

soloed the Arash route in four days. Since then several alpinists have attempted the face but failed...until the winter of 2001.

On February 6 the team (comprising Mohammad Moosavi Nejad—leader, Ramin Shojaei—technical leader, Ara Megerdichian, Esmail Motehayer Pasand, Kazem Faridian, Mohammad Nouri—cameraman, Ali Parsai, Abbas Aghasi, Abbas Mohammadi, Mahyar Pour Abdollah, Afshin Lahouri, Mehdi Broumand, Omid Amohammadi, and Ali Haji Saeed) reached Alamchal, the cwm below the face. While the others erected a hut below the face, Megerdichian and I started fixing the first pitch below the Golesang, the névé at the base of the wall. The following day I fixed another 200 meters of rope to the base of the wall.

The next day Faridian, belayed by Megerdichian, took the lead on the first pitch of the main wall. Near the start he fell on rock that was not so steep and injured his ankle. After carrying him down to Roodbarak in one and a half days, three team members, along with five new ones, came back. Meanwhile Megerdichian and I had stayed behind and led the first two pitches on the main wall.

A further pitch and a half were climbed over the 13th and 14th, after which it snowed for two days. Five members left. With Nouri filming, Megerdichian and I continued climbing over the next few days and on the 20th I completed the fifth pitch to reach the less steep, loose summit rock band. I placed the Iranian flag at the high point and then climbed down 10 meters to install a safe belay. That day we cleaned pitches four and five but due to snowfall left the remainder to be cleared on the following weekend. Our route Anjoman was graded VI A3 5.8

While we were on the wall Mohammadi and Nouri took two days off to repeat their 1990 first winter ascents of the Haft Khanha peaks (ca 4700m). They were away from Alamchal camp for two days and climbed three peaks. At the same time Amohammadi and Saeed climbed the nearby Shaneh Kuh and Miansechal peaks (4300m).

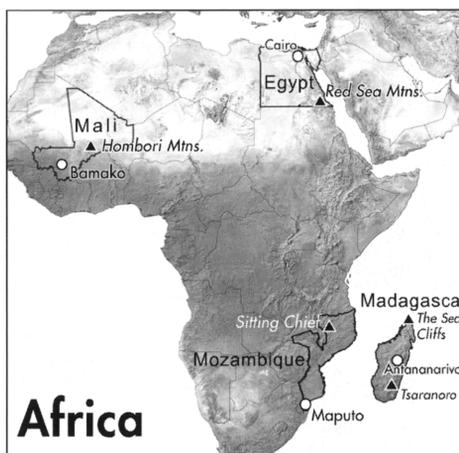
RAMIN SHOJAEI, *Iran*

## Africa

### EGYPT

*Red Sea Mountains, an historical overview and recent first ascents.* Following the discovery of an old book by G.W. Murray entitled *Dare Me To The Desert* (1967), in which the author describes his explorations of Egypt's Red Sea Mountains in the 1920s and 30s, Di Taylor and I decided to follow in his footsteps. Delving into archives revealed that Murray was a Director of the Egyptian Desert Survey in the early decades of the last century. He was

also a respected member of the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society, the latter awarding him their Founder's Medal. He served as an officer in the Northern Red Sea Patrol in the 1914-18 war and was awarded the Military Cross. Not only did he obviously know his



subject well, scattering his pages liberally with unclimbed or otherwise attractive peaks, but very few climbers seemed to have been there and possibly none since the 1930s. We were hooked.

Our first attempt in 1988 was turned back by endless sandstorms and unexpected military checkpoints. Our second attempt in 1996 was an almost equal disaster. Despite sponsorship by Egypt's Tourism Authority and an Egyptian travel agent, the military refused to recognize our permits to what is a closed area of the Nubian Desert near the Sudan Border. Our planned exploration of the other parts of the Red Sea Massif was also inexplicably cut by the travel agent from five weeks to one—not much time for 600 miles of mountains.

Nevertheless, we located many of Murray's more northerly peaks in the Eastern Desert and managed to climb briefly on some. The granite was not perfect but definitely climbable and good in the water-worn gullies, where some Bedouin hunting routes exist. We also discovered that the renowned Italian climber, Emilio Comici, had been there in 1937, climbing several peaks the same year as Murray. The most interesting seems to be Gebel Shayib (2187m) the highest on the Egyptian mainland, climbed by Murray on April 26, 1922 and by Comici on April 29, 1937. The Austrian Alpine Club also climbed several peaks in this area during 1931. Adjacent to Shayib, Gebel Qattar (1963m) and other summits just to the north were climbed by Comici in 1937 (all these mountains in this area are accessible from the coastal resort of Hurgada). Gebel Gharib (1750m) is a couple of hours drive further north again. First climbed on the remarkably early date of April 29, 1823 by British explorer J. Burton, the peak was also climbed twice in 1937, first by Murray on February 22, then by Comici on April 3—a busy year for Egypt's mountains. In addition to these existing routes, all this area offers interesting exploration potential with climbs up to 900 meters in length, some of which could be good quality. Intrigued by our discoveries, and in honor of Comici, some Italian climbers visited this area in autumn 2000, making some new ascents.

In spring 2001 we decided to try our luck a third time with the mysterious “forbidden” southern peaks. Here, not far from the disputed border with Sudan, lies Murray's “unclimbable glass dome” in a remote part of the desert. Nearby, just above the wild and empty coast, are the Farayid Mountains “the most aggressive in Egypt.” This dramatic massif is also the location of Murray's rock bridge “which seemed to sway in the throb in the wind” and the Berenice Bodkin, “sharper and more vertical than the Aiguille du Géant, rising exactly on the Tropic of Cancer,” which Murray “left alone in its austerity.”

After considerable preparation with a new travel agent and some last minute fears that the trip was going to fail yet again due to continuing Egyptian military intransigence, we finally got our permits—all five of them. We were also given an escort in the form of a soldier “for our security,” before finally making it into the desert together with climbing friends Mark Carr and Christine Evans. Driving the two vehicles, which were compulsory for a journey through this remote area, were Tamer El Sayed and Hany Amr, the directors of two Egyptian safari companies (Nomad Adventure Tours and Dune Desert Adventures), both keen to extend their desert knowledge.

Due to last-minute permit problems, our planned 17 days visit had shrunk to 10. This left us with about a week in the desert, 600 miles south of Cairo. It's a particularly wild and beautiful area nearly 500 meters above sea level, studded with large acacia trees, supporting herds of gazelle and, nearer the coast (four days' camel ride), scattered families of sword-carrying Ababda Bedouin, eking out a hard traditional life of camel breeding and charcoal making.

Our first objective, Gebel Sila'i (baldhead) “as sheer and smooth and unclimbable as The Hill of Glass” (756m) proved unexpectedly easy: Murray had failed to find the one reasonable

route up this ca 300-meter-high, atrociously exfoliating, granite dome. It will be an excellent "trekking peak" if the area ever opens up, with magnificent panoramic views in all directions. A black basalt intrusion may offer a possible direct route but even it is obviously loose in places due to the extremes of temperature.

The Rock Bridge was truly spectacular; a ca 50-meter flying buttress of bizarre shape and proportions "like a tea cup handle" as Murray described it. We did a 250-meter route up the crag, climbing through the arch to the summit, extracting the maximum enjoyment from this most unusual rock architecture. The temperature on the top (in mid March) was 100°F. The climb was straightforward but as on Sila'i, the granite was disturbingly creaky.

Elsewhere in the massif of The Farayids (1366m), known as Mons Pentadactylus ("five finger mountain" to the Romans), there are numerous other impressive peaks with cliffs up to 300 meters high. Situated on the Tropic of Cancer, the Berenice Bodkin (1230m) is one of them but we only had time to find a way in to its base for future reference. It's definitely climbable from the northeast and the steep 150-meter upper cliff may be of better rock. On its north side slabs sweep up into a vertical, or possibly overhanging, headwall, in total 300 meters high. Just north of The Bodkin (also known as The Dagger of Berenice) the steep cliffs on the south face of Purdy's Peak (height unknown) looked equally, or even more, impressive. Whether or not any of these cliffs are climbable by a sane person is another matter. The only way to find out is to get on them.

Despite its brevity, it was a fascinating trip, allowing us not only to experience the joys of exploration and the ascent of new climbs, but also and equally importantly, to spend a little time with the Bedouin. Living four days' camel ride from the coast, they are still leading a traditional life. However, changes are inevitable—a new international airport is under construction 100 miles away on the coast, near Mersa Allam. New Red Sea coastal resorts for divers and sun-seekers are rapidly spreading south towards the area we visited. No doubt permits will be relaxed and the timeless solitude of the desert, its mountains, wildlife and people, will be faced with the arrival of mass-tourism as visitors escape the coast for desert safaris. It could spell the end for the people and wildlife, though if organized with forethought and consideration it could also be an opportunity for a new beginning. It will certainly allow the climbing and trekking community easier access. We are hopeful that our report to those concerned with Egypt's tourism and environment will contribute to protecting the future of this unique area and its indigenous people.

Useful contacts If you plan to go 'off road' you will almost certainly need permits, in which case you will need the assistance of an Egyptian tour agent. Permits, transport, and provisions for the above trip were arranged by Tamer el Sayed, Nomad Adventure Tours, 155 Al Sudan Street, Mohandessin, Cairo, Egypt, e-mail: [nomad@sitravel.com.eg](mailto:nomad@sitravel.com.eg); in co-operation with Hany Amr, Egyptian Adventures, 58 Abdullah abu el-sude St, 1163 Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt, e-mail: [hanyamr@hotmail.com](mailto:hanyamr@hotmail.com). Both these companies would be pleased to quote you for desert tours such as The Western Desert Oases, Gilf Kebir (SW Desert), Sinai, The Red Sea Mountains etc. Allow one month (maybe longer) to obtain Permits.

TONY HOWARD, *United Kingdom*