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## Middle East & North Africa 2002-2003

Despite the infamous 9/11 and the subsequent collapse of tourism in much of the Islamic world, climbers, albeit in reduced numbers, have continued to visit North Africa and the Middle East during 2002 and have been greeted with the usual welcoming friendliness.

### MOROCCO

This is one of the least affected North African countries. The following notes have been mostly compiled from info supplied by Les Brown. The peak **Jebel el Khest** (2374m) is the highest point of a 40km long quartzite ridge at the western end of the Anti-Atlas above the pleasant market town of Tafraoute. It presents on all its flanks an array of rock buttresses, pinnacles, ridges and gorges offering immense scope for traditional adventure climbing on good rock. Tony Howard and friends climbed on the area's massive granite boulders reminiscent of Joshua Tree or Hampi in 1962/3 winter. They were rediscovered by Dennis Gray, followed by Ron Fawcett. Then, in 1990, Les Brown and friends made their first visit and have been every year since, Les and Trevor Jones doing the first new routes in the mountains that dominate the area. There are now about 150 climbs, varying in length from 100m up to the 750m 4+ *Great Ridge of The Lion's Head*. Other climbs range from severe to E2.

The team bases itself in Tafraoute, on the south side of the massif. In 2002 a team consisting of Les Brown, Claude Davies, Joe Brown, Pete Turnbull, Derek Walker and Chris Bonington continued the explorations, adding about 30 routes. Locations included climbs above the villages of Inergui, Assgaour and Tafghalt on the south side and Sidi Mzal, Assandrar on the north side.

Other climbers have undoubtedly visited the area and no doubt the French have made ascents, as elsewhere in the Moroccan mountains. Some bolted routes of unknown origin have been found amongst the boulders. The main climbs are described in a log book kept in the Hotel Les Amandiers in Tafraoute. The season 2002 saw the first forced bivouac and the first leader fall since climbing began here. Considerable scope for new routes still exists, particularly on the north side where the rock topography has prominent lines and where it is cooler in hot weather.

A guidebook is being prepared by Claude Davies.

### TURKEY

I am informed that there is now a company which organises rock-climbing holidays of various standards. Trans Nature are based in Antalya and have an agency in Marmaris: [info@transnature.com.tr](mailto:info@transnature.com.tr). They also have a website at [www.transnature.com.tr](http://www.transnature.com.tr)

## ALGERIA.

This country is deeply troubled by internal unrest but the south, including the mountains of the **Hoggar**, seems little affected. Climbers are still visiting in limited numbers, flying into Tamanrasset and thereby avoiding the north.

## EGYPT

Little seems to be happening in the mountains of Egypt whose Red Sea coastal mountains seem to have been deserted following our brief spell in Cairo's military jail in Dec 2001 for being (unknowingly) in a closed military zone! There's lots to be done there once the area opens up again. Sinai, once popular with Israeli climbers, is open but quiet.

## SUDAN

French climbers David Jonglez and Matthieu Noury visited the exfoliating granite **Kassala Domes** on the Ethiopian border in winter 2002/3. They repeated R.A. Hodgkin and L. A. Brown's 1939 route to the main summit **Jebel Taka**, probably making the fourth ascent, the second being by a Czech team in 1981 and the third by the author and friends in 1983. Apparently the first ascent pitons are still in place, in 'a splendid 5+ dihedral'. They also repeated the Czech climb on nearby **Jebel Totil** up 'athletic fissures, ED, 6c' before adding three routes of their own, all at around Fr 6b with lengths between 120 and 300m, the longest being 'a beautiful route finishing near the top of Jebel Taka'. They correctly point out that 'the compactness of the rock offers only rare lines of natural protection'. I would also add that most of the possible climbable features are already home to enormous Ruppel's Vultures! It is nevertheless a fascinating and remote place and well worth a visit for lovers of exotic rock and African culture. See the web report by David Jongles at [www.camptocamp.com](http://www.camptocamp.com).

## ETHIOPIA

This country had a visit by Andre Hedger and friends who, with a hint from our trip some years ago, climbed some towers and faces in N Tigray Province, to the NE of the Simiens and 800km N of Addis Ababa. (High Dec 02). These gave routes of between 100m and 300m at grades up to E2 5c. The Simien Mountains, where North Africa's highest mountain **Ras Dashan** (4620m) is located, have numerous big walls, but they are mostly grass and baboon covered! However, in N Tigray where Andre Hedger's team climbed, the spectacular towers have better rock and more good climbing should be found. For advice and assistance with travel, contact Tony Hickey at Village Ethiopia: [village.ethiopia@telecom.net](mailto:village.ethiopia@telecom.net), and website: [www.village-ethiopia.com](http://www.village-ethiopia.com).

## JORDAN

There was quite a lot of new route activity in Wadi Rum in 2002 (*High 239*) though some involved the creation of pure bolt-protected sport routes. Not, in

my opinion appropriate in a 'wilderness' area and disapproved of by the new Rum Park Authority. More traditionally, the key to a long lost Bedouin Route, the S to N Traverse of **Jebel Rum** was finally found by Rum regular Gilles Rappeneau with aspirant Bedouin Guide Talal Awad. The route was later completed in full in one day by resident French guide Wilf Colonna and friends.

Also in 2002, the Rum 'Protected Area' was finally set up by Jordan's Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature and handed over to the Aqaba Authority early in 2003. After considerable debate, including input from regular Rum climbers and the BMC, the park regulations, aimed at protecting the environment and wildlife, seem quite amenable towards the climbing and trekking community. Previous concerns about the park's impact on the local community also seem to have been overcome. At the request of the RSCN, the author and Di Taylor, again with input from the BMC, have prepared a leaflet on 'Safety and Environmental Awareness in the Rum Protected Area'. The question of Guides and Rescue is also being considered again and the park authority are proposing to further train the local Bedouin guides and equip and train a rescue team. (See *High & Summit*, March 03)

In week one of the Iraqi war, March 2003, the Rum Bedouin told us all was well. There were no visitors but they were fine, many having returned to life with their animals.

## OMAN

Geoff Hornby sent the following report on recent developments in the Western Hajar mountains:

In early 2001 Oswald Oelz and Robi Boesch climbed a fine line through the middle of the SE face of Jebel Misht. This route appears to follow much of the existing route *Eastern Promise*, first climbed by Paul Ramsden and Tom Nonis.

I returned in early 2001 with Aussie Dave Wallis to explore the further potential of the huge faces of Misht. Our first offering was a new 750m line on the S face. Kicking off to the right of my previous route *Madam Butterfly*, it provided some excellent and bold face climbing in the lower third before finishing with a definitive sting in the tail. From the summit the stinging wasn't over as Dave was bitten by a snake on the descent. The route *Snakes and Ladders* weighs in at TD 5.10 -.

After this warm-up we set about our main objective, the unclimbed groove line on Misht's SE face. The first eleven pitches passed with sustained 5.8/5.9 climbing leading up to an obvious bowl in the face. From there, easier ground for half-a-dozen rope lengths led to a rising line of corners and bulges which led to the summit ridge with one pitch up an overhanging groove (5.10). *Intifada*, TD, 23 pitches and 1000m is an excellent route and worthy of further ascents.

Our route was small beer, though, compared with what was to follow. Pat Littlejohn and Steve Sustad blew through town, with the rapidly warming temperatures of March, and climbed the superb hanging line up the left edge of the SE face. After 15 pitches they crossed the French pillar and then forged a route just left of the upper arête to the summit. Pat reports that the temperature on the face was so hot that he took his rock shoes off on every stance and hid

them in the shade to get them to cool down a little. They completed *Icarus* in 27 pitches to ED3 (5.11+) in two days.

In November 2002 possibly the best line in the range was climbed on Misht by resident Austrian guide Jacob Oberhause and Brian Davison. They stormed the direct line up the crest of the South Pillar in a day at ED3 (5.11+) and 1200m in length, and named their line *The English Arête*.

An interesting and possibly frightening development during the winter of 2001/02 was the arrival of the highly prolific Austrian team of Albert Precht and Sigi Brachmayer. This pair have dominated new route developments in Jordan's Wadi Rum over recent years and have now turned their attention to the cream of Arabian limestone, all at the invitation of Oswald Oelz. Oswald and Albert were part of a team attempting Makalu 25 years ago. Since then Albert has given up high-altitude mountaineering in favour of exploratory alpine and sub-alpine rock-climbing. Oswald went on to climb many Himalayan peaks, sometimes with Reinhold Messner. So this invitation was designed to be a reunion.

The Eastern Wall of Jebel Misht, known as the Al Jil Wall, had received an ascent by Geoff Hornby and David Barlow in 2000, but our route avoided the obvious difficulties of the central pillar. After an exploratory ascent of a line called *Half Moon Corner* with Gerhard Hafner, the Precht, Brachmayer and Oelz team climbed the central pillar and named it in Oswald's honour as the *Doc. Bulle pillar*, TD and 500m.

The Precht/Brachmayer team then took to the SW face of Misht to climb the left edge of the wall. *Watergate*, TD and 500m, takes the obvious corner system with the difficulties predominantly in the lower half. The Austrians then swung around the back and climbed a 200m new route on the N face of the First Tower at TD, just to fill in the rest of the afternoon!

In March 2003 Geoff Hornby with Mark Turnbull and Susie Sammut climbed the face right of *Watergate* to finish up the front face on the upper pillar. *Sorely Misht* is D.Sup and 600m.

The Austrians added another independent line up the central section of the S face of Misht at TD with 800m of climbing. Yet again, they were up and down with a fair amount of the day remaining and Oswald, who watched them through binoculars, described them as mutant dwarfs. *Way of the Dwarfs* or *Wichtimannchen* looks like a good outing.

The British team of Peter Bishop, Aqil Chaudhry and David Barlow attempted the right-hand pillar on the SE face. *Riddle in the Sands*, 850m, TD inf, traverses into *Intifada* for three pitches at half height and so loses some of its attractiveness, but was an excellent voyage up an obvious feature.

From Misht, the view southwards is dominated by the mass of Jebel Kawr. This so-called 'mountain of waterfalls' is surrounded on all sides by walls of between 400m and 900m in height. On the NE side a system of towers becomes visible with the changing light of the late afternoon. The Austrians invited me to join them in exploring the potential of these towers.

Our first venture was the striking N ridge of Jebel Asait. This beautiful towered ridge rises for 600m above the small village and provided us with steady climbing, a few pitches of 5.9 and a steep 5.10c. *Internationale* is one of the finest routes I have ever done and deserves repeat ascents.

The north pillar of Jebel Asala gave 500m of TD rock and a further 500m of scrambling, which is a good day in its own right, but not enough for Precht, so he soloed a 500m line on Asait's N rib, as he passed it on the way down! *Solo climb*, D Sup, now has a pair of parallel lines, courtesy of myself and Susie Sammut, named *Two's Company* and *Three's a Crowd*, both 500m and D.Sup. Brian Davison soloed the wall left of *Three's a Crowd* to give *Alone in Space*, TD, 500m, and two shorter and easier lines further to the south end of the face.

An attractive tower to the west of Asala's summit has become known as the Asala Tower. The full Austrian contingent climbed the Luadabuam pillar at TD and 250m. While the others wound their way down the back, Albert soloed down another line before soloing back up a third line. These two lines are *Down Hill* and *Straight Up* and both contain climbing to 5.9!

Meanwhile, Peter Bishop and I were beavering away on Asait's W face. This 600m wall is brilliant. Our route, *Snake Charmer*, climbed the pillar separating the NW and SW aspects and went straight to the summit. Face climbing, cracks and grooves, never harder than 5.10a, it is truly superb. Our ascent was made during the Islamic festival of Ramadan. After descending from the hill and into the village at sunset, we were invited by the shepherds, who had been watching us all day, to break the fast with them. Sitting around the camp fire with the whole village, sharing dates and drinking cardoman coffee, whilst the children did imitations of bouldering moves, was very, very special.

Aqil Chaudhry and David Barlow worked away at a steeper line to the left of *Snake Charmer*. After six pitches, including E2 offwidths, the boys hit a patch of soft rock and were forced to rap down. Left as a climb in its own right, they named it *Muscat Rap* and graded it TD Sup.

The next day, Albert and Sigi left their last mark on the range for the year with a second line up the N face of Asala. *Rock Fascination* weighs in at TD and has 600m of climbing and 500m of scrambling.

The British posse then took off to investigate the potential of Jebel Misfah at the head of Wadi Ghul. The only existing rock climb on Misfah was the excellent looking Sisi pillar up the S buttress. We took to the SE face and added a pair of fairly moderate 400m climbs called *Sunburst* and *Shadowlands*.

Our last route of the trip was a second line on the beautiful Mistal Tower. This gorgeous looking feature did not provide us with the quality climbing we were expecting and *The Way of the Goat* is an apt name, TD- and 450m.

Oswald Oelz was not finished. Back he came in January 2002 with Robi Boesch to add a third line to the W face of Asait. Close to the top of this sustained TD route (5.9), the pair found a bizarre man-made bridge between two towers of rock. Unable to guess how and why this feature had appeared, they named their route *Mystery*. I presume that the shepherds had found a spot that their goats occasionally escape to.

The Austrian-Swiss team returned in November to continue their explorations. First, accompanied by Italian Dolomite guide Hans Peter Eisendle, they climbed two lines on the Karn Sheik S face in Musandam, *Windjammerer*, 450m and 6+, and *Meerresleuchten*, 400m and 6+. Subsequently they moved to Central Oman and climbed another pair of lines on the mystery wall of Asait, *Annas Tango*, 400m and 6+, and *Mish Mushkila*, 400m and 8- (with Jakob Oberhauser from the North Tyrol). On the W face of Asala they added *Jebelistas*, 400m and

6+, whilst on the N face of the same peak they added *Ramadan for Bolts*, 450m and 6+, and *Omaniak*, 300m and 6+.

As this team left the mountains so Brian Davison, Susie Sammut and myself arrived from the UK. Davison completed an extensive programme of soloed first ascents on Jebels Asait, Asala and Khormilla, whilst the three of us added two important first ascents on previously untouched mountain features. Jebel Manzoob is a subsidiary peak of Jebel Kawr and provides a handsome looking 600m N face. Our line climbs a 400m arête on the left side of the face, *Gully Arête*, weighing in at ED2 (5.11).

On the other side of the range, Jebel Ghul has an extensive ridge line with north-facing buttresses on it. From the highest point drops a pair of 650m-high pillars and we climbed the eastern one via a series of walls, ramps and covers to give *Original route* (5.11).

Brian Davison's other solo routes were on Jebel Asala's N face with three easy routes and on Jebel Khormilla with four routes.

**Note:** Info on all the above areas will also be found on Tony Howard's website: [www.nomadstravel.co.uk](http://www.nomadstravel.co.uk)