Ailefroide…a rock climbing heaven kept secret!

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Voila, the end of summer in the northern Hemisphere, and here we are: two lonely climbers in the small camp site of Ailefroide somewhere in the south eastern “Fronch” Alps. Ailefroide could be considered as a puzzle of all vertical places flirted by the climbing community. Indeed the wee valley hanging at 1500 meters is surrounded by sheer granite faces of all aspects with mountains tops reaching permanent snow.

Located near Briancon, few kilometres from Italy, Ailefroide has an ideal climate for anything related to the vertical world. It is unspoilt and not crowded like Chamonix. Locals say that you could easily survive from the land eating wild berries and drinking the local brew.

So we found ourselves: “feeling lucky punks” and privileged to be in a fantastic play ground with so much quietness, tranquillity. We could have brought twin ropes, for long, very long multi pitches, we could have taken nuts, wires, crampons for quality rock, ice, sport, trad climbing (non exhaustive list). Instead that time we brought a rack of finger tips and climbing shoes (no crash pads… those things have turned us into woosies). As soon as we parked the old Citroen in the cheap campsite, with not a single tent, Stewhan (Kiwi anti-gravity champion) ran to the first bolder in view, and yelled out loud his euphoria echoing on the slabs: “gros poisson !”. From that point we knew that this place was better than a Fontainebleau in the mountains. Oui! Ailefroide is a bouldering Mecca, the granite is aggressive offering excellent friction. The variety of problems is endless, ranging from the castle hill odd sloper with a mantle top out to the Jardine nasty crimper. The only problem is that skin is hardly saved due to the roughness of the rock and thanks to the little time for rest with no or few wet days. The climbing bum will just have to accept the diversity of movements till he reaches the ecstasy of “just” being there.

Infos:
When?
The rock climbing season goes from June till October, late spring until early autumn as the place is fairly high up in the mountains. If you want to avoid the European crowd best is to go before the 15th of july or after the 15th of August. The weather is Mediterranean and can be assimilated to Alexandra’s type of weather, very dry and hot in summer.

Where?
Ailefroide is situated next to Briancon, 120 km from Grenoble in the Southern Alps.

Getting there?
From Paris, Lyon or Geneva you can travel to Grenoble, by TGV (high speed train), bus or by car. From Grenoble, you can either choose to get to Briancon by train (4 hours) or by car (2 hours) via the Lautaret pass.
From Briancon, go to L’Argentiere (10 km), then turn right to Vallouise then keep on the same road till you reach Ailefroide. There is not really any need of car.

**Now you are there:**
You could be autonome as there are shops in the camp site as well as climbing stores where you can get some infos about new routes and find climbing partners if travelling alone.

**Bouldering:**
The hundreds or so boulders litter to valley-flour. There are everywhere in the camp site and for any taste, slabs, over hangs, dynos, statics….a crash pad can be useful however not compulsory as landings are soft…or often soft!
In July a bouldering event, called "Tout à Bloc" (everyone on the boulders) takes place at Ailefroide. Around the same period an international bouldering competition takes place in l'Argentière la Bessée (10 kms from Ailefroide).

**Cragging:**
There are extensive routes in this area, single to multi-pitches up to 600 meters, trad to sports, so it is up to you to arm yourself with 12 quickdraws or a rack of natural pro. The grading system is French and routes range from 5 (12) till 8b+ (32).

**What else?**
Ailefroide is the main gate to Ecrin National Parc, where mountaineering is the main activity.
If you are bored with granite you can travel few kilometres downstream to be able to climb hundreds of limestone routes towards Briancon (20 minutes) or towards Ceuse (1:30 hour).
White water sports have also their place here, with good grade 1 to 5 rivers, and excellent canyoning for hot summer days.

**Language:**
Locals…or most of them speak French but are happy to show off their English!
Here is a small list of useful terms:
Bonjour/ Salut: Hello/ Hi
Comment ca va?: How are you?
Ca va bien: I am fine
Ca va mal: I am bad
Au revoir/ salut: good bye/ bye
Je m’appelle …..: my name is…..
Je suis Néo-Zélandais : I am from New Zealand
C’est génial!: it’s great!
C’est nul! It stinks
C’est facile/difficile: It’s easy/hard
Pas de probleme: no worries
Ou est la voie : where is the route ?
Le graton : the crimper
L’aplat : the sloper
Vas-y/ allez: come on
Je suis dobé (ze swee dobay): I am pumped