

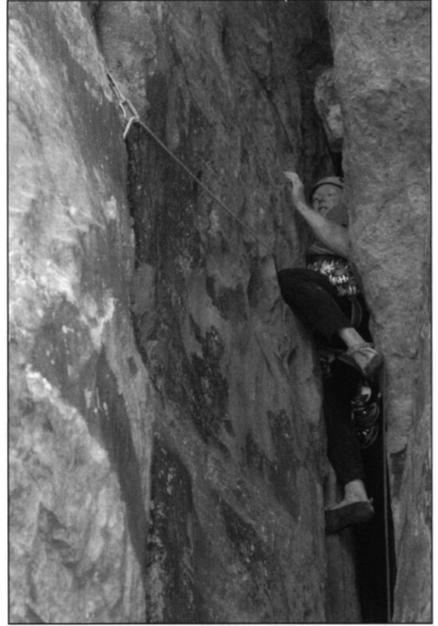
famines of the 1980s and inspired “We Are The World.” This is where the Derg dropped a napalm bomb on a market in 1988 and killed 2,500 people. Where endless terrace systems fight the ongoing battle against drought, rain, and short-harvests. This is not climbing to get away from it all. It’s climbing within it all.

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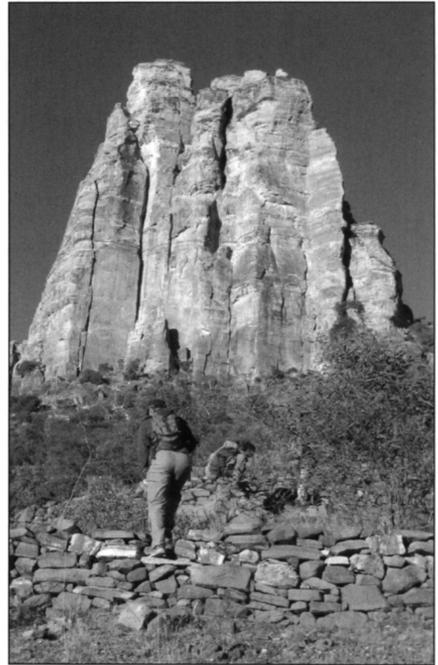
*Tigray, Adwa, Nebelet, and Harrar; new routes and exploration.* On November 30, Mark Wilford, my wife Teresa, and I flew from Addis Ababa to Mekele to explore the rock climbing of the Tigray region. We had learned of its climbing potential from Pat Littlejohn, who has made several successful trips to Ethiopia and was very helpful in supplying information on where and what to climb. In Mekele, we hired a four-wheel-drive vehicle and driver and headed north to the town of Hawzien, where spectacular sandstone towers and walls, reminiscent of the American Southwest, stretch for miles. In addition to the climbable rock here, ancient churches and temples, some dating back to the 4th century, are found throughout the region. A few of these churches are located high on cliff walls and require moderate climbing to visit. Although very little tourist infrastructure exists in the Tigray region, we found in general the roads to be good, the food excellent, and the people incredibly helpful and friendly.

The rock quality was another matter. The sandstone around Tigray turned out to be soft and at times scary to climb. I started off the trip with a bad fall when a handhold broke on the first pitch of an unclimbed tower just outside of Hawzien. I landed directly on my tailbone, but besides a severely bruised butt (and ego), I was generally OK.

Next we traveled to Adwa, where we found a different type of rock, probably basalt and much harder and more featured than the Tigray sandstone. There are many cliffs, escarpments, and great boulders here with tremendous potential for



Mark Richey inside the Nebelet Tower during its first ascent. *Mark Wilford*



Approaching Nebelet Tower for its first ascent. *Mark Richey*



*Mt. Aftera in the Adwa region. Mark Richey*

exploration and new routes. On December 5 we made the first ascent of the west face of Mt. Aftera (6-7 pitches, 5.10R), which takes the prominent right-leaning ramp and crack system in the middle of the wall. We descended in the dark by a steep goat path on the east face, something we would never have found had it not been for a local guide who showed up at the top. On the climb we saw patches of an almost glass-like surface of bullet-hard rock, and gigantic Ruppels griffon vultures nesting on the route and landing a few meters from our belays.

After traveling around the Axum area and doing some great bouldering in the Axum quarries, on December 10 we made the first ascent of a spectacular sandstone tower that rises about 400 meters above the small town of Nebelet, which is about 1.5 hours' drive on a dirt road northwest of Hawzien.

Our route (6 pitches, 5.10R) followed a steep line of chimneys and cracks on the southeast side to a huge ledge between the two highest summits, where we made a long traverse right to a steep unprotected passage to the final summit. On top we were rewarded with spectacular views of the desert and the cheers of dozens of local villagers who'd turned out to watch the entertainment. After a long rappel from the summit block, we found a 3rd class descent that got us most of the way down the tower without ropes.

After the tower climb we discovered superb granite bouldering only a few kilometers from the Italian hotel in Hawzien, where hundreds of huge round and very featured boulders formed a long train in a lovely setting of small villages and cultivated fields. The local children were delighted to give us a tour and eager to impress us with their own climbing prowess. Next time I would bring some shoes and watch them really climb!

The last place we briefly visited was the region around Harrar in the extreme eastern corner of Ethiopia near the border of Somalia. In a place called the Valley of Mysteries, just above the main road, we found endless pinnacles and short, steep walls with many cracks. The rock appeared a kind of granite and much harder than in Tigray. Many of the wild-looking pinnacles would be a real challenge to surmount by even their easiest route. The intense heat and dust from major road construction in process discouraged us from climbing, but it would be worth returning during a cooler season after the road is complete.