Avon Outdoor Activities Club Standard Operating Procedure – Via Ferrata

Reviewed: 19 Apr 23

1. Introduction

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) sets out the procedure for holding via ferrata (VF) activities within Avon Outdoor Activities Club (AOAC). It also identifies the responsibilities of Participants, in order to ensure that VF events are safe and enjoyable for all. This SOP does not apply to VF events that are not listed on the Club Calendar. These are private events and are not covered by AOAC policy or insurance.

2. Participation Statement

VF is an activity with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in this activity should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement.

3. Event Planning

VF activities will normally take place during overseas trips to the European Alps. Planning will most likely be ad hoc/short notice and subject to demand of the participants on the trip. If the Alps trip organiser wishes to include VF as an activity they should list in the trip activities and identify a suitable VF Leader as described in this SOP.

4. VF Grading Scheme

Table 1 below provides an overview of the UIAA VF grading scheme

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| **VF Grade (UIAA)** | **Definition** |
| F (Facile) | Equipped path, with low exposure and long walking  tracts. Good fixed protections, consisting mainly of cables (or chains) used only to increase safety. |
| PD (Peu Difficile) | Short Via Ferrata with low exposure. The itinerary usually presents couloirs, chimneys, short vertical tracts where chains, cables, pegs and stairs help the progression |
| D (Difficile) | Via Ferrata of medium length, requiring a good physical condition and technical competency.  Often, the route is vertical and overhangs may be present. Equipped with cables, chains, pegs and stairs. |
| TD (Tres Difficile) | Exposed and technical sequences. A very good physical condition and technical competence are required. The route is vertical, and overhangs are climbed with few artificial aids. Equipment consists of cables, pegs and stairs. |
| ED (Extrement Difficile) | Several exposed and technical sequences, possibly created on purpose in order to increase the engagement, only few artificial pegs/stairs are in place. Therefore, a very good physical condition and some climbing technical competences are required. |

Table 1: UIAA VF grade descriptions

5. Participant Experience Levels

The Experience Level is the level at which the Participant can confidently and safely perform the skills identified in Table 2. These levels are self-selected by the individual, and it is strongly recommended that caution is exercised in doing so. As an individual progresses, they may choose to self-select into a higher Experience Level; however, it is recommended that they seek advice and an informal assessment from an Instructor or VF Leader before doing so.

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| **Experience Level** | **Skills Required** |
| Beginner | * No skills required but a reasonable level of fitness in line with the proposed activity (including walkout) and a suitable “head for heights” is required. * Initial instruction must be provided by a qualified VF Instructor. * Note: Complete Beginners must have received formal instruction on the basic techniques and completed at least 2 VF routes at F level of difficulty (or greater) before progressing to Novice level. |
| Novice | * Can securely fit a climbing harness. * Can safely attach a VF lanyard and understand the principles of using dual leashes. * Can tie a figure eight knot (for use when being belayed up a section of the VF route). * Can communicate using standard climbing calls. * Understands basic VF etiquette. * Understands the reasons for, and complies with the Club requirement for VF participants to wear helmets, gloves and appropriate footwear during the activity. * Note: In order to progress to Competent Level a Novice VF participant should have completed at least 2 VF routes at PD level of difficulty (or greater) and have learnt to belay a lead climber. |
| Competent | * Very competent at all Novice level skills. * Can assess the serviceability of all equipment before use. * Can use a guide book to correctly identify routes. * Can confidently and safely belay a leader on an exposed pitch of a VF route. * Can safely assess rock and fixed equipment quality, and other hazards and take appropriate measures to prevent injury to themselves and other participants. * Can confidently remove leader placed equipment and stow it safely on their harness whilst climbing a route. |

Table 2: Experience Levels and minimum skills required to achieve each level

6. VF Leader Experience Levels

In order to become a VF Leader members must be a competent Outdoor Activity Leader (OAL) (in accordance with the AOAC Outdoor Climbing SOP) or be an AOAC approved Walk Leader (in accordance with the AOAC Walking SOP) with suitable VF experience. VF Leaders are not expected to provide any formal instruction during the activity and route selection should be made with the competence level of all participants in mind, such that instruction is not required. However, the VF Leader should observe/supervise participants and if necessary provide guidance and/or refresh skills expected of the participants. Table 3 below provides an overview of the skills required for VF Leaders and the associated grade of routes within each tier.

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| **AOAC VF Leader Level** | **Skills Required and Associated VF Grade** | **Minimum Climbing OAL Level** | **Minimum Walk Leader Level** |
| VF1 Leader | * VF Novice Level skills. * Grade F | Sport | B |
| VF2 Leader | * VF Competent Level skills. * Grade PD | Sport | B |
| VF3 Leader | * Can climb a VF route on lead rope and safely clip in to fixed gear (bolts) using Sport climbing equipment. * Can competently build a safe belay using fixed gear (bolts) on a VF stance. * Can safely abseil/rappel using an appropriate device and back-up/autoblock. * Can competently belay a VF participant from above. * Can safely supervise VF participants and ensure they make themselves safe during activity and at the stance. * Can manage a range of ‘standard’ incidents using appropriate equipment and techniques. * Grade D | Sport | C with experience of climbing at least 2 VF routes at this grade |
| VF4 Leader | * Competent at all VF 3 Leader skills. * Can climb a VF route on lead and safely place traditional protection equipment. * Grade TD | Trad Single Pitch | D with experience of climbing at least 2 VF routes at this grade and has completed an NGB compliant Scrambling Learn to Lead training course or similar |
| VF5 Leader | * Competent at all VF 4 Leader skills * Can competently build a safe belay using leader placed protections on a VF stance. * Grade ED | Trad Multi Pitch | E with experience of climbing at least 2 VF routes at this grade and has completed an NGB compliant Scrambling Learn to Lead training course or similar |
| VF Instructor | * Competent at VF4 Leader level skills. * Be a Mountain Training UK qualified Rock Climbing Instructor or above. | Trad Single Pitch | N/A |
| Senior VF Instructor | * Competent at VF5 Leader level skills. * Be a Mountain Training UK qualified Rock Climbing Development Instructor or above | Trad Multi Pitch | N/A |

Table 3: VF Leader Experience Levels and minimum skills required to achieve each level

7. Individual Event Requirements

Each VF event must be led by an approved VF Leader of the appropriate level for the planned routes. The VF Leader will manage the event according to their responsibilities set out in Section 8. Event Participants will participate in events according to their Experience Level, and comply with their own responsibilities set out in Section 9.

An event group may be subdivided into smaller groups when actually climbing routes. The overall group should have a suitably experienced ‘head’ VF Leader. When acting within the overall control of a suitably experienced ‘head’ VF Leader, lower level VF Leaders or a very experienced Competent Level Participant may lead a sub-group on specific pitches of the route. At all times the ‘head’ VF Leader shall remain accountable for the whole group. Awareness should be made of the complexity for sub-groups to come together on more difficult routes due to the ‘one-way’ nature of VFs. Sub-groups should maintain contact with one another, throughout and the VF Leaders should agree rendezvous points during and/or at the end of the event.

Beginner level VF Participants must be supervised by a VF Instructor. The instructor should have all members of the beginner level group in sight at all times; therefore, group size should not normally exceed 2 or 3 participants, except on simple routes with good/safe areas to unclip and regroup, typically where the VF Leader is able to retrace their steps in order to manage the whole group.

For VF activities, it is expected that each Competent Level Participant will have their own harness, VF lanyard, suitable shoes, rock climbing helmet, belay device and locking carabiner as a minimum. Beginner level Participants may wish to use their own equipment, subject to approval by a VF Instructor, and /or hire equipment from the Club.

8. Responsibilities of the VF Leader

The VF Leader on each event is responsible for:

* Reviewing the Rock Climbing generic risk assessment (and site specific risk assessments if written) and mitigating risks as necessary, both before and during the activity
* Ensuring all Beginners are identified and allocated to a VF Instructor in order to be taught the techniques required to progress to Novice level
* Selection and briefing on the chosen venue/routes, rendezvous points, general communications and event management etc.
* Checking and advising on equipment and good practice to Participants as required during sessions
* Informing Beginners/new members on the event of Experience Levels and the method of self-selection as described in Section 5
* Ensuring the group has a trained First Aider and First Aid kit with them, and has a means of communicating with the emergency services. Note: The VF Leader must be a qualified First Aider themselves but may delegate this responsibility to another member of the group
* Carrying suitable equipment for the management of incidents such as slings, cordelettes, prussiks and belay devices
* Managing any incidents during an event and if necessary, ensuring that the emergency services are informed
* Informing the AOAC Climbing Coordinator of any accident or injury as soon as possible after the event, and reporting details of the incident using the AOAC website form.

9. Responsibilities of all event Participants

Each event Participant must ensure that they:

* Self-select into an appropriate Experience Level and err on the side of caution if unsure
* Book onto events through the Club website or other trip-specific means, and inform the Organiser if they subsequently are unable to attend
* Use a rock climbing harness, VF lanyard, belay device and carabiner that meet UIAA/CE safety standards for rock climbing equipment, and is within its usable lifespan as recommended by the manufacturer, and regularly inspect such equipment for wear and tear
* Wear a UIAA/CE approved rock climbing helmet when on a VF route or in the immediate vicinity of cliffs/crags
* Advise the VF Leader of any relevant medical conditions
* Follow the instructions of the VF Leader
* Notify the VF Leader if they are uncertain about performing a particular procedure safely
* Use an anchor or resistance device when belaying anyone more than 1.5 times their own body weight
* Carry out appropriate “buddy checks” with other Participants as directed by the VF Leader
* Act in a way that does not negatively affect the enjoyment of other VF route users.

10. Selection of VF Leaders and Instructors

A person wishing to be a VF Leader must fulfil the criteria laid out in Table 3 above and, hold and maintain a valid 8 hour (minimum) First Aid qualification. Note: subsidised training is available from AOAC.

Prospective VF Leaders must be assessed and confirmed in accordance with the AOAC Outdoor Rock Climbing and/or Walking SOPs in order to meet the standards expected of those disciplines as listed in Table 3. In addition, to become a VF Leader or Instructor a candidate should be assessed by a minimum of three current VF Leaders to have a suitable level of experience before being permitted to lead the particular activity. At least one assessor must be an NGB qualified Outdoor Climbing Instructor. The Climbing Coordinator is to provide a list of competences to be checked during the assessment(s).

AOAC Approved Walk Leaders wishing to become VF Leaders at VF4 or VF5 (who are not AOAC Approved Rock Climbing Outdoor Activity Leaders) must have completed a ‘Scrambling Learn to Lead’ training course that is compliant with the UK NGB recognised best practice and therefore delivered by an NGB qualified instructor, typically a holder of the Mountaineering Instructor Certificate (MIC). Training is available from a range of suppliers and may be subsidised by the Club.

Although the Mountain Training UK qualifications do not specify a level of skills and experience associated with leading or instructing VF, it is acknowledged that qualified rock climbing instructors with suitable and documented VF experience may be approved AOAC VF Instructor status by the Climbing Coordinator without further assessment by their peers.

A register of VF Leaders will be maintained by the Climbing Coordinator and published on the AOAC website. It will be reviewed at the annual Climbing Development and Planning Meeting.

11. Risk Management

A generic Risk Assessment for AOAC rock climbing activities is available through the Club website and will be maintained by the Climbing Coordinator.

All Activity Leaders and Activity Participants must follow the AOAC Health and Safety Policy at all times.

11. Definitions

* Outdoor Rock Climbing Instructor:An individual who holds a National Governing Body (NGB) qualification for outdoor rock climbing instruction and in the context of this SOP may act as a VF Instructor by default as described in the approval process at Section
* VF Instructor: An individual who has been approved by AOAC to instruct VF techniques as described in this SOP.
* VF Leader: the person supervising, directing and providing peer-guidance to participating members during the course of an AOAC VF event. This person will be responsible for dynamic risk management during the activity.
* Climbing Coordinator: The individual with overall responsibility for compiling and coordinating the AOAC climbing activity programme and providing leadership to climbing activity within AOAC.
* Event Organiser: A person who plans and publishes to the calendar one or more AOAC events. Note, the Event Organiser does not need to be a VFLeader or Instructor themselves but should ensure that VF Leaders are nominated for the event.
* Event Participant:Individual AOAC member participating in the specific event.

Enclosure: VF Leader - Competence Checklist (available through Club website)