
TONY HOWARD
Middle East 1994

Oman

Since the publication of Alec MacDonald's guide to *Rock Climbing in Oman* (distributed by Cordee), and Alec's departure from the country, development has been taken over by Jerry Hadwin. He is currently (January 1995) rumoured to have set his sights on another major route on **Jebel Misht's** 1500m S face, having added a route of his own to this huge wall earlier in 1994 at VS grade between The Nose and the SE Pillar.

The United Arab Emirates

John Gregory and friends have been busy in recent years, in particular at **Ras Al Khaimah**, bordering the western edge of Mussandam. He writes:

'The United Arab Emirates has recently become a very popular holiday destination, possibly because sunshine is almost guaranteed for 12 months of the year. Very little rock climbing has been done so far, but there is vast potential for routes of up to 300m-400m on many of the walls in the various wadis. The rock is limestone and can vary from very solid to horribly loose.

'Some 300m routes have been done in **Wadi Bih** and another smaller crag has produced 30 routes that have all been documented. Once the routes have been climbed and the loose rock eliminated they have proved to be varied and of good quality. Some routes were done as straight leads and others were cleaned off first. We have used only natural protection. The grades are generally about VS with a few HVS, E1 and E2.

'The best places are in the north of the country between Ras Al Khaimah on the west coast and Dibba on the east coast, an area of mountains known as the **Ru'us Al Jibal**. They form part of the Musandam Peninsula which protrudes northwards to the Straights of Hormuz at the entrance to the Gulf. These mountains rise to 2000m and also provide excellent scope for walking. All the main peaks have been explored and have provided many interesting and demanding walks of up to 14 hours. Exploring is the operative word as it has been very much a question of trying a route and seeing what happens. Success in reaching a summit is never certain as there are many steep rock bands barring access.

'The best time to visit is between November and March. The daily temperatures drop to around 20° in January. There is always a chance of rain during these months, which can be very heavy at times but rarely lasts for more than a few hours and the rock and wadis dry very quickly.

'A local contact would be very useful as there are no maps or guidebooks available. Access to the mountains is usually by 4-wheel drive and these

can be hired. There are some superb spots for camping and the lack of people and the peace of the wadis is one of the area's great attractions.'

Yemen

Local politics continue in turmoil. Sandstone and limestone cliffs have been reported with apparently good potential, but little or no development. The Shibam area was visited by Newcastle University Exploration Society where they reported sandstone cliffs with 'varied climbing offering a wide range of grades, but with little natural protection'. Travel is currently possible but not easy (it depends on your chosen destination) and permission to visit and climb in remote areas is unlikely.

Jordan

This continues to be the major destination and area of development for climbing and trekking – especially so now that the borders with Israel are open and flight costs are reduced by 50%! For £170 it is now possible to fly to Eilat, where a couple of taxi rides will take you into Wadi Rum. Conversely the influx of tourism has led to an unprecedented leap in prices in Jordan. To get to Petra now costs £20 instead of £3 (unless you use your navigational skills to locate one of the 'backways'!). Prices in Rum for 4-wheel drive and camels have risen by about 30%, so be prepared to bargain hard or to get a small group together to climb in the more remote places such as Barrah Canyon.

Rising costs however have not stopped development. The most important contributors in 1994 were Austrian climbers Albert Precht and Ziggi Brochlmeier. The big shady N wall of **Jebel Kharazeh** (450m, UIAA 6), rising from the narrow gloomy depths of the Canyon of Zernouk el Daber, typifies their bold and fast ascents. It was matched by a route of similar grade and length on the opposite canyon wall, ascending **Jebel um Ishrin**. They also added two more routes to their own Vulcanics Tower on **Jebel Rum** and Precht completed his 600th new route on the S ridge of **Draif al Muragh**, to the south of the Nassrani Towers.

Also in the area last spring, Di Taylor, Mick Shaw and I continued our relaxed search for more esoteric gems following someone's plea in the New Routes book for 'more short climbs'. In the easily accessible maze of ravines in Rakabat Canyon, we and a team headed by Geoff Hornby added five new routes with grades of 5, 5+ and 6A (French grades are used throughout). These two English teams also spent time exploring more remote corners. Out east of Barrah, Hornby's team found a new dome and added some 5+ slab routes, and to the SE Pete Bishops climbed *Freedom as a concept* (6A) up the first pitch of the still unclimbed horrendous gash left of Doug Scott's *Guelta Grooves*. Over on Burdah the same group added two 450m slab routes up the E face, at TD and TD inf, finishing at the summit, and two shorter climbs also on the E face slabs at 5+ and 6A in the area of *Orange sunshine*.

Meanwhile, we were sniffing around the domes of Abu Khsheibah with young Bedouin climber Atieeq Auda (proud owner of the fastest camel in the valley!). Ascents included *Macho Man and the Granny* (5), to the recently discovered dome of **Jebel Farata Shaib** and, facing it, *The Gorgon* (5+) to another new top - **Jebel Dugranji**.

On the next dome to the west, members of this group also added *Walking the Plank* (5+) to the top of **Jebel Ikhnaisser** up the obvious northern black slab.

French Guides, Wilf Colonna and Bernard Domench were once again in Rum in the autumn. They too added numerous two and three-pitch routes of good quality in the Abu Khsheibah area as well as in Rakabat and Barrah Canyons and out near Disi to the NW.

More recently, Atieeq Auda solved the long unanswered question of the south-western approach to **Jebel Rum**'s summit by guiding Julian McIntosh and Joy Shand to the top in December 1994, up the huge and obvious canyon S of *Sabbah's Route* - 'a great day out'.

On a more ominous note, four young Austrians spent a few days creating a bolted sports-climbing crag just 10 minutes walk from the Rest House. We, and most other climbers visiting Rum, feel that the area should be preserved as an adventure climbing area, not a bolted playground. We took the bolts out and removed the eyesore. There are infinite possibilities for new routing in 'free' style without creating bolted lines. Details of all these routes and others will be found in the New Routes book at Wadi Rum's Rest House and Campsite. The 1994 guide to *Treks and Climbs in Wadi Rum* is available from Cicerone Press.