

CRUCY



BOOKS FOR

REPORT

In the Summer of 2008, members of York University Cave & Pothole Club travelled to the Gouffre Berger in the Vercors region of France on a two week expedition. The Gouffre Berger was discovered in 1953 and until 1964 was considered to be the deepest cave in the world.

To obtain a permit for the Berger an application form (demande d'inscription Gouffre Berger) can be obtained by telephoning the town hall in Engins (Mairie d'Engins, tel: +44 476944913) and the completed form must be returned before the deadline (November of the year prior to the requested permit dates).

The main website for the Berger is: http://latronche.free.fr/berger.html#recom_en

YUCPC originally applied for the Berger permit in October 2006 but due to a change in the permitting system, had to reapply and in February 2007 we got the news that we had got the permit from the 21st to the 31st of July, so planning immediately got underway...

Expedition Members:

Andy Gilmartin
Andy Vick
Ben Reynolds
Charlie Dixon
Dave Sproson
Debbie Flowers
Ellie Jones
Helen Spring
Laura Bennett
Lauren Ellis
Luke Brownbridge
Mark Sims
Simon Herrod
Steve Gilbert

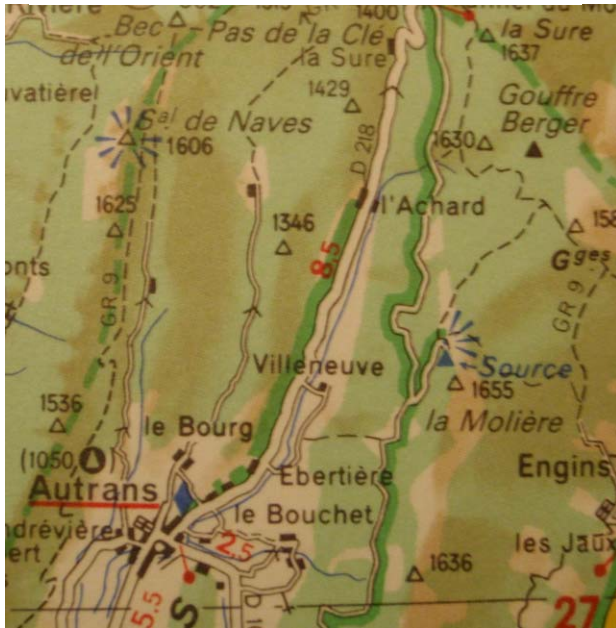
The team we had was significantly smaller than we had originally anticipated and several of the members weren't around for the whole time we were there. This combined with the fact that there were a fair few relatively inexperienced members (3 who a year previously had never been caving) meant that our expectations for the trip were fairly open ended.

A special mention should also be given to Matt Gosling, who unfortunately was struck down by appendicitis the day before we were due to leave, and to Ade Turner who, despite not being able to go in the end, gave a large amount of help with the expedition planning.

Accommodation:

We decided to stay in the Agora Café, situated in Autrans about an hours drive from the car park nearest the cave. This was largely because this was where YUCPC's previous Berger expedition had stayed, and with flexibility for the number of people staying, a large room for gear storage and being fairly cheap (approx. €110pp/pw) it worked extremely well. We had the whole place booked most of the time which was also useful as it meant arriving back at 04:00 wasn't going to wake up any other guests!

Right: in the apartment just after we arrived



Above: Map showing the location of the Berger in relation to Autrans



Right: Sorting rope in the garage

Travel:

Due to the amount of gear we had to take we knew that at least one car/Land Rover would have to be taken, and in the end it worked out cheapest for 3 cars to go with some people joining us by train later on. Although by car the journeys from York to Autrans took over 20 hours with breaks & waits for the ferry etc. it wasn't too bad, especially on the way as we went from cold damp England to hot sunny France!

Preparation:

Due to quite how different tackling the Berger would be in comparison with our standard Yorkshire caving trips a large amount of preparation had to go into both the sorting out of gear, and into training ourselves:

Gear: Rope/rigging equipment was the most obvious thing that needed sorting, with Berger's 33 pitches to rig, and we managed to accumulate almost all we needed from the club gear although thanks must go to Steve for the donation of his rope to fill some of the gaps! On top of this there were plenty of other bits & pieces to remember such as first aid kits, a dingy, sleeping bags, tackle sacks, stoves, gas, cave food, a tent for the surface, the list goes on!

Training: We were all well aware that with the size of the Berger & our relatively small team of people, fitness (more



Rescue practice in the sports hall

specifically prussiking fitness!) would have a major effect on the success of our expedition. As well as this we all knew it would be very beneficial for people to be doing long trips underground as our usual 4-5 hour trips weren't going to be very representative of our trips in France. For these reasons we tried to organise trips down the longer caves in the area, such as Pen-y-Ghent Pot, Rowten, Black Shiver, King Pot, Vespers, Brown Hill Pot, Quaking Pot etc. Along with this we also encouraged (bullied?!) each other into doing the long prussik in the sports hall - prussiking up a 100m rope rigged over a pulley.

Another aspect of training we worked on was rescue practices; as well as regularly practicing mid rope rescues in the sports hall we had a trip down Jingling to try these techniques down a cave and also to practice rigging & using Z-rigs. There was also a trip arranged down Sell Gill where we practiced hauling a stretcher from the bottom.

Merchandise/Sponsorship:

Of course something that couldn't be overlooked for the expedition was the merchandise! After the narrowing down of proposed designs (regrettably rejecting a "Berger King" logo!) we settled on 2 similar designs:



We also applied for sponsorship from various companies and were kindly given a much appreciated 10kg of porridge from Morning Foods!

Enjoying our porridge kindly provided by Morning Foods

So, enough of the organisation! On Thursday 17th July we started packing the cars...

Thursday 17th July

A day before we were scheduled to leave and there were still ropes to be cut and 2 of the cars to be packed. Mark spent an afternoon in the container cutting & marking the ropes and in the evening Mark, Andy V & Steve started the packing of the cars. The main problem with this was that we knew the cars would have more people in on the way home than on the way out, so we had to try and account for the space they would take up on the return journey! Despite this the packing was finished by 10pm with us all slightly surprised that 1000m of rope only took up half of the boot of an Astra! We also got a call from Matt that night telling us he had stomach ache and that a nurse had said something about appendicitis. He was insisting it was just dodgy chicken though...

Spending all afternoon in the container wasn't great fun it has to be said, and I was getting more & more worried about whether we were ever going to fit this amount of kit into 2 cars, although thankfully I was proved wrong! I also found out that I was in fact going to be driving

the next day which I was slightly apprehensive about having never driven Andy's car or driven abroad before! - Mark



Debbie enjoying the sun during the drive down

Friday 18th July

Finally we were leaving! The day got off to a real downer though when Matt confirmed that he did indeed have appendicitis and so wouldn't be able to join us on the expedition. Nevertheless, the plans had to go ahead with 3 cars leaving that day: Si, & Debbie travelling from London picking up Charlie, Andy V leaving from York picking up Luke, and Steve & Mark leaving later from York.

Another fairly frantic afternoon of sorting out (Andy mainly being the frantic one as he was supposed to be leaving at lunchtime & was yet to pack!) which was rearranged slightly in order to go and visit Matt briefly in hospital to see how he was & to give him his merchandise. There were no problems on the drive to Dover (other than trying to work out how to use Steve's new Tomtom), but we weren't too happy to find that we'd missed the ferry all the others were on by a matter of seconds! - Mark

Saturday 19th July

The plans were fairly flexible for the drive through France depending on how awake the drivers were feeling. Steve and Andy's cars had to meet to exchange drivers and so travelled down together, picking up Laura and doing a big shop in Grenoble on the way. Si's car, meanwhile, had stopped for a long sleep but still managed to reach Autrans before the others, having not been delayed by the shopping trip or Grenoble's one way streets! That evening no one was in a state to do much, having been travelling for the best part of 24 hours, so it was an early night all round.

Sunday 20th July

After a not particularly early morning we decided it would be a good idea to walk to the cave entrance so we all knew where we were supposed to be going. We found the car park without too much difficulty and largely due to Steve's memory, also had few problems finding the entrance. We weren't feeling too optimistic about the water levels at this point though, as it was



Steve sampling the local cuisine on the way to the entrance



Andy V at the entrance

drizzling on and off throughout the day. The Sunday afternoon/evening was set aside for sorting the gear, as to save on space in the cars we had decided not to pack the tackle sacks before we left. It was probably at this point that we all realised just quite how much gear we were going to have to carry. In total we had 14 tackle sacks of rope, 4 camp bags, a dingy and 2 brew stop bags.

Monday 21st July

The first day of our permit! We decided two teams should go down the Berger with the first team (Steve, Debbie & Charlie) intending to rig as far as possible before they were caught up by the second team (Andy V, Simon, Luke & Ben). Laura & Mark stayed above ground & set up the tent at the surface. The result of the first day was that the cave was rigged as far as the traverse above Gontard's by the first team and the second team managed to rig to the top of Aldo's, but parts of the meanders would need re-rigging.



Si with his 3 tackle sacks

Tuesday 22nd July

Two teams went underground on the Tuesday, this time with the intention of reaching camp. Steve, Charlie and Mark were in the first team and successfully rigged from the relay pitches through to camp, also managing to communicate with surface camp using the Nicola radios, whilst Andy V, Laura & Ben moved tackle sacks down to Aldo's.



Mark rigging Aldo's

Having heard everyone else's accounts of their trips down I was really looking forward to my first trip, but fairly apprehensive at the sheer length of the trip combined with a slight worry about rigging on bolts for the first time. Even so, there was no way my excitement was going to be overshadowed by my various worries! The entrance series was much larger & more impressive than I had imagined and we reached the end of the rigged section much faster than I expected, with some efficient re-rigging in the meanders from Steve, who continued to adjust some of the rigging further down. I was then persuaded to take over, so we set off for Aldo's. Within a couple of minutes we were there & having rigged the first couple of bolts in the traverse I was now leaning out over the 42m drop wondering how on earth I was supposed to traverse out to rig a Y hang! The description said there was a large ledge round to the left to rig from and leaning out much further than I was comfortable with, I could just about see it. At this point I was pretty confident there was no way I was going to be able to rig it, but Steve evidently disagreed and with many "it'll be fine's", and, "you'll manage it"s, I was convinced to carry on. With the walls overhanging on either side and seemingly no footholds, I wedged myself in as best I could trying to ignore the chasm below with the

reflection of my light glinting up at me from the pool at the bottom. Bolt by bolt I worked my way round the corner, giving Charlie a piece of my mind part way round when she thought I might appreciate it if she started singing(!), finally reaching the very spacious ledge as described. From there it was just a case of rigging the Y hang and enjoying the

descent to the bottom, passing the 'sling graveyard' on the way down. This was a large projection of rock about 1/3 of the way down with many slings still around it. Having just rigged the top, there was no way I was up to the amount of swinging required to get anywhere near it, so there was no deviation rigged but Steve reckoned he wanted to put it in another time.

Continuing from the bottom I stooped through a smallish window and my first reaction was that I was outside! It was in fact the Grand Gallerie which was one of the most stunning places I had ever been - With all three of my lights on full it was still difficult to appreciate the scale of the place. Setting off to the right towards the sound of the water, all three of us were still amazed at the size of the passage, with the ceiling fairly frequently rising out of range of our lights. The route finding/rigging on our way to camp was fairly uneventful, apart from completely missing Lac Cadoux due to a complete lack of water! Having made our way down the massive boulder slope (I had read descriptions of boulders the size of houses, but some were easily bigger than that!). After a brief bit of confusion and by following the radio wires we



Charlie & Mark admiring some of the vast amount of calcite in the Grand Gallerie

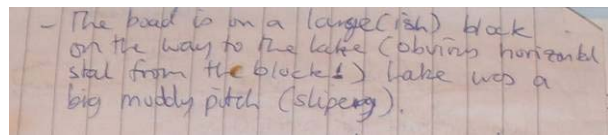
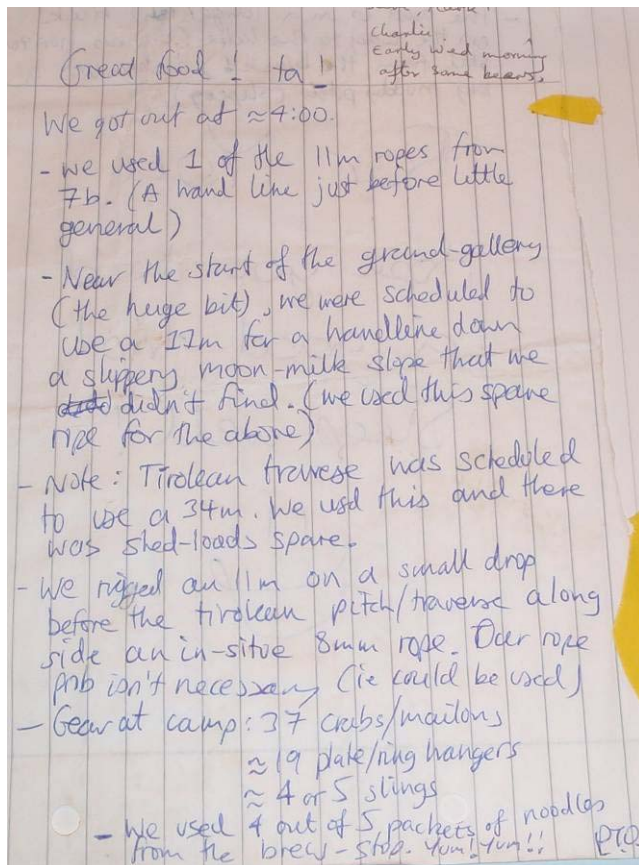
made our way into camp, where we unpacked the radio & tried to make contact with the surface. We were all a bit disappointed when we could get no response at all, so I followed the earth wire down the slope to make sure it was well earthed in some water/mud. Eventually I reached a pool of water and satisfied that it was earthed I looked up, suddenly realising I was at the edge of a gour pool in the Hall of Thirteen!! After a brief look around



The radios at camp (Borrowed from CDS 38 (email: cds38@free.fr))

knowing there was food waiting at camp I headed back and we settled down to eat before trying to contact the others again during the next radio window. A few minutes later Steve realised that the probable reason for us not hearing from the others was that he had mistakenly set the volume on the radio to minimum, so it was with renewed optimism that we tried again! This time we could hear them very clearly (much clearer than they could hear us, it turned out) and set off on the return journey. The trip on the way out was fairly uneventful, the reflectors proving extremely useful for navigation back to the streamway. I was a bit daunted knowing the amount of

prussiking that was in store, but I coped much better than I expected and reaching the Aldo's pitch head, wondered what all the fuss had been about on the way down! We surfaced in the pitch dark after 14 hours underground but watched a great sunrise on our walk back up to the car park. All in all, an absolutely amazing day, the Berger exceeding all my expectations.
- Mark



The note left for the others by Steve, Charlie & Mark after the trip to camp

Wednesday 23rd July

By this time we realised that to get further than camp we'd need plenty more bags moving down, so Si, Debbie & Luke went down to camp carrying the extra camp bags plus as many rope bags as they could carry. Meanwhile Andy V and Mark drove down to Grenoble to go food shopping and to pick up Andy G & Lauren from the station, and Charlie & Ben were on the surface manning the radios.

Thursday 24th July

An early start for Steve, Andy V & Mark who set off to try and rig as far as they could beyond the camp. The day's other trip saw Andy G, Lauren & Laura carrying yet more tackle sacks down to camp as an introduction to the Berger for Andy & Lauren. The first team managed to rig down to Cascade Abelle, further than the original aim of reaching the canals. Despite the good progress, however, we realised at this point that bottoming the cave would be one step too far as a result of the relatively small number of people we had combined with the time we had left. This time it was Si & Debbie's turn for a fairly long stint at the surface radios to contact both teams.



Some of the many in-situ ropes in the canals

Friday 25th July

Almost halfway through the permit and we decided a day off from the Berger would do us good. While Andy V went down to Grenoble to pick up some more food & alcohol and to meet Dave at the station, everyone else went to Lans en Vercors for a round of minigolf.

With a birthday collage made from the Expe catalogue, a caver cake, mini-golf, a meal out and party games this was a fantastic birthday!- Laura

a crazy golf to pick up Dave's.

Then went for

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MINI-GOLF DE L'ESPÉRANCE
38250 LANS-EN-VERCORS
Tél. 04 76 95 40 56

Minigolf final scores!

Saturday 26th July

Now we were half way through the permit, it was decided that this should be the final rigging day, so Steve, and the two Andys went underground with the intention of going as far as they could beyond the canals, intending to derig whatever they rigged that day. They managed to reach the top of Puits Gaché, 860m below the surface before returning without camping for a 22 hour epic. Having got a taste for the outside, the others wandered down to take their lives into their hands at the Devil Karts along the road, apart from Lauren & Laura who were manning the radios.



Mark, Ben & Charlie in the Devil kart queue!

Sunday 27th July

The next section of derigging was done by Dave, Debbie, Mark, Si and Charlie who derigged everything between the canals and camp, managing to move an impressive 10 bags to the bottom of Aldo's. Meanwhile Lauren, Andy V, Andy G, Steve and Luke stayed above ground enjoying icecream, with Laura and Ben this time on radio duty.

This trip was one of the highlights for me - we had an efficient trip down the now very familiar entrance series (Dave more efficient than most, having realised that he'd put the bottom bar of his rack on backwards!) and reached camp fairly quickly. We stopped briefly for some food before carrying on to the canals. Simon and I went to the far end, to start the derigging leaving the others to have a look around and admire the ridiculous state of the in-situ tat! The derigging went pretty quickly, but with a few slightly nervy moments like when the rope Si was clipped into suddenly slipped, but he managed to escape with just a wet foot! Charlie and I took over from Si for the pitches back to camp, realising how long it takes to derig bolts as opposed to p-hangers! After stopping for more food at camp we all grabbed two tackle sacks each and started off up the boulder slope, really noticing the height of it this time as it was the first time any of us had actually carried any bags uphill. On reaching Aldo's we thought it would probably be sensible to leave the bags at the bottom and head out, so once again we surfaced after 14 hours underground. - Mark



Debbie preparing food at camp 1

Monday 28th July

This was probably the biggest derigging day, with Steve, Ellie & Luke derigging from Aldo's to Gontard's; Andy G and Andy V moving bags between Aldo's and Cairn, joined by Mark for their second run, and Lauren & Laura hauling an impressive 13 tackle sacks up Cairn, getting 10 to the surface!

Tuesday 29th July

The final day of derigging saw Andy V, Dave, Si and Debbie finishing off the job underground, whilst Laura, Ben, Andy G, Mark, Charlie and Lauren came to dismantle the surface camp, haul up the 9 bags from the entrance pitch and carry everything they could from the entrance back to the cars. Ben and Charlie had earlier



Luke dismantling surface camp



Andy G descending the entrance pitch to collect tackle sacks

gone to try the French equivalent of Go Ape which was just up the valley from Autrans. Steve, Ellie and Helen decided on a day's climbing.

Wednesday 30th July

Wanting to make the most of the days we had left in the area, we decided to split into two groups, one going canyoning and the other going down to Grenoble to try a via ferrata and to drop Ben off at the station to catch his train home.

The group going canyoning (Steve, Ellie, Helen, Dave, Charlie, Andy V, Andy G, Lauren and Mark) had to find a place to hire wetsuits en route, and after a fair amount of touring around eventually found a shop. Meanwhile the problem for the group doing the via ferrata (Si, Debbie, Laura & Luke) was also finding a place to hire gear - after much touring around they found somewhere to hire lanyards, only to later realise that there was a shop a few hundred yards from the via ferrata itself!

Finally, after about 5 hours of trying, we sorted the travellers' cheques. The via ferrata, hmmm, well I'm really glad I did it and the longer the time since it



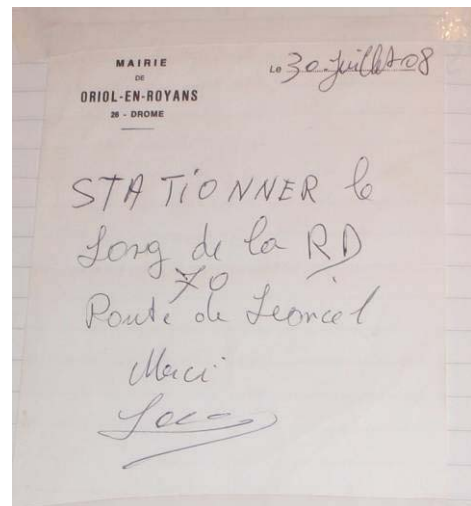
Dave and Lauren watching Andy G about to descend

was over, the better I remember it. It was fun and very exhilarating but also very scary! There was a tightrope bridge which was very wobbly and scary, but the vertical climbs were also a bit scary! The wooden bridge was also wobbly but not very scary, however the wooden plank seemingly balanced on rock edges was a bit worrying when you put your whole weight on it! All in all though - fun! - Debbie(?)

Canyoning was a lot of fun! Bit of faff hiring wetsuits, but it was a gorgeous day so everyone was happy. The canyon was very pretty and we found some fun jumps and toboggans! The worst part of the day was seeing a butt naked French man washing in the stream - EWWWWW! Horsefly extravaganza when we were getting changed. Also I got an angry parking notice from the mayor and got a line painted around the car for some bizarre reason! - Lauren



Lauren looking on as Andy G descends the first pitch in the



Lauren's parking notice!

Thursday 31st July

We had decided that it would be a shame to be in such a nice caving region and not do any caves other than the Berger, so two groups went off to do the Grotte de Gournier (Andy x2, Lauren & Mark and Si, Debbie, Laura & Luke) with the intention of finding the streamway and following it as far as time/cold levels would permit. Meanwhile Steve, Ellie & Helen went to do the via ferrata in Grenoble and Charlie and Dave relaxed back at the Agora Café.

The via ferrata was a little hot, but really good fun. The first section was great! Plenty of exposure and monkey bridges and wooden bridges.

The second section starts with a really steep wall - the crux of the section. At a "terrace" (which I expected to be a large rock ledge, not a park bench bolted to a vertical wall!) you go straight up for an easy finish, or to the right for a hard section. This "hard section" was a lot easier than the start wall (Ellie and Helen did the easier route) - Steve



Paddling across the lake at the Grotte de Gournier entrance

When our group got to the Grotte de Gournier there with the intention of sorting out the dinghy for the entrance, Andy G realised that his wetsocks were still in the garage at Autrans. This meant inflating the dingy was substituted by a sunbathe in the car park waiting for the others with Andy's wetsocks, so finally we wandered up to the cave entrance. The dinghy thankfully largely inflated (only one out of the three air compartments had a leak!) so Lauren paddled out across the lake to rig the traverse, by which time an audience of about 20 people had appeared at the entrance! After much untangling of cord and

waiting around for the other group on the traverse we carried on. By English standards the passageway was massive with stunning formations, but although we appreciated them I think we were all comparing it to the Berger & so we were obviously less impressed than we would otherwise be. A while later after some searches for the streamway (one resulting in finding a small section of it annoyingly emerging and disappearing from 2 chokes) the others caught up and we found our way down. The streamway was pretty impressive as a result of the calcite passage & the slightly blue looking water. We set off with varying degrees of traversing, wetsuit depending, with me typically having faith that I'd manage to keep my feet dry, but discovering after a fairly short distance that I may as well just wade as falling in was getting increasingly likely! We didn't continue particularly far as we were still all a bit weary from our Berger exertions so headed back to the lake. On the way into the cave we had been a bit cautious with the dinghy as it



Gour pools forming in the Grotte de Gournier

had 1 compartment deflated and was only intended for 1 adult & one child and so had decided 1 person with caving gear was probably the sensible maximum. This seemed fairly inefficient though and found on the way out that it could comfortably take 3 people, but 4 did seem to be possibly one too many. Si meanwhile decided our boat wasn't good enough for him, so managed to get a lift in another group's boat! After ice cream in the Grotte de Charanche café we headed back to Autrans. - Mark

Friday 1st August

Most people went down to Grenoble for the via ferrata (for the second time for some). Steve, Ellie and Helen went on a (successful!) marmot hunt in the morning near the Berger car park, picking up Luke later on with the intention of going canyoning but with the result of going to the Grotte de Charanche show cave!

Marmot hunt: Success!! With careful observation the little critters could be seen lolloping along the grassy terraces. The tourist info was correct.

Post marmot hunt we (plus Luke) gambled all on the weather. We headed for a canyon. It pissed it down big style. Nil point.



There's a marmot there somewhere!

So we did the show cave at the Grotte de Gournier. We had a crazy plan to pretend the Gournier was a canyon by swimming the lake and jumping off the ledge in all possible directions. My team proved weak. It was vetoed. - Steve



On the Via Ferrata above Grenoble a

Saturday 2nd August

After some frantic final cleaning first thing in the morning, most people set off on the drive back to the UK, but Si & Debbie were heading south for an extra week's holiday and Laura caught a coach to Florence.