
TONY HOWARD
Middle East 1997

Jordan

With the third edition of Tony Howard's *Treks and Climbs in Wadi Rum* now out, listing around 400 routes in the area, the pace of development has slowed. The main activists are still Albert Precht and Sigggi Brochmeyer of Austria, who make an annual spring pilgrimage.

Spring 1997 got off to a poor start with cold *Hanseen* winds. This was followed by unusually high temperatures and it was not until late April that life settled down to normal. During this spell of peculiar weather Precht and Brochmeyer continued to add new routes on their favourite cliffs of **Vulcanics Tower** and **Makhman Canyon**. In the canyon they made two particularly hard routes, namely *Reise nach Kurdistan* (UIAA VII-) and *Geschenk Gottes* (UIAA VII+), to the top of **Jebel um Ishrin**. This latter route is 500m long, was climbed in 11 hours and was the scene of this team's first forced bivouac in Wadi Rum. The climbing is described as 'superb, with finger-tip dihedrals'.

Albert Precht also made a solo *enchaînement* up and down the 500m *Hiker's Road* (D+) on **Nassrani** followed by *Pillar of Wisdom* (TD-) on **Jebel Rum**, returning to camp down *Hammad's Route* (AD+).

Geoff Hornby and team added a few more big slab climbs and short test pieces out near **Burdah**, while we continued our exploration of the **Dead Sea Hills** for a forthcoming trekking guide. Interestingly, we were shown a newly discovered limestone cave in the far north, which looks as if it might be extensive. We hope to investigate next spring.

In the summer of 1997 three Bedouin from Rum (Sabbah Atieeq, Sabbah Eid and Atieeq Auda) visited the UK, sponsored by HM Queen Noor and the Tourism Ministry. They climbed in the Peak District, the Lakes and North Wales and attended courses at Plas-y-Brenin and Troll in rope techniques and mountain rescue to enable them to work more safely as guides.

Finally, big business has now discovered that there is money to be made in Rum and major investments and being made to develop the area for tourism with massive World Bank loans. We are trying to have as much input as possible into a scheme which, despite fine intentions, could marginalise the Bedouin community and the needs of climbers if commercial interests are allowed to dominate the project. If you have been to Rum and believe that the area should be protected as a National Park, with the local people playing a key role in its organisation and with the access needs of climbers protected, please send letters of support to : Tony Howard, c/o Troll, Spring Mill, Uppermill, Oldham OL3 6AA.

Libya

In spring 1997 Di Taylor and I were in Libya as guests of Wings Travel and Tours of Tripoli, checking out the potential for adventure tourism. Whilst we didn't find any obviously good climbing, there are some possibilities and also opportunities for short treks and caving. **Jebel Nafusa** south of Tripoli has a lot of known caves, some very extensive (over a kilometre) and others (sometimes man-made) have yet to be explored. Over 1000km east, between Benghazi and Tobruk, is the **Jebel Akhdar Massif**, the Green Mountains. Here too the rock is limestone and in places excellent but the crags we found were mostly small. Further east, just south of Tobruk, there is reputed to be a large limestone sea cliff which we didn't have time to visit.

There are, however, some impressive gorges with climbing opportunities, though the larger steeper cliffs looked yellow and rotten. Nevertheless these beautiful forested valleys have some nice walking and impressive cave entrances. The caves have provided human habitation since the time of early man and there are still some 'bandits' supposed to be living in them. Probably the best two gorges are Wadi Derna and Wadi Kouf. The latter is in the heart of the massif, close to the magnificent Greek and Roman cities of Cyrene and Apollonia which along with Sabratha and Leptis Magna near Tripoli are some of the best cities of their era outside Rome and Athens. These alone make Libya's coastal area well worth a visit.

Heading south, we crossed 100km of the amazing 200m high dunes of the Ramlat Dawada at the eastern end of the great Ubari Sand Sea *en route* to the **Akakus Towers** 1500km away in the far SW corner of Libya. The **Akakus** present an astonishing collection of weird sandstone towers and arches mostly 50-200m high. They rise from a vast desert of dunes and hamada covering an area of over 7000 square kilometres. Unfortunately, due to extremes of temperature, the rock is exfoliating badly and with virtually no rain the surface remains loose on both a small and a large scale. Climbers in desperate need of rock will find some single-pitch slabs and cracks to amuse themselves on, while some of the highest and largest towers way up on top of the plateau, with faces up to 300m, look more compact and solid – which is presumably how they have managed to stay up there. With no maps, however, getting to them looks very problematical.

The real attraction of the **Akakus** for its few visitors is an abundance of superlative rock art. The paintings and inscriptions of tribal life, elephants, giraffes, rhinos etc are amongst the best in Africa and date back 10,000 years. Photos we were shown of cliffs and cave drawings elsewhere in Libya revealed possibilities for short routes in **Haruj el Aswad** (Black Rocks), a basalt mass in central Libya, and also for longer mountain routes at **Jebel Arkno** and **Jebel Uweinat** in the far SE corner, on the Egyptian border. The same enthusiastic informant, a rock art specialist working with Wings, also told us that **Djebel Nuqay**, the northern arm of **Tibesti** which protrudes a long way into Libya, has potential for mountain routes.

Anyone wishing to visit any of these areas in this spectacular desert country should contact Isam Harus at Wings Travel and Tours, Tripoli (tel 00218 21 3331855; fax 3330881). They can arrange everything from visas and permits through to 4-wheel drives and guides.