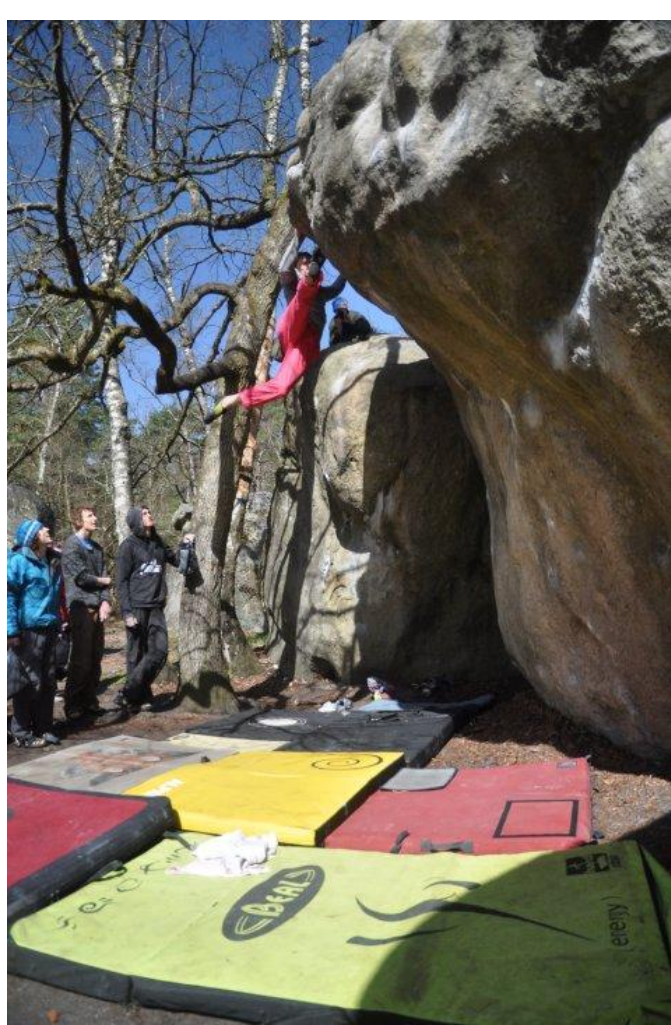


“Fontainebleau Gets the LUUMC Stamp of Approval..”

So, 6 months have passed since the new academic year began and you take a moment to sit back and reflect on times gone by. Whether it be half a year of sweaty, dank clubnights care of that once-weekly ritual we know and love as ‘Fruity Friday’; be it 6 months jumping in-and-out of textbooks and journals, or maybe you simply cannot remember - courtesy of a terrible combination of the two, now is the time to plan for that month-long Easter holiday.

If you’re a keen boulderer, half-keen trad-climber or dare I say it bolt-clipper, chances are you’ve atleast dabbled in Yorkshire gritstone bouldering. Patrons of the foremost category will have found themselves shedding skin at all the best venues Leeds and West Yorkshire has to offer. Now, while there’s alot to be said for the quality of these “Cathedrals of Crush”, I can’t help but suggest that you look a little further afield for your Easter bouldering fix as the grit season ends.







Fontainebleau is a charming historic town just south of Paris, surrounded by forests that just happen to be full of sandstone boulders. The original bouldering mecca, nowhere else will you find top-quality bouldering venues with such an abundance of brilliant problems on good quality sandstone.

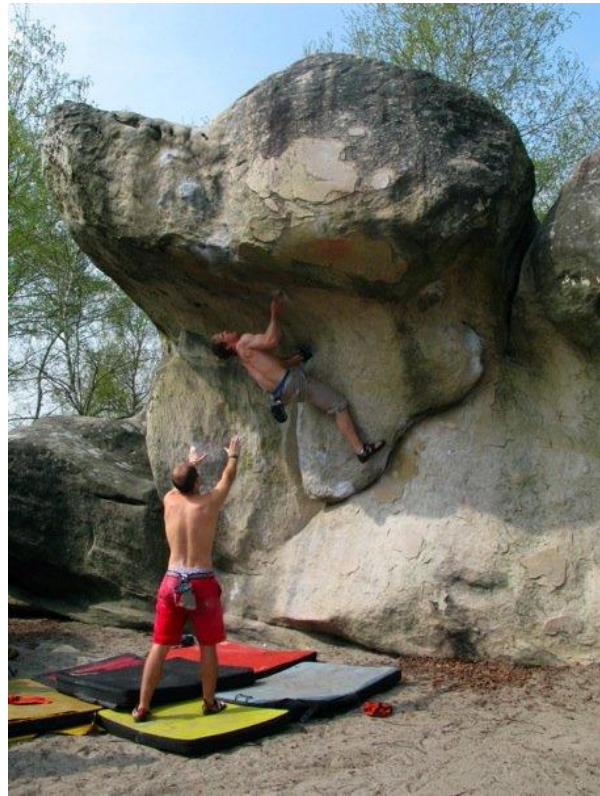


LUUMC resident tank Joel Millward-Hopkins on Bas Cuvier classic “L’Hélicoptère” (F7a**); Photo: Lubos Klepac

Unique in its “user-friendly” feel, most, if not all problems at the many areas here are given a colour-coded grade based on a standardised system. Although this conjures images of indoor walls, it really does help to provide focus in this vast expanse of climbing opportunity.

Further useful is the fairly extensive guidebook selection available, which helpfully detail climbs in the various areas of Fontainebleau according to the colour assigned to each circuit. Listing collections of climbs as circuits is a practice whose origins lie in the early part of the 20th century, when aspiring French mountaineers made a bee-line for the most bold and committing boulders in preparation for the likes of the Himalayas. The legacy of these climbers is omnipresent, for example pegs can often be found having been left behind from climbers polishing off their aid techniques. It was thought (and still is to an extent) that to complete a ‘climb’ was to complete a whole circuit.

| Colour | Font Grade / Adjective |
|--|--|
|  | Enfants (Infants) |
|  | 2/3: Facile (Easy) |
|  | 3/4: Assez Difficile (Quite Difficult) |
|  | 4/5: Difficile (Difficult) |
|  | 5/6: Très Difficile (Very Difficult) |
|  | 6/7: Extrêmement Difficile (Extremely Difficult) |



James Wilson on “*Le Toit du Cul du Chier*” (F7a***); Photo: Lyndsie Plowman



Clockwise from left: Duncan Kaye at the well-worked mid-height moves on “*Le Surplomb Statique*” (F6a+**) at Franchard Isatis; Ben Finley reaching for the elusive finishing rail; got it. Just. Photo: Lubos Klepac

with great emphasis on footwork, whilst simultaneously demanding fairly good upper-body strength and squeezing ability. Yep - plenty of slopers; no shortage of mantles and some very dodgy top-outs.

Elementary as it may seem, this grading system immediately provides a long list of problems at, just below or maybe pushing your grade, once you’ve found the boundary of your ability.

This means firstly, that you’ve got 40/50 problems at your fingertips, saving the traipsing around looking for something you’ll be able to get up. Secondly, it means that you know exactly what to look for if you do feel like pushing the grade. Of course, there are outliers within each grade boundary (i.e. oranges that feel like reds), but this just adds to the experience and enhances your ability in this unique environment where a very particular climbing style is key.

The Climbing

Chances are that on your first day you will get schooled – or should I say, savaged. There is a definite art to the climbing style here,



Kate Pritchard pulling out the slab technique for a tricky problem on the red circuit at Franchard Isatis; Photo: Lubos Klepac

Just work on general body tension and try to get used to sloping holds. Don’t worry. You will get the hang of it, and you’ll have a blast. Speaking from experience, I can quite comfortably say that it’s highly addictive.

First Trip Destinations

My first trip to Fontainebleau was highly surreal. You pitch up the tent (or get to the gite if you’re posh/rich), have a kip after a good 9 hours’ driving, then wake up and head into one of the forests.

You're greeted by something that looks as though it's been consciously designed to be the best bouldering centre available; a "chaos" of fluvial boulders just screaming out to be explored. The friction's second to none, the landings ideal (flat, soft sand) and best of all, it dries quick as you like!

Les Trois Pignons is one of the largest bouldering areas in Fontainebleau, home to arenas of annihilation including La Roche Aux Sabots and Le Cul de Chien. The former of this pair is one of the best all-round areas I've visited; endless problems at all grades, from highball slabs to roofy power-fests, it's all there. Particularly delectable are "*Graviton*" (F7a*) and "*L'Auriculaire – Toit aux Frelons*" (F6a*).

Le Cul de Chien plays host to perhaps one of the forest's most celebrated crowd-pleasers – "*Le Toit du Cul du Chien*" (F7a**), and you'll also find the desperate-looking "*Eclipse*" roof (F7c ***). Fear not however, for as well as these classic test-pieces, Le Cul de Chien (so-named for the dog-shaped boulder marking its bounds), there is plenty to go at in the yellow-blue-red range. Something for everyone then.

Bas Cuvier is another perfect destination for those yet to pop their Fontainebleau cherry. Yet another area with problems at all grades and climbing of all styles. Classics include "*La Marie Rose*" (F6a***), and "*L'Hélicoptère*" (F7a** - pictured on first page), and of course, each circuit always has its own individual un-named gems.

Guidebooks

There are a number of guidebooks available for Fontainebleau bouldering. I have personal experience of "*Fontainebleau Climbs*" by Jo & Françoise Montchausse and Jacky Godoffe (translated by Sue Harper), widely available in climbing shops and on the internet. Once accustomed to the layout of the book and the way they list circuits, it's perfect for purpose and very easy to use.

There is also, for the stronger of us, a guidebook called "*7 + 8: 1789 straight ups in Fontainebleau*" listing no problems below 6c+, by Bart Van Raaij, which is slightly more expensive.

Again, this is fairly easy to get hold of in most climbing/bouldering shops.

Accommodation

Having no personal experience of gites (chalets) in Fontainebleau, I can but offer recommendations from friends who do. A far cry from camping, these offer a warm cosy bed and living quarters for those who appreciate luxury. I suggest that those interested pay a visit to www.maisonbleau.com and other similar sites for booking costs and further information.

Having stayed at the English-owned Camping Les Prés in Grez sur Loing (visit <http://www.camping-grez-fontainebleau.info/caravanning.html> for more information) on numerous occasions, I recommend it highly. Hot showers, plenty of toilets and smack bang in the middle of all the major bouldering areas.

Getting there

Of the many methods of transport for a holiday to Fontainebleau, I'd suggest taking a car. Dover to Dunkerque ferries are very reasonably priced during the autumn (£12.50 each way leaving at the crack of dawn per car plus £13.00 fuel surcharges at the time of writing, split between 4 is a pittance!), although this cost increases for more reasonable hours and at peak times of year. Furthermore, a car is particularly useful for getting to and from the forests when transporting pads and multiple bodies.

I would advise against satellite-navigation systems that are inclined to drag you through cities, having been stuck in Parisian traffic from 4am through 9am after making this mistake myself.

The best route (although it contains toll roads) from Dunkerque would seem to be to follow the A25 to Lille, following which you join the A1 towards Paris. Exiting the A1 at junction 8, join the N330 heading towards Meaux. Once here, join the A140 towards the A4, then exit following signs for Melun on the N36/D636.

From here, follow signs for Fontainebleau on the D606. These directions are simply those that I use when I travel to Fontainebleau, picked out from the map to avoid Paris at all costs. You may well find a better route, and please, just use this as a guide! I shall accept no responsibility for your getting lost after following these directions.

It is also very easy to get a train from Paris to Fontainebleau and, with a return journey from London St. Pancras to Paris in October costing £59, it's not that much more expensive. However, you will need to add the cost of the train from Paris-Gare de Lyon to Fontainebleau at E7.90 each way.

I'd still suggest that wriggling your way into a car would be your best bet.

When do I go?

Well, this is fairly subjective as it depends on what you want to get done. High summer (i.e. June-July) is good if you're planning a fairly quiet, chilled affair as, the consensus is that it's far too hot to climb during the day. The best times of year to go are spring and autumn, when the days are cool but weather fair. Also, accommodation is often cheaper due to lesser demand.

It doesn't matter when you go, just so long as you do.

-Duncan Kaye – duncan.j.kaye@gmail.com