

Solihull Cub Scouts' Expedition to France

76 intrepid Cub Scouts, some aged just 8 years of age, and 21 leaders of varied ages (!) had the experience of a lifetime when they took part in the County Cub Scout Expedition to Northern France at the beginning of August.

Planning had been going on for a year and culminated in a wonderful time enjoying a good number of activities and visits. The Cub Scouts, representing over a dozen Cub Packs from all over the Borough, met a number of times before the Expedition to get to know one another, to learn more about what they were going to experience and to have fun.

August 1st saw St Mary's Car Park in Hobs Moat swamped with eager boys and girls (just 6 of them) carrying heavy rucksacks and hold-alls and sporting their favourite mascot (including a good number of lucky teddies). All were dressed in their Cub Uniforms complete with Expedition cap, neckerchief, woggle and badges. Parents seemed more nervous than the Cubs and in no time the coaches were loaded and were setting off amid the waves and cheers of their Mums and Dads.

En-route we stopped at the services for a comfort break and some exciting relay races on the lawns of the service area. Eventually we reached Dover and drove on to the Sea France ferry. Excitedly the 97 members of the expedition explored the ship, each small group accompanied by at least two leaders and there were few passengers who didn't notice that the Cubs had arrived on board. Indeed the number of ship's staff and other passengers who stopped us to remark how smart the Cubs looked and how well they were behaving. Some staunch Cubs and leaders braved the strong winds and walked along the decks waving farewell to the gradually receding white cliffs of Dover.

Cheers went up as the coaches drove off the ferry and we were, at last, on the French soil. Calais had been invaded! After a short drive we arrived at the town of Ardres, near which was to be our home for the next few days. The campsite has a superb lakeside setting just outside the town and we were divided into two villages with 16 tents in each. After a guided tour of the campsite, the Cubs eagerly found their new homes and quickly settled in. In no time they had "unpacked (?!)" and were found trying out the volleyball court which was situated in the middle of each village horse-shoe of tents. One village tended to use their sandy court to practise the game itself whilst the other village found the sand to be great for building sandcastles and other such grand designs!

Following a hearty evening meal served in the two marquees, we all set off for an evening ramble around the lake. One village circumnavigated it clockwise and the other anti-clockwise. At the point of meeting half way around we joined together to enjoy a well-earned ice cream of their choice from a French café, whose owner rubbed his Gallic hands in glee at the prospect of selling almost a hundred cornets of ice cream at one go. Following this excitement the two groups continued their circumnavigation. Despite the usual tales of cubs not sleeping the first night and of playing football at 4 am, these Cubs did not. We had succeeded in tiring them all out and they slept well and there was no activity outside the tents until after 07.00 hours!

The next day was spent mainly on activities which included rafting – after having carefully constructed the crafts, kayaking, sailing, dragon boating and high wire activities – including crate stacking. All the Cubs entered into the activities with zeal and vigour and certainly impressed the instructors with their enthusiasm and their excellent behaviour. Stopping at midday for a well-earned lunch, they kept busy enjoying these activities. After their evening meal, where the Cubs hungrily devoured all that was offered – and there was plenty, we all went out to explore Ardres, the local town. The charming town is an unspoilt market town with many buildings of historical interest. Each group were issued with a spotter sheet and they set off, taking their leaders with them, to find out what a boulangerie sold and what the French for a chemist was. Having solved the

puzzles we all met up and had the pleasure of finding out what French fries (or frites) really tasted like! Over 90 cubs and leaders could be found sitting outside the friterie enjoying a bag of chips!! How English!!

After another quiet night when they certainly slept well, the next day was spent enjoying the activities that their group had not experienced on the previous day. The evening was spent in the two marquees playing a game together whilst the rain lashed down outside.

Our final day dawned sunny and warm and we were able to “pack” in the dry. Isn’t it strange how bags that had held all their kit on the journey out suddenly didn’t seem to hold it any more! I wonder if the Cubs need to practise the art of packing? After a hearty breakfast we returned to our coaches and, having bid a fond farewell to the campsite and staff there, set off for our next visit – Saint Joseph Village at Guines, just a half hour journey from Ardres. Here we were able to wander around the museum village (rather like a smaller version of the Black Country Museum) and explore the church, windmill, school, blacksmith’s forge, shops, garage and numerous other interesting buildings and artefacts. We concluded the visit with a welcome drink and set off for the port of Calais where we embarked on our ferry and returned to those famous white cliffs. Again we had the usual complimentary remarks from fellow passengers and crew and the Cubs were able to take their leaders on a tour of the ship!

On the journey north we had a few Cubs who dozed whilst others chatted or played quiet games. The final treat was at the services at Cherwell Valley where we had arranged for “healthy” Burger King meals to be served to our gallant participants and the Cubs were soon making short work of mini burgers, chicken bites, chips and washing it down with a long cold drink. Again their behaviour was good and the public were treated to a parade of smartly dressed Cub Scouts entering and leaving the premises. After another hour, we had reached home again and we were met at St Mary’s by crowds of waving parents, greeting us back from lands afar! They were grateful that, not only were their children back safe and sound, but that they had been able to follow our adventures through reports and photographs which had been posted on the website throughout the whole expedition.

They certainly must have had a great time. I have had so many e-mails from parents telling me how much their sons and daughters had enjoyed the whole experience. “A wonderful opportunity for our children and I know that my son had an absolutely great time.” “He has never stopped talking about it.” “He has had an absolutely brilliant time and wants to go again.” “You know you’ve got it right when they want to come back.” “The commitment and enthusiasm of all the volunteers involved is inspirational.” “He will remember and cherish the experience for many years.” “I have never seen him so enthusiastic before about a trip.” “I felt very proud that my son was one of the expedition.”

Thanks must go to all the hard working and patient leaders who gave up their time to accompany the children and without whom the whole expedition would not have gone ahead. Our Cub Scouts have been a great example of Scouting spirit and adventure and were certainly children of which we were justly proud. Their enthusiasm, their energy and their good positive spirit have been most marked. They have certainly been a credit to Scouting, their Packs, their families and to themselves. Cub Scouts we salute you!

Ian Carnell (known as Sherlock)
Expedition Leader