

//SCENE

QUIT LOLLYGAGGING AND GET ON THE BUS

An overnight bus service to Fontainebleau has just started – climb aboard on Friday night and climb abroad for le weekend. *Climb sent Adam Powell on the first trip to see how it goes.*

The first thing you notice about the Boulderbus is the colour. The electric blue leather sofas, the blue ceiling lights, the blue walls and the ultra-tactile stroke-on, stroke-off petrol blue table lamps. The second thing is the driver. An ageing roadie, sporting a magnificent mullet, skinny black jeans, T-shirt and a heavy metal logo-emblazoned tour jacket. "Call me Chop," he says in a broad Welsh accent, as he flips open the luggage bay with a grin and grabs our bouldering mats. This ain't National Express it's a rock'n'roll touring bus which nails every heavy metal cliché – but move aside Ozzy, this weekend there's a different kind of rock on the agenda. Eight of us have met at London's Mile End climbing wall, on a Friday night in February, for the first ever Boulderbus trip to Fontainebleau. The weather's miserable but by 10pm, we've had a few beers in the lounge, watched a movie on the flat-screen TV and are aboard the ferry. It's been a painless trip, driven into the bowels of the boat before we even realise we were in Dover. My busmates range from a Swedish couple in their early 20s, a couple a few years older, and Joel, Chris and myself, travelling together, aged between late 20s and mid-30s. We're all from London and between us we work in a range of jobs: there's a nurse, a few IT guys, a teacher, a receptionist, a banker and everyone loosens up in the ferry bar as we get to know each other. There are no superheroes on board – we all climb between Font 4a/b to 6a/b and are keen to do circuits rather than lay siege to a particular problem. Soon it's midnight and we're on French soil and it's time to test the beds as the bus thunders towards Font. There are 16 bunks, each with sheets and duvet, curtains and light. They're comfy enough yet it takes a while to sleep as the momentum and vibrations of the bus betray Chop's presence at the wheel. But by 8am we're waking into the La Musardiere camp site near Milly-la-Forêt. The sun is shining and we're just 25 minutes' walk from some of the best bouldering in Fontainebleau. After a quick breakfast, Joel, Chris and I set off to 95.2, a bouldering circuit we're told dries quickly and, by the time we reach it, the sun and wind have done their job. Even better, we have the area to ourselves. Slopers,

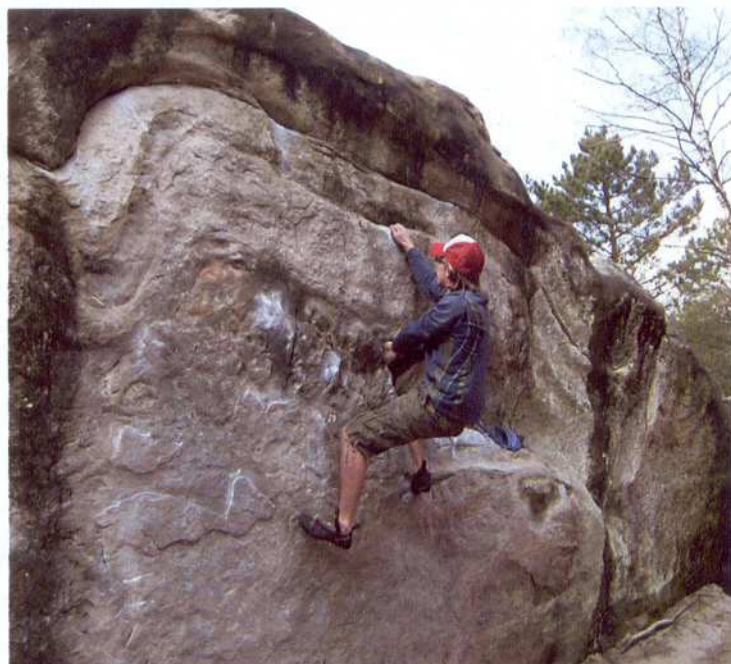
BOULDERBUS FACTFILE

The Boulderbus can sleep upto 18 people but is normally configured for 16 to allow more room onboard.

The bus also has air-conditioning.

Once at Fontainebleau, Boulderbus plans various drop-off and collection points around the forest to allow climbers to reach different sectors. All the normal camp site facilities are available to passengers, including the swimming pool during the summer.

Other departure points in London and the south east are being planned. Sheffield is not being considered as it will require an additional driver to be provided which will make the trip considerably more expensive.



A Boulderbuser feels the friction of Fontainebleau after sleeping away the journey south.

crimps, slabs, steep stuff, the problems come and go, do-able or not, as we dash around the forest. As the climbing takes its toll on our arms and our tips, the rests become longer and we start to appreciate the beauty of the area. None of us have visited Font before and we're like kids in a toy shop as we explore the endless jumble of sandstone boulders scattered as far as the eye can see. By 4pm, Joel, young and motivated, completes his final overhanging finger-shredder as the clouds roll in and it's time to head back to the Boulderbus. Chop has been on the road for a decade and, although he does not own the Boulderbus, spends 320 days a year living and touring on it. He had spent the previous four months driving rock bands around Europe – most recently a US band called Soil – and collected an impressive repertoire of tales of drunken antics and, it must be said, stupidity. Get him to tell you about the drunken lead singer who materialised half-naked outside the bus after his bandmates vomited into their boots in the middle of snowstorm. Or the one about the drummer who pulled off the door handle to the sleeping area, threw it out of the window, and then spent the next three weeks complaining he couldn't get into the room. As he entertained us we brewed up in the kitchenette (complete

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with tea, coffee, mugs, kettle, fridge, microwave and dinner table) before chilling in front of the telly before dinner. As well as the kitchen, there are two lounges. The main one seats eight and has a beer fridge, icemaker (for pre-dinner cocktails, of course), Playstation, DVD and VHS players and flat screen TV. There's a hard drive with 200 movies and TV shows to watch, while the smaller, second lounge also has a DVD and TV.

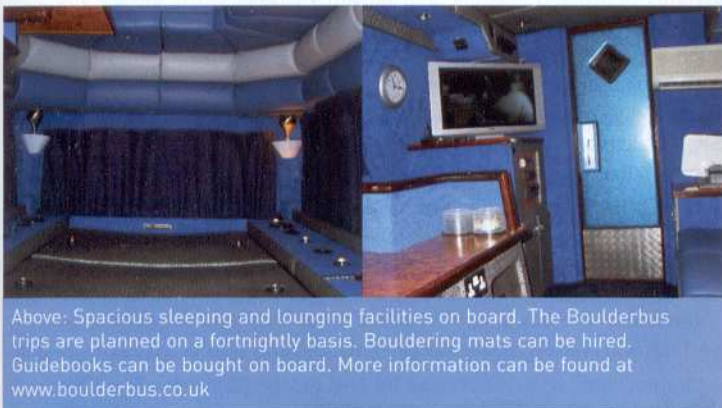
But back to dinner, our party, plus Chop, walk three kilometres to Milly-la-Foret, a pretty, little market town about an hour south of Paris, and to the restaurant (Citronelle) recommended by the camp site boss. Ian Wilson, the climber behind Boulderbus, and Chop sort a table and we're soon tucking into our Roquefort salads, steak frites, and knocking back the local red wine. After a day in the fresh air our appetites are certainly healthy and we devour everything put in front of us, pausing only to order more wine and tell tall stories. There's a problem though. The heavens have opened and, despite it being a Saturday night, there are no taxis. As we contemplate a long, cold walk the charming madam who runs the restaurant ensures we'll pay a return visit next time we're in town - her husband, in his chef's whites, is summoned to get his car; her son and his girlfriend are in the restaurant and they're despatched for their Citroen too, as is the waiter. Twenty minutes later, we're back at the bus with a few bottles of wine and laughing at American climber Chris Sharma as he spouts mystical nonsense in Pilgrimage, a bouldering film set in Hampi, India.

The second day echoes the first. We opt to climb at Cul de Chien, famed for its classic roof problem. Again the diversity and scope of the climbing is amazing and we run around, dodging rain showers, and spout Sharma-isms: "Send it, man. I got you well dude."

"Sometimes I can feel the rock reaching out to touch me, it's, like, spiritual."

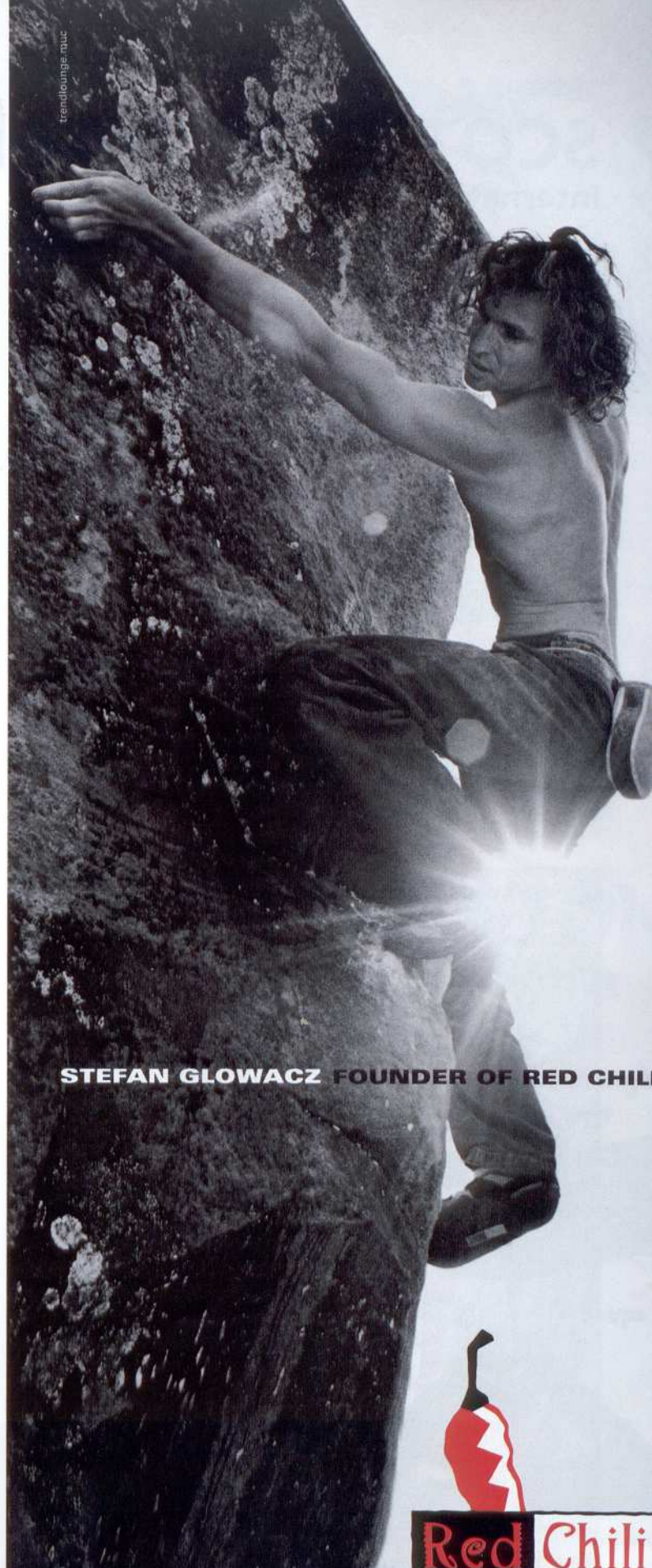
We finish ourselves off by trying the roof of Toit du Cul de Chien but by 2.30pm our time is up. Chop is keen to get north of Paris before it's too late in the day. We drink tea and watch movies as the bus heads for Calais, aiming for the 7.30pm ferry. A snarl-up delays us but we catch the 9 o'clock boat and reach Blighty by 10pm local time. The last stage of journey flies by and at quarter past midnight I'm home in north west London, having been dropped off at King's Cross in time for the last tube.

The weekend has flown by and that's mostly down to the ease of travel. Between them, Ian and Chop sort everything and we only have to step off the bus to show our passports as we return to the UK. There're no airport check-in hassles or train connections to make in Paris. It might take a little longer to arrive but on the Boulderbus you just shove your crash-pad into the hold and relax. You can get to Fontainebleau by quicker means and cheaper. At £159 per person it is an expensive option for a big team to travel, although there's a £79 version on a standard coach too. But for comfort, for not having to schlepp through airports and railway stations - for simply having your own rock'n'roll tour bus for a weekend, dammit - the Boulderbus is hard to beat. Monday morning in the office, my fingers are sore, my shoulders and back are aching and I've been parachuted into a meeting I know nothing about. But after my whirlwind weekend to Font I can cope. And I can't wait to go back.



Above: Spacious sleeping and lounging facilities on board. The Boulderbus trips are planned on a fortnightly basis. Bouldering mats can be hired. Guidebooks can be bought on board. More information can be found at www.boulderbus.co.uk

trendlounge.muc



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