

GLIDING

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THE FRENCH ALPS IN SUMMERTIME . . .

Chris Streat, an Omarama pilot writes about Aubenasson, France



Chris Streat, an Omarama pilot, compares the French Alps to the New Zealand Southern Alps, after flying from the Aubenasson Gliding Field with Association Aéronautique de Rochecourbe.

In his 12 day visit to Aubenasson in mid July 2014, Chris had seven days flying including some very unusually inclement northerly weather during the first 10 days with the French northern alps clouded in. He flew over 40 hours in total, just under six hours each flying day and covered around 2447 km using the O.L.C. method. Flying kilometres was not his goal - new terrain everyday was his quest. Chris flew four days in the Aubenasson Duo Discus with instructor Gabriel Briffe, and three days solo in the Aubenasson Club's ASW 24 following Gab in their DUO while he was training local pilots in cross country soaring.

Chris goes on . . . I was very glad to have my own PNA moving map GPS with the 'See You' navigation program to help orient me before I looked at my map in flight.

French Registered Rolladen-Schneider LS6 above the airfield of Sisteron with Gap and Ecrins National Park in the distance

Gab spent many hours with me going over the area's Glide Maps and their separate book of all the out-landing fields. It took me two to three flights over an area to get familiar with all the designated sites.

THE SOARING

In France we encountered ridge lift, thermal, wave, and convergence, sometimes all in the same day, just like Omarama.

On several days at Aubenasson, we popped into wave straight off the ridge. On stable high pressure days I towed some 1300m up to Col de Penne to the east for an early start. On the stronger northerly days, we rode the ridges or wave with low cloud bases prevailing from Aubenasson to the basin of the Serres. Eastwards winds got lighter followed by convergence conditions once you were in the lee of the Alps proper - this right down to the Italian border. Our return to Aubenasson at the end of day was via the ridges and wave. They were epic days!

In France we contacted wave much lower than Omarama. The waves are quite grunty, and we often entered wave below 1500m. At Omarama you are not in wave proper until 2500m, usually due to the larger mountains upwind on New Zealand's main divide. On wave days the winds in France were a lot lighter, 30kts at altitude. At Omarama winds usually get to more like up to 40-50 kts on wave days. It proved to be hard to compare in a just a week - but it's accepted Omarama and the South Island wave lies directly across the prevailing southern ocean winds. Hence Omarama is far windier than France.

The flying highlights included the Italian convergence by Col d'Etache, entering Italy above Bardonecchia, and the King's Way (voie royale) in Ecrin's National Park where storms blocked our return via Mont-Dauphin. The convergence on the Italian border north east from Lake of Nine Colours Glacier Blanc and the glacier of Les Deux Alpes, home of summer skiing was also a high!

Both Omarama and France have gliding maps with airspace and landing fields notated, and separate detailed field landing books. I couldn't have flown safely in France without my personal PNA with 'See You' GPS moving map.



Aubenasson airfield is located on the de Chivre family farm approximately 35km south east of Valence and 70km south west of Grenoble, in the Drome River Valley near the town of DIE. Parts of the family villa date back to the mid 1700s. The family run a Bed and Breakfast in the villa and a campground. Fixed wing pilots visit the B & B regularly also (50Eur own room, 20Eur bunkroom). There is great swimming 300m from the airfield in the Drome River, and old mountain villages nearby in walking distance.



Twin sisters Cecille and Marion de Chivr  have three teenage children each, their mother Genevive is the Aunt of Klaus Ohlmann's airline pilot wife. They all live onsite. Marion de Chivre is a very experienced tow pilot, and wonderful personality. After my first flight to the Mediterranean Sea, Marion opened a special bottle of wine on our return made in the ancient roman method. Cecille de Chivre has flown hang gliders for years and competed with my kiwi friend Rachel Alexander in the Womens World Hang gliding championships around 1995. At Omarama we have a thermal named "Rachel" on our nearby lift hotspot - Magic mountain. The sister's great uncle was a French World War I pilot.



I have known Gabriel Briffe from his four years flying for Glide Omarama in New Zealand. Gab invited me to Aubenasson Airfield in France where he works in the French summers. I was impressed by the number of high hour young local instructors at Aubenasson. Errol, Gab and Christophe are all under 30 years old with over 1000 flying hours. Christian the CFI, owns an ASH 26e. There are at least a dozen gliders in the hangar. Most local pilots speak fluent or at least some English. I joined the Aubenasson Club. Warning! Leave plenty of time to get a French gliding license - like months. Gab is 28 and has 3800 hours in gliders. He has been number two in the French Nationals - an ultra talented pilot.

TOPOGRAPHY

Cliffs in the area south of the French Alps, including Vercours Regional Park, were conveniently oriented to the south facing the sun creating (1) excellent climbs of up to 4 m/sec without the need to circle; (2) generating wave in the prevailing northerly winds; and (3) Gab used the sunny southerly lee side of ridges on northerly wind days, which worked well in the lee just below the tops. Airspeeds often up at 120kph were common but it was quite rough with plentiful, hard short negative G forces.

We don't run sunny cliffs in the lee at Omarama because they don't exist - Omarama area ranges face West or South West, with sun to the north. The Ecrin's National Park to the north east of Aubenasson has newer sharper mountain topography similar to



The French (Griffon) vulture in 'soaring' mode

Southern Alps at Omarama. There are far more glaciers around Omarama, and lower snow levels.

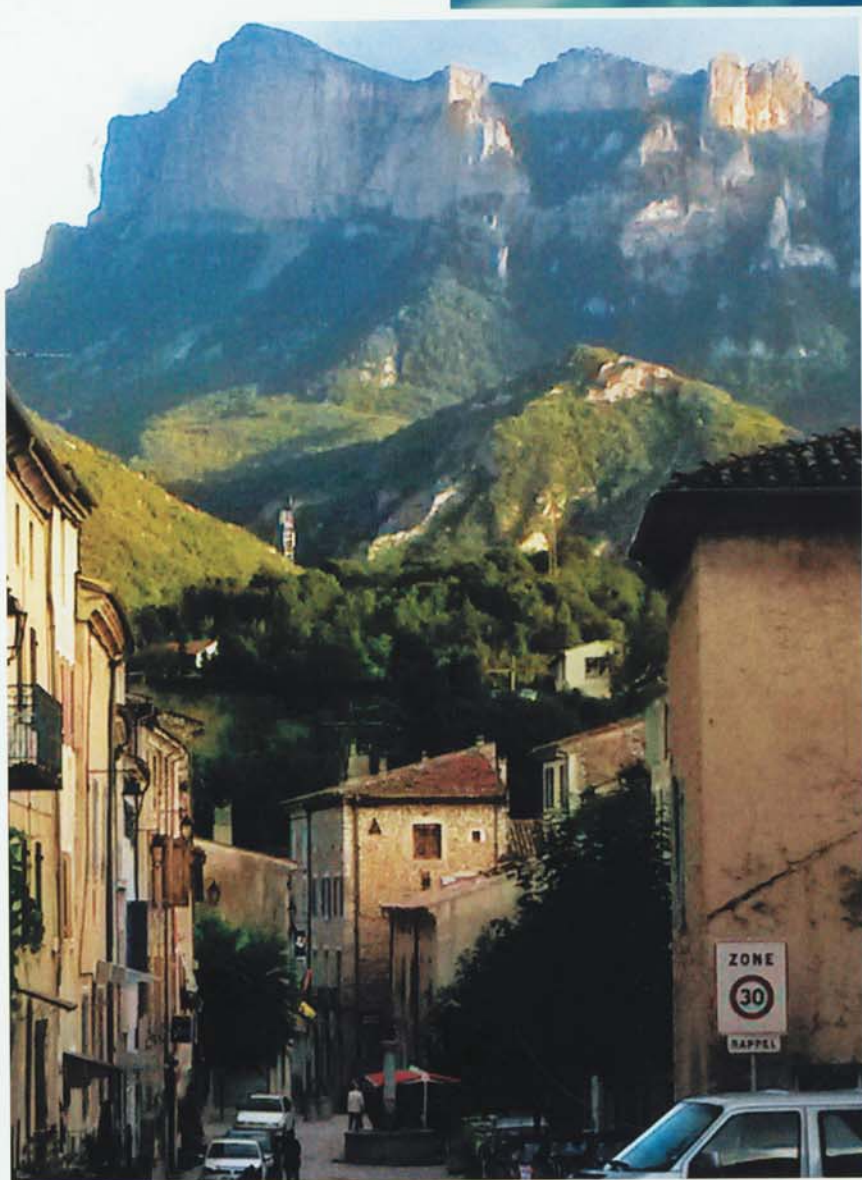
FRENCH VULTURES

In the Vercor Regional Park we flew past the nesting sites for vultures. We flew with vultures every day. They always circled in the best thermals and gave me several low saves. If there were seven vultures, it was a really good thermal. Vultures sleep in thermals a good reason to keep your distance. Vultures have killed glider pilots when they hit a glider canopy or tail so I was warned not to fly under vultures from behind as they fold their wings and drop, a natural reaction to predators. Vultures drop their legs down before they dump ballast.

WEATHER, CLIMATE AND LATITUDE

Omarama latitude is 44 30 south. Similarly Aubenasson latitude is 44 42 north (only 12 Nm difference). The Antipode (opposite side of the World) from Omarama is off the French Coast in the Bay of Biscay.

The northern hemisphere is about 2 degrees warmer due to the larger land mass. Aubenasson is much further from the sea than Omarama, providing a continental climate versus



Often it was off the ridge and directly into wave. The Aubenasson Ridge viewed from nearby town of Salianna (pronounced say-anne)

island climate at Omarama.

Warmer and Continental Aubenassons produces slightly better thermals, and much larger east west convergences than Omarama, but Omarama has much better and more frequent wave flying being an island in the Southern Ocean's roaring forties. But my observations based on seven days flying are not statistically significant.

At Omarama in pre-frontal conditions the winds back around the compass with altitude from north down low to west up high. In post frontal conditions they veer clockwise around the compass with altitude from southerly down low to westerly up high i.e. in both pre and post frontal conditions the winds tend to the west with altitude.

The opposite occurs in France due to Coriolis effect being in reverse in the northern hemisphere, e.g. on northerly post frontal days in France winds are northerly up high and westerly down low.

Sea Breezes at Omarama come from 45 degrees to the left looking out to sea. In France from the right, again due to Coriolis effect.

One day Gab apologetically asked me 'if I was offended by all the medieval towns here and how they compared to the remoteness of Omarama scenery'. I thought the old French towns were fantastic, and what is more - they give off good thermals.

Most days at Aubenasson, located in the foothills, an anabatic 8 to 12kts westerly blew from the Rhone River plains. Omarama has easterly sea breezes a little stronger and later in day - 10 to 20kts around 2 to 4pm. On high pressure days, both Omarama and Aubenasson can have tricky flying for the first hour or so getting inland to the mountains proper and the higher cloud bases. The thermal days started earlier in France.

CONCLUSION

Thanks again to everyone at Aubenasson for a once in a lifetime experience which is highly recommended.

Aubenasson and Omarama are both incredibly good places to fly, similar soaring techniques, but quite different weather, topography and culture.

More photos and descriptions at [chris.streat](#) on facebook

Right: Convergence!
On the Italian border,
this wall of cloud hides
the flatlands of Torino

Finally: See the centre
spread Pages 32/33 for
the final photograph.



Rock face - Vercours Regional Park

