

About Irghil M'Goun and the Bou Goumez

Hamish Brown

If Irghil M'Goun sounds a bit like a hero from Sir Walter Scott it will perhaps excuse my last preparatory letter to our group spelling it McGoun. Irghil M'Goun is not in fact a person. It is a mountain.

It is the only Moroccan 4000m summit outside the Toubkal Massif and lying well E of that highest and most popular area of the Atlas. In 1972 four of us in my VW dormobile went to have a look at its approaches. Eric Roberts and Donald Mill set off to traverse the range while Alistair Lawson and I drove a long way round to pick them up. They had a memorable crossing, an account of which appeared in the 1973 *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*. Eric, an inveterate Munro-bagger had also made a stormy trip to bag Iferouane beyond the Lac d'Yni, east of Toubkal. It was 4001m after all. The latest map, however, gives it another name and a mere 3853m.

M'Goun seems to be 4071m on most maps, but if it has a reasonably standard elevation the place names were erratic in the extreme. One valley, crowded with villages, could only produce one name in common when we compared three maps. (The I.G.N. 1:100,000 map series for Morocco is the latest and best.) We arranged to be picked up at Bou Drarar, only to find it Bou Thaarar, only to find it Bou Taghrar. In the end we were not picked up there anyway—which was as well—but we had best start at the beginning.

M'Goun naturally beckoned for many years, but having the responsibility of vehicle-ownership my chances in 1972 were rather ruled out. All I wanted was to get my vehicle out in one piece! As the way in to the M'Goun Massif is long and rough there is no great desire to simply enter and exit the same way; traversing the range is the lure, but logistical problems multiply at once if that dream is set forward. It would not be easy to find anyone willing to drive round and wait. We would have to hire a vehicle to drop us off and, later, collect us. The party all had air flights and as for our original pair this was always a thought to spur them on through blizzards or blistering heat. That pair travelled light, with their gear on their backs. Having read Colin Wyatt's account (in his *The Call of the Mountains*) we decided to take skis. It would be a natural trip for the Eagle Ski Club which is concerned with ski-mountaineering.

I first met this body at the Neltner Hut in 1965 and having thereafter ploughed up most of the Atlas peaks in deep snow determined to learn to ski. It seemed an easy way to climb mountains. So years later, Eagles later, it was only right that 6 of us should aim for M'Goun. It was a gamble all the same: too much snow and the mules would not make it across the passes, too little snow and we would not be ski-ing. Our schedule was tight. Robin Day, Patrick Fagan, Rodney Franklin, Mike Mason and Sue Baldock were the victims.

I had written, hopefully, to Aït Mehammed asking for mules, so it was infuriating to be stuck at Azilal 12 miles off as the minibus needed diesel fuel. We waited 2 hours for a tanker to come as the pump was dry. Then at Aït Mehammed there were no mules. (Things were running true to form!) An official, however, wrote a letter to the sheik of the Bou Goumez valley saying we needed mules. He wrote the message with my Parker biro, and forgot to give it back.

Now our driver was hired to take us only a dozen miles on to Tamda—where the

VW had gone in 1972 and beyond which I refused to drive, the road to Tamda being bad enough as it was laid, corrugated-iron fashion, across limestone pavements. We had planned to camp at Tamda and use mules beyond for 10 days, through to Bou Drarar. At Tamda the driver stopped hopefully but we cajoled him on. Brave man. Tortuous and rough miles later we skirted the peak of Azurki and from a 2700m pass dropped down into the secretive Bou Goumez valley. 'Never again!' swore the driver so we gave him hush-money and he set off home to Marrakech.

We had been dumped outside the Sheik's house so were soon installed in a cool courtyard and the long guest room. Mint teas and *cous cous* later we began the hours of bargaining for mules. The Sheik's spokesman was an ex-legionnaire and like most soldiers gave the length of his service in years, months and days. With a pile of skis and baggage dumped in the back of beyond our bargaining position was rather weak—and they knew it. We paid highly for our adventure.

Colin Wyatt's book, Mailly's guide *Villes et Montagnes Marocaines* and an article of Michael Peyron's in *La Montagne* (February 1971)—the best of the meagre literature—all told of a big lake (Lac d'Izourar) and a good ski hill above it with the name Irghil Ouaougoulzat. These lay a day's march up the Bou Goumez—under Azurki. We made a 3 day round trip for them. The valley itself was fascinating with a lot of building going on, the fields vivid and the people some of the handsomest imaginable. Even the children were charming. The sun took its toll and we were disappointed to find the lake muddy and undrinkable so had to push on, but we ended on green pastures with icy springs. A bearded vulture inspected us and we were seldom without redstarts and wheatears of many kinds. The mules cantered about and Brahim and Mohammed sang by their smoky fire. It was great to be free among the hills again, especially in the hot sun one expects in Morocco.

Most ascents on ski actually missed the highest summit but we made sure of it. A carry in the dark, then skins (and later ski crampons) led to a ridge where we were perched above a hollow with Ouaougoulzat arrayed across a corrie. We crossed the

1 Azurki from Ouaougoulzat (This and next 3 photos: H. Brown)



hollow and an easy ridge took us to the top at 3770m. The view was extensive: M'Goun, an endless 15 mile switchback of tops, the river below crooking and plunging into a great gorge on its way to die in the Sahara sands. The Bou Goumez river ran down into an impenetrable gorge too; we had come into a well-defended land.

Down off our ridge half the party skied home, the other half skinned up an oven-hot gully to a col to gain extra running and view the corries beyond. We found (Swiss) ski tracks! The porters gave us mint tea on arrival at camp and the next day we wended back slowly to overnight with the Sheik, a man of charm and grace, who ruled this forgotten corner. We came down just ahead of bad weather, delighted to have had a fine round trip and Ouaougoulzat climbed. How lucky we had been we only realized later as from then on we were dogged by difficult weather. Morocco (and much of Europe) was having a very wet and wild period. The storms broke against this barrier before the desert, so we had our share of them.

Sadly we left the Bou Goumez valley, climbing from Tabant up zig-zags to the Tizi n' Ait Imi, which was just clear of snow. The more frequented route up the Arous valley was still blocked we were told. This *tizi* (pass) lay well E on the Ouaougoulzat crest, a break in the toothy ridge through which the wind blew coldly. We only stopped on it long enough to view the unpromising land.

The path wound down in such tight bends that the 4 mules at times faced in alternative directions. Below lay a dry valley, honeycombed with caves on its far bank, then a low range of hills, then the long M'Goun array beyond. It was really a huge valley with 2 rivers running down it, separated by this odd low barrier of hills. As the rivers met well downstream we turned up the nearer one determined to camp high up it and, on the morrow, follow from the pass at its head running to the pass at the head of the other, and so lodge below M'Goun itself. This we did—but not without problems.

We pushed on up to a fine gentian meadow. A chill wind and snow in the night turned it into a bleak wilderness. The porters (who just slept out) could not take it. There was a deal of planning and changing. They went down, promising to return the next night: we turned, without skis and carrying our gear, to try and salvage M'Goun. The Tizi n' Ounout was over 3000m and led to the plunging hollow of the Arous, draining to the Bou Goumez, a gorge which is not used as too sheer—the entry fights over the slopes above and beyond. We skirted round to the head of the other valley, the Tizi n'Oum Soud and sat, at last, in close view of the mountain we had come years and miles to climb. An hour of peering through binoculars and working out lines left us happy. Even the weather had cleared. The sun is a marvellous additive to wash away doubts. We sauntered down to a smelly *azib* (sheep shelter) still deserted, and rounded to a clear stream which came from the gun barrel of gully up which lay a fairly sure route for the morrow.

By evening meal time it was snowing again, and when my alarm went at 2am it was blowing a blizzard. It was heart breaking.

Over breakfast we noted the barometer had risen slightly and there was a corner of blue beyond the spindrift grey. We decided to give it a try—and very trying it proved.

For 2 hours we wended up easy slopes to gain the edge of a superbly-sculptured corrie. It was almost perfectly circular with the headwalls cliff-bound like a barrel. The left (E) arm was simple but long. We took the right (W) arm as it led more directly to a summit just one off the highest. There could be a step on it but we



2 Irghil M'Goun from the S

would chance by-passing any such barrier. Scree led to slabs which led to the crest—Cuillin-like—and presently we were presented with a Thearlaich-Dubh Gap. It looked as if a massive loss of height might defeat us. We *had* to leave camp by 4 to reach the gentian meadow for dusk at 7 and link with our worried muleteers, who had much of our gear and food too.

By dropping down right we found an escape gully. We donned crampons and climbed down it and then rose again to the crest on hard snow flanks. An hour had gone. We lunched. The crest was broken and time consuming. Atlas lethargy was being felt too. We turned problems on the left, snow, till I realized that on the right lay a great scree flank all the way to the col to M'Goun. We took to it and it went in typical hobbling, traversing fashion. Looking back we had left a splendid ruler-straight line across it. We had won back some time.

On the col the bitter wind knocked us about; we reeled along like four drunken knights tilting at invisible difficulties. The final cone was just foul scree and desperately hard work. Six hours after leaving camp we stood on the summit of M'Goun. I have seldom had to work so hard for what was really an easy enough ascent—but then this is in line with all the accounts I've read of this elusive summit. M'Goun is not a tame mountain, as C. S. Lewis might have put it.

The descent took 1½ hours as we simply tumbled down the corrie/gully direct to camp. It had been a maelstrom of drift at dawn, now it was a soggy mess in the blazing afternoon sun. The storm had blown itself out. The 2 at camp had brews for us and the hour of rest there is a treasured memory. The haul over the cols and down to the gentian meadow was taken in stately progression. It was too good to hurry. We had a sweeping sunset. Far-off Ouaougoulzat cleared of cloud for the first time since we had been on it. We came down to earth though—the porters were not at the camp as promised which left interesting speculations for the morrow.

Luckily we had food for 24 hours so were soon fed and bedded and the next day found our muleteers an hour's walk down the valley. Mohammed had come up with 2 mules but had given us up at 4pm. If we were daft enough to stay in those desolate heights, they were not! We pitched that afternoon in the lee of a decaying *kasbah*—as romantic a spot as could be imagined. We had descended to where the 2 rivers met, well down E, so we looked over to the multiple southern buttresses of Ouaougoulzat.

The romance wore thin as dusk blew in a storm, not of snow this time, but of dust. It penetrated everything and gave one of the most miserable of nights. It was not a good early morning for the member with contact lenses.

The porters were as glad to stir as we were. They slept just wrapped in their *djellabas* and blankets. The Tizi n' Aït Hamed is just on the 3000m mark, well E along the M'Goun crest, so we crossed still almost opposite Ouaougoulzat—whereas we had been well W on its crest to cross the Tizi n' Aït Imi. The drear valley itself ran down into a gorge which is seldom followed, and certainly not with the snow-melt then in the river. It had been a poor, barren place compared to the Bou Goumez, yet whenever water was available people had established themselves.

A threatening storm failed to come and slowly the porters relaxed the pace. The overcast sky and cold wind were actually a boon for long ascent. We had only climbed two summits but of peaks *and* passes we had a healthy hand; and who would place one before the other?

Nomadic families with all their belongings were coming over the double pass. So were traders. We pale northerners felt very humble.



3 Camp by the abandoned fort below M'Goun ridge

4 The approach to Bou Drarar

The true top of the pass had a white scar of rock which can be seen from the main road along the desert S—an abiding landmark for the future. A slope of scree led down and after one or 2 began to run down it Brahim took off in pursuit—and overtook all, effortlessly, though his knees were hobbled with his robes and on his bare feet he had plastic shoes.

Suddenly we were among camels and gaily-dressed families, a different world—the Sud. We had broken over the Massif. We were on schedule despite the weather, despite all the problems. We passed through the first village with its great walnut trees and cool shade and camped by the stream before a gorge. We could just see the scarred pass in the distance. Rather than suffer our female snorer I slept out under the stars—and they were the swinging brilliants of the S too. It was very good.

The red cliffs of the gorge towered sheer, or even undercut, but somehow there was always a passage. One pool held the interesting mixture of mosquito larvae and tadpoles. Amajgag, the village past the gorge, was civilization: the children had learnt to beg! We crossed a stony plateau to the Assif Znag and followed this dry river till, downhill, it became a stream again. Bou Drarar was a rose-red town, surrounded by roses and barley fields and the contorted wilderness of desert. Morocco is a land of constant contrasts. Sometimes the contrasts are a bit bludgeoning.

The schoolteacher offered us one of his rooms and we had all made ourselves at home—invited to tea in houses, etc—when the chance arose of a lorry out to the main road. We were due to be picked up by 'Sahara Tours' at noon the next day but the road looked even worse than the Tamda road in. If the driver baulked at it . . . We took the lorry, a wise move, as the road was a wild succession of hairpins up over a scarp and then dusty miles down to El Kelâal des M'Gouna. We arrived youngest and oldest uniformly grey with dust.



Slowly we insinuated ourselves into the elegant 'Hotel Roses de Dades' so from camping outside it in the blowing dirt we dined and slept within. Never did skis look so out of place as ours stacked by the tent against the hotel with nothing but desert all round. Only in the north lay the hint of snowy peaks. The next morning they were white-washed with new snow, but that salvo was too late. We were out.

We phoned and arranged for the mini-bus to pick us up at the hotel. Another driver, a surly maniac, took us over the dramatic Tizi n' Tichka pass (nearly 2400m) back to Marrakech, and because the journey was based on mileage we were actually charged *less* than expected. The patisserie and later a gourmet meal in the 'Bagatelle' with lots of *Chaud Soleil* really ended the tour. If it gave little ski-ing for our Eagle selves, the Alpine halves of our beings were fully satisfied. It was the sort of expedition John Ball had made at the start of the game, a hundred years ago; very traditional.

Sandstone towers of the American south-west desert

Eric Bjørnstad

The American SW desert is a loosely delineated area of the Colorado Plateau. Geographically, it is referred to as a table-land or high desert country and encompasses portions of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. The territory is the product of relatively recent geologic activity. Only 50 million years ago the entire region was convulsed by violent movement of the earth's crust, and 12 million years ago, the area uplifted 1200 to 1800m. As a result of this cataclysm, water run-off was extensively accelerated. As the watershed of this ancient bottom evolved, spectacular erosion formed the canyons, cliffs, mesas, buttes and spires, now identified synonymously with the Indians who predominantly inhabit the land. With the exception of scattered small towns settled by the Mormons, the SW desert is an area insulated not only physically but culturally from the general public; few roads are paved, maps are vague, not always reliable, and available literature is often of interest only to the botanist, geologist or Indian historian.

Climbing in the desert has never been popular. The common sentiments have been briefly stated by Yosemite pioneer and desert veteran Chuck Pratt: 'Desert climbs are generally short, often requiring less time than the approaches. The rock at its best is brittle and rotten, and at its worst is the consistency of wet sugar'.

Yet, the desert compels with a type of magical attraction. It is unique, decreeing its particular demands, offering its fulfilling rewards. It is at once alluring and repelling, a harmony of extremes, addicting its trespassers to its treasures.

Temperatures are seldom right; often it is unbearably hot, or unpredictably cold: frequently running the gamut within the few hours before and after dusk and before and after dawn. Only brief days of Spring and Fall offer passable climbing conditions, and then, one's eyes are subject to pain from the sand-filled air. Food is unavoidably gritty. High winds can whip the climbing rope to threads in hours and bring communication to a frustrating halt. Climbers usually know on their first visit whether or not they are likely to return. A successful ascent can require the logistics of an expedition with many of the trials of grand alpinism.