

The other side of the MOUNTAIN



Richard Hammond and his family take the train to a lesser-known region of the French Alps to try out a series of outdoor mountain activities.

Pictures by **Richard Hammond** ▶



Clinging to a rope over the edge of a steep-sided gorge, it occurred to me that I didn't really know the person I'd trusted my life to. Bernard – a local French high mountain guide – looked like he knew what he was doing, but in those fleeting moments before I let go of the rope he'd slung up with a series of carabiners, I couldn't help questioning his credentials. His wife, Sally, told me that morning he'd been a professional high mountain guide for years, and she was now giving me an enthusiastic thumbs-up from the ground, after belaying down herself. Then my son, who was desperate to give it a go, yelled: "Just go for it Dad!" Banishing all negative thoughts, I kicked out my legs and off I went, dropping gently down to the ground 100 feet below as Bernard gradually released the abseil rope. My son soon followed suit without a moment's hesitation, his face blushing with the exhilaration and confidence of youth.



"CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE WANING POPULARITY OF SKIING MEANS THE ALPINE VALLEYS HAVE TO FIND NEW OPPORTUNITIES"

LA GRANGE DES ECRINS, CHABOTTES



VIA FERRATA AT GORGES D'AGNIELLES

The belay was the exit point of our morning's Via Ferrata in the Gorges d'Agnielles in the Southern French Alps. Via Ferrata is a type of climbing where a series of metal rails are bolted into the mountain rock, which you clip into and use as a safety line throughout the route. Sally (who runs Undiscovered Mountains, the activity holiday company we'd booked through) explained that Via Ferrata had been



LOCAL GUIDE BERNARD, UNDISCOVERED MOUNTAINS



installed by the Italians in the First World War to make it quicker for its troops to travel more efficiently across high mountains, but in France it has since been adopted as a sport, designed so that many of the routes go to scenic places. The scene of Gorges d’Agnielles was certainly that; even though this was a family-friendly beginner’s course, it ran across a tall vertiginous ledge at times 300 feet above the road below, flanked by the impressive limestone cliffs.

BRANCHING OUT

We’d come to the Southern French Alps because we wanted to travel by train from the UK to go on an outdoor adventure that was off the beaten track. The Hautes Alpes is home to the popular ski resort of Serre Chevalier but mostly it’s a little visited part of the Alps for British travellers. After taking the Eurostar, we had a night in Paris then took the morning high speed train to Valence

where we caught the train to Gap to stay for the first few nights at La Grange des Écrins, a guesthouse in the valley, before heading higher, to two mountain refuges.

Écrins (also the name of the surrounding National Park) means jewel and the guesthouse lives up to its name, with gem-coloured textiles, a pool with a view and grounds that run, bucolically, through meadows to a woodland stream. Run by Frenchman Jean Mellot and his Taiwanese wife, Meg Liu, this ancient farmhouse is catering to growing numbers of visitors wanting to connect with nature. “Agriculture is dying and the golden years of winter tourism are gone,” says Jean, softly. “Climate change and the waning popularity of skiing means the Alpine valleys have to find new opportunities”. Green tourism is an obvious one, he adds. “We have good weather here and we didn’t damage the landscape with huge ski resorts.”

Gastrotourism is another, I think, as Meg plies us with course after delicious course, blending



WATERFALL ON WALK UP TO REFUGE DORMILLOUSE



MAISON DU BERGER



WALKING UP TO REFUGE DORMILLOUSE

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Richard's trip was organised by Undiscovered Mountains (undiscoveredmountains.com) with travel and accommodation provided by Hautes Alpes tourist board (hautes-alpes.net). A fully customisable seven-day summer multi activity holiday organised by Undiscovered Mountains costs from €518 per adult and €474 per child, including 10 activity points per person exchangeable for a range of activities, a choice of

accommodation (including camping, luxury chalet with private hot tub, farmhouse bed and breakfast, chalet style youth hostel or hotel to suit your budget) and a personalised App with all your trip details, unique itinerary, and practical information. Richard and family travelled by Eurostar from London to Paris, train from Paris to Gap, return journey on the sleeper train from Gap to Paris then Eurostar Paris to London.



A MULTI-ACTIVITY HOLIDAY IN THE SOUTHERN FRENCH ALPS

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL PART OF THE ALPS, BUT THE REALLY STRIKING THING IS HOW UNTRAMELLED THIS LANDSCAPE IS

her Taiwanese influences with a menu that starts with delicate spring rolls and continues with pink lamb chops from nearby Ancelle.

Meg's delicious food also provided much needed fuel for a series of outdoor mountain activities we took part in the coming few days, including canyoning in the Marmites du Diable, mountain biking around Ancelle, and white-water rafting on the Durance, each one led by

professional guides selected by Undiscovered Mountains. For the final two nights, Bernard took us on a different kind of outdoor adventure, this one less about adrenalin, it was designed to introduce us to the experience of walking in the mountain landscape. We hiked up to two mountain refuges – Refuge du Tourond and Gite de l'Ecole in Dormillouse – said to be the sole permanently inhabited village within a

French National Park that's only accessible on foot. The treks took us up alongside fast flowing rivers, through larch forests, past beautiful wildflowers, and several breath-taking waterfalls as Bernard gave us an introduction to the wildlife and geology of the region, pointing out yellowhammers, narcissi, orchids, wild pansies and cowslip. It's a beautiful part of the Alps, but the really striking thing is how untrammelled this landscape is. Besides the rocky track we followed and the odd stone wall, there was little sign of human impact.

We were grateful to have Bernard on hand to point out things we'd missed on our own. Sally explained that it is possible to organise the refuges and activities independently, but if you book the activities through her company Undiscovered Mountains, you get an itinerary tailored to your ability and experience. Faced with the alternative of seeking out a mountain guide somewhat randomly on the internet, I know who I'd choose. **gt**



FAMILY E MOUNTAIN BIKING FROM ANCELLE