

CORSICA GR20 EXPEDITION 2017



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Expedition Aims and Background

Aim

To hike the entire length of the GR20 trail across the island of Corsica. We chose the GR20 because it is widely considered one of if not the most challenging hike in Europe for its length and duration, and it also crosses the beautiful island of Corsica. It will be the first time any of the members of this expedition have travelled to Corsica.

- To complete the trail in 15 days or fewer
- To challenge ourselves to move as fast as possible while still appreciating the scenery and the mountains
- To record our journey with photography, as several members are keen photographers
- To gain the experience of a long distance alpine trek

Background

The GR20 bisects the long axis of Corsica. It begins at Calenzana in the north-west and it finishes at Conca in the south-east. The trail winds through the central mountain range for 180km of which purportedly no portion is entirely flat. It includes 21km of ascent and descent, reaching its highest

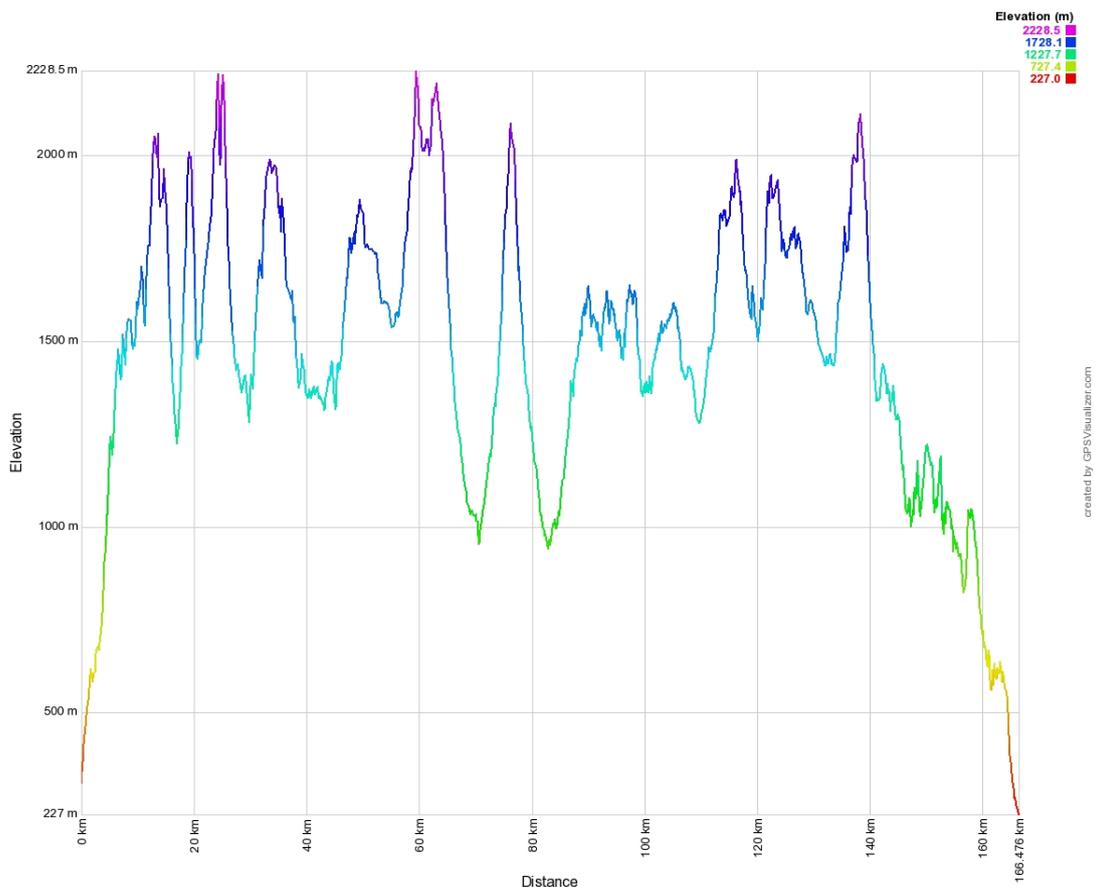


Figure 1: The elevation change along the course of the trail point at 2228.5m.



Figure 2: The route of the GR20

During the summer the GR20 is a relatively popular route among hikers in Europe because of its difficulty and stunning imagery. Just over a quarter of those who begin the trail in Calenzana finish it. It is notorious for being treacherous underfoot as most of the trail is along scree covered slopes which are by nature uneven. For most of the route there isn't a path, however the trail is marked clearly with red and white flashes painted at points along the trail.

We plan to hike the trail carrying the lightest equipment we can, while at the same time bringing the additional food with us. This will allow us to have proper nutrition and to hike the trail in as fast as possible. We are going to hike the trail in September 2017. We chose September because it is outside the European holiday season so costs will be lower, the trail won't be as busy, the huts will still be open and we will still be able to enjoy warm weather. There is also a lower chance of dangerous summer storms. In Corsica the primary languages are French and Corsican with some Italian. On our team we have a native French speaker and another with intermediate French so communication shouldn't be a problem.



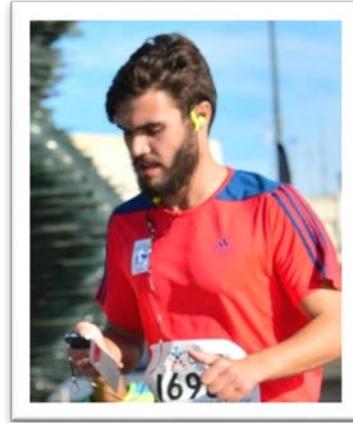
Figure 3: Trail markings along the GR20

Expedition Team

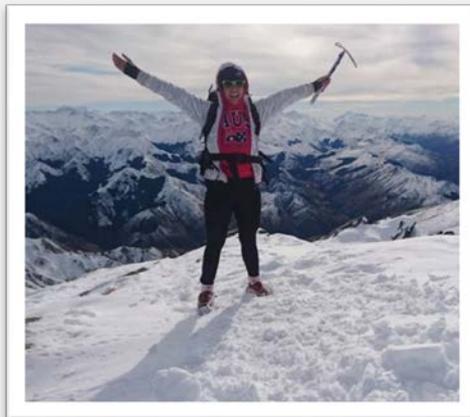
Our expedition team is made up of people passionate about pushing themselves to the limit. The expedition members have a wide range of experiences that will help form a strong and knowledgeable team.



Max Ralston



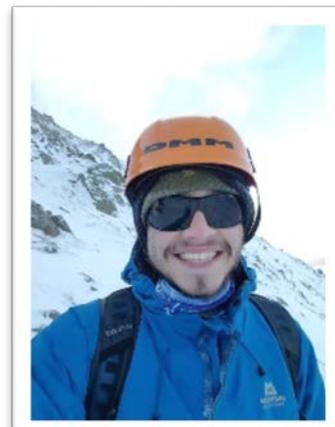
Georgios Chatzitheoklitos



Carla Huynh



Diane Tavignot



Harry Brookes

Max Ralston

Expedition Leader, 18 Years Old

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND:

- 2016-Present: MSci Geology

MOUNTAINEERING EXPERIENCE:

- 2016: 90km thru-hike of Snowdonia National Park.
- 2015: 107km circumnavigation of the Black Mountains and Pen y Fan in 4 days
- 2015: 5 day hike through the Peak District
- 2014: 3 Days hiking across the New Forest



FIRST AID EXPERIENCE:

- 2017: Completed Expedition first aid course, provided by the College.
- 2016: Completed Fieldwork first aid course, provided by the Department of Earth Science and Engineering.
- 2012-2016: 4 years of being taught and subsequently teaching emergency response and basic first aid in CCF
- 2015: Duke of Edinburgh Gold 2 day pre-expedition first aid training.

PERSONAL PREPARATION:

- Tour du Mont Blanc: 11 day 180km circumnavigation of the Mont Blanc massif.

Georgios Chatzitheoklitos

Expedition Treasurer and Medic, 21 Years Old

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND:

- 2016-Present: MSci Geophysics
- 2013-2015: MBBS Bart's and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry

MOUNTAINEERING EXPERIENCE:

- 2016: Organised, together with 2 other staff members, a 3-day hiking excursion in the Greek mountains and countryside for a group of 20 children aged 10-13, as part of the YMCA summer camp. I was the medical officer and responsible for finding safe places to sleep (we camped).
- 2016: Hiked the Rob-Roy way in the Scottish Highlands (120 km)
- 2015: Climbed and hiked in the Isle of Skye, as part of the Bart's Alpine Club



- 2014: Organised a Hiking trip to the Norwegian Fjords.
- 2014: Climbed to the top of Mount Olympus twice in a week.
- 2008-2011: Member of Greek Ski racing team, competing in national and European level.

FIRST AID EXPERIENCE:

- 2016: Completed Fieldwork first aid course, provided by the Department of Earth Science and Engineering.
- 2013-2015: Member of BL Lifesavers, where I taught basic first aid skills to children.
- 2013-2015: Various (and assessed) first aid teaching in Bart's Medical School.
- 2014: Internship at the A&E department of a busy Greek hospital where I trained in minor surgical procedures (incisions, excisions, wound sutures), re-bandaging, use of local anaesthesia (infiltration and block) and drainage technique in minor surgery. I also helped with administration of intramuscular injections and venous injections under the supervision of a physician.

Carla Huynh

20 Years Old

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

- 2016-Present: MSci Geophysics

MOUNTAINEERING EXPERIENCE:

- 2016: Arctic survival expedition in northern Sweden
- Various UK hikes including the 3 peaks, Brecon Beacons, Snowdonia, Exmoor, Peak District and Lake District (1-4 day hikes)
- 2016: Solo winter hiking in New Zealand
- Climbing - member of Imperial College Mountaineering Club



PERSONAL PREPARATION:

- 2 weekends navigation training with ULOTC (University Officer Training Corps) in Brecon and Snowdonia
- A week camping, hiking and biking in Wales over Easter
- Participating in the 101st Nijmegen International four day Marches with the military in July, for which I will need to partake in military training and a qualification march in April.
- Applying for a place in the ULOTC's Cambrian patrol team which is a 2-day patrol carrying 30kg over 50km designed to test soldiering skills to the limit.

FIRST AID EXPERIENCE:

- 2009: Personal survival and lifeguarding qualifications
- 2016: Cold weather injury first aid training (for Sweden expedition)

- 2016: Completed Fieldwork first aid course, provided by the ESE department

MISCELLANEOUS:

- County athlete during school. Currently do a lot of road biking and open water swimming (Imperial Tri Club and Serpentine Swim Club)

Diane Tavignot

18 Years Old

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND:

- 2016 - present: BSc Geology

MOUNTAINEERING EXPERIENCE:

- Regular holidays in the French Alps
- 2016: Climbed the Pierra Menta in the French Alps.
- 2016: Ascent of the Gran Paradiso (4061 metres, in Italy), cross-country skiing with a group of 20 friends.
- 2016: Cross-country skiing excursion with 2 friends between la Tarentaise and le Beaufortain (Savoie, France) (3 days). In charge of the itinerary.
- 2015: Travelled to Kamtchatka, hiking trip on active volcanoes: Avacha, Tolbachik and Kozielski.
- I have been practicing cross-country skiing since I am 12 years old. I usually do a whole week of cross country skiing every year in the Alps, sleeping in mountain refuges.



FIRST AID EXPERIENCE:

- 2016: Completed Fieldwork first aid course, provided by the ESE department
- I have been a scout for several years, with regular first aid training and real life situations during camps.

Harry Brookes

19 Years Old

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND:

- 2016- Present: MSci Geology with a year abroad

EXPEDITION EXPERIENCE:

- I have been climbing for 2 years, mostly indoor, outdoor bouldering and top-roping. I have been a member of the ICMC (Imperial College mountaineering club) since the start of the academic year and have gained experience in lead climbing, Traditional climbing (natural protection) and winter climbing, spending a week in December 2016 with a mountain guide in Scotland learning winter skills.
- 2016: 6-day trek across the lake district backpacking carrying all gear and food with a team of 8.
- 2016: one month sailing in august around France and parts of the Mediterranean, on a Sadler Starlight 35 Mk1. Crew of four 18-year-old. Many shorter excursions had with the same crew and boat throughout 2016 around the southern coast of England and northern coast of France. I have been sailing for around 3 years now.
- 2016: 4-day backpacking trek across the peak district carrying all kit and resources
- Yorkshire dales three peak challenge
- 1 week camping and hiking the Scottish Munro's
- Summer 2015: Hiked the length of Hadrians Wall, camping on route. Team of 7
- 2 weeks sailing the east coast of Ireland. Crew of 5
- General- camping and hiking holidays every year with family, all over the UK.
- Day hikes and climbing in Snowdonia, Cairngorms, Lake District, Yorkshire Dales, and Peak District.
- Sailing around the south of England in my friend's boat. Mainly at summer and Easter time.

FIRST AID EXPERIENCE:

- 2016: Completed L2 Fieldwork first aid course, provided by the School of Earth Science and Engineering.



Risk Assessment

All members of the expedition have experience in multiday treks and so are aware of how to prepare and administer themselves while hiking. All team members have thorough experience in navigating and basic first aid.

This table is colour-coded by severity on a per column basis; red being the most severe and green being the least.

Hazard	Severity	Probability	Risk (Severity x Probability)	Prevention
Sprained ankle or similar injury due to under-foot terrain.	3	3	9	We'll all be wearing decent hiking boots above the ankle (not trail shoes) for added support and taking care to be moving only when visibility is high.
Dehydration – especially since it can get quite hot in Corsica over the summer months	2	2	4	There will frequently be places to top up water on route and we'll all be carrying water at all times.
Exhaustion	4	2	8	We will be eating at least 3000 calories per day and not overexerting ourselves.
Getting lost	3	2	6	The route will have markers but we will also be taking maps and using GPS. We have all done basic navigation training, and there are numerous villages along the trail
Hypothermia – it can get quite cold at night in the mountains	4	1	4	Everyone will have at least a 3 season sleeping bag and warm kit for the evenings and we'll have at least one Trangia between us to brew hot drinks. Make sure that any wet clothes from the day are dried and everyone has a wind and waterproof jacket. September Mediterranean climate is mild.

Bad weather – storms often come in in the afternoon and weather can be unpredictable	3	3	9	If the weather isn't safe enough we may have to remain tent-bound. We have allowed for a few days float and we will be starting out early in the mornings to avoid afternoon storms.
Blisters	4	4	16	Over such a long trek on rough terrain our feet will inevitably wear down so thick socks and well worn-in boots are a must along with blister plasters and zinc oxide tape.
Cuts/ bruises/ other minor injuries	1	4	4	We all have basic first aid training.
Sun/heatstroke	5	2	10	The weather is mild in September but can become hot, so we will be carrying the appropriate clothing as well as hats and 2L of water each.
Contaminated water	4	3	12	Many of the water resupply points are likely contaminated by animal activity and aren't chlorinated. Therefore we will be bringing chlorine tablets to purify water along the way.
Theft	3	2	6	Once on the trail this shouldn't be an issue, but enroute we will keep a close eye on our kit.

Budget

Item	Price	Quantity	Total
Transport			
Flight London-Toulon	£61.11	2	£122.22
Flight Manchester-Marseille	£49.49	1	£49.49
Flight Thessaloniki-Paris BVA	£157.71	1	£157.71
Train Paris BVA-Toulon	£41.74	1	£41.74
Train Paris-Toulon	£26.59	1	£26.59
Train Marseille-Toulon	£14.42	1	£14.42
Ferry Toulon-Ajaccio	£24.56	5	£122.80
Rental car Ajaccio-Calenzana	£30.00	1	£30.00
Train Toulon-Versailles	£41.74	1	£41.74
Ferry Bastia-Toulon	£23.40	5	£117.00
Train Toulon-MRS	£10.95	4	£43.81
Flight Marseille-London	£30.27	4	£121.06
Train Ajaccio-Calvi	£25.10	5	£125.50
Train London-Blackburn	£34.10	1	£34.10
Other travel			
Subtotal			£1,048.18
Accommodation			
Calvi (1 Night)	£110	1	£110
Camping (15 nights)	7 €	105	£735
Bastia (3 nights)	£85.00	3	£255
Subtotal			£1,100
Equipment			
Sleeping mats	£30	4	£120.00
3 Man Tent	£200	1	£200.00
Trekking Poles	various	4	£144.50
Solar Charger	£30	1	£30.00
Sleeping Bags	£120	4	£480.00
Cicerone Guide Book	£15	1	£14.95
Boots	£165	2	£330.00
Subtotal			£1,319.45
Food			
Food (along the trail)	£310.00	5	£1,550

Emergency Supplies	£10/person	5	£50
Subtotal			£1,600
Practice Expedition			
Trains	Various	4	£259
Camping @ YHA	£13	5	£65
Subtotal			£324
Other			
First aid kit	£100	1	£100
Misc.	£60		£60
TOTAL			£5,552

The currency of Corsica is the Euro, and in order to do this hike we are going to need a large amount of cash with us, in the order of €1500. This is because the refuges will not accept card. The money will be withdrawn largely in London, where certain team members are aware of the best places to make exchanges. As carrying food is one of our main challenges, companies that specialise in dried food, bars and gels for athletes (Hammer, GU) have already be contacted.

Equipment

It is essential to pack light. Over the course of a long term expedition in mountainous and uneven terrain without any real path, fatigue will build. Bringing light equipment, especially sleeping bags and tents, will mitigate this by reducing the energy burnt each day while scrambling with a backpack on. This is why we have decided to purchase the major light equipment i.e. tents.

Trekking poles are an important item of equipment on this route. Trekking poles take the pressure off of the knees, which will reduce the risk of injury and increase the recovery rate as the weight of the backpack will be more evenly distributed over the body.

The trail is very rugged. There is no path as such, but only markings painting frequently along the side. It is typically very rough underfoot, with mostly uneven rocky and scree covered surfaces. This, combined with the constant ascending and descending, will have a big impact on our feet. This is why is important to have a pair of good quality well worn-in boots to help protect us from rolling an ankle and importantly from blisters. Using sock liners will also help prevent blisters.

The members of the expedition are well acquainted with the type of equipment that they need to pack and have all other necessary kit besides what is listed in the budget, including personal first aid kits.

Food

When hiking in mountainous environments it is important to be consuming a large number of calories per day – in the order of 3000 calories. However, this has to be balanced with keeping rucksack weight

as low as possible. Therefore, we have decided to buy supplies along the route as 3000 calories for 15 days would weigh around 18kg. We are also bringing supplementary rations worth the equivalent of 4 days of food, as well as emergency rations for one day. One day of emergency rations is sensible because we will never be more than a day's walk from a town or village and usually half a day from a refuge. We plan to buy food at refuges along the way to form the majority of our daily intake.

The refuges provide cooking facilities and most have small food stores to sell to passing hikers, from which we will purchase food. We will also be using the water provided. The water will have to be sterilised by boiling and/or through the use of chlorine purification tablets because the water is from mountain streams which could be contaminated by dead animals or faeces. Each person will be carrying 2L of water at the start of the day, and there will be high mountain streams and mountain lakes to source more water from along the way to supplement our needs. While walking across the mountains (and with the possibility of hot weather) while carrying a heavy load it is important to consume ~3L of water a day to remain hydrated.

Accommodation

We will be staying in tents for the duration of the trek. There are specified camping grounds alongside the refuges which provide stoves and limited cleaning facilities for the cost of around 5€ per person. The refuges themselves are purportedly poorly sanitised, dirty and expensive at around 20€ per person, with an additional cost of ~15€ for food. These combined factors have convinced us that camping not only the smarter option but also the cheaper option, with the purchase of suitable tents costing a quarter of what staying in refuges would.

We have decided to leave a buffer/ rest day in Bastia at the end of the expedition. This is in case we don't finish the expedition in our allotted 15 day time slot due to delays such as storms.

Itinerary

10th September 2017, Day 0:

Team meets in Calvi after travelling from all over the UK and Europe. Brief one night stay in Calvi to make our last minute preparations for the hike ahead.

Day 1:

Travel to Calenzana (275 m) for the beginning of the first stage. We will climb to Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu (1570 m) Ascent = 1295 m, descent = 50 m. 10 km, 6h30m.

1. **Calenzana** (275 m)
2. Col de Revalente
3. Col de Salto
4. Col de Bassiguellu
5. **Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu** (1570 m)



Figure 4: Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu

Day 2:

Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu (1570 m) to Refuge de Carrozzu (1270 m). Ascent = 667 m, descent = 917 m. 8 km, 7h.

1. **Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu** (1570 m)
2. Col de Tartagine
3. Monte Corona
4. Bergerie de Mandriacia
5. Col de Piccaia
6. Col d'Avartoli
7. Col de Carrozzu
8. **Refuge de Carrozzu** (1270 m)

Day 3:

Refuge de Carrozzu (1270 to Haut Asco (Refuge d'Asco Stagnu, 1422 m). Ascent = 790 m, descent = 638 m. 6 km, 6 h.

1. **Refuge de Carrozzu** (1270 m)
2. Passerelle de Spasimata
3. Col de Stagni
4. Lac de la Muvrela
5. **Refuge d'Asco Stagnu (Haut Asco)** (1422 m)

Day 4:

Haut Asco (1422 m) to Refuge de Tighjettu (1683 m) or Bergeries de Ballone (1440 m). Ascent = 999 m, descent = 738 m. 8 km, 6 h.

1. **Refuge d'Asco Stagnu (Haut Asco)** (1422 m)
2. Col de Pedru
3. Cirque de la Solitude
4. Col de Minuta
5. Ravin de Strancione
6. **Refuge de Tighjettu** (1683 m)
7. **Bergeries de Ballone** (1440 m)

Day 5:

Refuge de Tighjettu (1683 m) to Castel di Verghio (1404 m). Ascent = 607 m, descent = 78 m. 13 km, 7 h.

1. **Refuge de Tighjettu** (1683 m)
2. Bergeries de Ballone
3. Col de Fogghiale
4. **Refuge de Ciottulu di i Mori** (1991 m)
5. Bergeries de Tula
6. Cascade de Radule
7. Bergeries de Radule
8. Fer a Cheval
9. **Castel di Vergio** (1404 m)

Day 6:

Castel di Verghio (1404 m) to Refuge de Manganu (1601 m). Ascent = 643 m, descent = 1033 m. 14 km, 5½ hours.

1. **Castellu di Vergio** (1404 m)
2. Bocca San Pedru
3. Col de Reta
4. Bergeries de Vaccaghja
5. Col d'Acqua Ciarnente
6. **Refuge de Manganu** (1601 m)

Day 7:

Refuge de Manganu (1601 m) to Refuge de Pietra Piana (1842 m). The highest point is Breche de Capitellu at 2225 m which is the maximum altitude of the trail. Ascent = 830 m, descent = 589 m. 10 km, 6h30m.

1. **Refuge de Manganu** (1601 m)
2. Breche de Capitellu
3. Col de Soglia
4. Col Rirosa
5. Bocca Muzzela
6. **Refuge de Pietra Piana** (1842 m)

Day 8:

Refuge de Pietra Piana (1842 m) to Refuge de l'Onda (1430 m). Ascent = 490 m, descent = 902 m. 10 km, 5 h.

1. **Refuge de Pietra Piana** (1842 m)
2. Bergeries de Gilagu
3. Bocca Manganellu
4. Bergerie de Tolla
5. Pinzi Corbini
6. Bocca d'Oreccia
7. **Refuge de l'Onda** (1430 m)

Day 9:

Refuge de l'Onda (1430 m) to Vizzavona (920 m). This is the middle of the trail. Ascent = 711 m, descent = 1221 m. 10 km, 5½ h.

1. **Refuge de l'Onda** (1430 m)
2. Crete de Muratellu
3. Monte d'Oro
4. Cascades des Anglais
5. **Vizzavona** (920 m)

Day 10:

Vizzavona (920 m) to Bergeries de Capannelle (1586 m). Ascent = 890 m, descent = 224 m. 15 km, 5½ h.

1. **Vizzavona** (920 m)
2. Col de Palmente
3. Bergeries d'Alzeta
4. Bergeries de Scarpaccedie
5. **Bergeries de Capannelle** (1586 m)

Day 11:

Bergeries de Capannelle (1586 m) to Refuge de Prati (1820 m). Ascent = 642 m, descent = 408 m. 16 km, 6 h.

1. **Bergeries de Capannelle** (1586 m)
2. Bergeries de Tragette
3. Lischetto stream
4. Plateau de Gialgone
5. Col de Verde
6. **Refuge de Prati** (1820 m)

Day 12:

Refuge de Prati (1820 m) to Refuge d'Usciolu (1750 m). Ascent = 677 m, descent = 747 m. 11 km, 5h45m.

1. **Refuge de Prati** (1820 m)
2. Punta della Capella
3. Rocher de la Penta
4. Col de Laparo
5. Monte Formicula
6. **Refuge d'Usciolu** (1750 m)

Day 13:

Refuge d'Usciolu (1750 m) to Refuge d'Asinao (1530 m). Ascent = 845 m, descent = 1065 m. 14.5 km, 8 hours.

1. **Refuge d'Usciolu** (1750 m)
2. Col de l'Agnonu
3. Refuge di Pedinieddi
4. Col de Luana
5. Monte Incudine
6. **Refuge d'Asiano** (1530 m)

Day 14:

Refuge d'Asiano (1530 m) to Refuge de Paliri (1055 m). Ascent = 429 m, descent = 910 m. 13 km, 7 h.

1. **Refuge d'Asiano** (1530 m)
2. Col de Pargulu
3. Col de Bavella
4. Bavella
5. Volpajola
6. Col de Foce Finosa
7. **Refuge de Paliri** (1055 m)

Day 15:

The last stage descends from Refuge de Paliri (1055 m) to Conca (252 m). Ascent = 160 m, descent = 926 m. 12 km, 5 h.

1. **Refuge de Paliri** (1055 m)
2. Anima Damnata
3. Foce di Bracciu
4. Col de Sordu
5. Ravin de Punta Pinzuta

6. Col d'Usciolu
7. **Conca** (252 m)

Highlighted in bold are the overnight camps, and along some of the days there are multiple options. This will provide us with the opportunity to push further on one day if we feel as though we are able to. The remaining places are waypoints along our route.

If we stick to the above schedule we will finish on **25th September 2017**. On arrival in Conca we travel by bus to Bastia where we will rest for two nights before flying to London on the 27th. However, we may complete it in less time. This has been difficult for us to estimate because some complete it in as few as 8 days and other in as many as 18, however it appears that 15 or 16 days is standard.

Training

We are planning a 50km hike for the end of May across the Black Mountains in Wales as training. We will be doing this in one full day and 2 half days, camping for two nights. The culmination of this will be a 22km march across Pen y Fan, testing our endurance, teamwork and equipment. This will be the ideal opportunity to become familiar with our equipment and team members. We are going to learn about each-others habits and skills, as well as practicing our personal administration and navigation.



The undulating terrain of Wales combined with the steep and rugged slopes around Pen y Fan will help us become more accustomed to the terrain which we will be contending with in Corsica. Therefore, this will highlight any lack of fitness which can be improved upon in the 3 subsequent months before the expedition, as well as helping us decide what equipment is necessary and which we will not need to bring (as if we bring anything unnecessary to Corsica it will be with us for 2 weeks or thrown in the bin).

Training Weekend: 10th – 11th June 2017

In order to ensure our new kit was up to scratch and the group's fitness was good enough, Max organised a weekend trip to the Brecon Beacons, where he had planned a 50km route over the 2 days. Unfortunately, Max's leather boots caused him problems on the first day, to such an extent that we decided it was best not to continue the hike. In this sense, the training weekend was useful and Max bought a new pair of fabric boots which didn't cause him a single blister during the entire length of the GR20. Instead, we tested out the tents, sleeping bags and sleeping mats in Carla's back garden and were then confident our kit was fit for the trail.



Figure 1: Bit of navigation practise in Brecon

The Corsica GR20 Expedition: 7th – 21st September 2017**Day 1- Stage 1A (high level route)**

We began early, waking at 5:15am. Kindly driven to our starting point in a small town named Calenzana by our host of the night before, we were eager but nervous to set off. The first thing to arouse our curiosity was why Diane's rucksack felt like a sack of bricks. This was closely seconded by the mystery of how Georgios' bag with 6 (yes 6!) t-shirts did not feel like a sack of bricks. Setting off at 6:45am we quickly climbed in altitude, reaching our first peak at 10am. Our spirits were high and we thought we were in for an easy day. But with 1550 metres of ascent today, the next part of the stage ramped up the incline and several sections of scrambling followed, with the infrequent assistance of chains. Upon arriving at our second peak, the refuge was in sight and it proceeded to



Figure 2: Not a bad first night on the trail...

taunt us for the next hour as we contoured our way around the edge of the valley towards it. From a distance refuge D'Ortu Di U Piobbu appears to sit impossibly on the mountainside, as though perpetually sliding into the valley far below. Everything we needed was on offer, and once we'd had a bitingly cold shower followed by a hearty dinner of mushroom soup and lentils, we felt more than ready to sleep. This is all except Harry, who felt the need to stand vigilant wearing nothing but his underwear as the freezing mountain air washed over him. Our first evening on the trail and we were treated to a stunning sunset overlooking the small village we'd left behind earlier this morning.

Day 2 – Stage 2B (low level route)

After a luxurious sleep-in, we awoke to the ringing of our alarms at 6:30. After the girls had finally got to grips with how to disassemble their tent and we'd dealt with the complex task of hunting down Georgios, who's porridge decided to take all morning to cook, we were ready to set off half an hour later than planned. Having tackled a day of relentless climbing yesterday, we selected the low-



Figure 3: The view overlooking the valley before the final ascent

level route so as not to over exert ourselves. The route wound its way through the forest to the valley floor where we were to ford what we'd read was a raging torrent. There we sat upon the bone dry boulders to eat. After lunch, we began the climb up a stony trail which frequently opened up onto ledges with stunning views. The excitement of crossing a rather bouncy suspension bridge was soon mitigated by a sudden and steep climb over a boulder strewn (a seemingly recurring theme) path through the forest. We passed a seemingly endless stream of Germans before happening upon a helipad jutting off the mountainside and, shortly after, the Refuge de Carozzu. Upon speaking to the other trekkers, we were somewhat horrified to hear of a painful journey over the top of the mountain involving many chains and scrambles, and were relieved we'd chosen the low route.

Day 3 – Stage 3

The guardian of the refuge told us a storm was imminent and recommended that we have a 6am start for the hike to Ascu Stagnu. So we packed up in the dark and set off with our head-torches. The sky was lit by a full moon that was framed by the peaks we were about to climb. The day involved some technical climbs and a large fraction of the 860 metres of ascent involved climbing and scrambling, as well as big rock slabs with chains that we used to hoist ourselves up. We made good time on the way up, stopping only when we came across a couple of British hikers who told us excitedly that there was signal where they were stood. Glad for a break, we took the opportunity to tell our families all is well before plodding onwards to the top. Here we met a hiker walking in the opposite direction, from South to North, and in conversation asked him how his legs were now he was nearing the end of his GR20 experience. His reply was a rather discouraging, “fucked – absolutely fucked!”. The descent was just as steep, if



Figure 5: Signal...in Corsica? Surely not...

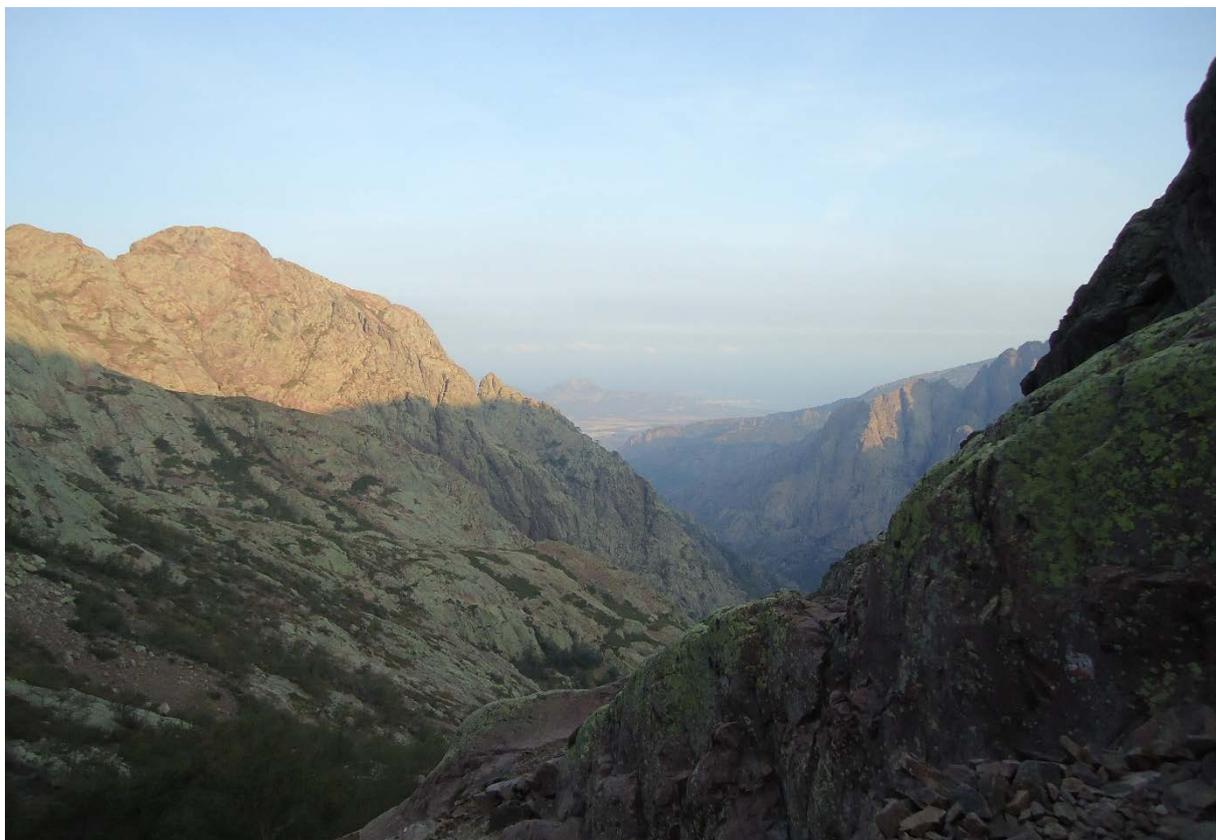


Figure 4: Oh look...more granite!

not steeper, than the ascent, making it hard on our knees and slow moving. But with the entire day

being only 6km in total, we were at the refuge before midday and had all afternoon and evening to get to know our fellow hikers from all over Europe. The storm we'd been warned about hit in the evening, just as we were heading to bed, so we opted for a dry night in a refuge dormitory and Max treated himself to the ski resort hotel ready for the challenging day's hike ahead of us tomorrow.

Day 4 – Rest day

With an early rise for what was one of the hardest stages of the GR20, we were disappointed to discover that there was another storm due and it wouldn't be wise to hike today. Erring on the side of caution, we remained at Ascu Stagnu for another day, resting our legs and carbo-loading for tomorrow. A military medical vehicle arrived in the evening and, at first, we wondered whether something had happened to the small group of hikers that had ignored the warnings and headed out anyway. But shortly after about 80 military personnel poured into the showers and, upon asking, we discovered that they were Belgian paratroopers hiking some of the Northern GR20 as part of their physical training. Annoyingly, the poor weather that was promised never quite appeared.



Figure 6: Considering our options with some new hiking friends.

Day 5 – Stage 4

We were very disappointed to wake up to yet even more rain this morning but, with a good forecast for later on, we set out at 6am in the rain, getting an hour head start on the Belgian paratroopers. Although we thought the rain would stop fairly promptly, it taunted us all the way up, making the rock slippery and harder to climb. Fog descended, limiting visibility to just 10 metres and at a maximum height of 2607 metres, even after donning all our layers we were absolutely freezing, our hands completely numb. At times, we doubted whether we should have been hiking in these conditions but just before 11am we had reached the shoulder of Monte Cinto – the highest point on the GR20 trail. We sheltered from the wind for a quick break, disappointed that the clouds were obscuring the beautiful view that we'd been promised. However, we had a stroke of luck and just before we were about to start the descent, the clouds suddenly opened up and the scenery was even more spectacular than we'd hoped! As the sun came out, Georgios, Diane, Carla and Harry couldn't help but be tempted to summit Monte Cinto – not strictly part of the GR20 trail but 2-hour excursion that our guidebook recommended to reach the highest peak in Corsica. Unfortunately, Max was too cold from the wet ascent, his 'waterproofs' not quite being what they claimed, so decided to start the descent to the refuge whilst the rest left their bags and continued on up. It was well worth the extra climb! The views from the summit (2706m) were truly spectacular and we couldn't help thinking that this would be the best moment of the expedition. We left our mark on the summit: signing the book at the top as 'RSM miners 2017' and shouted the RSM chant at the tops of our voices. We were on top of the world!

By the time we'd re-joined the GR20 for the descent, the Belgian paratroopers had caught up, but proved rather unimpressively slow and caused traffic jams on the otherwise quiet route down.



Figure 7: Celebrating on top of Corsica - the peak of Monte Cinto

Day 6 – Stage 5

Now a day behind schedule due to the ‘storm’ on day 4, we were of mind to do 2 stages today – 32 kilometres of mountainous hiking – to get back on schedule and escape the 80 paratroopers that were crowding the pristine wilderness of the Corsican mountains. In order to do so, we began hiking at 6:30am just as the sun was rising. The first 2 hours were relentless climbing in 70mph winds that proceeded to keep blowing us over. At the top the wind was so strong that we could lean our whole body weight into it without falling over! We kept our sheltered break at the top short, before starting the long but gentle descent to the end of stage 5, arriving just after midday. It was far easier underfoot than previous stages, but even so it was 15km and by the end of the stage we were split as to whether we should continue the double stage as planned. While Max, Carla and Diane were keen to push on and get ahead, Georgios and Harry had sore feet and Harry’s dodgy ankle might not last another 17km in the same day. Concluding that it was more important to finish than out-hike the paratroopers, Carla and Diane stayed with the boys and enjoyed a relaxing afternoon of wine, beer and RSM chants with our hiking friends Alexandra and Mandus. Meanwhile, Max pressed on to the next stage, escaping the testosterone of 80 airborne rangers.



Figure 8: View from the top of today's peak

Day 7 – Stage 6

Without our leader to guide us, we opted for a more laid back 9am start for stage 6, knowing it was one of the easier stages. After a late night in the hotel bar saying goodbye to Victor and Lila (some hiking friends who were ending their GR20 experience yesterday), we were glad for a bit longer in bed – especially Harry who may have had one too many beers! One benefit we found of the army men taking over camp, were the boxes of free ration pack snacks they left behind for anyone to help themselves to. We got a bit carried away with the concept of free food (the refuge food is very expensive (I'm talking €6 for 4 slices of ham expensive!) and we started the day with packs multiple kilograms heavier! The gentle climb and descent to Lac Du Ninu presented no problems. We had a paddle in the painfully cold lake and many breaks throughout the day, thoroughly enjoying the Corsican landscape instead of having to glue our eyes to the tricky terrain at our feet. We also found River Tavignanu – a river that we're convinced must resemble some link to Diane's ancestors. The sun was still blazing in the sky upon arrival to Refuge Manganu so we went for a swim in the river and sunbathed on the granite rocks.

Day 8 – Stage 7 & 8B

We were awoken to a 02:30 alarm for a 4am start up the mountain – all because a French man told us that the highest point today provides a view of the best sunrise in Corsica.... we were not disappointed. After 2 hours of relentless scrambling, we reached the summit at 6am while it was still dark and a dim red glow was visible on the horizon. Also joining us on our twilight climb was a dog who guided us all the way up. We called him Max to complete the team once again. As the sun began to rise, we wriggled back into the comfort and warmth of our sleeping bags and enjoyed the landscape appear before us, relishing in the fact that the hard work was over and everyone back at the refuge will have only just began to stir. It was one of the best moments of our GR20 expedition.



Figure 9: Well worth the twilight hike - Carla and Diane keeping warm as they await sunrise

We spent an hour taking photos and listening to music in our sleeping bags before emerging back into the chilly morning air to begin traversing along the arrête. There were some awkward slabs, boulders, gullies and short scrambles to negotiate, including a very steeply inclined slab with chains underneath a boulder that practically required sliding down on our bums. At this point Harry sped ahead down to the refuge because he was desperate for the loo, and upon arrival was disappointed that the toilets were of the squat style. The rest, meanwhile, took advantage of the head start on the other hikers and spent many hours sunbathing with Max the dog and posing for photos in the morning sun. We arrived at Refuge de Petra Piana just before midday, had lunch and then decided to

push on to Refuge de l'Onda with Alex and Mandus who caught up with us while we were sunbathing. Although only 4 hours long, the second stage of the day was hard on everyone – the wind picked up and fog descended while we climbed up to the ridge. But it was the last 2 hours of descent that were the hardest. We'd been walking for 13 hours and covered thousands of metres of ascent and descent by the time we arrived so our feet were sore from the constant impact on the



Figure 10: A happy team knowing it's all downhill to the end of the stage ft. Max the dog

rock. Upon arrival, we found Max (the person as well as the dog!) and Diane thoroughly spoil the dog with left-overs from her dinner. In fact, she had become so attached that Carla was surprised to find her bed occupied by him when she came back from dinner in the refuge! He was swiftly kicked out and spent the night sleeping in the tent outer instead.

Day 9 – Stage 9A

Having started at 4am yesterday, we relaxed the start time by 5 hours and set off at 9am. Since Max didn't have such a long day the day before, he was off before we woke up, negotiating stage 9 – the last stage of the northern part of the GR20. Much to our dismay, the dog was also nowhere to be seen, despite us treating him so well last night! We had a few hours of steep ascent followed by a long but mainly gradual descent. Getting up to the peak was tricky and involved some scrambling. Even in places that didn't require scrambling, we found the steep incline very tiring after yesterday's double stage. On the way down we found a waterfall with a deep pool underneath so we took off our boots and took the plunge – many times in Carla's case. We then proceeded to sunbathe for an hour or so and when Harry eventually suggested moving on, Georgios and Diane responded rather unenthusiastically as they lay back down to sunbathe! We came across a British couple just before we left who Harry lectured them on the geology of Corsica – they didn't appear quite as enthusiastic as him! The last part of the day was nearly luxury for the GR20 – an almost level path leading down to Vizzavona where the guidebook had promised us a pizzeria. There was indeed a pizzeria, but much to our horror we were told their pizza oven had broken! Nevertheless, we treated ourselves to

a team meal in the restaurant with Alex and Mandus, where Georgios enjoyed the first of a series of steaks.

Day 10 – Stage 10

We planned to leave at 9am this morning but it was 9:30 by the time the boys had finally put their tent down. It didn't matter though because the day's route was easy going and we covered ground very quickly. Already we could see the difference between the terrain in the South compared to the North and at one of the highest points reached today the Aiguilles de Bavella were visible in the distance. These are the pointy peaks of the penultimate day on the trail and a reminder that we were closing in on



Figure 11: Not a bad spot for a nap...

Conca. Most of the day was walking through forest with much shallower inclines than we were used to. In fact the terrain was so much flatter than previous days that we passed the time by singing musicals, ABBA, Queen and Eminem. There was a particularly good spot where we took a break on a rock overlooking a forested hilly landscape where Harry sang 'the hills are alive'. That night was very windy and the door of the boy's tent inverted in the wind, leaving them with little sleep.

Day 11 – Stage 11A

Having set our minds on doing the alternative high route in pursuit of more stunning views, we agreed to leave at 7am. But the boys overslept having had a nightmare with the tent in the strong winds overnight. Also, with strong winds forecast to continue for the rest of the day, the refuge staff advised us that nobody should attempt the high route that day, since it involves traversing an



Figure 12: Harry and Georgios singing (...well Harry singing) 'the hills are alive'

exposed arrête that would be dangerous in high winds. After agreeing on the shorter, easier low route, we enjoyed a hot chocolate in the refuge before setting off. We were delighted to find that the terrain was even easier than yesterday and we had completed the 14km to Refuge di Verdi by midday. After a lunch at the Refuge where Georgios had a flame cooked steak, Max pushed on to

Refuge de Prati which was 4.5km into the tomorrow's stage, while the remainder of the team lingered a little longer in the sun at Verdi. This would wipe off nearly half the 1290 metres of climbing that was involved in stage 12. However, another group of hikers told informed the rest of the team they'd just come down from there due to high winds. After a half hour of debating whether to push on or not, Georgios grabbed the bull by the horns and flipped a coin...tails and the team stayed. So the group spent the rest of the afternoon by the fire reading Asterix & Obelix en Corse and playing cards with our new German friends, Felix and Caroline, ironman triathletes who were hiking the GR20 for their third time.



Figure 13: Dense forest - the terrain in the South was very different to the Northern part of the trail

Day 12 – Stage 12

Felix and Caroline somehow managed to convince us to put ridiculous o'clock alarms on again to climb up the mountain before sunrise, but when we woke up and stuck our heads out the tents,



Figure 14: The calm before the storm... a nice flat path enroute to Monte Alcudina

there wasn't a star in sight. We concluded it'd be too cloudy for a decent view so happily fell back asleep, setting off at a more reasonable 6am instead. Today's hike involved 2 main climbs – the first up to the refuge we considered staying at last night, at 1820 metres, (and Punta Mozza slightly higher up) and the other a steeper bouldery climb that zigzagged up to Monte Furmicula, at 1981 metres. It was just as we began the final descent towards Refuge d'Usciolu that the rain began. Once it started it did not relent. We miserably pitched our tents in the rain, shivering from the cold, and ate our dinner in bed before going to sleep at 5pm (well trying to sleep anyway...). The night that ensued was one of the worst that any of us could recall. Water pooled under our tents and our flip-flops could be seen floating in the outer. Everything got wet and even in all our layers and our survival blankets we were freezing in our sleeping bags. But it was the boys, and Harry in particular, who had it worst. He was ill and threw up all over his sleeping bag, hiking boots and tent. Georgios was not best impressed!

Day 13 – Stage 13/14

Despite our intentions to double today, we had the latest start of the expedition because Georgios and Harry had the joyous task of cleaning the tent of Harry's sick from last night. Everyone was feeling quite grim, so we were unsure as to whether we'd be up for the double stage, but we didn't have to decide until the turning which was 2 hours into the day. Our kit was wet from the night from hell last night so our bags were heavier and the going was very tough as scrambled across the arete. We



Figure 15: Harry after summiting Monte Alcludina

eventually found our rhythm though and gritted through both stages. It was the afternoon ascent of Monte Alcludina that really challenged us. Before the climb even began we'd already had a long day's undulating hike and the incline was never ending and seemed to get perpetually steeper. As more mountain kept appearing above us, even Harry (who usually powers up the ascents) was left broken and collapsed in a heap at the top! We were glad to see Refuge d'Asinau only a short descent from the peak and spent the evening desperately trying to get warm in the communal tent space with the other hikers. Another cold night ensued and everyone except Carla (who seems to sleep through absolutely anything) were kept awake by hail and a thunderstorm which left the mountain covered in ice and snow when we awoke the next morning.



Figure 16: Carla posing for yet even more photos!

Day 14 – Stage 15B



Figure 17: the GR20...a hike or a rock climb?

It was a momentous morning this morning – for the first time in our GR20 experience the boys were ready on time! Perhaps even slightly before Diane and Carla so they claimed. We set off, actually as planned, at 9am for the high route. Only 8km long, it involved a steep ascent up to Aiguilles de Bavella which provided a beautiful view over the East and South Coast from the rocky towers at the summit. The penultimate day of our expedition and we got our first peek of the finish. The descent was full of day walkers, filling us with anticipation of the small taste of civilisation waiting for us in Village de Bavella at the foot of the mountain. We could almost smell the pizzeria (which had a working oven this time – thank goodness!) only 2.5km of hiking away, but it took nearly 2 hours for us to complete the incredibly steep, rocky descent involving the use of chains in places. One part in particular involved a giant sloping slab of rock surmounted by an enormous jammed boulder which we heaved our way up on the chain then squeezed through a gap at the top. Surrounded by slightly overhanging

cliffs, it was clearly a hotspot for rock climbers, as bolts were visible on many of the rock faces and a few groups could be seen roped in higher up. Once the day's work was over, we booked into the gîte d'étape (there were no campsites in the village) and went straight for pizza. We thoroughly gorged ourselves in the food we'd been dreaming about for days before a late afternoon nap to revitalise ourselves for the 3 course evening meal included with our accommodation! It was as if tonight was an appetiser for the luxuries we could enjoy when we complete the trail tomorrow.

Day 15 – Stage 16

Knowing only a matter of hours separated us from the end of the hardest trail in Europe, we relaxed (perhaps too much) at breakfast, feasting on bread and Corsican jams and left to the sound of live Russian music performed by Harry. We took our time, relishing the last 19km of the GR20 with Alex and Mandus, taking in the views for a final time. We all wore our team expedition polo shirts and took group photos at every opportunity. Our legs were weary, especially Harry's whose ankle was causing him trouble again on the tricky terrain, but we pushed on, reminiscing about our journey across the island. Today the landscape was like that of a different country all together, as we descended away from the mountainous spine of Corsica and down into the forests towards the sea. Even the pools we bathed in 5km from the end were described as 'lukewarm' in the guidebook. They were by no means any description of warm but they were much more bearable than the mountain lakes and rivers we'd paddled in on previous days. The final few kilometres seemed to last forever but eventually we rounded a bend to a view of Conca not far below us. There was a lot of excitement and pride as we strode down into the village, where we were greeted by... well practically nothing! No glorious finish line or souvenir shops. There was barely even a sign to tell us where the official end actually was! But there was one small bar in the village where we found many of the hikers we'd shared our journey with and just down the road was Max, who had decided to split the stage 13/14 double that we had done into 2 separate double stages, hiking stages 12 & 13 together and stages 14 & 15 and finishing a day earlier.

More than 2 weeks of trekking through the Corsican mountains had come to an end. We all agreed it was one of, if not the, best thing we'd ever done. We'd met some incredible people, bonded as a team, learnt some French (perhaps not Diane), seen the geology of the entire backbone of Corsica and, above all, completed the hardest trail in Europe.



Figure 18: Day 1 and Day 15 – One heck of a lot wiser

Acknowledgments

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