
RICHARD ZÖLLNER

The Mountains of South-eastern Iran



Hezar and Kuh-e Hezar rising from the Iranian plain seen from the east.
(*Mojtaba Vasou*)

Trotting on along the road, I realised how I actually preferred this to finding another ride. Walking really is the only form of locomotion I have ever found adequate for human comprehension. Even riding a bicycle: how much there is we cannot take in any more. At the same time I was aware of our timetable: four days, two mountains 130km apart as the crow flies but 320km on the road we would most likely travel hitchhiking. I found comfort in the knowledge that even if we had to walk the last 20km to the base of our mountain in 40°C heat, we could still manage to climb up to the hut by about 9pm or 10pm. And then there was the beauty of the landscape: ochre volcanic hills radiating from the bulky mountainside ahead, wild rhubarb flowering in red and yellow, anthracite coloured lizards, flocks of sparrows as brown as the land and among these robust, earthy tones the otherworldly blue of the Eurasian roller (*Coracias garrulus*) and always the green, the inconceivable green of the irrigated fields in the valleys below.

Then, suddenly, a lorry ground to an abrupt halt beside us, having come around the last bend in the road seemingly without any sound whatsoever. The driver didn't even bother to look at us, but a large group of schoolboys in the open bed of the truck waved us on board. Climbing up, Mojtaba,



View W from the summit of Taftan shortly after sunrise. (*Richard Zöllner*)



At one of the active fumaroles on the summit of Taftan. (*Richard Zöllner*)



A brook with sulphurous water high on Taftan. (*Richard Zöllner*)

my Iranian friend, had soon found a little corner to squeeze in among them. I must have seemed hesitant, because I was motioned to what seemed like a large metal box, well suited for sitting on. In Iran visitors from other countries are treated with great respect and friendliness. Only this time my 'hosts' were boys aged 10, who must be the same all over the world. They were smiling in my face and were all well aware of my backside becoming quickly and uncomfortably hot from my seat, which turned out to be a saucepan filled with food, apparently having come straight from the fire.

Reaching Dare Gol (Flower Valley), the endpoint of the road and a popular picnic spot, I was so glad to disembark. Here we fell into the hands of a mullah organising a school holiday weekend for the boys. As is the custom, we were invited to eat with them. My experience of Iran told me that should we accept we would most definitely not reach the hut that day, so as politely as possible we excused ourselves. The mullah, a local of Khash, turned out to be a man of great learning and soon we were discussing Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, incurring substantial delay. As he insisted on showing us the way we set off together, still deep in conversation, followed by some of the boys, trying to sneak up on us to beat the mullah's bottom with a thorny twig; something he took with the fatherly dignity of somebody who has not forgotten that once he too had been young.

Over two hours later we parted. Encounters like these are one of many reasons I have fallen in love with Iran. A country full of an intelligent people

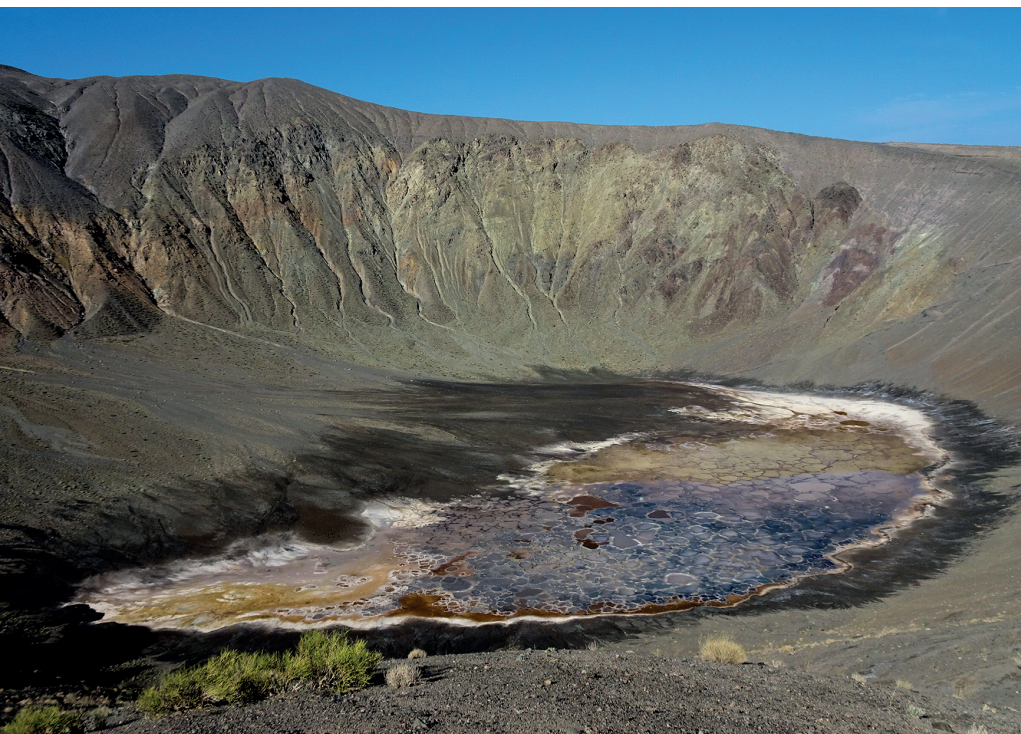
grossly misrepresented in western media, full of hospitality and openness, eager to meet foreigners. For me, mountaineering is more than the rocks or the ice or the route or the top and more than the sum of these parts. It's these aspects of anthropology and natural geography that really drive me to seek out places like this. As human beings, how could we view the mountains isolated from the matrix of the world in which they rest, suspended like the clasts of a sedimentary breccia, poorly sorted, so much so that the matrix and clasts become one. This then is man and these are the mountains, and both are of interest for their interplay with each other.

Catching up for lost time we sped up, first along a brook and through a narrow valley, with some enjoyable scrambling in places, gaining height, leaving the gorge higher up for an easy path leading to the Sobah hut, reaching it as the sun sank low and the longer wavelengths started to dominate, while around us a sea of jagged volcanic peaks reached upwards as black as charcoal suspended in fire. Mojtaba had started making tea – what other occupation could be more quintessentially Iranian – but I had to call him over. I had identified Kuh-e Bazman's dark silhouette to the south-west, the great mysterious mountain nobody knew anything about. This was as we stood 3,100m up the active volcano Taftan (c3930m?). Next morning we would go to the summit, but all I could think of was this other volcano, the most alluring of peaks in all of Baluchistan.

An early start at 3am ensured we reached the lower active summit of Taftan, also known as Maddeh Kuh, before sunrise. The wind blew noxious smoke from the fumaroles along the summit ridge towards a flank of the mountain with 60m tall rock needles rising from unconsolidated tuff. Having seen and smelled enough here, a short, half-hour traverse over rocks and snowfields led to the higher inactive Nar Kuh summit, 3,930m according to my own measurements. (In older literature and maps the altitude for this mountain is often stated as exceeding 4,000m.) Looking down from the summit, one wonders how people could possibly eke out a living from this bareness, but, albeit in small densities, they do. Underground water pipes known as *qanats* provide the basis for this, often running for tens of kilometres from the mountains to the settlements on the plains.

Up on the summit, the fresh breeze and altitude provided an acceptable climate and only with reluctance did we manage to part from it, reaching Dare Gol at noon, where the celebrations of one of the numerous religious holidays in Iran were in full swing: plenty of tea, sweet soft drinks, dates, confectionery, kebab and watermelon everywhere. Young couples that had stolen away from the city for a day were strolling about, holding hands behind trees amidst the strewn rubbish. For a westerner this is hard to understand: how it could be romantic to linger among such a profusion of discarded plastic bottles and other garbage. But perceptions of these matters are different and the problem is only seen as such by some. During a visit in 2015, I collected 32 plastic bottles on the descent from the summit of Damavand alone.

Finding a ride away from Taftan back to the main road was less straight-



The Qaleh Hasan Ali crater near Rayen, a good example of the geological richness of this region. (*Richard Zöllner*)

forward than expected. Because of the holiday, everybody was travelling in the wrong direction. Eventually we managed to find somebody and later somebody else, making it all the way to the city of Iranshahr. Here the brutal heat of 44°C stifled one's every movement. Before leaving on this expedition I had managed to get hold of some contacts in a village not far from Bazman volcano but my phone had developed a peculiar fault. I could talk to whoever answered the phone but couldn't hear their replies. So we had no way of knowing if our arrival in the village would be welcome or even expected. By coincidence we ended up near a post of the Iranian Red Crescent and were taken in for cool water, tea and biscuits. Explaining our goal, we were soon made to watch several lengthy videos involving rope-work in emergency situations, such as abseiling from motorway bridges. Just when one of our hosts had donned his full kit for a live demonstration of these skills on a bridge nearby a bus pulled over and we were on our way again, this time for a ride westwards, to Bazman town.

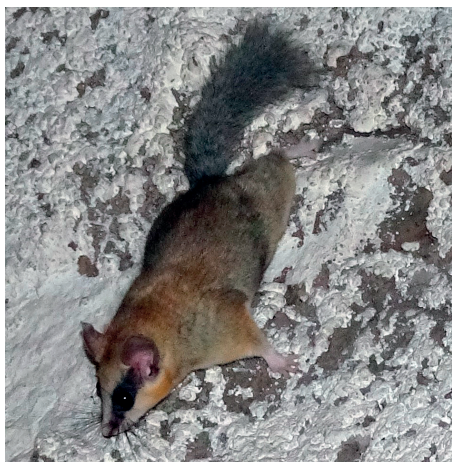
Here further assistance from the same organisation ensured our onward progress over unsurfaced roads to our destination village. And then the moment came when we could finally see our mountain, in the last light of the day. Much to my dismay it was far from the pristine wilderness I had

hoped for. Several large antennas crowned the summit, clearly visible as black silhouettes against the not yet black sky. Luckily we arrived shortly after and there was no more time for disappointment.

Our host had heard our telephone calls or else was ready anyway for guests, the latter being more likely. While Iranian hospitality undoubtedly ranks as among the best in the world, within Iran it is the Baluchi people who are regarded as being most generous. This, however, comes at a price. As a general rule of thumb, the more generous a people, the later dinner is served. In our case, this was at 11.30pm, which is not at all unusual in this region of the world, but which made our planned start of 2am impossible. The route I had envisioned, via the relatively steep east ridge of the mountain was out of the question as well. Instead, we were told we could, owing to the antennas, only go 'near the summit' and this only on a dirt track, which itself runs to within near the summit. A mountaineer's nightmare unfolded in front of me. The remote peak I had dreamed of reduced to an 18km slog 2,000m up a dirt track. Luckily I am not easily deterred and since I was already here, the first foreign visitor to the mountain for 40 years, or so I was told, it would be foolish not to go up.

At 4am next day we finally started, walking at great speed to cover as much ground as possible during the cool of darkness. At noon we reached a point 'near the summit', lunch offering a very welcome excuse to linger once more in the lower temperatures of higher altitude. Here at 3,450m it was a mere 30°C. It was 3pm when we finally convinced ourselves to begin the descent. If the landscape is generally similar in appearance to Taftan, the vegetation is markedly different. The lower slopes and moist ravines are covered in *baneh* trees (wild pistachios, *Pistacia atlantica*). The whole massif is a protected area, supporting among other animals a population of leopards. Later, in the first darkness, still with some 7km to go, we met a group of Basij, members of a paramilitary organisation, and were promptly invited for food. Unfortunately the kid-meat kebab served to us not only brought sustenance but also salmonella poisoning, which resulted in my hospitalisation in the city of Zabol a few days later.

After two weeks spent recovering from this misfortune and on other exploits, my path led me to Rayen, a small town situated at 2,200m on the slopes of Kuh-e Hezar and famous for its ruined medieval adobe castle. The wider area is of outstanding geological interest, boasting for example Iran's largest volcanic crater at Qaleh Hasan Ali, a 'maar', or broad, low-relief volcanic crater 300m deep and 1,200m in diameter. Having at that time spent three weeks constantly in the presence of others, some moments of solitude would be a welcome relief and what better opportunity than an ascent of Kuh-e Hezar, at 4,465m the highest mountain in Iran outside of the Alborz? From a well-known waterfall near the town, which I reached by hitchhiking, I made my way along the stream feeding this waterfall, first over a wide plateau, later through a narrow valley, necessitating several river crossings up to a small hut, where I was glad to be the only guest. Having reached this location at noon I set out, thinking I could reach the summit on the same day and return to the



A forest dormouse (*Dryomys nitedula*) in the shelter at Kuh-e Hezar (Richard Zöllner)



Sajad Ali Abadi and Mojtaba Vasou in the Qanatqestan gorge during the approach to Joupar mountain. (Richard Zöllner)

hut by torchlight but was turned around by a heavy thunderstorm at 4,000m.

The night was eventful insofar as soon after dark a large group of rodents started to scuttle about noisily. Nothing more than your average night in a bothy, I thought, and put in earplugs only to be woken an hour later by one of them sitting cosily on my forehead. Needless to say, this incident made further sleep rather difficult. Reminding myself that biology constitutes one of my main fields of interest, I set out to observe these animals, counting 11 at one time and soon identifying them as forest dormice (*Dryomys nitedula*). At 3am I had had my fill of this kind of entertainment and started for the summit, reaching it after fast progress up easy scrambling, already familiar from the day before, among large flocks of snow buntings (*Plectrophenax nivalis*). Hezar stands isolated on the vast Iranian plain. Further in the west Lalezar, another well-known mountain in this region, rose gently towards the sky. By way of contrast, to the north-east the Joupar massif stretched upwards in more abrupt steps.

After a week pursuing other interests, I reached the climax of my current Iranian mountain adventures. In Kerman I met up once again with Mojtaba as well as Sajad Ali Abadi, a well-known Iranian mountaineer who is famous for his knowledge of the area. As is often the case, Iranian mountaineers are eager to team up with their colleagues from other countries. Soon we were speeding along the motorway – I am yet to meet an Iranian who does not exceed the speed limit – south towards Kuh-e Joupar. This 60km chain of peaks constitutes one of the most famous arenas for technical mountaineering outside of the Alborz and Zagros ranges.

Our aim was the highest summit: Seshak (4135m), or ‘three horn’. For this we followed the Qanatqestan valley, a narrowing and deepening gorge



Mountain hut and resident donkey at Kuh-e Joupar. (*Richard Zöllner*)

through red sandstone. After some 8km a steep 100m ramp, about V Diff, is climbed to exit on a gently sloping plateau, which is traversed to a tiny mountain hut. Here the donkey in residence, living in the vicinity of the hut for as long as Sajad can remember, greeted us enthusiastically. The location of this building could not be more impressive, nesting in a cirque of the highest peaks, with Baluchi, second-highest summit in the range, apparently being the most technical, although it appeared gentle and easy angled from what I could see.

Next morning we started for our summit at 5am, first easily, but soon through a steep and loose couloir called Qife Mosibat, and later over steep snowfields and firm rock, mostly just Diff but up to HVS in places, to a gap in the ridgeline. The rest of the route runs on the western side of the mountain, passing a small emergency shelter constructed from the debris of a crashed aeroplane. After this, mostly easier ground led to the pointed summit cone, which we reached at 11am. To keep in line with another Iranian tradition, we took the last step onto the summit together holding hands. The whole ridge of this massif lay either side of us. The complete traverse ranks as one of the most highly prized achievements among Iranian mountaineers. With the snowfields having turned into bottomless slush, difficult down climbing alongside them was necessary. As no rope was carried this ensured some exhilarating situations. With the long walk out from the hut we did not reach the car until 9pm.

A turn in the weather the following day prevented our planned attempt on nearby Kuh-e Palvar and Mojtaba and I said goodbye to the mountains



The convoluted line of the Joupar ridge as seen when facing south from Seshakh summit. (*Richard Zöllner*)

with a 35km trek through high plateaus to the east of Kerman. We sat for a long time on one of the minor summits along the way. Still tired from our previous efforts, we had forgotten to take food and had to be content with what we found left over in our bags. This we supplemented with wild sage, eaten in huge bundles between what little sangak bread we had, like the *sabzi* or greens, which form such an integral part of Iranian cuisine. Our eyes gazed over the desert below. My time was up, my flight home in two days' time. In the last light of the day Sajad picked us up, waiting with a watermelon in a tiny mountain village. I once more realised what a special place this country is. The mountains of Iran impress with their endless variety of forms and sizes. Her people offer one of the richest, most engaging social tapestries over which journeys like these can be woven.

