

In search of the yeti: part 2

THE dizzying, snowy heights of Mt Blanc du Tacul rose steeply from the glacial plain. Expansive views to the left were broken only by distant peaks as jagged as teeth.

Immediately to the right of the rocky outcrop on which the Cosmiques hut and I perched at 3,613 metres, the Bossons glacier tumbled through a succession of precipitous ice-falls to the eventual depths of the Chamonix Valley, some 2,500 metres below.

Through the steam of two exceedingly strong black coffees, I watched small groups of tiny black dots carefully zig-zagging their way down the mountain. The closest appeared almost to be sleep-walking across the glacier. When the roped figure at the end stumbled, I knew just how he felt.

Not even after my worst nights on call, had I ever felt so wasted. Due to an unfortunate fitness/ambition imbalance, the 10-hour hike over this mountain and the even steeper peak beyond to the summit of Mt Blanc had been the hardest thing I'd ever done.

However, I didn't choose veterinary medicine because it was easy, and as a veterinary cryptozoologist I was determined to develop my ability to care for sick yetis and other species woefully neglected by conventional medicine. After reaching 4,807 metres, I now had the ability to conduct home visits to yetis throughout the Alps – at least in theory. All I needed now were some yetis.

And besides, the mountain had not been unkind to me. At 70mph and -10°C, her breath had been unusually gentle and warm, allowing me to stagger briefly onto the summit. And with the exception of the inevitable hypoxia-induced cerebral necrosis, I appeared to have suffered little permanent damage. It would, however, take some time for the skin to regrow on my heels and cheeks, and for the conjunctivitis and bloodshot eyes to recede.

I therefore swapped my unyielding mountaineering boots for super-

comfortable trainers and hiked the blissfully oxygenated, warm and snow-free valley trails, in search of yeti spoor. It was time to start Phase II of my training: Yeti Biology and Husbandry. Whilst Tibetan yetis have been intermittently sighted for decades, much less is known about the fabled European yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis yetii*. Far shyer than its Asian counterpart, it inhabits only the most isolated of mountains ranges. That

would have to mean those beyond the furthest Chamonix cable-car lift at La Flégère, I concluded. Furthermore, such creatures were probably nocturnal.

And so, late the next afternoon, I hiked to the valley hamlet of La Flégère, catching the last lift up around 5pm. Once again the forests, rocks and streams dropped away beneath, as I approached the heights above. Arriving at 1,877 metres, I hiked the remaining 90 minutes

to remote Lac Blanc, at 2,352 metres, where I unexpectedly discovered a rustic mountain hut serving bread and steaming vegetable soup.

The evening light faded gradually throughout my second dinner, and by my third the upper peaks were turning pink – revealing the source of their name: the Aiguilles Rouges, or Red Needles.

On exploring the lakes after dessert, I observed an interesting phenomenon: as the last sensible people left, rushing downwards to make the final lift off the mountain, the animals came out, one by one. Fascinated, I stalked with my camera a large buck that appeared to delight in leading me in circles.

I clambered over rocky outcrops and through streams, until I realised the entire range was alive with mountain deer. Encouraged, I searched keenly for signs of *Gigantopithecus* activity. Excitement was generated by the footprint of some large animal in the mud by a mountain lake, but unfortunately closer examination revealed it to resemble the shape of a boot, oddly similar to mine.

By 9pm true night was fast approaching, and I was forced to concede defeat. Yetis may well be nocturnal, but I, unfortunately, am not; and uncertainty about their possibly carnivorous nature began to haunt me. I therefore retraced my steps down towards the La Flégère lift – now long-

since closed, but still providing a welcome beacon of light on the darkening mountain side.

As the dusk rapidly faded, I ran faster and faster, chasing the last dregs of daylight down the mountain.

Whilst I was still up high, a large dark shape suddenly sprung up from the shadows, just to the right of the trail. I instinctively leapt to the left, balancing above a cliff, whilst straining to identify features in the shaggy mass, which towered at least as tall as me.

Frozen, we stared at one another for long, still seconds, until I realised it was wearing a jacket very similar to mine. My pounding footsteps had, in fact, disturbed a French hiker named Jacques on a very budget tour of the Alps. Having failed to make Lac Blanc before darkness, he was attempting to bivouac by the trailside. It was nice to exchange pleasantries with my first fellow human for many hours, before I hastened downwards once again.

At La Flégère I finally conceded defeat and donned my head torch. The 15-minute lift descent would now take several hours along winding mountain trails, before the safety of the valley was reached. As I descended into the spookily quiet forest, I wondered how low yetis roamed, in their doubtlessly insatiable search for food.

Close to Chamonix, a pair of eyes gleamed from the tree line, some 50 metres to the left. Fortunately, they were at knee height, and disappeared as I drew close. Soon after midnight I reached the safety of my climbers' hostel in Chamonix town.

Having failed to locate a single yeti on the Mt Blanc range or Aiguilles Rouges, it seemed clear that remoter mountains would be needed. Hence, with my long-suffering partner I duly proceeded to the infamous North Face of the Eiger, in neighbouring Switzerland.

It was profoundly disturbing to witness the global warming-induced glacial recession as we drove across Switzerland, dramatically illustrated by the retreat of the Rhone Glacier. Yetis, like polar bears, are increasingly endangered by climate change.

Indeed, the mid-summer weather was unusually hot, and we briefly swam in the top few centimetres of the Thunersee, produced from the melt water of those same glaciers. It was then that I saw a sight never previously witnessed in all my years of Australian surfing: a dog cruising regally by on a



A possible yeti lair discovered in the mountains.



ANDREW KNIGHT continues his attempt to locate, and study, the little-known European yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis yeti*

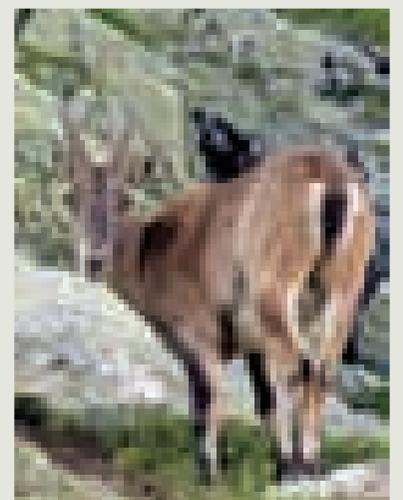
long board, whilst his human servant provided locomotory pedal power. Doubtless, as yetis decline, dogs surfing on melted glaciers are destined to become increasingly common.

All too soon, however, duty called, and we were off to resume our search for yetis. The four kilometre high North Face of the Eiger loomed terrifyingly from a hole in the cloud as a steady drizzle fell, frustrating both my search and my plans to climb at least its first few metres. Australians cannot possibly be expected to work in rain, and so we drove instead to Zermatt, gateway to the feared and famous Matterhorn.

One glance assured me that yetis would not be found on the Matterhorn itself – it was far too steep. A side-trip to the sobering Climbers' Cemetery convinced me that with so many climbers falling off, there would be very little left to eat. Hence, I was forced to don skis and explore the high-altitude summer ski area around the Matterhorn.

There was considerably more yeti-food available in this playground for the rich and famous. However, although a careful search of the brightly-coloured masses revealed many interesting costumes, yetis, unfortunately, appeared lacking. Where could they possibly be hiding? Clearly, to find a yeti I would have to think like one...

And then it struck me, as I gazed across the ski fields! Just uphill from one of the quieter runs, a deep, dark



A mountain deer grazing in the area.

London-based veterinary cryptozoologist Andrew Knight, BVMS, MRCVS, hopes to become the first RCVS-registered specialist in the medicine and surgery of supposedly mythical animals (DipCrypt).

A language-learning sabbatical

I PLANNED a trip to France to learn French for two reasons.

I wanted an extended break between finishing my PhD (studying how adult stem cells could be used to repair tendon) and starting my next academic position. Secondly, for many years achieving fluency in French has been a personal goal – not least since I have a French name, but limited ability to speak the language.

Therefore, with great expectations I arrived in Montpellier on 19th July 2009 for eight weeks of French lessons followed by a week of relaxation.

Key preparations for the trip included selecting the location and school, finding

accommodation and budgeting. I chose to book through CESA, an agency based in Cornwall which places students in multiple language schools abroad to learn languages ranging from French to Arabic *in situ*.

Over many e-mails, starting six months prior to departure, this company helped me identify the location which best matched my

budget and ambitions. Using an established agency also provided assurance of the quality of the school and an expectation of support should a problem arise while attending classes in France.

I arranged a flat-share (with French speakers) readily using

Appartager.com, although CESA can also arrange a variety of accommodation placements including in student residencies, with French host families or in private hotels.

I chose an “intensive” course involving preparation for the DELF B1 examination. DELF is an abbreviation for *Diplôme d'études en langue française* and B1 is the third of six levels of the

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. At the sixth level (C2) students are considered to have mastery of the language.

Of course, there are many types of course packages offered by language schools in France, many of which do not feature examinations. Other options include French with surfing, French for business and courses targeted at specific age groups such as

gap-year students and over 50s. My choice entailed 30 45-minute lessons per week: 20 “standard” and 10 “intensive” lessons.

Standard course teaching was held Monday to Friday and each lesson included grammar points, conversation, oral and written comprehension exercises, and usually finished with a game (such as *Scrabble* or *Twenty questions*).

My first four weeks of “intensive” lessons, held three times a week, were preparation for the DELF examination and were well constructed. Initially, passing this exam seemed like a very tall order, but after practice in class and a lot of homework the exam was not difficult. The DELF B1 is held by some sources to be equivalent to GCSE level, but having achieved an A grade at GCSE, albeit many years previously, I felt that the vocabulary and range of written and oral comprehension was wider at the B1 level.

In my experience the 30 lesson schedule was optimum; although a small number of students took additional private lessons, I was fully stretched learning the new vocabulary and grammar and completing the homework for my 30 lesson schedule.

I did regret not having a good digital French-English dictionary as I spent a large amount of time flicking through the hard copy of the dictionary, when I could have spent this time memorising!

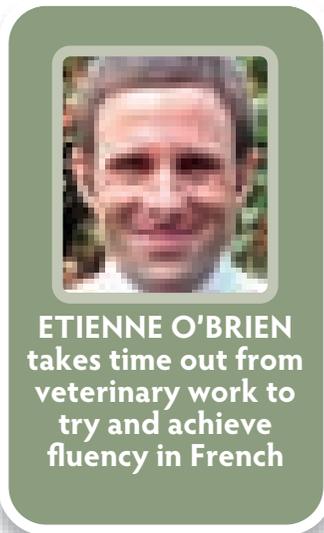
Electronic translation

Many students used portable electronic translation tools in class and at home. I think, however, that a laptop or netbook (the latter would take up less desk space in class) running the Collins Robert French-English dictionary would be a better investment.

After the DELF B1 exam (week 6) the “intensive” classes no longer focused on exam preparation, and consisted instead of oral and written comprehension exercises and conversation with minimal homework. In addition to developing our language skills, the material in this and the standard class improved our knowledge of French political and cultural life.

I enjoyed all the classes, but received the greatest satisfaction from the appreciable improvement which followed the exam preparation classes.

Prior to arrival the school required an online language skill assessment test to be completed. This test determined which standard class each student first joined. However, it was simple to



ETIENNE O'BRIEN takes time out from veterinary work to try and achieve fluency in French



The author flanked by two fellow students in Montpellier.

change classes, up or down in skill level, depending on one's progress.

Teaching was entirely in French, and all conversations in the classroom amongst students were expected to be the same. The students were, on the whole, highly motivated and the teachers consistently impressed me with their energy.

Outside of classes, students of a wide range of nationalities met frequently and the school offered activities such as wine tasting and sightseeing trips which were also good opportunities to socialise.

Montpellier, the eighth largest city in France and growing, is an excellent choice of destination both in terms of city life and as a base to explore France. This city is a student centre for most of the year but during summer months students are replaced by tourists from the north.

Truly vibrant

Access from the UK is convenient: Ryanair and Easyjet fly directly from Stansted and Luton respectively.

It is a truly vibrant place. The beating heart of the city is the *Place de la Comedie* containing many terraced eateries. During my stay there were public events several times weekly throughout the city, including outdoor cinema and classical and reggae music concerts (all of which were free to attend).

A personal highlight was the street (break) dancers who performed most nights in the *Place de la Comedie* – I



One of many stunning views encountered during the quest for the yeti.

crevasse yawned from the mountainside. I left my skies and cautiously approached the edge, gingerly testing the snow depth with my poles. Icicles and collapsed snow

bridges loomed above a mysterious cavern, but unfortunately it appeared that any yeti residents were out to lunch.

One, however, does not succeed within the demanding world of veterinary cryptozoology by giving up readily. And so I remain determined to continue my quest to bring the benefits of modern medicine to our neglected yetis and other supposedly mythical animals, regardless of how many alpine trips I'm forced to make, or how much skiing I'm forced to do.

After all, yetis deserve our care as much as cats and dogs, so my practice will just have to manage without me for a while.



Unusual sight in the Thunersee.

Etienne O'Brien, BVM&S, CertVA, CertEP, PhD, MRCVS, graduated from Edinburgh in 1999 and completed an internship and residency in equine practice and orthopaedics at the Royal Veterinary College. Thanks to a Horserace Betting Levy Board Veterinary Research Training Scholarship, he studied for a PhD at the University of Manchester which was awarded in 2009. His thesis title was An evaluation of whether multipotent mesenchymal stromal cells may be used to improve the quality of tendon repair. He is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the McCaig Institute for Bone and Joint Health at the University of Calgary, Canada.