

'Lake Tortue' (Les Etangs de La Croix Blanche Complex) by Bill Hopkins

The trip began from my home town of Whitchurch in Shropshire on Saturday 6th of October 2007 where six of us loaded up the tackle into my Nissan Serena and Ian Jones Transit Van. We left at 7.00pm on the Friday night and arrived at our destination at the Reylon Car Park in Dover at 1.30am on the Saturday morning. Our party of six included Gareth Jones, Ian Jones, Ivan Griffiths, Will Hopkins, Jason Hopkins and myself Bill Hopkins.

After loading up the gear on the 'A&J Euro Carp Tours' trailer and boarding the luxury coach we were transported on the ferry to Calais and slept for most of the 150 mile and 3 ½ hour drive to the Les Etangs de la Croix Blanche complex where we were greeted by the on-site bailiffs, Rob and Les.



Ferry trip from Dover to Calais, from left to right-Jason, Ian, Gareth and Ivan

An hour was spent with Trevor the A&J bailiff who had met us in Dover and had followed us to the complex to look around the lakes and fill us in on the details of each lake accordingly (Croix Blanche and Tortue). Another party of seven anglers were with us in attendance and both parties agreed to have a lake each to themselves in which case our party of six were all happy to fish the larger lake 'Tortue' which boasts some huge carp and catfish.

There are eight pegs on Tortue in all and Jason, myself, Gareth and Will were bivvied up on the far bank with Ian tucked up in the bottom corner and Ivan on the other side directly opposite Gareth and Will.

The first night past by quietly with only the low drone of Jason's singing and Gareth's strange dancing moves to keep us amused. The banter went on well into the early hours with high hopes and the chatter of huge carp to be caught during our stay over the forthcoming week, however the trip from Shropshire to the complex had taken its toll and eventually we all turned in for some much needed sleep.

8.15am saw Gareth next to me pull into a flying run only to lose it through a hook pull, he was gutted. We all reeled in at a quarter to nine and retired to the anglers breakfast and evening meal retreat where Les cooked a fantastic full English that was the works. I have to say the bailiffs Les and Rob were great all week and were always up for a chat and a laugh.

After breakfast we once again approached our swims and cast out for the day ahead. I was using my own companies (Cyprinid Products)'Warlock Fish Mix' Smoked Fish

and Black Pepper boilies for the session the same as Jason and Ian. Gareth and Will were on the same bait but with Cranberry and Garlic and Ivan was using the Pineapple and Black pepper which had worked well for so many anglers over the past year back in England.

Two large PVA bag were fired out by me about 60 yards just short of some large weed beds straight out in front of my swim. At the front of the weed it was quite clear for a few yards before I was once again pulling through quite thick weed. This area I found to be a bar of about 5ft in depth that dropped off into 8ft in the heavy weed. I felt this a perfect area to target anything moving through the weed beds from the more open water in front of Gareth to my left and down towards the narrower area of the lake towards where Ian was situated well down to my right. Another rod was dropped only 20 yards out to my left and filled in with boilies and pellets of differing sizes for either the carp or the chance of a big slug thing with whiskers. All of my hook-baits were single 22mm Smoked Fish and Black Pepper boilies with one of the 14mm Snowman Toppers on top of the same smell. The hooks I was using were barbless (as required on this venue) Teflon coated Korda wide-gape in size 2's.



My swim, peg 10 on Tortue

The day ahead was glorious with bright sunshine and a clear blue sky to heighten our hopes for the chance of a fish or two to go with the chilled crates of beer readily available from the kitchen fridge. Carp fishing heaven I was thinking to myself eagerly when at 4.00pm and only an hour before the evening meal that Les would already have been preparing I had a screaming run on my middle rod out to the weed beds. The fish had me straight in the weed but I kept the pressure on with the trusty 4lb test curve carp teasers I use for all my big carp adventures and managed to keep the fish moving. A slow dogged fight for the next 10 minutes between me and what felt like a good fish followed as I tried to gain line at every opportunity to keep the fish away from green sanctuary. At one point the fish managed to snag me up in a weed-bed to my left that wasn't initially apparent to me as it was below the surface from view. I had a heart stopping minute or two where everything was solid before I managed to apply enough pressure to get it moving again. Everyone from all over the lake appeared in my swim to see what the commotion was going to produce on the end of my line and it wasn't too long before I had what was a really good fish wallowing in the margins. Jason's netting techniques were a little

dodgy which had me sweating a little but on at least the 7th attempt (or maybe more) he managed to engulf what was a big mirror in the awaiting mesh.

We immediately got on the walkie-talkie to Rob the bailiff who made his way round on the quad and helped us weigh and photograph a truly stunning fish of 45lb 8oz. Rob recognised the fish as one he had caught himself at least three or four times but never before at this weight. I had a few shots in the water and then gently released her back to her home where she kicked off and gave me the right soaking I deserved.



45lb's 8oz, I was more than pleased with this one

I didn't bother with a recast as we were due for a superb chicken curry evening meal back at the retreat where both parties met up at 5.00pm and we replenished ourselves with Les's good food, more than a few bottles of the local wine and plenty of the chilled Kronenbourg beers from the fridge.

An hour passed by during the meal and plenty of light-hearted chatter was heard before we returned to our swims for the night ahead in the hope of another whacker on the bank.

Back in my swim I recast two PVA bags on the bar to the weed bed spots and followed them up with the throwing stick with plenty of the warlock fishmeal boilies. The short rod to my left was heavily re-baited with boilies and pellets and at 8.00pm in the dark of the night I had a take on this rod from a huge catfish that I couldn't do anything with. After ten minutes or so it weeded up badly after a fight that had me all over the lake with run after run through every dense weed bed it could find. Eventually the line parted after I tried to tease the fish out from the heavy weed well to my left and almost in front of Gareth's swim. I was gutted that I lost the fish as I knew it would have been one of the big cats that reside in Tortue, however I retackled and dropped the rig back on the spot and re-baited accordingly.

Only an hour passed by before Jason has a screaming take to my right that saw him hanging on for dear life. A huge cat had snaffled his hook-bait and was quite quickly making off in the opposite direction of Jason's swim. I stood next to him and quietly mentioned that he needed to slow it down before it made Calais. Ivan wound in his rods and appeared in the swim ready for gloving the fish out if Jason could do anything with it, however this thing had other ideas and nearly pulled Jason's arms off for the best part of twenty minutes with run after run up and down the whole of Tortue's 8 acres. Eventually (and I don't know how Jason managed it) a big head with long whiskers appeared from the depths in the night. As soon as Will saw those whiskers he ran for cover but Ivan was in there straight away and grabbed the lower jaw of the fish and pulled it onto the awaiting cat mat on the margin bankside.

Rob and Les came round and weighed the awesome fish at a staggering 74lb 4oz. 'That was some fish' I gasped. Les mentioned that there are a few in there at well over 80+ with possibly much larger.

Ivan helped Jason hold the fish for the trophy shot and we gently put her back and proceeded to celebrate Jason's first catfish with more than a slight tippie of beer that went well into the early hours.



Rob, Ivan, Jason and Les during the weighing procedure



74lb 4oz a truly amazing fish

5.00am the next morning saw us into the Monday and I was dazzled from my sleep by a catfish that had taken off from the 20-yard mark on my left-hand rod and was shifting quickly across the lake. This one though I managed to easily enough bully back to me and into the waiting net. I never weighed the fish and guessed it to be about 15lb's before releasing straight away.

Just over three hours passed by after my small cat when Gareth lost another carp through a hook pull, he was very pissed off at this point and needed to find some form of some sort to brighten his mood.

The full day went past very uneventful after Gareth's loss, and once again we were bathed in glorious sunshine. We had all enjoyed Les's full English in the morning and had gorged ourselves on an evening meal of steak and kidney pie with all the trimmings accompanied with bottles of the house wine to wash it down before setting off for the night ahead.

This night was really cold and the weather had taken a turn for the worse. A thick mist had engulfed us in the middle of the French countryside and came down upon us like a horrendous cloud. None of us could see the rods in front of us and the mist was cold and damp.

4.30am and I was awoken by a faint shout from across the lake 'I've got one on' came Ivan's cry through the misty darkness. Ivan was into his first Tortue carp. I ran round to Gareth and told him to look after my rods while I took my camera and hurriedly made my way through the night towards where the commotion was heard. As I appeared in the swim the fish was only a few yards out and I quickly picked up the landing net and took position in front of Ivan. I couldn't see a damn thing in the mist and even the head torch struggled to find more than a few feet in front of me. Ivan carefully coaxed the fish nearer until I could just about make out the huge shape of a mirror carp wallowing near the net. When I knew she was ready I lifted the mesh around the bulk of the fish and turned and congratulated him on his first carp of the session.

Rob was called on the walkie-talkie and we photographed a lovely 39lb 2oz mirror that had broken Ivan's personal best by just over 16lb's. Well chuffed was Ivan and I don't think he could believe it himself. Ivan had also managed two small catfish in the night, both around the 8-10lb mark



Ivan with his 39lb 2oz personal best

An hour had gone by after I had got back to my swim when Gareth was into another fish. I was praying he got this one in this time. I stood next to him as he carefully played the fish every yard and I had my fingers crossed for him as he teased it towards the landing net that I was holding at the ready. In the fish went first time and I turned round and congratulated him on what looked like quite a good fish. Rob was once more called and turned up within just a few minutes on the quad laughing that he had only just got the covers back over him in bed. We photographed a lovely mirror for Gareth in the mist that had gone 32lb.12oz on the scales. That had definitely pleased him and had cheered him up no end after his previous two losses.



Gareth with a well deserved 32lb 12oz mirror

I don't know whether the much cooler night had made all the difference but the carp were definitely on the feed as at 7.00am I pulled into what seemed a heavy fish from the front of the weed-beds on my right hand rod. Only a couple of bleeps had me away on the alarm but unfortunately it had buried its head in the heavy weed and the line had parted easily before I had the chance to exert any steady pressure to keep the fish on the move.

Daylight tried to excel but was not making any headway through the complete cloud of mist that kept the surrounding countryside completely invisible.

After my lost carp a faint shout from Will down to my left only an hour and a half later could be heard as he was playing a fish that he had hooked from a tree-line baited area on his middle rod. A small common appeared in the margin, which I duly netted and we weighed at 15lb 15oz. Will had finally managed some action and although only small he was happy to have at last caught as we were by now 3 nights into the session. Will had struggled in his swim as the fish were more in front of Gareth to his right and seemed to be holding up between Gareth and Ivan on the other side in the open water. By this time Ian had still caught nothing at all from down to my right in the corner and that morning he was on the move into the swim next to Ivan for the hope of a chance nearer to where the fish were holding out.



Will with a stunning little 15lb 15oz common

For the whole of the day ahead nothing else stirred our alarms and it wasn't until almost 1.00pm in the afternoon that the mist had completely cleared. We spent most of the day enjoying the friendly chatter between us, and the occasional banter with Ivan across the lake from us who always kept us amused for the whole duration of the week.

Once again darkness fell upon us and the mist came down even thicker than the night before and Tortue and our little party of green abodes around the lake were completely engulfed once more.

Gareth was again unfortunate this night as at a little after midnight a steady take saw him struggling with a fish in the weed out in the darkness and his 18lb mainline parted with ease. I was gutted for him and we had a couple of beers together with Will and Jason in accompaniment to try and numb his pain. Actually I think we were all a little numb that night as the Kronenbourg was doing a tremendous job and we enjoyed the long hours of darkness chatting about our fortune or misfortunes so far this session. One thing that had really highlighted the previous day was that Rob had helped Ivan marker a few spots in his swim. Upon leaving the marker out for Ivan to bait up to, a 22mm Pineapple & Black Pepper boilie from Ivan's catapult took the flight completely off the thing at about 70 yards. Well this had us in stitches from our side of the lake that day and when Rob returned later on to retrieve the rod from Ivan we were creased up with laughter listening to Ivan explain how good he was with

accurate baiting. Whether it was night or day, catching fish or losing fish we were totally enjoying the week's unfolding events.

It was well into the morning before we had all turned in but it wasn't too long before I was back out of the bag and bent into another hard fighting fish. This time it was from a spot that Rob had put me onto just out in open water to my left. He had mentioned upon a previous conversation with me that he and a mate of his used to put a marker out about 30 yards and double up in the swim and fish a rod either side of the mark with quite a bit of bait. Apparently they had done really well on this spot taking quite a few decent fish between them. Whatever I had on the end of the line had fallen for my offerings in this area and was trying to do a quick exit putting maximum yardage between its evacuating tail and me. Luckily this fish didn't find any green sanctuary to bury itself into and so I was able to play the fish without too much trouble of it snagging up. Within a few minutes I had the fish under the spell of the rod and slipped the net under a chunky 31lb 14oz mirror. We photographed the fish in the darkness of the early morning and I carefully slipped her back. I recast the bait back out to the mark and proceeded to fire a few free offerings over the top when Gareth next door had a strange take that he didn't connect with. That was the last of the action before we retired for breakfast at 9.00am.



31lb 14oz on the Smoked Fish and Black Pepper

After breakfast Jason and Gareth decided to have a little dabble in the stock pond by the kitchen area as the days were quiet on Tortue for the chance of a take. The night-time was definitely proving to be much more productive. The stock pond is only an acre in size and yet holds some strange fish at very big weights. All manner of creatures reside in this small amphibious abode including large tench, carp to over 50lb's, huge bream, catfish and grass carp up to and over 40lb's.

I stayed in my swim on Tortue in the hope of daylight action but it wasn't too long before Gareth was on the walkie-talkie as Jason had had something very strange and very big from the pond. I reeled in and took the five minute walk past Croix Blanche where the other party of anglers were fishing and made my way to the stock pond where I found Rob already helping Jason and Gareth with what looked like a huge grass carp. '31lb 8oz' Gareth shouted to me and I peered into the cradle and started laughing. It was certainly the biggest grass carp that I have ever seen before and I asked Jason how he had managed that one as wherever he goes he always seems to hook some strange things. They both looked as if they been taking the odd stroll for a

beer from the kitchen too between takes as they both looked the worse for wear and Jason had fallen in at least once already. We photographed the fully scaled torpedo and Rob took it and released it into Croix Blanche as it was obviously getting too big a fish to stay where it was.

I hadn't even begun to make my way back to my swim when the walkie-talkie Gareth was holding sounded with Ian on the end. Ian had hooked a carp at last and with no messing Rob got the quad bike started and I got on the back. We zoomed past Croix Blanch to the other side of the bank on Tortue where Ian was situated just in time to see Ian and Ivan weighing a lovely 23lb 2oz common. The fish had fallen for a Smoked Fish and Black Pepper stringer and Rob mentioned that it was a fish known as 'Son of Shoulders' a smaller version of another big common on the complex. This fish really had to be seen to be believed, being so short and quite thin but amazingly deep in body. We photographed it there and then and Ian slipped it back into the lake well pleased with himself.



Jason's 31lb 8oz grass carp



Ian with 'Son of Shoulders' at 23lb 2oz

Nothing else happened that day either on Tortue or on the stock pond for Jason and Gareth and we all retired for another great evening meal from Les which consisted of gammon, eggs, chips and peas with buttered French bread baguettes to be washed down with either white or red wine, well actually both.

On the Friday morning in the early hours I was awoken by Will in the darkness who explained that Ivan had caught another fish and Rob was with him photographing it. The next morning at the breakfast table Ivan confirmed his capture and had recorded the weight of a mirror carp of precisely 33lb's, a cracking result for him and we all celebrated with an early morning beer.



Breakfast in the cabin

Unfortunately Ivan's fish was the last one we actually banked as Gareth didn't connect with another strange pick up and Jason lost three good fish in the weed. I was with Will on the final morning at 2.30am as he had another take that locked him up solid too. We tried everything to get it moving by applying steady pressure and slackening off also, but all to no avail and eventually he pulled out of the weed and the fish was gone.

The daylight of Saturday morning arrived and we packed everything away. We had a final laugh and joke with Rob and Les who had looked after us so well over the week's duration and loaded the awaiting trailer and boarded the coach. The journey back was quite eventful on the coach with loads of banter to be had by all from both parties of anglers. We arrived back in Dover at the Reylon car park about 3.30pm in the afternoon after the short one and a half hour ferry crossing back and once again said our goodbyes to everyone including Trevor the A&J bailiff who had greeted us in the beginning.

The week on the Croix Blanche complex and the lovely Lake Tortue will never be forgotten. Tortue and Croix Blanche are not the easiest of venues when conditions are against you and the fish can sometimes completely switch off. However you have to make the most of what you have got and enjoy it to the full. We all had a fantastic time on the complex and I don't think it will be too long before we are once again touring across the channel somewhere next year for another week of fun and carp fishing.



Jason and Gareth on the journey home