity of Doolin that weekend (bikers and all). The night was great and other climbers out with the club joined us, indeed, it was Derek’s favourite part of the weekend!

Doolin was great that night, with a massive full harvest moon; however Sunday was no day for the climbing and, whilst I believe some folk surfed, others just suffered.
When Con Farren asked me to lead Jug City, I was a little apprehensive. Having taken a break from climbing for over 15 years and just starting to find my feet again, I wasn’t sure I was up to it. Usual climbing excuses went through my mind; hungover, no spare rope for the abseil, forgot to clip my nails, harness too tight, climbing shoes too tight, no climbing chalk, etc.

Con’s enthusiasm, however, was infectious, “There’s an abseil rope setup!” he eagerly advised. With no valid excuses, I agreed.

Con abseiled in first and taking some photos of him abseiling in gave me flashbacks to warm memories of a spectacular weekend of Ailladie climbing with good friends from Bolton St Mountaineering Club – 19 years ago.

Jug City is one of those standout climbs that just seems to put a silly grin on your face when the name is mentioned and I hoped it would be every bit as good 19 years on and more to the point, that I would be able for it.

Con established a 3 point sling belay and I then followed him down. The noise of the crashing of the waves, brilliant white phosphorescence of the wash, gentle occasional spray on our faces and sheer steepness of the rock created a magical atmospheric situation.

Once Con and I had exhausted literally every selfie opportunity available on the belay ledge, it suddenly dawned on me... we had made a faux pas. Not just any faux pas, but the sort that is so elementary and dumb ass that it leaves you red faced. The piece
of equipment we had forgotten provided much amusement for the experienced IMC climbers nearby and lots more amusement in O’Connor’s pub later that evening.

With a little assistance from above, we were finally on our way. As I lead up the crack the holds and gear were completely supportive and this inspired confidence. I felt good as I reached the horizontal ledge and using careful footwork stepped out left into a wonderful airy position. I took a brief moment to absorb the atmosphere and then made the careful step and reach up to more of those ‘Jug City’ holds. I savoured the final few moves on the upper section of the route and topped out with blissful contentment.

So was it as good as it was 19 years ago…absolutely YES! And it has just further reinforced my love of climbing.
The Grande Randonnée 20 is one of the large network of waymarked walking trails found throughout France. The route follows the spine of the central mountain chain of the island of Corsica. Running roughly from NW to SE, it covers a distance of about 180KM with 12,000m ascent. Due to the nature of the terrain and the facilities available, it is generally regarded as one of the toughest of all the GR routes. The “path” has been characterised as walking along a dry rocky riverbed. It's not quite that bad but it is certainly a rugged mountain path that requires constant attention. Usually described in 16 stages/days, there are a few short ones where it is possible to double up (meaning longer days of 10-12 hours.)

We travelled (N to S) as far as Refuge d'Usciolu. See the map below with the refuge circled. At that location, according to our plan, we were two days from the finish but, due to a knee injury sustained on the stage into Usciolu, we opted to bail out. While that was a bit disappointing, so close to the finish and with the hardest sections done, overall it was a really great trip. The mountain environment is exceptional. We met interesting people and enjoyed their company and stories. The weather was excellent except for one day and we enjoyed each day’s trekking experiences. We used the hired tents at the refuges / bergeries and took the (luxury) hotel options at Asco and Vizzavona. We especially liked the northern section where the dramatic and wild beauty of the terrain is first revealed. We were less keen on the forestry sections the further south we travelled. The route was challenging, as expected, but perfectly achievable for your average fit walker.
The Grande Randonnée 20 - Fra li Monti ("through the mountains") travels the spine of Corsica.

Our preparation was good and that paid dividends. We did our research; we selected our gear and we got into shape. Research was reading Paddy Dillon’s Cicerone guide and trawling through just about everything we could find on the net.
Gear-wise, we already had most of what we needed and, looking back, we feel we got most things right. Our packs weighed in at less than 10kg for Antoinette and 12kg for me. Plus water which was never more than 2 litres. We started out with some food and that got variously added to or subtracted from as the days went by.

In the 3 months leading up to the walk we each ran almost 1,000km and we did some hill walks and climbing. Some of the running was trail running. Overall we felt in pretty good shape though we still worried about not spending more time carrying heavy bags and/or doing some multi-day hikes.

Our plan for the return journey was an overnight sailing from Porto Vecchio - just south of Conca - back to Toulon, thereby avoiding a long trek back north. The Porto Vecchio/Toulon route appeared to be new for the 2016 season but only had two sailings per week. This meant at least one double stage to avoid the risk of missing the ferry. For anyone contemplating a similar approach, make sure to book a flexi-fare for the return.
The crossing from Toulon to L’Île-Rousse took 6 hours. From L’Île-Rousse we got a train to Calvi followed by a taxi to Calenzana, the starting point. We hadn’t booked accommodation in advance in the Gite d’Etape and as it happened Antoinette got the last bed while I got to sleep on the kitchen floor. We’d taken a last minute decision not to bring a tent and while that worked out fine, having a tent would have given a bit more flexibility and would have saved some money. We did bring sleeping bags and mats.

Due to the alleged presence of bedbugs (subsequently confirmed), we planned to stay mainly in hire tents on the route itself and that posed no issue, usually being offered a choice of tents.

After so long in planning, we were psyched to begin (to borrow a phrase from our American friends). The first 4 days blessed us with magnificent scenery and walking, made even better by great weather and the sense of embarking on a big adventure.

The guardians at the refuges were friendly and helpful and the people we met were interesting. We hope the Swiss lady who left her wallet at Ref Manganu got it back. A tribute to the honesty of all who stayed that night - the wallet was still hanging unclaimed on the door to reception the next morning.
It was nice to see a few (literally, 3) Irish faces. It was also nice to meet a few “father and son” teams and it was great to see some young people on the trek. In fact everyone was very friendly even where language barriers made communication more difficult.

Seeing some of the wildlife (people excluded!) added to the walk. The black and yellow Corsican Fire Salamander was spectacular to see in the wild, as were the Mouflon near Asco. On the other hand we were forced uncomfortably close to feral pigs on the final descent into Cozzano.

The low points included when Antoinette developed a stomach bug and all that goes with it on Day 2 at Carrozzu. Being unable to eat dinner, this looked serious but fortunately all was well again by morning. Phew!

We tried to stay in the Bergerie de Vaccaghja about 40 mins before Manganu. They refused to take us even though we could have slept outside. At that stage we had been walking for 10 hours and really didn’t want to pick up our bags and begin climbing again. It was a bit strange as it didn’t look at all full.

Day seven was misery weather-wise. Taking the unplanned and longer low level route
due to mist, rain and high winds, we arrived in Onda at 11.20am. There we took the decision to press on, despite the arrival of two walkers who had set out earlier and who were forced by the bad weather to return to Onda having reached 1,900m. We were a bit worried what we might find high up but they told us others had gone and so we figured we had a chance. As luck would have it, the wind eventually died down, though the rain and mist got worse. In the end it was two miserable walkers who arrived at the quaint and historic Hotel D’Oru, at the Col de Vizzavona where we enjoyed a lovely meal in the restaurant and a sound night's sleep.

Our final disappointment was in having to quit. We know we could have completed by turning a planned two days into three or four but we had no real interest in just struggling on. The GR20 is a great trek but to be honest, it’s not that good, especially on the southern low level options.

Using public transport on Corsica can prove challenging, as we found out when we took the decision to leave the route. Getting from Usciolu to Porto Vecchio on time for the Monday ferry presented some challenges involving luck with hitch hiking and a traumatic bus journey thankfully numbed by a couple of beers.

Arriving in Porto Vecchio, we found, to our horror, that the only hotels available were costing €300+. It was a long night before we found a place to rest our heads….that too was an adventure.
Next morning, we were able to change our ferry from Thursday 15th to Monday 12th giving us a couple of pleasant days in town to gaze at the gleaming yachts and ponder what it might mean to be really wealthy.

In retrospect, since we bailed out after 9 days, we couldn’t help asking ourselves if the possibility of finishing in 11 days had tempted us to push too hard. On balance, we don’t think so. We always expected to finish in 13 days or less if the weather was kind, which mostly it was. Also, we had little interest in some of the low level stages towards the end and we would always have extended ourselves to finish with a long day instead of another overnight. We enjoyed each day (with the exception of the bad weather one) and we never felt overly challenged or tired. We were very fit after all our preparations. The only day we wished away was the double stage from Petra Piana to Vizzavona. That was our one bad day but as we had arrived in Onda (end of the first of the two stages) at 11.20am it was just too early to stop. Unfortunately the wet and windy conditions slowed us down on the seemingly never-ending (11 hour) descent into Vizzavona.

We’d planned to do the GR20 in 2015 partly because we were attracted by its reputation and partly in memory of a friend who had passed away 10 years previously. Unfortunately, injury lead to postponement and the Tour de Mont Blanc taken as an alternative (no scrambling, no need to use the hands, better paths etc.). Comparing the GR20 and the TMB we can say with certainty that the GR20 is a far more challenging proposition.

With retirement from work now looming on the horizon (actually, shining like a welcoming beacon) we will hopefully have more time, good health and resources to repeat the experience of stepping away for a while from the complexity and stress of our 21st Century lives.

The Sierra High Route? Torres des Paine? Manaslu circuit? Who knows…

Beautiful, but frozen for 6 months of the year (left).
A tapestry of early morning light (above). [Photo: Kevin Byrne]
Birds of a Feather, Part I

by Gerry Moss

Lliwedd Pecking Order

We were high up on the north face of Lliwedd, half-a-dozen pitches of climbing below us and as many more to come. Normally a dull, gloomy spot, on this particular day it was the place to be. Refreshingly cool as the rest of Snowdonia sweltered in an unusually hot September. A genuine Indian summer.

Comfortably seated on a throne belay, my back resting against the cool rock, paying out the rope to Liam, who was out of sight above and climbing steadily upwards, I was in a relaxed and placid mood as I surveyed the scene spread out before me. On the left, the huge bulk of Snowdon brooded over the dark, shaded waters of Glaslyn, which bore hardly a ripple in the still autumn air; across from us the narrow, jagged rim of the Crib Goch was bathed in bright sunshine, with a steady trickle of walkers picking their way carefully along its exposed crest of copper-coloured rock; off to the right, the flat waters of Llyn Llydaw stretched away in the direction of Pen-y-pass, with the Glyder summits beyond. We had the place all to ourselves: cocooned in an atmosphere of deep silence, with not even a breath of wind stirring across the face. This is the life, I thought to myself, as I stretched my legs out on the commodious ledge.

Then, suddenly, there was an explosion of sound, rousing me from my reverie with all the abruptness of a slap in the face, scattering my thoughts like dry leaves before a winter wind. It was the sound every climber dreads when high on a rock face - the sound of falling rock. Instinctively, I cowered in against the face, tightening my grip on the rope as I did so, waiting for the clatter of rocks about my head and shoulders. Then I realised, to my relief, that the rock fall was not directly above, but off to one side.
Looking across, I could see the cause, and effect, of the incident.

A hapless sheep had lost its footing on some loose ground and was now plummeting down, accompanied by a shower of boulders. As the sheep fell through space it cartwheeled slowly, almost gracefully, through the air, before crashing into the rock face and rebounding out to continue its fall, repeating this process a couple of times before landing, with a sickening thud, in a hollow a short distance below me. It twitched convulsively for a few moments, then all was still.

But not for long. Within less than a minute a small flock of ravens, those dark denizens of the upland airways, came swooping down to settle on the rocks circling the hollow. After a brief pause two of them hopped down and moved in for a closer inspection. There must have been some movement, some sign of life, still present in the animal, for they turned, took off again and went their way.

All, with the exception of one. The largest, probably the oldest and canniest of the flock, moved in closer, chose a rock just above the sheep's head, closed its wings and settled down to wait. The reward for its patience would probably be the sheep's eyes, a favourite snack of ravens everywhere.

A call from above informed me that Liam was ready to take in (he had been so absorbed in the climbing that the whole incident had passed un-noticed) and I was soon on my way. As I gained height a little shoulder of rock cut off the scene of the tragedy from view. But something else caught my eye as I climbed. A pair of buzzards had arrived and were circling above the spot on outstretched wings, drawn unerringly to the upcoming feast by who knows what form of bush telegraph.

For Nature shows no sentimentiality in these matters and the recycling process would proceed with ruthless efficiency. There was enough food here to support, for a while at least, some of the creatures inhabiting these inhospitable mountains, fortifying them for the rigours of the upcoming winter. Within a few months there would be nothing more than a pile of bleaching bones to mark the spot of the sheep's demise. But even then its contribution to sustaining life would continue for, the following spring, in raven's nests all over the area, many a newly hatched chick would benefit from the insulation provided
by tufts of fleece plucked from the carcase of the long-forgotten sheep.

Mahatma Gandhi, that wise old owl, summed this cycle up nicely: "while everything around is ever changing, there is, underlying all that change, a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and re-creates. In the midst of death, life persists".

*Falco peregrinus sarcophagus*

We were on the cramped stance below the final pitch of Sarcophagus, sorting out ropes and gear, on a fine spring morning, when we spotted them. Two peregrine falcons, most likely the pair which nest on the upper cliffs, circling leisurely overhead.

Suddenly, as if on a given signal, they flew towards each other, locked talons, folded their wings and began plummeting earthwards, in what looked for all the world like a suicide pact. As they fell, they tumbled over and over, faster and faster and faster. From where we were standing, and as we watched in horror, we could hear the wind tearing through their plumage as they shot past. They approached the boulders at breakneck speed but, just when it seemed there was no avoiding smashing into them, they parted, spread their wings, and skimmed above the rocks, with little more than inches to spare. How they could judge the critical moment to part, while tumbling at such a dizzying rate, is a tribute to their renowned eyesight and aerial skills.

They repeated the process twice more, starting at a higher altitude each time and falling at a faster rate towards what looked like certain death. Then, having established their trust in each other, they soared off into the distance.

Somehow, our antics on Sarcophagus seemed quite tame, in comparison.
Raven's End

There is, in a narrow, secluded, tree-lined glen, a small but steep crag, known only to a few, that I like to visit every now and then. This crag lies on private land, where, it would seem, walkers are tolerated, but the situation regarding climbing is, as yet, untested. For although permission to climb here has never been refused, this is simply because permission to climb has never been sought. In these matters I follow the policy of "don't ask, don't tell" popularised by the U.S. military for dealing with a different matter entirely.

None of the few routes recorded thus far came easily, or yielded without a struggle, but these days, for me, struggling is the order of the day. High up on the face of this crag there is a small pedestal, neatly situated beneath a roof which protects it from the elements. In other words, a perfect spot for a raven's nest. So it was no surprise to discover, when first climbing there one winter, that it did, indeed, bear a nest.

We avoided the crag the following spring and summer, leaving the birds to rear their young in peace. But when I paid a return visit in autumn, to check things out, I discovered that a minor tragedy had occurred. In common with many nests of large birds, this one incorporated lengths of the binder twine that some farmers are prone to leave lying around. The foot of one of the fledglings had become entangled in the twine and, when it launched off on its maiden flight, it had been brought to an abrupt stop. It had fallen down below the ledge and dangled there in space, upside down, unable to right itself. It must have suffered a slow, lingering death, with the parent birds powerless to intervene.

There was a strong wind blowing through the trees on the day of my visit, and every so often a sudden gust would set the dead bird gyrating wildly at the end of the cord, spreading its wings and ruffling its feathers, so that it seemed as if the bird was still alive and trying to free itself. I found this danse macabre unsettling, so I set up an anchor, abbed down and cut the cord. The nest itself was a mass of binder twine, still posing a danger for any subsequent users, so I swept it off the ledge in the hope that, should the birds return the following spring, they would start afresh.

So far they haven’t returned. Not surprising, for having had to watch the young bird's death throes would probably have been enough to scare them off for good.

However, such an ideal nesting site is too good to be left idle and, sometime soon, I expect it will be discovered by the next generation of ravens scouting out the glen.
Wed 6th July 2016

I slowly rolled off the ferry in Cherbourg on my way to the Aosta Valley in Italy. I was terrified. I’m pretty comfortable driving on the right hand side having lived in the US and rented cars in Europe. However, I had never driven with the steering wheel on the wrong side.

The driving turned out to be no bother and I was soon appreciating the 130 km speed limit. One of my favourite moments was arriving at my first toll booth. I was on a high because I had overcome my terror leaving the ferry, and had discovered Aires – magic French rest spots. I pulled up to realise the booth was on the passenger side. As I was riding solo, the only way I could pay was stopping the engine, getting out with an apologetic wave to the car behind, running round the back of the car, putting my bank card in, running back, another wave, starting the engine and moving off as soon as I could. It felt like a Mr Bean sketch that I had to repeat many times.

Thur 7th July 2016

I arrived at the campsite in the Aosta Valley for the MI meet around 10pm. I couldn’t find any Irish people but Dave Gaughan overheard me asking a group of campers and
introduced himself. Dave and his buddies were very welcoming and helped me setup camp. I was wrecked so promptly went for a shower. It was bracing as the water was cold. I discovered later there was a button for hot water.

Fri 8th July 2016

I did a lovely six hour hike on a loop west of the campsite to a hut, with a traverse to a pass at 2700m and then a long descent. Sitting at the pass, I could see the fog rolling in. It reminded me of Wicklow. The trail out was well marked and a popular route. The descent was more ambiguous but I had a good map so was happy enough. Finding the campsite was a different story. There was a BBQ party that night at camp which was very social. Some folks had returned from the mountains so I got more info on acclimation options.

Sat 9th July 2017

I got the ski lifts towards the Sella hut. I walked until 3100m before turning round. It was great to be up at higher elevation and very busy with some very big local groups. There was another BBQ at camp on Sat night with great food and company.

Sun 10th July 2017

I returned to the same ski lifts (18 euros return), and got up to 3300m. The forecast for the afternoon was mixed and when I encountered whiteout I turned around.
I had almost got down to the ski lift when I met James and Siobhan heading up. Siobhan, a fellow Cork woman insisted I turn around and join them. Con and John were following along behind. I was out of water, tired and thirsty but delighted when we reached Sella Hut at 3600m. The weather had cleared up too.

**Mon 11th July 2017**

We slowly made our way up Castor. A facile snow climb and my first 4000m peak. The weather was perfect and the views were amazing. I was very grateful for it :)

![Castor](Photo: Ger Murphy)

**Tues 12th July 2017**

A bad weather day brought a welcome rest and an opportunity to do laundry. I went for a swim and sauna at the local pool, and had dinner with the posse. The restaurant was closed so Gerry K cooked us a fine dinner.

**Wed 13th July 2017**

Siobhan, James, Con and I travelled to the next valley and after a pleasant lunch set off
at a slow pace to the Vittorio Emanuele hut. It was a very beautiful valley but mad busy.

**Thur 14th July 2017**

We moved very slowly up Gran Paradiso. It was very windy and cold. At about 3600m, James wasn’t on his usual form and I came down with him while the others went on. Later on we returned to the campsite and enjoyed a big group dinner.

**Fri 15th July 2017**

I left Gressoney planning to camp on the south of Lake Geneva. It was way too built up for me so I aborted that plan and drove to Argentiere near Chamonix. It was late at night and I was thinking about sleeping off some side road when I found a quiet campsite called Chalet Pierre Semard.

**Sat 16th July 2017**

I woke to awesome views and enjoyed a chill day in the sun. I was delighted with my new found retreat.

**Sun 17th July 2017**

I drove to Les Houches and got the lift and tram to the start of the most popular route up Mont Blanc. The Mont Blanc tram is the coolest train but it’s not so frequent so it was 11am before I started walking and 1pm by the time I was at Tete Rousse (3300m).

The day before I had made a last minute reservation at the Goutier Hut as a spot had opened up but I decided to turn round as it was late and I was alone and didn't know the route. Never the less, I had a great hike.

**Mon 18th July 2017**

After collecting my buddy Peter at Geneva Airport, we drove to Saas Grund and set up camp. The campsite included a pass for the ski lifts.

**Tues 19th July 2017**

We drove to Saas Fee, got the lift to climb Alinahorn but stopped an hour from the summit as we were late starting and didn't want to miss the last ski lift back. It was gorgeous territory though, and good to get our gear out and practice together.

**Wed 20th July 2017**

We returned and made it to the top of Alinahorn. There were amazing crevasses and seracs in the area. I wouldn't be going exploring on unknown routes. My second 4000m peak.
Thur 21st July 2017

A cold weather front was forecast for the next couple of days. It's possible there were good windows but we didn't know enough about local weather patterns to take advantage of it so we got the lift up to look at Weissmies and did a short hike/scramble from the path.

I was absolutely smitten with Weissmies. It’s on my list! Afterwards, we drove to Chamonix and met up with Petra for dinner.

Fri 22nd July 2017

Peter, Petra and I had to abandon a plan to get some altitude and practice in as there were thunderstorms at higher elevations and the lifts were closed. I ended up doing a hike from Col des Montets which was very enjoyable.

Sat 23rd & Sun 24th July 2017

Rain, rain and more rain. Everything was off. Niamh arrived from Austria having trained
for Mont Blanc as the goal. It was also Peter’s goal as he had been diverted from it twice. We considered going to the Ecrins but the weather was the same everywhere. It looked like there was a break in the weather on Monday/Tuesday, and we got three spots in the Goutier hut for the Monday night.

**Mon 25th July 2017**

There was cloud in the valley but the weather was clear above it. I really enjoyed the scramble from Tete Rousse to the Goutier. The Goutier is a very comfortable but expensive hut. I discovered later that the Club Alpine Francais gives members 50% discounts on its hut and had a 50% discount on annual membership in the Summer.

**Tues 26th July 2017**

We had an early start for the long slog to Mt Blanc. It was spectacular. We took a break at the unmanned hut to add more layers as it was cold. On the way down, we stopped...
at the Goutier. It was a lot of descending in one day.

**Wed 27th July 2017**

A rest and laundry day. I went for a welcome swim and sauna at the local pool.

**Thur 28th July 2017**

We did some sport climbing at a mellow spot. It was warm climbing in the sun, and we had a welcome cold beer afterwards.

**Fri 29th July 2017**

On my last mountain day, I joined an organised trip with another client and a guide on the Cosmiques Arete. It was amazing and the highlight of my trip. I finished on a high, determined to improve my skills and experience so I can do more AD routes like this.

**Sat 30th July 2017**

I left Chamonix planning a stopover on route to Cherbourg with some more Mr Bean moments.
When the Aer Lingus flight landed in Geneva in July 2016 the holiday had begun. Well almost, as I collected the Mercedes substitute for a boxy mini, events didn’t quite go to plan. Mary Reilly and I were heading for the second week of Mountaineering Ireland’s Alpine Meet at Gressoney St Jean, at an altitude of 1,400m up the Lys valley on the north side of Val D’Aosta near the Italian/Swiss border.

The plan was that we would reach our destination in one day. A flight delay of one hour with the loss of another hour under C.E.T. made us wonder. However when we cruised out of the Eurocar Hire in the Merc it alleviated concern except for the fact that unfamiliarity with automatics caused some stalling at junctions with glares from the normally placid Swiss. Navigational errors on the motorways resulted in more wasted time and extra Toll payments. It was getting dusk as we approached Chamonix and we pulled off the road to look for cheap lodgings. The car and its driver seemed less temperamental the next morning as we headed for Italy via the Mont Blanc tunnel where a Toll charge of €42 was grudgingly paid to the madam in the kiosk, after a slow crawl for an hour up to the entrance. The delay is due to a 15 second spacing between all vehicles in the 11k two way tunnel. However all was forgiven as the beautiful Italian sunshine lifted our hearts and even the car seemed to hoot!

We were dazzled by the view from the hotel of glaciers and snow fields on Monte Lyskamm, part of the Monte Rosa group of high summits over 4,000m at the head of the valley. The first task was to call to the Alpine Meet camp site down the valley from our hotel. It was deserted but later on we met many of the gang at a coffee shop in Gressoney, including Jane Carney, Training Officer at Mountaineering Ireland, and some of the guides who I knew from previous Meets. We received a lot of information on routes, maps and things. After a river walk and some shopping we were ready for our Italian dinner!

Early the following morning, well not too early, we set off with map in hand to explore one side of the valley above the village. A circular route was planned taking in a hut at about 2,400m, a climb of 1,000m. Most Alpine walks are up, meaning relentlessly upwards through pine woods, alpine pastures and rock. We, that is I, huffed and puffed
a bit as we were not acclimatised, though the legs weren’t too bad for a person of my generation! We reached a coll for drum up and lay down in the sun while taking in the wonderful panorama of Alps on all sides. This was our limit for today without reaching the hut.

We bought a better map and a guide book of valley walks which proved to be useful in opening up many exciting mountain routes. Alpine flowers were an added attraction in the valleys, forests and high alpine meadows. Many were identified from a little Alpine Flower Book. As equipment we had a small rope and limited climbing gear with us but early on we decided to focus on hiking opportunities which were assisted by cable cars, known in Italy as gondolas. There were two at Staffal at the head of the valley about 10km from Gressoney and another one down the valley. With our weekly ticket we were able to enjoy many hikes high in the Alps with the hospitality of some great huts. Mary even discovered a selection of gluten free cakes baked by the warden of the Orestes Hutte where we got into conversation with the assistant warden from Australia who was descended from Michael Dwyer, the infamous Irish rebel deported to Australia where he did well. He was chuffed that we were familiar with his exploits and his memorial stone in Glenmalure where the hotel had a photo of his very fancy tomb.

There was a via ferrata near Gressoney and we were looking forward to climbing it, but for some reason we could not find the start in a large boulder field below the rock face. So back to the Alps and we walked up to the glaciers and snowfields below Monte Rosa with some spectacular hiking routes. The days followed one another in glorious sunshine. Even our rest days ended up with shorter hikes of about 4 hours as there was so much more to do and explore.

One memorable route was to Alta Luce at 3184m. Sections of the climb were very steep but the effort was worthwhile. The views across the glaciers towards Monte Rosa to the east and the Matterhorn to the west were impressive and beautiful. Beside the summit was a large brass bell which Mary rang ferociously. This was followed by a crash of an avalanche. I had to reassure her that she did not start the avalanche as it was 2 or 3 km away and, like thunder, the crash would have taken maybe 10 seconds to reach us.

Drum up on a great peak is always special. But something was missing! So down we went to the above mentioned hut for apple strudel and gluten free cake – but it was all gone, devoured by a big gang of young Italians!

The two weeks of our Italian journey had come to an end with great memories of mountains, and some great Italian meals and wine!