Wanderings in Eastern Turkey

An Ascent of Suphan Dağ

KARL SMITH

(*Plates* 39, 40)

Eastern Turkey is a land differing enormously from the more developed west of the country. While hotel-building à la Costa Blanca proceeds apace along the coasts, the east remains relatively free from the impact of mass tourism. Economically impoverished, it nevertheless possesses a great charm, the inhospitable nature of the land often more than compensated by the hospitality of the inhabitants. Frequently, while walking, one is invited to drink tea or be a guest at a family gathering.

Apart from Mount Ararat, which has been well-known since at least the time of Noah, there are numerous other peaks and ranges to attract the mountaineer. But despite the massive army presence, this is still a lawless region; the rugged, inaccessible terrain makes it ideal for smugglers, bandits and Kurdish separatists.

Unfortunately for the climber, the central base for the Kurdish rebels lies in the Cilo Sat mountains, straddling the borders of Turkey and Iraq. This range possesses some of the most impressive mountain scenery in the Near East, with huge dolomitic faces, small ice-fields, and it includes Resko Tepesi (4170m), Turkey's second-highest peak. Access to this region has been banned to visitors for some years, and going there one risks being arrested, or worse. The nearest I managed to get to the Cilo Sat was Hakkari, the capital of this region, a small mountain town facing the northern slopes of Resko Tepesi.

Catching the bus down to Yuksekova to gain a better glimpse of the range, I was arrested within minutes for photographing a military installation. The soldiers are understandably sensitive, and on the road through the mountains westwards to Cizre there were numerous army checkpoints. Locals were subjected to full body-searches on several occasions. I, being a Westerner, was offered tea instead.

If ever this area becomes more stable, there is immense potential for new routes. Northwards from here, the mountains continue in a wide band as far as the border with Russia. But here they are mainly volcanic in origin and therefore offer little scope for more technical routes. For giving a sense of wildness and isolation, however, ascents of these peaks can be very rewarding.

Approaching Eastern Turkey from the Black Sea coast, I had not intended this as a climbing trip; but on seeing Mount Ararat my desire to escape from buses took hold. Hiring gear was possible in Dogubeyazit, but obtaining a permit to climb was not. Permits took at least a month to arrive from Ankara. Each group is accompanied on the ascent by a liaison officer, and as there is only one normal ascent route avoiding detection seemed unlikely.

Continuing south by bus, I was struck by the sight of a snow-capped volcano on the western shore of Lake Van. Like Ararat, it rose in splendid isolation and seemed to provide a suitable challenge. A glance at the map confirmed it as Suphan Dağ (*c*4010m), the highest mountain in this part of Turkey. A week or so later, after a mixture of dissipation and walking, I was on the road heading north along the western side of the lake.

Things were not looking too promising. I had already spent most of the afternoon in the shade of the mosque, waiting for a lift. Eventually a truck stopped and I climbed in, sandwiched between the burly driver and his equally large mate.

As we followed the shores of the lake, Suphan Dağ came into view. I knew precious little about my objective – the idea of climbing Suphan Dağ having only occurred to me a couple of days earlier as a consolation for being unable to climb Ararat. Seen from this angle, it appeared to offer little technical difficulty – a definite plus in view of my equipment (training shoes, a thin jersey and no bivvy gear). Dropped in the dusty little town of Adilcevaz, I found a room in the only available hotel, a building I had twice walked past, believing it to be derelict.

On my way down to the lake for a swim, I tried to buy a few plastic bottles of mineral water – none were available. Reluctant to haul glass bottles up a 4000m peak, I reasoned that I might at least enjoy the contents. With this in mind I called at the town's sole 'off-licence'. It sold one type of beer, one type of wine (red) and, somewhat improbably, a single bottle of Napoleon brandy. Judging by the accumulation of dust, this had probably been left there by Napoleon himself.

As I prepared to leave with my three bottles of Efes Pilsen, the owner became agitated and asked me to drink them on the spot. After agreeing to return the empties as soon as possible, I escaped.

Swimming out from the shore, I was surprised to see how much snow was still lying on the hills surrounding the lake. Although it was only the end of June, the temperature was well into the eighties.

As I walked back into town, the off-licence owner jumped out of the shop and asked for the bottles again. 'Tomorrow!', I replied.

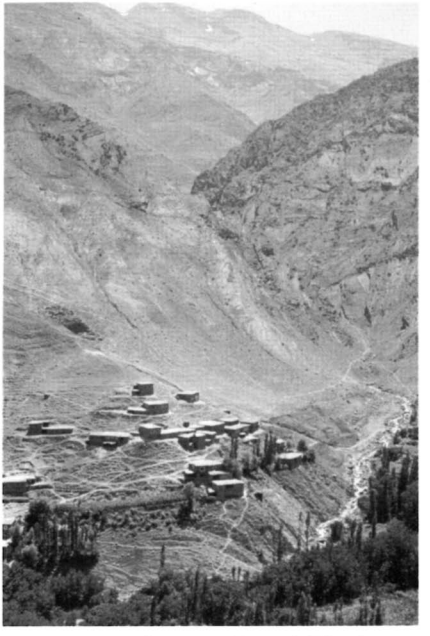
A few miles beyond the town there was a small lake, Lake Aygir. I vaguely recalled seeing in an old guidebook that it was supposedly a three-day ascent from here. Obviously, an early start was required if I was to avoid a night on the mountain. The lake was reachable by a dirt track, so I arranged for a taxi (at extortionate cost) to take me at 5am.

Next morning came, and there was no taxi anywhere. The only sign of life was in the village bakery, so I went in and was offered tea while a young lad ran off to get the taxi-driver out of bed. As time passed, I became less enthusiastic about the whole enterprise. Surely a day on the beach, or with the delectable Kate back in Van, was preferable?

Shortly before 6, however, the taxi arrived. I jumped in, and we set off . . . in the wrong direction. 'Where are we going?' 'Petrol, petrol!' By this stage, I was not in the mood for accepting any more excuses, so I told the driver to turn round and we headed at last toward Suphan Dağ. Leaving the town behind, we drove over a drab level plain, sparsely covered with yellow grass.



39. *Looking towards summit of Suphan Dağ.* (p 115)



40. *Kurdistan village (Cilo Sat range).* (p 115)

Suddenly the car started to splutter and, an instant later, it died. We had run out of petrol. After paying the driver off (needless to say, the full fare), I started towards Lake Aygir, on foot. As I climbed the long ridge below the lake, I looked back. The driver appeared as an ant-like speck, pushing his taxi before him across the plain.

It was already mid-morning by the time I skirted the lake again to begin the ascent proper. As with many other volcanoes, the route-finding presented few problems. Smooth, tussocky slopes led ever upwards, unrelieved but for an occasional outcrop of obsidian. Ahead of me in a slight hollow lay a nomad encampment, the low, dusty black tents draped web-like in a cluster of about half a dozen. I made a wide detour to avoid the camp; the novelty value of being used as a moving coconut-shy by young Kurds wielding rocks had worn off during the previous week.

Higher up the mountain, the grazing became ever more sparse, the bedrock now showing through everywhere. Despite this there were still the occasional shepherds, dressed in cloaks supported at the shoulders by a broad wooden bar. This presented a strange spectacle when first seen from a distance.

I shared my bread and cheese with one of the shepherds before pressing on. Despite my misgivings, I was making fast progress, and by 1pm I had reached the beginning of the snow-slope which I thought led to the summit. Half an hour later, I reached the crest of a sharp ridge. Here I was met by a stunning sight, in complete contrast to what there had been below. To my right, separated from me by a deep trough containing two frozen lakes, lay an expansive plateau of snow-filled hollows and bare rock. Ahead lay a sharp ridge leading to a col, and then a shallower ridge leading to what I presumed was the summit, half a mile from where I was standing. The views from here were very extensive; across the turquoise-blue Lake Van I could pick out the mountains leading eventually to Iran, while southwards Nemrut Dağ (Mount Nimrod) and its crater lake stood out clearly. At its foot I could pick out the town of Tatvan, where, a few days previously, I had encountered an Englishwoman riding down the main street on her horse.

More significantly, though, an ominous-looking wall of black cloud was coming in from the north-west. It was time to make haste. The ridge proved fairly awkward in places and, by the time I reached the col leading to the summit, the ridge behind me was already enveloped in swirling mist. Loud thunder rang in my ears as I hurried up to the top, and as I arrived a heavy shower of hail started. There was no sign of any other visitors having been there recently, and I saw little benefit in hanging around. Taking a more direct line down I soon found myself beneath the cloud level, and in another 10 minutes the clouds themselves had dispersed as quickly as they had arrived. I sat down on a convenient rock and broke into the beer, revelling in the isolation.

Going down was easy, the route being laid out before me, and by mid-afternoon I was trudging back along the dirt-track leading into Adilcevaz. After a short while a tractor came along, heading into town. I climbed on, to be greeted by a German with a huge rucksack. Throughout my trip, however unlikely the place, I encountered fellow travellers.

'So, you have climbed Suphan Dağ!' he said. He had bivvied overnight

and reached the top by mid-morning, which accounted for our not seeing each other up there.

Back in Adilcevaz, feeling fairly shattered, I didn't want to waste a beautiful evening in the less-than-salubrious surroundings of the hotel. A swim was clearly the answer.

Passing through the main street, I believed I had escaped the attentions of the off-licence owner, but as I walked by he ran out of his shop. 'Where are the empties?' I pointed. 'On top of Sulphan Dağ.' He looked at me for a moment, then we both roared with laughter. When I went past an hour later, he was still laughing.