

French speed carping

We've found a special place. A place in France where you can be within an hour. A place that's throwing up herds of forties and fifties on a weekly basis. A place where an uncaught for-two-years 70lb common lives. This place is called Vallee Lakes

Words and photography:
Joe Wright

I kid you not, it was getting ridiculous. It had gone past fun and boarding on the verge of painful. 25 minutes into the fight and we'd not even seen a tail pattern from whatever was attached to the end of my line, let alone see it. The words breezeblock and Jesus were used numerous times during this period. It literally wouldn't lift off the bottom. 28 minutes in and I'd resigned to the fact it was a sturgeon. It had to be. No carp could sustain that amount of power for this length of time. Then it appeared in the red torchlight. It was massive; deep, long and obscenely wide. Yes, this is why we come to France.

France, in an hour?

France: a wonderful place, full of stunning countryside, amazing food and of course the main reason why 25,000 of us go there each year: big, obese carp. France's Achilles heel though, is the travelling time. It always has been, and until now, we always thought it would be. You see, once you've got over to Calais, Bolougne or Dieppe, you've usually got a good three to six hours driving time ahead of you. It can be a grueller, but seeing as 98% of all the big fish in France are bigger the further you go down, it's something you have to do. Or as we've just found out, 'did have to do'. Less than 1hr from Bolougne ferry port is Vallee Lakes – one of the most picturesque fisheries we've ever been to in France – and one of the closest and quickest to get to. Although the company now operates two fisheries – Lake 1 and Lake 2, it's the former we're angling on for the next five days.

At 13-acres, it's a nice sized pond with access all the way around with 10 large

mature natural swims. The level of work that has gone into this fishery is quite extraordinary. When fishery owner, Mark bought the land, it was an overgrown, dead sheet of water. Now it's a thriving piece of paradise where the fish have done the same. It's a proper lake too: not a hole in the ground where you turn up, pile in a ton of food and then wait, this is an ex-gravel pit and the result is nothing short of exceptional. The array of features is mind-blowing, with deep margins, larger raised gravel areas and extensive gravel bars. Not to mention the island and tree-lined margins too. It's an angler's paradise and the sort of place I love; one where the harder you try and search out those feeding areas, the more you'll catch.

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Vallee Lake 1 operates on a book-your-swim-before-you-arrive basis and we'd managed to get into Pegs 6, 7 and 8. When booking these particular swims, you also get full use of the 'Carpers Cabin' which is situated just behind these three swims. It's a wonderful facility to have, as it's great for shelter during the really hot/rainy days and very useful for storing clothes/tackle. It also has satellite TV, mini kitchen with gas hob, BBQ, fridge, microwave, along with a couple of single beds. If you want even more luxury, then try and book Hook Lodge, a much larger cabin that has two floors and is situated at the opposite end of the lake to Carpers Cabin. It has sleeping areas, a large kitchen area, dining room and its own toilets and shower. It also allows the occupants to fish Pegs 1 and 2 – said to be the most productive swims on the whole lake.

Anyway, with there only being two of

us, Rob and I, it meant we could rest one of the swims. As predicted, we both favoured the same swim: Peg 6, a very carpy looking pitch which fishes across to the far far-tree. What's so attractive about this area is the depth of water you have – a good 8ft straight off the bank. And sure enough, as we expected during our recce of the lake, that back bay which Peg 6 fishes across to was packed to the rafters with large French brutes.

I always seem to lose when it comes to the toss and sure enough I lost once again. Still, I wasn't overly gutted as Peg 8 was my second choice and this covered a lovely chunk of water, including a large bulk of the access to the island. This peg also gave me access to a sort of 'out-of-bounds' area. It's an area where lilies normally grow but because of the extremely cold winter France has just endured (Brightly too), it's killed them right back and the casings the pads were planted in are now fully exposed – i.e. you could get snagged on them if you fished too close to the area. The zone has been marked out with white sticks and so long as you don't go too far in, it's still fishable.

After a number of casts with the marker, I found the area dropped down from around 2ft to 4ft, a nice gulley and an area I could imagine they would use to get in and out of the back bay where Rob was angling. The second rod (the middle one) was going to be fished to the island – an obvious spot and one everyone would fish to I'm guessing, so I spent a considerable amount of time marking the area. After a dozen or so casts I found a lovely deep hole: it went from 8ft, down to 9ft and then back up to 8ft, before it dropped off into nearly 11ft of water. It was a spot I couldn't imagine many other anglers using as it wasn't tight to the island and what with bait boats being the 'going' thing on here, I could see most going tight to the overhanging bush that's on the end of the island.

There wasn't really anything else taking my fancy in the swim for the final rod, so I decided to fish it down the deep left-hand margin for the night and then re-assess the situation in the morning when I would be a bit more in-tune with what was going on.

Rob's approach in the corner was straightforward bottom baits, fished tight to the far bank over very little bait. I was



Welcome to paradise...

