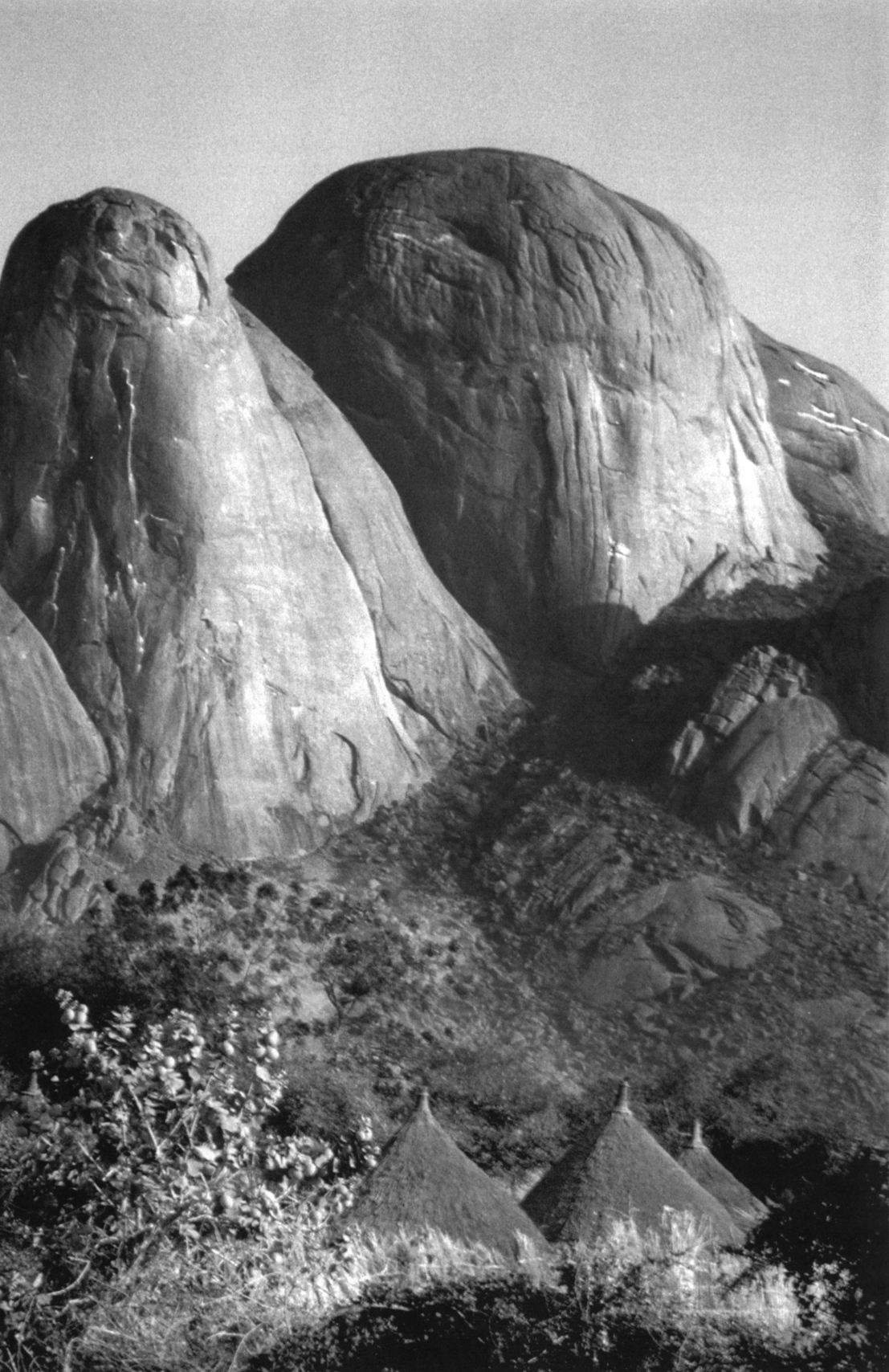


North Africa and the Middle East

Desert climbing on a larger scale

by Tony Howard, *United Kingdom*

The great Sahara desert, stretching for 2,500 miles across North Africa, has long presented a barrier, a tantalizing mystery and a challenge to European explorers and travelers. Concealed within the desert, remote mountains provided a refuge for various tribal peoples, who undoubtedly reached some of the tops on hunting trips. Early travelers and Victorian adventurers also climbed a few remote summits, but it was not really until the 1930s that mountaineers and cartographers began to climb and document ascents of North Africa's numerous and varied peaks, from the frequently snow-capped mountains of the High Atlas in Morocco and the Simiens in Ethiopia, to the barren volcanic plugs and craters of the Hoggar and the Tibesti in Algeria and Chad. The great linking theme of these European ascents has always been adventure and exploration, the essence of the achievement often being as much in getting there as in the actual climbs.

With the passage of time, the difficulty of access has, in many cases, eased considerably: good roads now cross Morocco's Atlas mountains, and the Trans-Sahara Highway reached the oasis of Tamanrasset in the Algerian Hoggar in the early 1980s. Other previously remote desert mountain areas in Libya, Egypt and the Sudan that had previously been "caravanserais" on ancient trade routes (the mountains being an inevitable source of water for scattered oases) also gradually became linked to the outside world by improving road or rail systems over the last century.

In the Middle East, mountain exploration was slower, impeded, perhaps, in places like Oman and Yemen, by the vagaries of politics in the early half of this century further compounded by tribal and ideological struggles that sometimes lasted into the 1980s. Jordan as we know it today was not even on the map, while Saudi Arabia continues to be a virtual "no go" area.

Morocco is both culturally and environmentally colorful. With its snow-capped peaks, great gorges and mud-brick Berber villages (complete with fruits, nuts and cereals drying on their flat roofs), it has much of the magic of the Himalaya, especially in its more remote mountain valleys that are only accessible by trekking in. This, together with the bustling bazaars of its ancient walled cities and their kaleidoscope of snake-charmers, traveling musicians, dancers, story-tellers, and sizzling food stalls, makes a visit to Morocco's mountains a must.

In the early 1960s, I made my first trip to Morocco with friends from our local north Manchester "Rimmon Mountaineering Club." The Atlas Mountains extend for about 600 miles, from the verdant Rif Mountains down to the Mediterranean, to the arid Anti-Atlas in the south, where granite boulders provide problems reminiscent of Joshua Tree. We visited this area in the winter of 1962-'63, when we were treated to raw cow's brain in olive oil after seeing the emaciated beast have its throat cut in the dusty village street—a memory that lingers more vividly than our games on the exfoliating granite!

LEFT: *The 2,000-foot domes of Jebel Kassala (in Sudan, on the Ethiopian border) from the west.* DI TAYLOR

For the mountaineer, the pièce de résistance is a winter ascent of Jebel Toubkal, which, at 4165 meters, is billed as "North Africa's highest mountain." Though none of the routes are particularly difficult, we found the trek in in the early 1960s, coupled with our ascent by a possible new route, a great adventure. Nowadays there are mountain huts and guides, and ascents are commonplace, though this in no way detracts from the panoramic view of the lush land to the west and the great Sahara to the east. For those in search of solitude, other nearby peaks are considerably less frequented and offer more difficult winter ice or long-distance ski tours.

Morocco drew Mick Shaw and me back for more trips in the 1970s, first in November, 1973, when we visited the 1,000-foot cliffs of the Todra Gorge in a side canyon of the great Dades Valley, which divides the High from the Central Atlas. Twenty-five years later, there are more than 200, no doubt excellent and often difficult climbs in the Gorge. Most of the them are bolted, and many would say that Todra is now the best climbing area in North Africa, but, from my point of view, the Gorge lacks the wilderness ambience that is the essence of Morocco's mountains.

There is equally good, more traditional climbing in the remote mountains to the north of Toubkal and Todra, on the limestone walls of Jebel Aioui and the Taghia Canyon in the Central Atlas. This area has also seen considerable climbing development by the French, with routes up to ED sup* and lengths of 1,000 to 2,000 feet. In the late 1970s, we were probably the first (and are maybe even now still the only) Brits to climb there, enjoying the high-mountain location and the excellent climbing on spectacular "Dolomitic" towers.

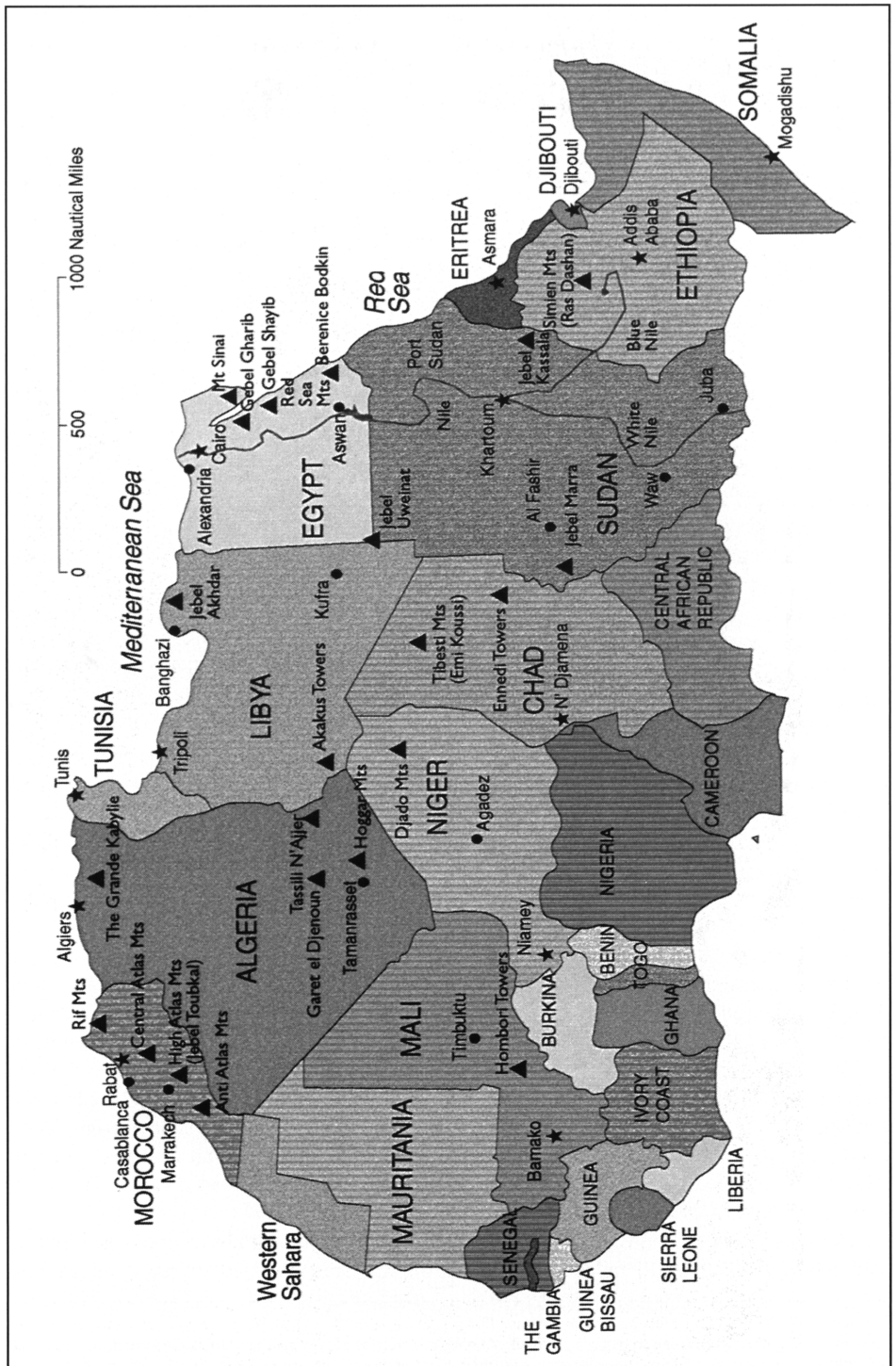
Also in the 1970s, we moved further afield, following the Mediterranean coast en route from Morocco to Corsica. We sat for three days of incessant rain and mist in Algeria's coastal Grande Kabylie Mountains and were rewarded only by a momentary glimpse of a 600-foot limestone tower rising from dripping vegetation before moving on in search of warmer rock. On our next visit to Algeria, we drove south for over 1,000 miles, following the line of the then-unfinished Trans-Sahara Highway to the oasis of Tamanrasset and the Hoggar Mountains, which rise to about 9,000 feet. After three days of traveling through vast desert dunes and past lonely oases, the towers of the Hoggar are a welcome sight for the climber.

Tamanrasset ("Tam") is the base for explorations, where blue-robed Touareg guides can be hired to visit the surrounding peaks of the Atakor and other nearby mountain areas. Or, like us, you can simply head out on rough tracks to the foot of your chosen volcanic plug. Perhaps the best towers are Iharen and the Tezoulags, with columnar 1,000- to 1,300-foot Devils Tower-like walls and routes up to F6. Most other towers, which rise in confusion throughout the Atakor, have faces up to 1,000 feet high with classic climbs of around F3 - 4, though harder routes exist. Most first ascents were established by French, Italian and Spanish climbers, and a few by the British. There are also numerous opportunities for new routes.

Our winter visit to the Hoggar left us with memories of endless desert vistas and semi-nomadic Touareg passing through on camels. As usual in desert terrain, the rock, on which we teetered high above, left much to be desired, though the cracks and corners were magnificent; overcoming the idiosyncrasies and occasional instability of the rock became a perverse pleasure with its own satisfactions, making topping out on new routes in the often-icy winds that much more rewarding.

Across the desert to the east, the Tafidet area, with virtually no climbs recorded, is even less seldomly visited, while 180 miles to the north of the Atakor is the Tefedest area, dominated by

*French grades are in common use throughout the area. TD, ED, etc., refer to the overall seriousness of the climb, taking into account the length, danger, sustained nature of difficulty, problems of retreat, and so on. French rock grades indicate technical difficulty of individual rock pitches. See Appendices at the back of this journal for a complete explanation of grades.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500
1000 Nautical Miles
Mediterranean Sea
Red Sea
Western Sahara
MOROCCO
Casablanca
Rabat
Marrakesh
Rif Mts
Central Atlas Mts
High Atlas Mts (Jebel Toubkal)
Anti Atlas Mts
Algiers
The Grande Kabylie
ALGERIA
Tunis
TUNISIA
Tripoli
Banghazi
Jebel Akhdar
LIBYA
Akakus Towers
Kufra
Tassili N'Ajjer
Garet el Djenoun
Tamanrasset
Hoggar Mts
MAURITANIA
MALI
Timbuktu
Hombori Towers
Bamako
Niamey
Djado Mts
NIGER
Agadez
Tibesti Mts (Emi Koussi)
Ennedi Towers
CHAD
N' Djamena
BURKINA
BENIN
TOGO
GHANA
IVORY COAST
GUINEA
SENEGAL
THE GAMBIA
GUINEA BISSAU
SIERRA LEONE
LIBERIA
NIGERIA
CAMEROON
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
Alexandria
Cairo
Mt Sinai
Gebel Gharib
Gebel Shayib
Red Sea Mts
Berenice Bodkin
Aswan
EGYPT
Jebel Uweinat
Port Sudan
Nile
Khartoum
Al Fashir
Jebel Marra
SUDAN
Waw
White Nile
Juba
Jebel Kassala
ERITREA
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Addis Ababa
ETHIOPIA
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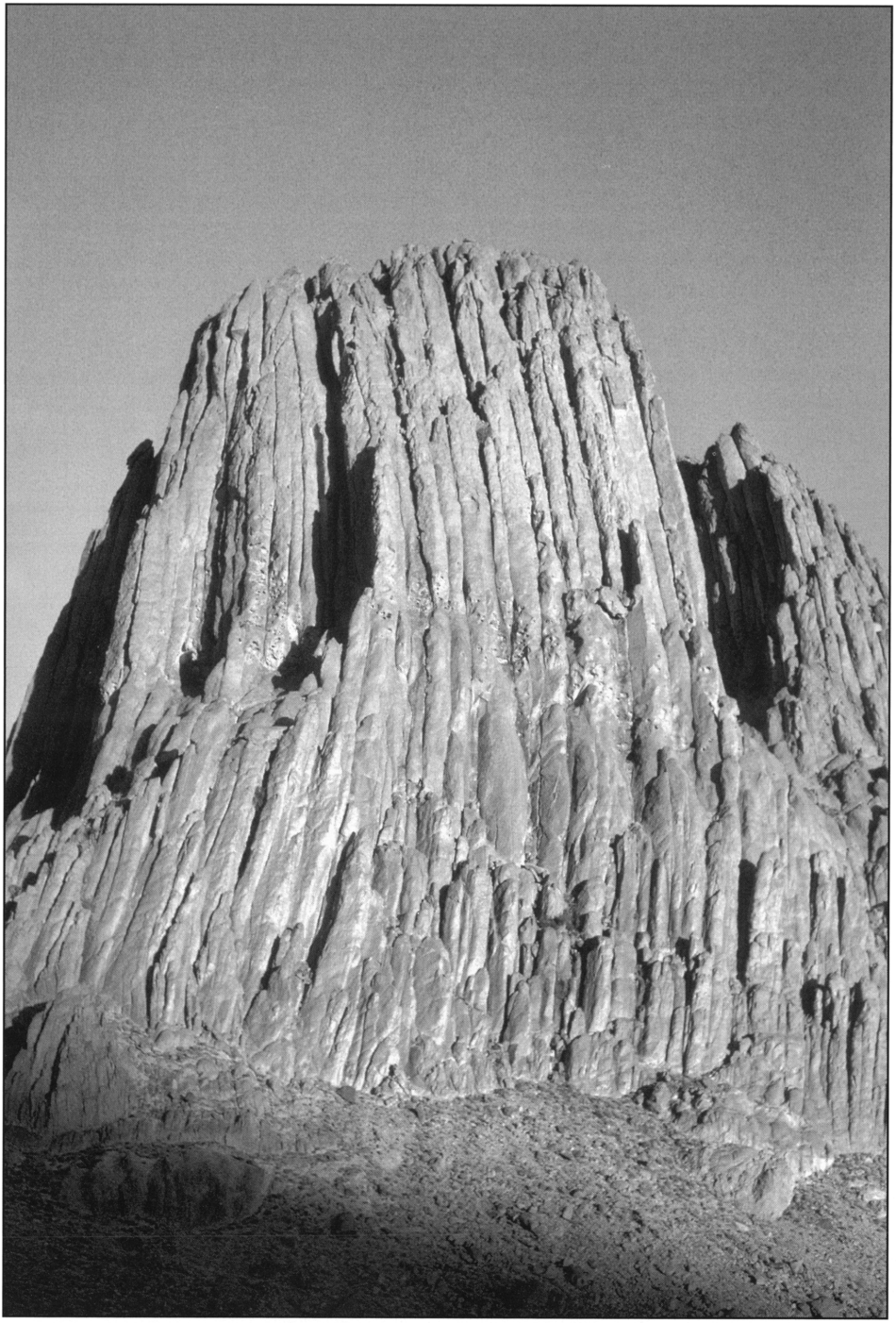


The 1,300-foot west face of South Tezoulag in the Hoggar Mountains, Algeria.
HOWARD/TAYLOR COLLECTION

the peak of Garet el Djenoun (2327m). There are some quite long and serious routes here, mostly hard and often using aid, some being 1,500 feet, ED with pitches of 6c. Even more remote, 250 miles to the northeast, is the Tassili N'Ajjer desert plateau, which reaches to the Libyan border and offers a playground of large granite boulders with well-preserved pre-historic inscriptions and paintings dating back 5,000 years.

Sadly, Algeria these days is caught up in an internal struggle for political dominance. It seems, as a consequence, the Hoggar and Tassili will be left to the Touareg and the desert winds for some time to come. No one will be crossing the desert south west from "Tam" to the Hombori Towers near the legendary Timbuktu in Mali, almost 1,000 miles away. Fortunately, however, these impressive peaks towering over the Dogon villages, with routes up to 2,000 feet (mostly in the TD and ED category), have other, easier means of access and attract increasing numbers of climbers.

Back north, and moving east along the Mediterranean coast from Algeria, the small country of Tunisia offers little for the climber, though Di Taylor and I did some bouldering there on the limestone sea cliffs of Cap Bon in the 1980s, and the great Bill Tilman, finding some rare wartime entertainment in 1943, searched almost in vain for rock on the 1180-meter Jebel Zaghouan.

East again is the vast land of Libya. Like Tunisia, it has a great historical past, as shown by the splendid Phoenician, Greek and Roman cities along the coast and in the hills of Jebel Akhdar to the east. The policies of the current Government have not been conducive to tourism, but a serious effort is now being made to encourage visitors. As a consequence, Di and I were invited there as guests of Wings Travel of Libya in 1997. We explored the hills, valleys and small limestone cliffs of Jebel Akhdar, then headed south, across 700 miles of desert. En route, we crossed the edge of the great Ubari Sand Sea with its hidden jewel-like lakes concealed by endless dunes. Our destination was the remote Akakus Mountains in the far southwest.

The bizarre contorted towers rise from huge orange dunes as far as the eye can see. The rock is exfoliating badly but, perched dramatically above large loose cliffs, the highest towers teased us with what looked like good rock (which perhaps it would have to be, to stay up there). Unfortunately, with no maps and limited time, we were unable to find a way up to them. The main attraction of the Akakus for its rare visitors are the fine rock paintings and inscriptions depicting elephants, rhino and other wildlife of 5,000 years ago when this part of Africa was green. Small stone arrowheads from this period are still found on the wind-swept surface of the sand.

South of here, across the Libyan border, are Niger and Chad. There's a good chance we'll be in Niger this winter, having a look at the rarely visited mountains of the Djado Plateau, one of the few parts of north Africa still extremely difficult to access. Reaching the mountains of Chad is no easier. There, the great extinct craters of the Tibesti rise to 3415 meters at Emi Koussi and are home to the hardy and independent Tibbu people. These high, lonely mountains have been intermittently visited by climbers for over 60 years, with a recent 20-year gap due to the political situation.

Again, it is the journey as much as the climbing that attracts the desert mountain enthusiast. One might continue to the almost-unvisited Ennedi Towers out east, toward Sudan, then travel north by the ancient 1,000-mile slave trade route of the Darb el Arabain ("40-day road") to Cairo, following the intermittent camel trail still visible in Egypt's Western Desert. There are no mountains on this side of the Nile, other than the lonely summit of Jebel Uweinat (1893m), which marks the meeting point of Egypt's border with Libya, Chad and the Sudan. East of the Nile, however, North Africa rises to a final barrier of mountains that run almost the full length of Egypt's 600-mile Red Sea coast.

We had a quick trip here in the 1980s, finding harsh, stony deserts concealing some attractive-looking mountains—though, as ever, the exfoliating granite creaked alarmingly underfoot. Sadly, we were refused access to one of our main objectives, the great slender needle of the "Berenice Bodkin" with a huge natural rock arch nearby, both commented on by Murray but unvisited since his time and still unclimbed.

Not far south of "The Bodkin" is the border with Sudan (hence the reason for the closed zone). Mick, Di and I visited this country in 1983, climbing on the 2,000-foot granite domes of Jebel Kassala on the Ethiopian border. The area around the Kassala oasis is the homeland of the Hadendowah and Rashaida and other colorful, swash-buckling tribes who still carry huge swords and spears. Smuggling and brigandry is as much the order of the day as camel-herding and agriculture!

It was a fascinating place to climb, the only initial deterrents being the featureless nature of the domes and the large and numerous Rupell's Vultures(!). Having summited on a 1,500-foot F5 route first climbed by Robin Hodgkin and L.W. Brown of the British Alpine Club in 1939, we were shocked to see people coming in from the Ethiopian desert to the east, the vanguard of refugees from the great drought and famine that was to hit the world news in 1984. It was no place to continue climbing, so we crossed the Sudan to the borders of Chad, 800 miles to the west, in search of other mountains.

The 1980s also found us in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, the most famous peak of which is Mt. Sinai (or Jebel Gebel Musa, 2285m), where Moses reputedly received the Ten Commandments. Here, despite the creaking granite, the encompassing desert with its semi-nomadic Bedouin people, coupled with its Biblical aura, lends a special ambience to the climbing. Numerous routes have been recorded on the cliffs around the ancient Monastery of St. Catherine's (location of the Burning Bush). There are crack climbs up to 2,000 feet (though most are shorter) and 6c. A few have even been fitted with bolts, which, though they permit otherwise unprotectable climbs to be led, seemed to us anomalous, being in proximity of the monastery.

For Di and I, the late 1980s and '90s were predominantly a time of Middle Eastern exploration, though we did get a chance to wander through the vast and varied land of Ethiopia with its myriad tribal peoples, its ancient cultures and high mountains. The summit of Ras Dashan (4620m) provided us with a seven-day trek, camping and staying in small villages en route with the very hospitable local people, who are poor in wealth but rich in spirit. Though we had no climbing gear with us, it seemed the rock towers to the north and northeast of the Simiens would be worth returning to.

By this time, however, we were immersed in Jordan and Oman. The latter gave us opportunities for a couple of trips as we worked on an Adventure Tourism Report for the government. This found us crossing the vast dunes of the Wahiba Sands, which sweep down to the contrasting blue of the Arabian Sea, or sailing below the high sea cliffs of the remote Musandam Peninsula, which guards the Persian Gulf, or driving and trekking through Oman's many mountains looking for the best rock to climb (much of it was awful, but some of the limestone was excellent).

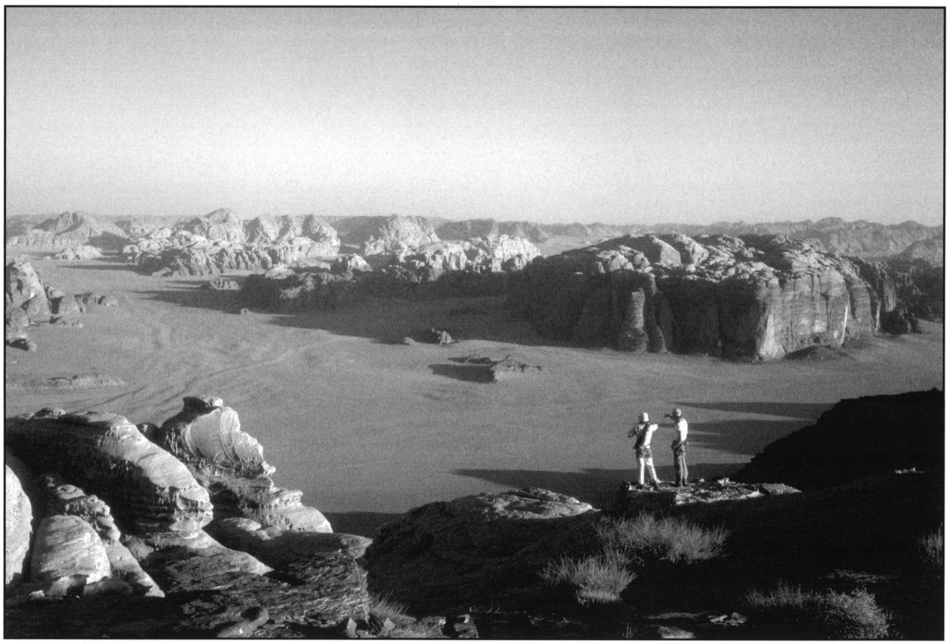
One of our first routes was on the great wall of Jebel Misht close to the northern edge of the infamous Empty Quarter, where resident climber Alec McDonald and I found a new 1,000-foot TD up its southeast pillar on excellent limestone. The "plum" 3,000-foot south pillar had already been done by French guides some years previously; aid was originally used on its lower vertical section, but it has now been climbed free.

Smaller cliffs in the nearby Jebel Akhdar Massif also provided numerous routes of quality, as did the cliffs of the great gorge of Wadi Dayqah in the mountains of the Eastern Hajar. Both

these areas are accessible from the capital, Muscat, in half a day by off-road vehicle. The mountains of Oman also entertained us in other ways, with descents of splendid canyons such as Wadi Beni Awf with its waterfalls, pools and cavern. On the south side of Jebel Akhdar, we descended the three miles of the Hoti Cave, abseiling and swimming beneath parched limestone peaks to exit by a short dive through a sump—a rather different experience for the desert traveler. Since then, others have been attracted to Oman, climbing routes of "alpine proportions" on Jebel Misht and on the impressive peaks above the black chasm of Beni Awf.

On the Mediterranean Coast, Lebanon (to which we traveled in February, 1999) is positively encouraging visitors. High above Beirut, the Middle East's highest summit, Qornet Es Saouda (3088m), offers both winter skiing and autumn trekking. Below its western slopes, the impressive limestone Qadisha Gorge is beginning to be explored by climbers, and the whole area is riddled with excellent caves. The Qadisha Gorge is about 1,000 feet deep with lots of limestone cliffs, but often broken; the best I saw were about 500 feet and they looked good in a beautiful setting. The magnificent Jeita Grotto is in the foothills. Further south, the forested Shouf Mountains look interesting, but Lebanon's second highest top, Mt. Hermon (2814m), is currently in a closed area on the Syrian border.

For us, however, the major attraction since 1984 has always been Jordan. Our attention was initially drawn to the mountains of Wadi Rum in the south of Jordan by David Lean's film *Lawrence of Arabia*. We then read T. E. Lawrence's masterpiece, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* in which he extols the region as "Rumm the magnificent ... vast echoing and god-like." Of his



"Rumm the magnificent. . . vast echoing and god-like." Mick Shaw and Alan Baker overlooking Jebel Khazali and the mountains of Rum, from Jebel Rum. HOWARD/TAYLOR COLLECTION

admiration for the area and the local Huweitat Bedouin, he leaves no one in doubt! Our subsequent application for permission to visit Wadi Rum resulted in a request from the Tourism Ministry to assess the area for climbing and adventure tourism, though our researches revealed that only one climb had been so far recorded, in 1949, by Sylvia Branford and Charmian Longstaff with a local Bedouin hunter, Sheikh Hamdan, to the top of Jebel Rum (1754m). (We have since learned that the top had been reached in 1947 by Major Henry-Coombe Tenant of the Welsh Guards and Corporal Lance "Havabash" Butler, Royal Signals, who were accompanied to the summit plateau by Major St. John Armitage.)

The European ascents, however, pale in significance when it is realized that Thamudic inscriptions indicate this difficult summit was climbed about 2,000 years ago by hunters. The local Bedouin continue this tradition, hunting ibex on these magnificent and complex mountains to this very day. None of their routes can truly be said to be "easy." Certainly all of them are serious undertakings, and some have moves of F5. When you realize that they are traditionally climbed alone and without equipment, you begin to appreciate the daring and commitment of their ascensionists.

On our first visit, Mick, Di and I were accompanied by our old climbing friend Alan Baker. The four of us were immediately made welcome by the local Bedouin, who accepted us into their black goat-hair tents. Though initially suspicious of our reasons for wanting to climb in Wadi Rum, they were obviously proud of their routes; they pointed us toward them, giving only enough information to get us started, and were there to meet us on our return, grinning mischievously if we had been lost in the bizarre maze of these sandstone mountains. We learned to think like Bedouin and discovered a wealth of unique Bedouin climbs, some of them ascending miles of rock to reach remote summits; for their grade, they rank amongst the best rock adventures in the world. Also on this first trip, we were pleased to top out on

one of the few summits not climbed by the locals, up a 1,500-foot TD. We also made the first tentative foray onto Jebel Rum's vertical 1,500-foot east face, finding some F6b crack climbing. There was obviously much to do in this 1,000-square-mile area of desert mountains.

Over the following years, we were joined by our friends from France, Wilfried Colonna and Bernard Domenech (whom we had first met in the Morocco's Taghia Canyon in the 1970s). The Remy brothers from Switzerland joined the bonanza, "a new route every day" their mantra. Albert Precht and friends from Austria became annual visitors, and, more than any others, made the big walls their home, climbing with the nonchalance borne of increasing familiarity over 2,000-foot faces formed of rock like melting candles or bracket fungi. Geoff Hornby and team from the U.K. became aficionados, as did others from Spain, France and elsewhere in Europe. Together with our French friends, we concentrated on searching out the classic lines up cracks, pillars and walls, sometimes overlooking the campsite, or, increasingly, out in the more remote parts of the desert. By the 1990s, Rum had become acknowledged as one of the world's best desert climbing areas.

The much-admired climbing ethos of the local Bedouin has largely been preserved so that drilled placements have been kept to a minimum. Only the most-frequented descents have been fitted with abseil chains, as much to clean up the growing confusion of worn slings as to improve the safety. The "golden age" of rock exploration in Rum is now undoubtedly over, though there is still much to be discovered. Most visiting climbers, however, are happy to repeat the best of the 400 climbs described in our guide, *Treks and Climbs in Wadi Rum*, which vary in length from a single pitch through to 2,000 feet and include star routes of all grades up to F7b and ED sup. If that is not enough, there are more in the "new routes" book at the campsite!

The Bedouin continue to play a key role; their encampment in the main valley of Rum has grown to a village of houses. Three of the locals have been trained in rope safety in the U.K. to

Tony Howard on the Vanishing Pillar, *Jebel Kharazeh, with Rum village below.*
HOWARD/TAYLOR COLLECTION

help them work as mountain guides. The area is prospering and has been designated a National Park with the inclusion of local people on the committee, a move that we have long supported.

We still return annually to Rum, and its battleship mountains rising from seas of orange sands still offer us opportunities for new climbs. Perhaps more importantly, its scattered Bedouin camps have become our "second home."

Meanwhile, we have discovered there's more to Jordan than meets the eye: the mountains guarding the ancient carved city of Petra, 60 miles from Rum, are providing us with magnificent wilderness treks. The huge canyons descending to the Dead Sea (at 400 meters below sea level, the lowest point on earth) have given us some heart-stopping descents as we abseiled over overhangs and through waterfalls. The forested hills in the north have revealed limestone cliffs hidden below Islamic castles. Climbing possibilities are everywhere. The adventures are endless and, together with the people, will continue to tempt us back.

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Mali

Topos for Hombori Towers may be available from the Club Alpin Francais, 24 Rue de Lumière, Paris. Also, see info in *Rock & Ice* numbers 43 and 45.

Route descriptions and other information will also be found in the *Annales du Groupe de Haute Montagne* (GHM) and *La Montagne et Alpinisme* (France), *Desnivel* (Spain), and *The* (British) *Alpine Journal.* The 1950s journals of the British Climbers' Club and Cambridge Mountaineering Club have information on The Hoggar.