
TONY HOWARD

Middle East and North Africa 1995

Jordan

The climbing development in Wadi Rum has continued at such a pace since our discovery of this area in 1984 that these annual updates are in danger of becoming an endless series of new routes. Since these are fairly meaningless unless you are familiar with the area, I will simply concentrate on the best of the 1994-95 crop to demonstrate the trends and the potential. Albert Precht and friends, of Austria, continue to dominate the bold big-wall scene with the 500m vertical and weirdly wind-sculpted walls of **Nassrani** being their favourite playground, producing routes in the grade VI and VII (UIAA) category. Also, last spring, they and Austrian climbers Behm and Reidl continued to develop the **Vulcanics Towers** area, adding some 300m grade VI routes.

Meanwhile, behind the campsite, on the E face of **Jebel Rum**, perhaps the hardest new route of the season was the 450m grade VIII, 14-pitch route from Tyrolean climbers Gargitter, Hainz and Obrist, climbed over 4 days and given the strange name of *Raid mit the Camel*. Whilst the use of bolts was minimal on this route, they unfortunately also created some bolted sports routes at the foot of this wall which is a pity when we have been doing our best to discourage unsightly bolting in this adventure-climbing area.

Geoff Hornby and team were active again both on the big slab routes in the east of the area, where they found a number of routes of up to 400m/5+, as well as around the **Khazali** area, where they added some nice crack climbing including what looks like a very enjoyable direct line to *Purple Haze* (300m 6b) - named *A Red Guitar, Three chords and the Truth!* They (like others) also failed to make much progress on the big crack-line splitting the W face of **Abu Judaidah**, ascending only the aptly named first pitch: *The Start of the Beginning* (6b+). Another active British team was Andy Nelson and friends, who clocked up a number of new routes also out in the E of Rum including the 450m slabs of *Red Admiral* (6b) on **Burdah's** E face.

Old regulars Mick Shaw, Di Taylor, and myself continued our search for esoteric delights. We were rewarded with the 280m *Hadj* (5+) up a superb wall almost on the Saudi border, as well as solving the long-standing riddle of the *Bedouin route* which crosses the northern ramparts of **Jebel um Ishrin**, starting up *Mohammed Musa's route* and ending down a 2000-year-old Nabataean rock-hewn staircase. This is a magic day out with a lot of grade 3 and 4 soloing: a real mystery tour!

The other annual regulars, Wilf Colonna, his girl-friend Emmanuelle and Bernard Domenech continue to be active and between their guiding commitments are concentrating on winking out the better-quality lines, the epitome of which, when it is completed, will be their project in the atmospheric canyon of **Rad al Beidah**. This ascends a magnificent smooth-walled and slightly overhanging 200m corner at 7a and will hopefully finish up the headwall above.

With two editions of the guide now sold out in the first ten years, the third should be out in the shops by autumn 1996: if you want to take part in the continuing bonanza, don't delay!

Turkey

French guide Wilf Colonna reports wonderful ski-touring and climbing, with considerable scope for new routes. He is pleased to pass on a request from members of the Turkish Mountain Federation that **visitors should not place bolts**. These are against the current Turkish ethic and at the present stage of development there is plenty of potential using traditional nut and peg protection.

Egypt-Sinai

It is rare to see non-Israeli climbers here but Swiss climbers Danny Wolfstein, Urs Neu and friends were active in recent years, adding a number of reputedly good 300m routes in the **Mount Sinai** area as well as some bolt-protected sport climbs: God is said to have delivered The Ten Commandments to Moses from the summit of Sinai but it seems that even this mountain region is no longer sacrosanct!

Ethiopia: 'The Roof of Africa'

The **High Simiens** of Ethiopia, known as The Roof of Africa, culminate in Ras Dashan at 4620m – Africa's fourth highest summit. (Maps vary on the precise altitude.) Our plans to visit another mountain region of North Africa having fallen through owing to bureaucracy, Di Taylor and I made a snap decision to visit the Simiens in October 1995. By late October we were at the spectacular Blue Nile Falls and Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile. A couple of days later we reached Debarq, like the capital Addis Ababa at 2400m, surrounded by rolling hills which are dotted with settlements and eucalyptus plantations (an Australian tree imported to stop the last indigenous trees from being used as fuel).

Debark, a dusty village on a dusty road, is the location of the Simien Mountains National Park Office, and here we signed on our compulsory minimum accompaniment of guide, mule-man and armed scout for the sum of less than twenty pounds a day, mules and food included. It's a six-day trek to Ras Dashan, including a rest day enabling you to include the summit of **Imet Gogo (3926m)** which forms a narrow peninsula projecting out above the Geech Abyss plunging almost 2000m to the so-called lowland hills. Unfortunately the basalt cliffs, like the nearby isolated volcanic plugs rising dramatically from the ambas, are all quite vegetated and appear to present nothing of real interest to the climber. However, whilst on Imet Gogo we did see two families of *Walia Ibex* (an endemic and endangered species numbering less than 200), as well as a troupe of hundreds of *Gelada Baboons* on the cliff-top plateau. Bird life is also plentiful, with eagles, buzzards, vultures and lammergeiers soaring very close on the thermals and numerous smaller species evident on the giant heathers, thistles, lobelias and other exotic flora.

Two of the campsites *en route* to Ras Dashan were once stone-built shelters but both were destroyed by Russian MIGs under Mengistu's regime in an effort to wipe out the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) who were using them as a mountain retreat. There are plans to rebuild them, as nights are often sub-zero and rain is not too uncommon even outside the rainy season, resulting in thickly iced-up tents!

Generally we camped near the villages, buying local food and accepting the hospitality of the local people who fed us in their thatched 'tukuls' on roasted beans and barley followed by coffee and wheat beer or, whilst walking, handing us armfuls of bean shoots or handfuls of wheat: their hospitality is, as yet, unspoiled by tourism.

The fifth day of the trek is the longest, entailing a climb from around 3500m to a col just below the summit of **Buahit** at 4430m and then down to a hot, verdant, 2700m and back up to camp at 3300m, in a total distance of about 15km. The next day takes you to the top of **Ras Dashan** by a pleasant, gradually-rising ascent finishing with 50m of perfect basalt giving an excellent little climb for those starved of rock!

The journey back takes much the same route over two or three days, or variations are possible, descending off the high amba down to the lowlands at the foot of the great escarpment and so back to Debark in a total of about 10 days.

It's a unique area still virtually unspoiled by tourism, though organised groups have been visiting the region with increasing frequency since the fall of the Marxist government in 1991. According to the Simien Park Office, around 500 people visited the region in 1994-95. They expect this figure to double in 1995-96 and double again the next season though most groups only go to the second or third camps. If you are going to visit this area of high mountains with its fascinating people, flora and fauna, now's the time to do it!

Climbing potential

Whilst the escarpments and various volcanic cores visible from the trek are big - sometimes over 1000m - they offer no climbing potential, being heavily vegetated. However, 100km to the NE and about 20km E of Axum (reputed location of the Queen of Sheba's ancient empire with its ancient granite stelae - at up to 500 tons, the largest man-made monoliths of their time), is a cluster of basalt towers and domes that could offer good climbing. We had no gear but trekked in for a closer look: there are a couple of dozen tops with walls between 100m to 400m located east of Adwa and as far as the 2500-year-old ruins of Yeha. A four-wheel drive would be useful!

Footnote

We travelled independently but a number of UK companies arrange treks and tours in the Simiens. In Ethiopia itself, the NTO (National Tourist Organisation), and EET (Experience Ethiopia Travel) both organise treks. EET has an office in London (tel. 0171 738 3197) and offers a very professional and environmentally-aware service. Should you arrive independently at Debark, our guide Mohammed Abdelkadir, scout Brahim, and muleman Naga were excellent - I recommend them.