

AGE OF REASON

THE VERDON GORGE IS TECHNICAL, SPICY AND RUN OUT, SO WHY IS THIS FORGOTTEN CLIMBING STYLE NOW BECOMING SO POPULAR?

By Whitney Boland • Photos by Keith Ladzinski

The view from the top of the Grand Eycharme, a sector in the lower part of the Verdon Gorge.



Jesus, Sam, just hang the draw,” I said.

We were 1,000 feet above the twisting river of the Verdon Gorge, on a seldom-climbed but flawless route named Graphique (8a/5.13b). Sam was in the crux, hovering just above a hard-to-clip bolt that he had skipped, and 15 feet above his last draw. I wondered how best to catch what appeared to be an inevitable whipper on this “slab,” which, to sport climbers like us, meant anything less than 15-degrees overhanging. Graphique was dead vertical with shallow pockets and small crimps like sharpened meat cleavers.

Sam reached far right and stepped his left foot up. His shoulders tightened, and I knew he was gripped. Grazing the edge of a tiny hold, he belted out, “Grawwww-www!” and sailed off into the air.

We were out of our element. New-schoolers, project-hunters, steep-line-finders, single-pitchers. We day-cragged at Rifle, used GriGris and owned rope bags. The Verdon, the veritable “Grand Canyon of limestone” in Southern France, was multi-pitch, vertical and

runout. Sam and I had come all the way from Colorado to visit this sport-climbing museum, to experience an area where the climbing we love had begun. The Verdon was alluring, if daunting, but we thought we were armed because, earlier, we had bought ATCs.

I gripped tight, and when Sam hit the end of the rope, we both violently slammed into the wall.

“Shit!” he yelled. “I think I’m hurt!”

It was just 100 feet to the canyon rim,

but 100 difficult, runout ones. A drum roll of thunder played in the distance. How would we get out? Sam, however, was only concerned with his failed redpoint attempt.

“Lower me,” he said. “I want to try again.”

“Really?” I said. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine!” he said. He wasn’t. A week later, he’d find out that he had broken his wrist.

Grudgingly, I lowered Sam to the be-

lay; he untied his knot and pulled the rope. Sam climbed back up to the crux, though this time he clipped the draw.

We got to the top that day, though just barely. A week later, we were on a plane, back to our lives in America and the familiar single-pitch cragging and multi-day projecting. Somehow, the climbing, though of course enjoyable, felt incomplete. As the year droned on, the desire to return to the Verdon burned painfully hot.



Nothing about the Verdon was like the climbing I had known. It is vertical, multi-pitch, sandbagged and petrifying. By today's standards, the Verdon is everything sport climbing is not. The style is outdated—runout, exposed and your feet hurt more than your arms.

You'll find pitons fixed in cracks, rotten retro slings and hook scars on pockets where moves deemed undoable by yesterday's climber were aided (aka "French freed"). The Verdon is anti-projecting, anti-pulling, anti-cragging and anti-low-risk, but this area is the patriarch of sport climbing's bloodline. At its height, when the likes of Patrick Edlinger and Jean-Baptiste

Tribout climbed here, the Verdon was far beyond its time, boasting groundbreaking lines like *Les Specialistes* (8b+/5.14a), in 1987.

The Verdon can accurately be called the venue that ushered in climbing's age of reason. It was one of the first climbing areas in the world to be protected almost entirely by bolts, the first to be equipped top down, and the first to accept top roping (a phenomena invented here by Jacques "Pschitt" Perrier and called *moulinette* in French). What appeared to be a bastardization of climbing to the traditionalists of 20 years ago was really a catapult into the future. The events at the Gorge took tradition and evolved it. This was a free rational inquiry into a fuller meaning

of rock climbing that wasn't pigeonholed by cracks and broken fissures. The shallow-pocketed, small-crimped, and immaculate blank blue faces of the Verdon became open canvases to a small clique of forward-thinking French ascensionists.

Verdon history can be broken down into three distinct phases. The first was in 1968 with the Gorge's first two traditional (ground up, onsight FA) routes: *Les Enrages* (6b+/5.11a, A2), established by Patrick Cordier, and then *La Demande* (6a/5.10b), by Joel Coqueugniot and François Guillot (so named because Guillot proposed to his girlfriend the day they climbed the route).

In 1978, Stephane Troussier and

Christian Guyomar ushered in the second phase of Verdon activity when they inspected a route from the top down. This new style made sense in an area where you approach at the top of the gorge rim anyway. Soon routes were equipped from the top and bolt protected. Because the style of ascent became less relevant, difficulty of movement became stylish. Some routes were simply short, single-pitch lines at the top of the canyon wall, such as *Les Braves Gens Ne Courent Pas Les Rues* (8b/5.13d), meaning "The brave don't run on the streets," though some were long, like the 1,000-foot *Mingus* (8a/5.13b), which Lynn Hill onsighted in 1994.

However, as newer, steeper areas were





Lauren Lee tripping balls on *Eve Line* (7b/5.12b), a two-pitch classic from the early 1980's and first established by Bruno Potie.

discovered throughout Europe, and climbers became increasingly committed to raising difficulty standards, fewer climbers visited the Verdon. Its technical, runout style of climbing on vertical rock became unfashionable.

The Verdon's third period, however, is only just emerging. There has been a swell of new-school establishment by pioneering climbers such as Greg Saugé, Bruno Potie, Bruno Clement, Pascal Foudou and others, ferreting out the steeper caves and walls embedded in the massive 1,000-foot deep chasm. New-school Verdon climbers are resurrecting the old classics as well.

Early this spring, I stood in the Marseille airport scanning the faces for someone familiar. Brian Rhodes, Lauren Lee, Keith Ladzinski and I had arrived in France a week earlier. Now I was picking up the remaining members of our group: Beck Kloss, Roman Gershkovich and Sam Elias, my climbing partner from the prior year, whose wrist had healed and who was, despite that injury, psyched for our three-week trip.

Marseille is a bustling port town on the edge of the Mediterranean and only two hours southeast of the Verdon. This city is testament to how history compounds: a conglomeration of ethnicity, wealth and culture drawn from generations of resettlement from nearby Italy, Spain and North Africa, all stuffed into the confines of a rather tiny space.

I saw Beck's face first, and he flipped his head like he'd just been slapped under the chin. Part Vonnegut, part Voltaire, Beck's an odd dichotomy who is as comfortable drinking fine wine and talking literature as he is listening to the Dirty South ghetto rapper Birdman.

Sam appeared behind him. He was dressed in a maroon linen shirt, wrinkled from 24 hours of travel, and his dark hair was held back out of his face by a pair of sunglasses—a look that said, "I own this place."

Then, out of the crowd came the unmistakable Roman: a small, stocky Southerner who looks exactly like Austin Powers.

That night we stayed in Marseille with folks Sam and I had befriended during our Verdon trip the year before. Given a true French welcome, we downed glasses of Pastis, an annis aperitif; a traditional dish with potatoes, pork, lamb and beef; four bottles of wine; a bottle of champagne; a cheese course; two baguettes; a crême-filled dessert; and a shot of a pear *digestif* that is as potent as diesel straight out of the



The author Whitney Boland reconnects with sport climbing's forgotten style on *L'âge de Raison* (7b+/5.12c).

gas tank. After dinner, we sipped *café*, talked about the weather, and were instructed by our hospitable *amis* that there is only one governing tenet here in France: *C'est la vie*.

The next day we drove two hours to La Palud sur Verdon, the village that would be our home for the next two weeks. While my first visit had been relentlessly sunny, this year was rainy, and fog settled over the landscape like gauze. We eased in to the comforts of Gite L'Escales, owned by the famous French climber Patrick Edlinger and his wife, Matia.

The bad weather was bearable for a couple of days with enough wine, reruns of *Family Guy* and *The Office* on DVD, and talking smack, but when a streak of blue sky slipped out—a mote between two plains of rain clouds—the group anxiety hit overload.

"I'm ready to climb, man. You guys ready?" said Brian. "Let's get at it! We should go!" Brian bobbed restlessly next to the table in the yard of the gite (pronounced "zh-eet," these are bed-and-breakfast lodgings found in many French villages). Lauren looked up at him, her cigarette balanced gracefully between her fingers just outside her mouth. She blew out a puff of smoke. "You're psyched," she said. "Like a little kid. It's good to see that the weight of the world has not crushed your spirit."

Brian laughed, nervously shoving his hands in his pocket—an apprehension that somehow seemed to contradict his thirst for action. Lauren took another drag, blew out the smoke and flashed her exotically beautiful grin—a hint of Chinese blood giving her smile a unique curl.

"Just chill out for a sec," she said. "We all want to climb, but let's let things dry."

Lauren was a pro climber a few years back, but for the past two, she hid virtually off the climbing map. Time and obsession, though, brought her back. Lauren is poised and self-possessed, but beneath her swath of steel confidence that can at times make her appear standoffish, she is affectionate and caring.

Despite Brian's disquiet, we gave the canyon a full hour to dry before heading in (though, according to locals, it only takes 10 minutes and a faint wind to remove all moisture from the big wall). We drove the Route des Crete to L'Escales, a sector of the Verdon Gorge where we could rappel in for single-pitch climbs, or *couennes*, in case the rain clouds decided to unzip on our heads.

We parked and hiked to the canyon's edge along latticed rock and tried to orient ourselves. For an hour, we con-

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sulted the guidebook to match similarities in plant life and rock features with the pictures in the guidebook. Occasionally, a route name is written on the cliff near some bolts, but more often than not, you search and scramble to find rap anchors and hope you aren't off course.

Lauren sat at the edge of the canyon with the guide. "I think this is it," she said, referring to the 6b/5.10d *Le Enième Tas* we wanted to try first.

"Sweet," said Brian. Anxious to get going, he set up the anchors, uncoiled the rope and tossed it into the abyss.

Brian, Lauren and I rapped down, and Brian took the lead first. Halfway up the route, Brian pitched into the air.

"No way. This can't be 6b!" he said.

Lauren and I just assumed Brian had fallen because he was unfamiliar with the climbing style. He pulled through the crux, and now it was my turn. The route involved using two very close monos that formed your left hand into a peace sign, then a deadpoint to a shitty gáston, another crimp, and a move off a sloper. My foot, perched high, popped off and I flew.

"Damn," I said.

Lauren went last—even she hit the crimp and sailed. We considered the fact that we weren't on a nice 6b, but rather, the 120-foot 7b+/5.12c to the right, *Tete l'Eau*.

"How old is this thing?" asked Lauren.

"Nearly as old as I am," I said, after consulting the guidebook for the year the route was established, 1983. We were learning the Verdon rules quickly. Anything put up earlier than 1985 would likely have piss-poor crimps, monos, desperate pulls and runouts longer than the waitlist to get into Hueco Tanks.

The next day we woke to clear skies. Sam and I got on *Boulevard des Stars*, a two-pitch 7b/5.12b that was established in 1983. I led the first pitch, climbing slowly. Ten feet above my last bolt, I stepped my right foot high and weighted it gingerly. *Bam*, the foot blew and I screeched through the air.

With the fall into the abyss over and my nerves slightly soothed, I pulled up and climbed to the anchors. On the second pitch, Sam, like me, took a winger, but he quickly found the key beta: Pull on a mono, hike the feet up to the chest and bear down on a sharp tooth-like hold. Well above and to the right of his last bolt, he made this committing move and sighed relief.

"Dude, that was sketchy," he called down. "I almost smoked off this hold. Those crimps will slice you."

These routes were old, and harder than we thought they should be for the grade. We swallowed our egos and tried our best, but as I learned, most people, especially sport climbers, who come here find it difficult. According to local Greg Sauget, in the 1980s the limit was 7b/5.12b or, at the very max, 7b+/5.12c. As better climbers came to tick off lines and establish new ones, no one accounted for physical, technical and tactical improvements. So automatically everyone rated everything at their "limit," around 7b+, no matter how hard it really was. In the Verdon, a 7c /5.12d put up in 1982 feels more like an 8a/5.13b) of today.

Though the grades might have been "skewed" in our eyes, they were still grades: Nothing more than a mark in a line of our progress.

When you enter La Palud (population: 200), you pass one single stoplight that lurks a lazy yellow, turned on one month a year for the influx of tourists in the peak summer season. Beyond this beacon of modernity, entering this village means entering a forgotten time. The streets are narrow and wandering. The alleyways are lined with roses, and sheep with bells chiming around their necks graze the outskirts of the village.

To give you a sense of La Palud's size, the gite where we stayed, Gite l'Escales, sits on the east side. In the time it takes to eat a croissant, you can walk from there to the other end of town to the market and post office. There is a tiny climbing shop, Perroquet Vert, stuffed to the gills with gear and clothing, and where you can find the Verdon guidebook. Just beyond the school playground is a continuously running public fountain. The two bars, Bar de la Place, which has been serving Pastis and Kir to the village since before the dawn of Verdon climbing 40 years ago, and Lou Cafeterie (the WiFi hotspot), share

the village's only intersection. A little farther there is a *boulangerie*, where we became full-fledged bread junkies and bought croissants, *pain au chocolat*, *grimpeurs* and fresh baguettes every morning.

With the rain again coming in sheets, we spent far too much time tooling around La Palud, surfing the Internet at Lou Cafeterie, getting lost in the nearby villages Moustier Ste Marie and Castellane, and trolling the network of tunnels that lace through the canyon and offer access to some of the Verdon's long routes from the ground.

La Palud hovers in its own little world, stuck somewhere between now and then—an anachronistic combination of awkward climbers and displaced locals that have somehow simply ended up there. Eventually, we met all of them, including Simon and Janyk, two strong La Palud locals who are behind new-school first ascents.

"La Palud is very strange place," said Simon, blond and sturdy, looking out the café window. "You must be very weird to live here. There is no city, nothing to do."

Every morning, all of the La Palud locals rendezvoused at the café. It was a typical French custom, the café acting as a crossroads for route developers to meet and talk about what new lines they were going to put up that day. Daniel Dulac, who had come to visit for a weekend, spoke of a long 8c he was developing that would likely be the hardest in the Verdon.

Beyond the spray, there was a relaxed calm in the air that seemed typical of French village life. "Patrick du Bar," a multi-lingual Slovakian who smokes rolled cigarettes and holds his wine in his palm between his middle and ring finger, was always found at his namesake: the bar. Bruno Potie and Greg Sauget, two route developers, could be



Sam Elias and Whitney Boland on *Salvaje de Corazon* (7c/5.12d) in the middle of a cold, but dry snap. By the time it was Whit's turn, the rain started to fall.



"Too Dope," or, to locals, the "Hurricane Crag," is one of many new locals crags to have sprouted up near the Verdon Gorge. The lines here are steep and stay dry even when it's raining.

(Below): The view of Rougon, a town just outside of La Palud.

found sipping coffee. Philip, the café owner, tended his pet snake. Outside, the bread-shop lady, crowned with hair rollers, used a wicker chair to sit and read.

We had seen Patrick Edlinger's wife, Matia, countless times around the gite, but we still hadn't actually seen the man himself, who by now had become something of a legend to us. When we inquired, locals said that Patrick kept to himself mostly. His image—the shirtless, blond-haired man who famously free soloed *Orange Mechanique* (8a/5.13b)—remained myth for now.

We often spent the evenings sipping bottles of two-euro wine at the gite, wondering when the rain would stop and laughing at Keith's commentary. This exceptional climbing photographer is eternally positive, and he claims to hate nothing and no one except for those who feel entitled to listen to reggae. He's a master of sarcasm, somehow making statements such as, "No, dude, this weather is sweet," sound funnier than they really are.

We had become familiar with La Palud's relaxed way of life, but it quickly turned annoyingly familiar—how tight-knit the community was, and how everyone knows everyone, and everyone's business. Sleeping in close quarters and watching villages pass from inside a car weren't helping anything.

It almost became unbearable until the day we woke to a glimpse of clear(ish) skies. We heard an afternoon storm would come in, but headed out to the Mission Sector of the Verdon anyway. *Surveiller et Punir* (7a+/

5.12a) is a classic route put up by Jean Marc Troussier in 1981. Sam and Beck thought they would have enough time to rappel the route and climb out. For time's sake, they decided they would jet the four-pitch route in two pitches.

Beck took the first two, rated 5.10b. He emerged from the bulge, 30 feet from the second-pitch anchors, having skipped bolts in already runout sections since he didn't have enough draws.

"Jesus, 5.10b my ass!" Beck yelled. "There was a *mono* down there! I'm downgrading *Realization!*"

Lauren, Roman, Keith and I watched Sam and Beck climb slowly against a backdrop of raging clouds coalescing above. The dark blue fist of rage, shifting and bulging in the sky, moved like a sucker punch toward the canyon. From the rim we could see the storm, but on the wall, our two climbers were oblivious.

The storm charged faster and we were all a little nervous. At the café, locals had told us that more people are killed in the Verdon by lightning than anything else. Raindrops fell as Sam, who ran the final two pitches in one and was now on top of the rim, tugged on Beck's end and yelled, "You're on!"

Beck climbed as fast as possible, but he was still relegated to going as slowly as the delicate climbing dictated. The wind raged and Sam yelled, "Come on, man, you got it. Faster!" Lightning flashed. The rest of us were frantically packing our stuff when, thankfully, Sam and Beck topped out and scurried over. Lightning flashed again.

We all ran through the latticed rock to the trail. In a moment of carelessness, I dumped my feet down onto the flat trail, caught my foot at an awkward angle and rolled it. I screamed, and crumbled into a fetal-shaped ball of pain.

"You OK, Whit? You OK?" Lauren asked, running over. She took my foot and wrapped it up with athletic tape.

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Patrick Edlinger still lives in La Palud with his wife and daughter. Edlinger was not only instrumental in developing the Verdon's hardest lines, he showed the world what flawless climbing technique looked like with his countless solos, often barefoot.

It's almost my last day, and I'd like to get all the costs settled up today," said Brian. "Can we all sit down and talk about it?"

The shitty weather and continual rain were beginning to grate on everyone's spirits. We sat in the café morning after morning, checking the Internet for *anywhere, dear god anywhere* in Europe that was dry. Still, no one could escape our fate, to be tormented by storm clouds and buckets of rain wherever we went. It was the inevitable, constant disappointment of something totally out of our control, like the weather, or, for me, my ankle, that was making us all a little annoyed. Brian's anxiety and his insistence on dealing with money and logistics didn't help.

"Brian, we'll get it figured out," Lauren said. "Just chill!"

"Bummer, dude," Keith said. "You need help?"

Being pigheaded, I said no, and hobbled out ... all the way to the bar.

We downed bottles of Beaujolais and ate pizza like wild hogs. Some French locals came over to me. I thought they were going to ask me about my ankle, which I was sourly icing, but instead, they said, "Your friend? He look like ... Austin Powers?"

"Who, Roman?" I said. "Yeah, that's Roman."

"Austin Powers!" the locals cried. "We buy you drink!"

Outside, clouds bunched up like a sweaty forehead in wet air. In one sense or another, each of us looked through the window, out to something else. None of us had gotten what we'd wanted, which was to come to France and climb our brains out. Yet there was camaraderie in our disappointment—even if we were bugging the shit out of each other. Part of me lamented the luck of the year before, when I first experienced the Verdon and its seemingly infinite bluebird days and stellar temps. Icing my ankle, I tried to reconcile how things can and will always change.

The locals said that they had not seen weather like this in 25 years. On the third straight morning of rain beating at the roof, we joked about bombing the canyon.

"If it doesn't stop raining soon," said Sam, "I'm going to go jihad on this place."

"What did you do to anger the gods?" said Beck. "Infidel!" He picked up a baguette and bit off a mouthful of it, then turned to the rest of us.

"Beck, bring me the pain!" said Roman, his head still under the bed sheet.

"Pain *au chocolat*?" said Beck.

An hour later we were back at the café, back in our established booth, giving the nod to the French barista for the usual: *café au lait*.

"I just got the stink-eye from Philip," said Sam.



lauren Lee and the awesome Verdon Gorge.

"You've been getting the stink-eye from everyone here, you terrorist," says Beck. "Yeah, because we're in here every day just to surf the Internet for weather reports."

Patrick du Bar came over and offered a cure for our woes. "There is a secret crag here that stays dry in rain. We took your American friend Dave Graham there last year. There are other places to climb in the rain."

Could it be? Hearing that there were steep single-pitch crags adjacent to La Palud somehow made my ankle feel better. We were skeptical, though. How could anything be dry in this Biblical downpour? Still, after getting the beta to the "secret crag," we decided we would go no matter what.

Using Patrick du Bar's poorly sketched directions, we headed toward the "village" of Chateauneuf, which is really just a giant uninhabited pile of rubble.

We narrowed in on the dirt roads with increasing speed and uncertainty, and Beck pulled out a bottle of wine. "If we can't find this so-called crag soon, we should move to plan B."

We soon hit a good road, saw bee houses, and then the edge of the cliff where there were at least 10 other cars parked.

"Secret my ass," said Sam. "This is the locals' playground." We got out to wafts of wild thyme growing on the plateau. The wind was warm due to the *Siroso*, as a local called it, that blew up from the Sahara, as opposed to the cold Northern Mistral wind that cuts through skin.

We hiked down and around to the cliff face below the plateau, where we were totally protected from the weather and found single-pitch sport climbing: hard lines, new-school grades, and steep caves. There we met up with Simon and Janyk, who taught us how to ask for beta: *Donne moi l'methode*.





Lauren Lee climbing *GTLOQ* (6b+/5.11a), with La Palud local Patrick du Bar, belaying her with old-school Verdon style, with a munter hitch.

and there were countless more single-pitch areas around the Verdon proper: Buchet, Les Neophytes, Solitude and one on Route des Crete, where local Grég Sauget and others have established 16 new routes this year. The development of these crags has taken off in the past six years with government-funded retro-bolting and an increase in visitors.

“The new climbers here,” said Michel Jourdan, owner of La Palud’s climbing shop, “how do you say, are artists. They crafted these rocks.”

Tensions relaxed as we became at least slightly satisfied by the idea that we weren’t totally screwed. At least there was some steep climbing that wasn’t totally wet, and in between downpours, we could hopefully make it into the Verdon proper.

One rainy morning, we finally met Patrick Edlinger. He was smaller and older than I imagined, but his chiseled, weathered face made him look like a prophet. First, he offered us some basic words about the area’s climbing.

“Everywhere, there is so much climbing here,” said Patrick. “I chose to live here because you can climb so much different rock all year. Long route, short, boulder in Annot, steep, vertical. It’s all good.”

Conversation shifted from Patrick’s first and favorite routes, to his many stints with soloing here, starting in 1978 when he linked *Les Rideaux de Gwendal* (7b/5.12b), *Pichnibule* (7b+/5.12c) and *Cthulhu* (6c+/5.11c). His face turned grave.

“Soloing is very dangerous. You must be all in it here,” he said. “You know what I mean, and with any route you climb. You must always feel the

“SOLOING IS VERY DANGEROUS,” EDLINGER SAID. “YOU MUST ALWAYS FEEL THE MAGIC. BECAUSE WHEN YOU DON’T,” HE SHRUGGED, “PSSST!”

magic. Because when you don’t,” he said, shrugging, “psssst!”

The next morning was clear, but Patrick, the seer of all things Verdon, had predicted that the storms would roll in that afternoon. I found Sam standing at the edge of an alcove looking down. He looked up at me as I approached, and pointed down into the canyon.

“Will you go in there with me?”

I sensed it was something big, because otherwise Sam wouldn’t have bothered to ask. As I got closer I saw a perfectly blue, pocketed pitch that traversed ever-so-gently to the right out of a bulge of blonde rock, and realized it was *Graphique*, our first major climb from the year before—the one that had broken Sam’s wrist.

“You want to go back in there?” I asked.

Sam answered by uncoiling his rope. I didn’t understand the need to get back on this climb any more than Sam did other than *that’s life—c’est la vie*.

Sam and I rapped in—placing the draws and dialing in the belay so I could give him a soft catch. We pulled the rope and committed.

Sam started climbing and, in no time, reached the crux that last year had spit him off and cursed him with a yearlong pain in his hand. I could tell (though he would never admit it) that he was tense. Yet while some things might get worse—as with the weather—time can change things for the better. We were beginning to show signs that we knew how to keep our cool, manage our ropes, use ATCs and master the subtleties of shallow, vertical pockets.

With a couple of delicate moves, Sam pulled through the crux. “That was much easier than last year,” he said.

In my mind, *Graphique* still felt like a big accomplishment, not because Sam had sent with a broken wrist the year before, but because we’d both successfully climbed out of the route without killing ourselves, and had come back the next year with so much more confidence, and so much more knowledge. We’d learned something, not just from our past, but from the blank, unique and original climbing founded here. The Verdon somehow accentuates these small successes because when all is said and done, pitches completed, runouts conquered, you’re standing on the top looking down at an immense and blank wall that you’ve just climbed.

Time shapes itself and everything in it. Rock transforms, heroes rise and fall, and climbs get polished. And that’s life.

Whitney Boland, Rock and Ice contributing editor, spent way too much money on her trip, but c’est la vie. She will be back there soon.

BECA



FLIGHTS AND DIRECTIONS: Air France has daily routes into the Marseille-Provence Airport, and tickets in 2008 from Denver varied from \$700-\$900 roundtrip. From there, take the A7 to the E712/A51, and then take the D952 all the way to La Palud sur Verdon. (The “A” roads are big like highways, and “E” and “D” roads are narrow and curvy.)

CAR RENTAL: Check out Renault’s Eurodrive Program (www.renaultusa.com) if you will be visiting for more than a month. For less than a regular rental, you get a brand new ride (that will be sold used later), insurance, 24-hour roadside assistance, and unlimited mileage. We paid \$1,600 for a five-seater for a month. For shorter stays, check out Sixt (www.sixt.com).

WHERE TO STAY: Gite L’Escales (formerly known as Le Wapiti) is the *di-zank!* Room for two to five people. Stay the night for 20 euros per person per night, or get petit déjeuner (breakfast) and dinner—cooked by Matia herself—for 35 euros per person per night. +33-4.92.77.30.02

Panoramic Hotel: more spendy and a few miles outside of town. Costs 56-75 euros per night for two depending on season. +33-4.92.77.35.07

Refuge de la Maline (Club Alpin Français) is located on Route des Crete and

perches on the rim of the canyon. It offers dorm-style rooms for 12 euros. +33-4.92.77.38.05

CAMPING: Costs generally range from 6-12 euros depending on site.

- Camping Municipal: +33-4.92.74.68.13
- Camping Bourbon: +33-4.92.77.38.17
- Le Grand Canyon Camping: +33-4.94.77.30.87

OTHER ESSENTIAL INFO

- As with French village tradition, most businesses are closed midday between 1 and 4, so plan accordingly.
- A Carrefour (like Wal-Mart) is in the village of Castellane, 30 minutes away on D952.
- Break-ins are common at parking areas, especially on the weekends. Leave your belongings in the tent or room.
- Lou Cafeterie has the only WiFi access in town.
- A 200-meter static line is useful for designated rappels; otherwise, an 80-meter dynamic rope will suffice and you can rap in one pitch at a time.
- See www.franceguide.com for excellent, useful travel information.