

AFRICA

Africa, Far-Flung Explorations. Briton Tony Howard, who, with his partner, Di Taylor, has been exploring north Africa and the Middle East from a climber's perspective since the 1960s, shares some of his tales and insights in an article that appears earlier in this journal.

MOROCCO

Morocco, Overview. During 1998, whilst working in Morocco, I took the opportunity to explore the enigmatic pleasures of the Atlas Mountains. Morocco is accessible and user-friendly for the tourist, but remains a niche destination as far as mountaineers are concerned. It can, however, be a highly worthwhile niche destination. Attractions include vast areas of undiscovered rock in the more remote areas, and the possibility of substantial snowfall transforming the summits into a wilderness ski-touring playground.

Inevitably, popular attention is drawn to the highest summit, Toubkal (4167m). From an alpine climbing perspective this massif is disappointing, since the normal routes are fairly trivial. There are some good long rock and ice climbs, however, such as on the north face of Tazarhart (3980m), and the area lends itself to ski touring. It has been well documented.

Of greater interest from the exploratory viewpoint are the cliffs hidden in some of the Atlas valleys. The awe-inspiring Todra Gorge has been well-publicized abroad and is consequently something of a honeypot for visiting rock climbers. The climbing has been developed substantially during the 1990s and there are now many bolted areas with mostly one- or two-pitch routes. Classic middle-grade routes the length of the 250-meter Pilier de Couchant in the main gorge have also been disfigured. The bolts happily occupy the majority of visiting climbers, leaving the vast remaining acreage of quality red limestone for the exploratory climber.

In 1998, I climbed routes at British VS in the main gorge right of the Pilier de Couchant and on the ramp just left of the Hotel Yasmina. In the nearby Dades Valley, the largest cliffs mostly lie below the road in a narrow river gorge. Huge areas of continuous climbing can only be approached by multiple abseil or by wading the river. Given that the rock is also rather loose, routes here would be serious undertakings. This area is probably untouched. Beyond, the small upper gorge cut through by the road has shorter but attractive cliffs. However, my attempt at a route on the west side led to much falling rock that threatened the gawping tourists below and eventually ended in a retreat in the face of a loose overlap.

Lower down the valley, some distinctive rock formations known as the "doigts des singes" (monkey fingers) are clearly seen from the road. Some of these are reputed to have been climbed on, but close inspection reveals them to be rather gritty, with no cracks for gear.

Climbing of an altogether better quality is to be found in the remote area on the northern fringes of the Central High Atlas centered on the village of Zawit Ahansal. This has been described as the best rock climbing in Morocco and likened to the Dolomites (such comparisons should be treated with caution). The access route, via Ait-Mohammed, includes over 50 kilometers of rough unsurfaced road and traverses the Tizi-n-Ilissi at 2650 meters. On the



The Todra Gorge as seen from Family Entertainment near the Pilier de Couchant. PAULL KNOTT

north side of Aroudan (3359m), there are three kilometers of crags up to 800 meters in height. The nearby area just south of Taghia is equally impressive. A number of routes, up to ED VI A3, are described in *Le Maroc: Les Plus Belles Courses et Randonees*, by Bernard Domenech. Considerable further potential almost certainly exists.

Further east, new route potential exists on an extensive and somewhat more accessible 300-meter crag on the north side of Irhil ou Abbari, near Sidi Yahia ou Youssef in the Jbel Masker range. Here, too, French climbers were active in earlier decades.

The limestone escarpments and wooded hills of the Middle Atlas offer little at this scale, but do have the allure of frequent rock outcrops with no visiting climbers. Unfortunately, most of the crags turn out to be of poor quality. Exceptions include single-pitch routes in the Fom Kheneg Gorge on the Azrou-Midelt road near Timahdite, and limestone bouldering off the Ifrane-Dayet Hachlaf road. The former yields a wealth of well-protected natural lines best approached outside the nesting season. Also worth investigating are sizeable steep limestone crags near the Sources de l'Oum-er-Rbia and the possibility of short ice climbs near the summit of Jbel Tichchoukt.

Other ranges worthy of investigation include the granite of the Anti Atlas near Tafraoute, visited by British climbers since the early 1990s, and the rocky summits of the Eastern end of the Jbel Sahro massif. In Morocco in general much potential remains, especially for those with the time to invest in penetrating well beyond the reach of the tarmac road.

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MALI

Hombori Mountains, Various Ascents. It was reported that a number of climbs went up on or near Le Main de Fatima in the winter of 1997-'98. On the Grimari Dagana Massif, on December 13, B. Regien and C. Dumont d'Ayot put up *Vendredi XII* (6a, 250m) on the north pillar of Wambe Ballo. Salvador Campillo and B. Marnette established *Soleil Noir* (TD/TDsup, 160m) on the east summit of the Ciseaux de Grimari on January 28. On Taganagategue in the Boni-Loro Massif, Campillo and Marnette put up the 180-meter *Khili-Khili* (6a A1). In the Bani-Kani area on the Fifth Tower of the North Dyoude Massif, Campillo and Marnette put up a 220-meter TDinf. route via its northwest spur.

The Hand of Fatima, Harmattan Rodeo. For many years, my regular gang of climbing partners—Todd Skinner, Bobby Model, Andy deKlerk, Ed February, Scott Milton, Bill Hatcher and Peter Mallamo—and I were intrigued by photos we had seen in Spanish magazines of Le Main de Fatima (“The Hand of Fatima”), a lovely grouping of giant pinnacles resembling the hand of the prophet Mohammed’s favorite daughter that rises from a parched landscape of massive quartzite towers and walls in Mali. From mid-December to mid-January, 1997-'98, we found ourselves living below and on these beautiful towers. To ensure we were choosing the finest climbing objective, we spent two days hiking around many of the area rock formations. The team unanimously agreed upon the region’s most outstanding challenge: a new route up a severely overhanging outside corner of a 1,400-foot spire called Kaga Pamari, the little finger of Fatima’s hand.