



On top of
THE WORLD

Enjoyment, exhilaration and excitement in the awesome Écrins National Park in the Alps

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



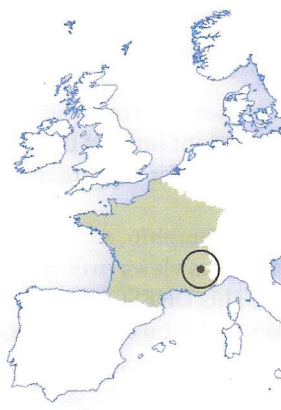
Carol Kubicki...

... and her partner, Anthony, use their 'van to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

BOOK

The Écrins National Park: A Walker's Guide, by Kev Reynolds
ISBN-9781852845216

LEFT The old town of Embrun sits dramatically on a crag



Watching the plump marmot appear out of a burrow at my feet and contentedly munch grass nearby was, for me, one of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences. These furry mammals – about the size of a large domestic cat – are seen on the hillside while walking in the Écrins mountains, but this face-to-face meeting was special.

It was some years since our last visit to the Écrins and, back home, I had excitedly regaled friends with the plans for our trip, trying to roll the 'r' in my throat in the French way. Their puzzled looks might have been due to my hopeless pronunciation, but I learnt to slowly explain that the Écrins National Park is in the southeast alpine region of France, on the Italian border between Grenoble and Gap.

The mountains of the Écrins top 4,000m (13,123ft) and, with no roads crossing the central peaks, accessing the unsurpassed mountain walking often involves driving on minor roads that wind steeply up deep-cut valleys. A hillwalker's paradise, this area also has an abundance of wildflowers, charming mountain villages and traditional houses, beautiful wall-painted sundials – and so much more.

Having planned an anti-clockwise tour around the mountains, our first excursion into the heart of the Écrins was along the green and wooded Valgaudemar in the west. The valley road quickly became narrow, squeezing through hamlets of stone buildings. We followed the river between steep valley walls, draped with ribbons of waterfalls to La Chapelle-en-Valgaudemar; this is a modest village where the houses huddle together, with a campsite and shop selling excellent local goats' cheese.

We took the short walk from La Chapelle to Les Portes and, in these few kilometres, found everything a good mountain hike should have: flower-rich meadows, views along the valley, a waterfall and an attractive mountain hamlet. On the steep hillside I spotted several orchids, including lady orchid – its flowers like bonneted women – tiny pansies and tall white asphodels. At the pretty stone bridge spanning the torrent below Les Portes, I watched the white water hurrying to descend the narrow gorge.

Moving south, we reached Embrun, a town dramatically situated on a crag in a wide sunny valley on the edge of the Écrins. Our campsite was beneath the crag and the warm evening air was filled with the haunting call of hunting scops owls.

We climbed the narrow streets of the charming town to the cathedral and the ►




TOP TIPS

Bus 3040 runs every day from Bourg-d'Oisan to La Bérarde in July and August

Dogs are not allowed, even on a lead, in the Écrins National Park boundaries. All the campsites we stayed at were outside the National Park boundary, but some of the walks were within it

The Rando Écrins app includes lots of information about walking in the area

 rando.ecrins-parcnational.fr/en

Marmots hibernate in winter so the best months to see them are May to September

café-lined square before following ancient tracks to the hillside above the town. Among the meadows we were accompanied by swallowtail butterflies and the call of a cuckoo, with spectacular views over the stunning blue of the large reservoir.

From Embrun we followed the River Durance towards Briançon, stopping at the marmot path in Eygliers, below Fort Dauphin, to enjoy that close encounter. For non-hikers, this Eygliers marmot community is an opportunity to see these sociable and adorable animals from an easy-to-access short path.

I felt privileged to meet a marmot face-to-face and see its luxuriant fur and its clawed front paws, perfect for digging their complex burrows.

We drove up to Fort Dauphin, a fort complex with tremendous views over the dramatic Guil gorge. This UNESCO World Heritage Site has monumental defensive walls of pink granite and was designed by the military engineer, Vauban, over 200 years ago to protect what was then the

Italian border. We crossed two immense moats to reach the gates. Inside the walls is a village with an orderly grid of streets, pretty houses, shops and an unfinished church, as well as military buildings that visitors can explore.

We returned to the central mountains and the attractive village of Vallouise, with an open aspect at the junction of two valleys. Popular with tourists, Vallouise retains a relaxed vibe that is ideal for strolling around. The magnificent carved doorway of the church and the beautiful sundial on the Maison de Bardonecchia are worth seeking out.

Camping at Vallouise gave us a head start the next morning up the hairpin bends on the narrow valley road to the Pré de Madame Carle. From the car park, so busy with scampering marmots that care is needed not to run one down, there are plenty of walking options. We chose the quieter Glacier Noir route and were soon alone in the mountains and following the exposed path along the lateral moraine



Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. Our Tempest is our second Devon Conversions 'van. At 5.3m we think it's enormous and, with a bathroom, also luxurious



THE JOURNEY

We spent 12 days exploring the Écrins area in June, with 10 nights on sites and had two further overnights each way in France

THE COSTS

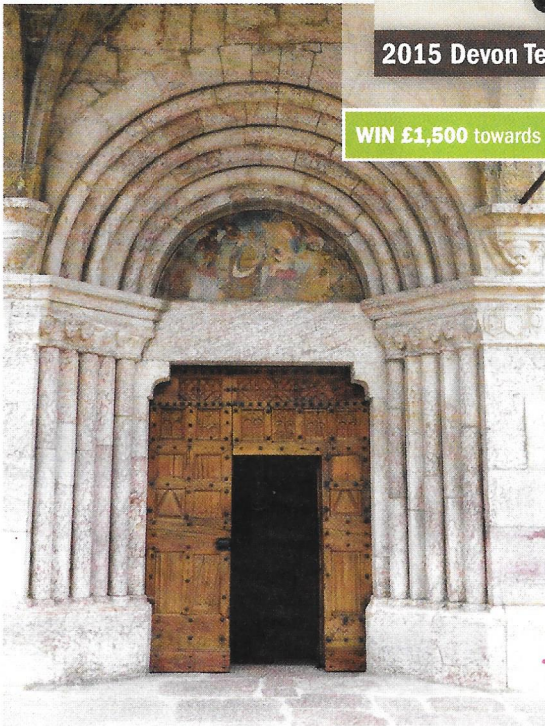
Fuel average 34mpg (€248.60).....	£219.03
Ferry Hull-Zeebrugge.....	£470
Site fees (€190).....	£167.40
Tolls (€23).....	£20.26

2015 Devon Tempest

1,677 miles

Total £876.69

WIN £1,500 towards your next adventure with Safeguard. See page 195 for details or call 0800 995 1314 



FAR LEFT The mostly deserted Hameau de Valfroide is picturesque

ABOVE CLOCKWISE A close encounter with a marmot below Fort Dauphin; walking cautiously along the perchoir above La Grave; the church doorway in Vallouise

above the glacier; a ridge of rock fragments shifted by the slow-moving ice.

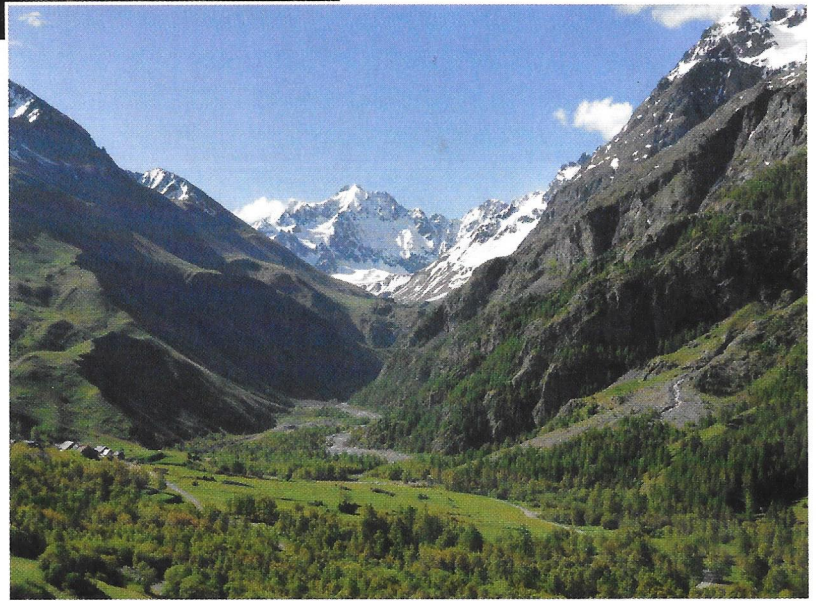
I am not overconfident on narrow ridges and this was only shoulder-width and crumbly. To one side was a grassy bank, a snowfield and crags, to the other, a precipitous slope with the boulder-strewn glacier around 50m (164ft) below; I walked cautiously, using walking poles, as we made our way up this unstable path.

While I was taking care, the marmots scurried over the loose slopes on their stubby legs and the chamois skipped among the crags. Even in this inhospitable environment there were still floral distractions, including azaleas and bright pink primulas. We rested, watching the chamois lying down on the snow fields to keep cool. As we neared the cirque at the head of the glacier, it was clear why this is called Glacier Noir. The contrast between the white snow and the black crags created a monochrome landscape; the silence of this spectacular place broken only by random rock falls.

After this adventure I needed a rest day and the Écrins' other Vauban fortified town, Briançon, was a perfect choice. We entered the maze of narrow picturesque streets at Porte de Pignerol, finding a lively and cosmopolitan town with a lingering perfume of patchouli oil. Sitting in a café in the sunny square, facing the twin-towered church, gave me chance to admire the sundial on the front. Afterwards, we sauntered to the ramparts for the view over the lower town and the Durance and Guisane valleys.

Feeling relaxed, we continued over the Col du Lautaret at 2,057m (6,748ft). Surrounded by snow-capped peaks, we couldn't resist an easy walk following the Sentier des Crevasses that traverses the slopes. Although only a few weeks since snow had covered these meadows, there were already carpets of blue gentians and multitudes of alpine poppies along the path.


We spotted a lammergeier (bearded vulture) soaring overhead and a short-toed eagle. We also saw plenty of marmots, >



INFORMATION


 ecrins-parcnational.fr

Marmots


 thealpinemarmotproject.org

The following websites have information in English:


Valgaudemar

 champsaur-valgaudemar.com/en/summer/home.html


Embrun

 tourisme-embrun.com

Vallouise

 tourisme-lavallouise.com/en

Vénosc village

 venosc.com

ABOVE CLOCKWISE

The stunning Asfeld Bridge in Briançon; a goat above La Grave; looking up the Col du Lautaret from Villar d'Arène; the sundial in the Place d'Armes in Briançon

their high-pitched alarm call initially drawing our attention. Scanning the hillside we located a marmot balancing on a rock on its hind legs, watching the sky for predators while others raced low across the ground, flicking their tails as they ran for cover. The path culminates at a craggy shoulder and natural belvedere where I soaked up the impressive view of La Meije at just under 4,000m (13,123ft) high and the Glacier de l'Homme.

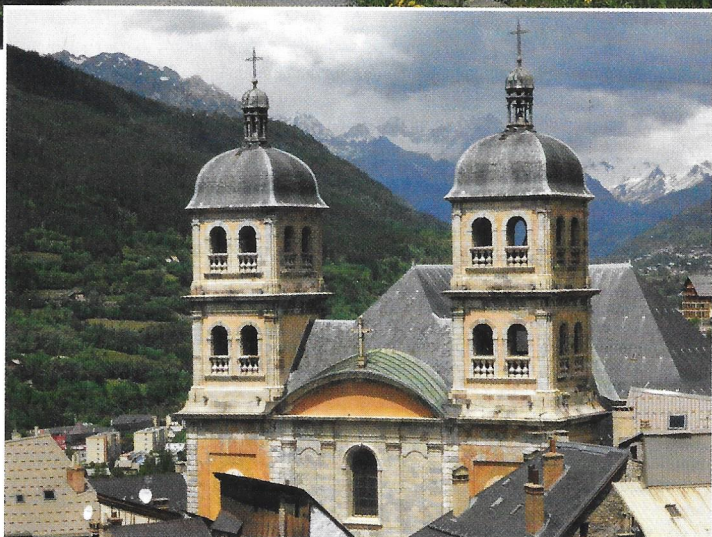
We stayed at La Grave's idyllic riverside campsite for a few nights, a short steep walk from the village that clusters on the south-facing hillside opposite the flanks of La Meije. With sunny mornings, clouding over by late afternoon with a thunderstorm and plenty of walking options, our days settled into a pattern of early starts to make the most of the good weather.

Above La Grave, I shuffled across the terrifying 'perchoir' hanging walkway that juts out of the cliff, only a plank between my feet and the river 600m (1,968ft) below, truly a 'walk of faith'. Looking down, I could see a tiny chapel perched on a rock and griffon vultures hanging on the morning thermals

waiting for me to fall. Back on firm ground, we walked through the higgledy-piggledy village of Chazelet to Les Plagnes, where the air was full of the distinctive scent of narcissi as we negotiated a field full of creamy-white daffodils.

The picturesque village of Les Hières clings precariously to the hillside and is made up of traditional stone houses with logs stored on wooden balconies under the eaves. Climbing higher through deserted hamlets, we reached alpine meadows surrounded by dancing butterflies and the scolding call of whinchats. A hare bounded across our path to L'Aiguillon, a 2,095m (6,873ft) high peak. This foothill has an isolated position and a bench to enjoy the fantastic views to the mighty bulk of La Meije and the switchback of roads below. We had to drag ourselves away to complete our circuit of the Écrins. Our final base was in the Vénéon valley, a deep glacial U-shaped valley near Bourg-d'Oisans.

We camped close to the picturesque village of Vénosc, bustling with visitors climbing the stone steps and browsing the craft shops in the narrow alleyway. ►



ABOVE Traditional houses with balconies for storing firewood; the twin bell towers of the Collegiate Church of Notre-Dame and Saint-Nicolas in Briançon

Our first day was the popular walk to Lac Lauvitel, which began easily through mixed woodland where we spotted a pair of black woodpeckers. In the lovely hamlet of La Danchère, we refuelled at the water fountain before taking the path to the lake.

This woodland path is steep and stony, with occasional snow-filled gullies to scramble over. Fortunately, the multitudes of path-side flowers gave me plenty of excuses to rest and the exertion was forgotten when we reached the lake.

With a backdrop of craggy mountains, Lac Lauvitel has a beautiful setting. The path emerges into the most stunning rock garden – the jumble of boulders are the backdrop for many colourful flowers.

For our final day in the Écrins, we drove the 'van to the valley head at La Bérarde, a beautifully situated and popular mountain resort. The narrow road was both dramatic and terrifying, but was mercifully quiet this early in the season. Our route to Refuge du Châtelleret on the south face of La Meije

WE STAYED AT

Camping Municipal des Mélèzes, 05800 La-Chapelle-en-Valgaudémar, Hautes-Alpes

☎ 0033 492 552301

📍 lachapelleenvalgaudemar.fr

📅 1 May – 30 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €13 (£11.45)

Camping La Vieille Ferme, Chemin sous le Roc, 05200 Embrun, Hautes-Alpes

☎ 0033 492 430408 📍 campingembrun.com

📅 1 May – 1 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €19 (£16.74)

Huttopia Vallouise, Chemin des Chambonnettes, 05290 Vallouise, Hautes Alpes

☎ 0033 492 233026

📍 europe.huttopia.com/en/site/vallouise

📅 19 May – 2 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €21 (£18.50)

Camping de la Meije, La Grave, 05320, Hautes-Alpes

☎ 0033 476 799334 or 0033 608 543084

📍 camping-delameije.com/en

📅 10 May – 30 September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €19 (£16.74)

Camping Champ du Moulin, Bourg d'Arud, 38520 Vénosc, Isère

☎ 0033 476 800738

📍 champ-du-moulin.com

📅 15 December – 29 April and 24 May – 17 September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20.90 (£18.41)

started steeply but soon settled into a gentle rising sandy path along the river. There were plenty of flowers, with hordes of dainty butterflies flitting among them and marmots and chamois accompanied our walk.

As we got higher, the path became stonier and the scenery more barren. The refuge eventually came into view, with the snowy slopes of La Meije towering behind.

We stopped at the refuge to enjoy lunch. As we did, I looked up to the blue sky and spotted a streak of rainbow colours among wisps of cirrus clouds. We watched this phenomenon for about half-an-hour until it eventually fragmented. This cloud iridescence is a diffraction event caused by small water droplets scattering the sunlight; this was not a silver lining but this special 'rainbow' made our departure just a little more bearable.

On our descent, we waved cheerily to our last marmot companion, who whistled 'cheerio' back as we took the zigzag path back to the village. 🐹