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DENNIS GRAY

## Up Above the World

(Plates 38, 39)

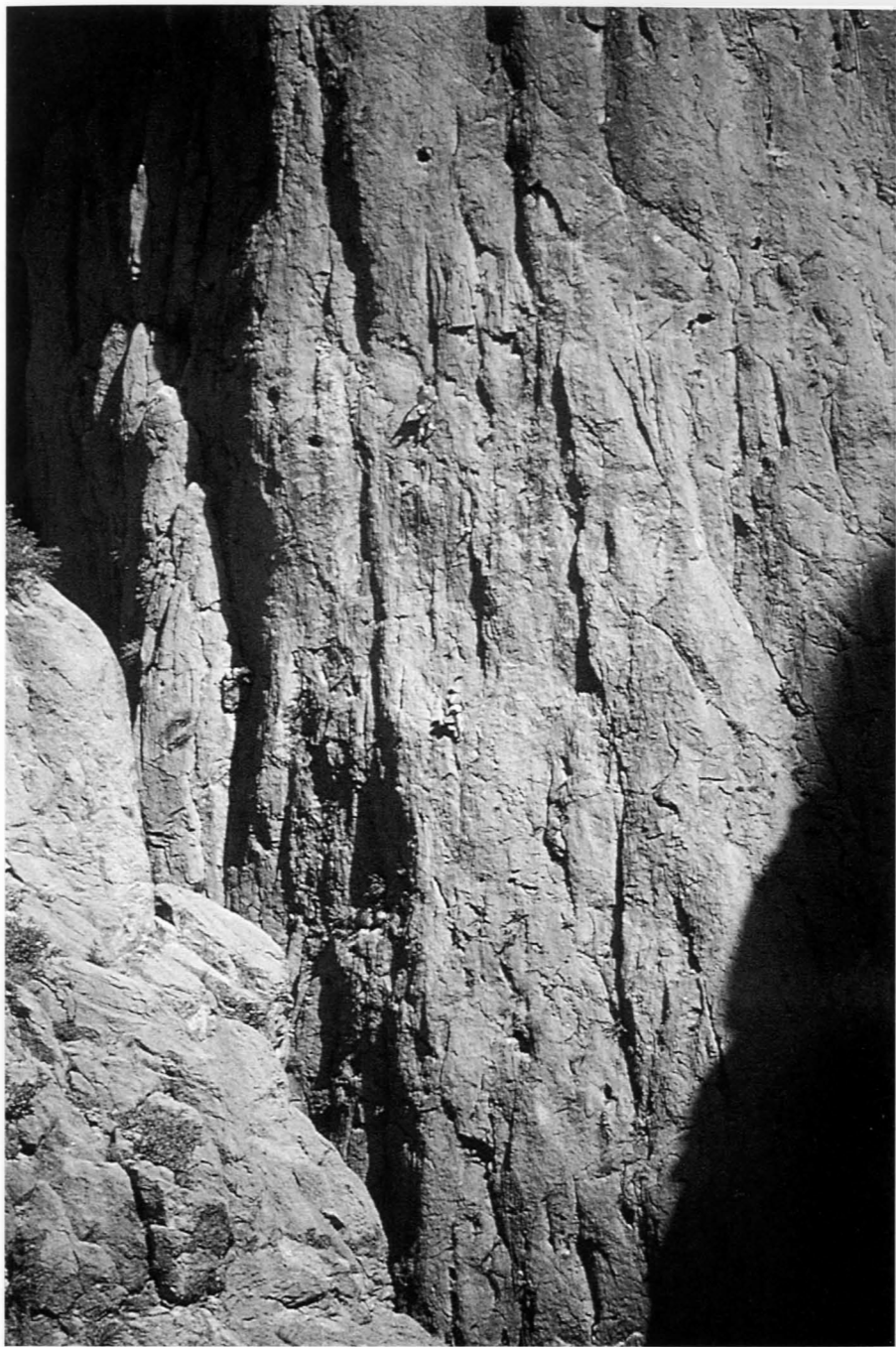
Morocco is the nearest country to the UK which you can still call exotic. With its mixed Arab and Berber population and undogmatic stance on religion, it is an important destination for mountaineers and rock climbers with good winter climbing in the High Atlas, outstanding ski touring in the Central Atlas, and first-class rock climbing at many different sites which have been developed during the last forty years. The oldest of these are the great limestone cliffs high in the mountains on the north side of the Central Atlas, first developed in the 1950s. These are best approached from Zaouia Ahanesal.

The current problem in visiting some parts of Morocco is the lack of up-to-date route information. No such difficulty exists with a visit to the country's premier modern rock-climbing site, the Todhra Gorge. Located in the Dades valley above the town of Tinerhir, it boasts every type of challenge from 300-metre traditional climbs to single-pitch sport routes. I have been there many times during the last decade and have witnessed an amazing period of development.

There are now eighteen separate sectors boasting more than 200 routes. In the Todhra Gorge are four hotels catering for tourists, but most climbers prefer to stay at the El Mansour or L'Etoile at the mouth of the huge canyon. At the latter, up-to-date information is available on the climbs and topos prepared by Spanish climbers. The original climbing pioneers of the Gorge were French but the Spanish have now taken over as the area's major developers, not surprisingly when you realise it is possible to drive there in about 24 hours non-stop from Madrid.

The rock at Todhra is a firm ochre limestone, and there is still an almost unlimited scope for new routes. Whole cliffs have not yet been climbed on, and some very challenging lines remain. There is even some bouldering to be found within the gorge but this is more limited. The best time for a visit is in the winter months since it can be stiflingly hot in summer, but be warned that the gorge is at altitude and can be extremely cold in December and January.

The best approach is from Marrakech over the Atlas via Ouarzazate, and it is possible to travel to Tinerhir either the whole way by 'Grand Taxis' or by the ordinary bus service, both of which are cheap by our standards. It is also easy to hire cars in Morocco, but these tend to be much more expensive than using local transport.



38. The Central Wall of the Todhra Gorge, Morocco. Two climbers are just visible in the centre of the picture. (*Mick Ryan*) (p120)

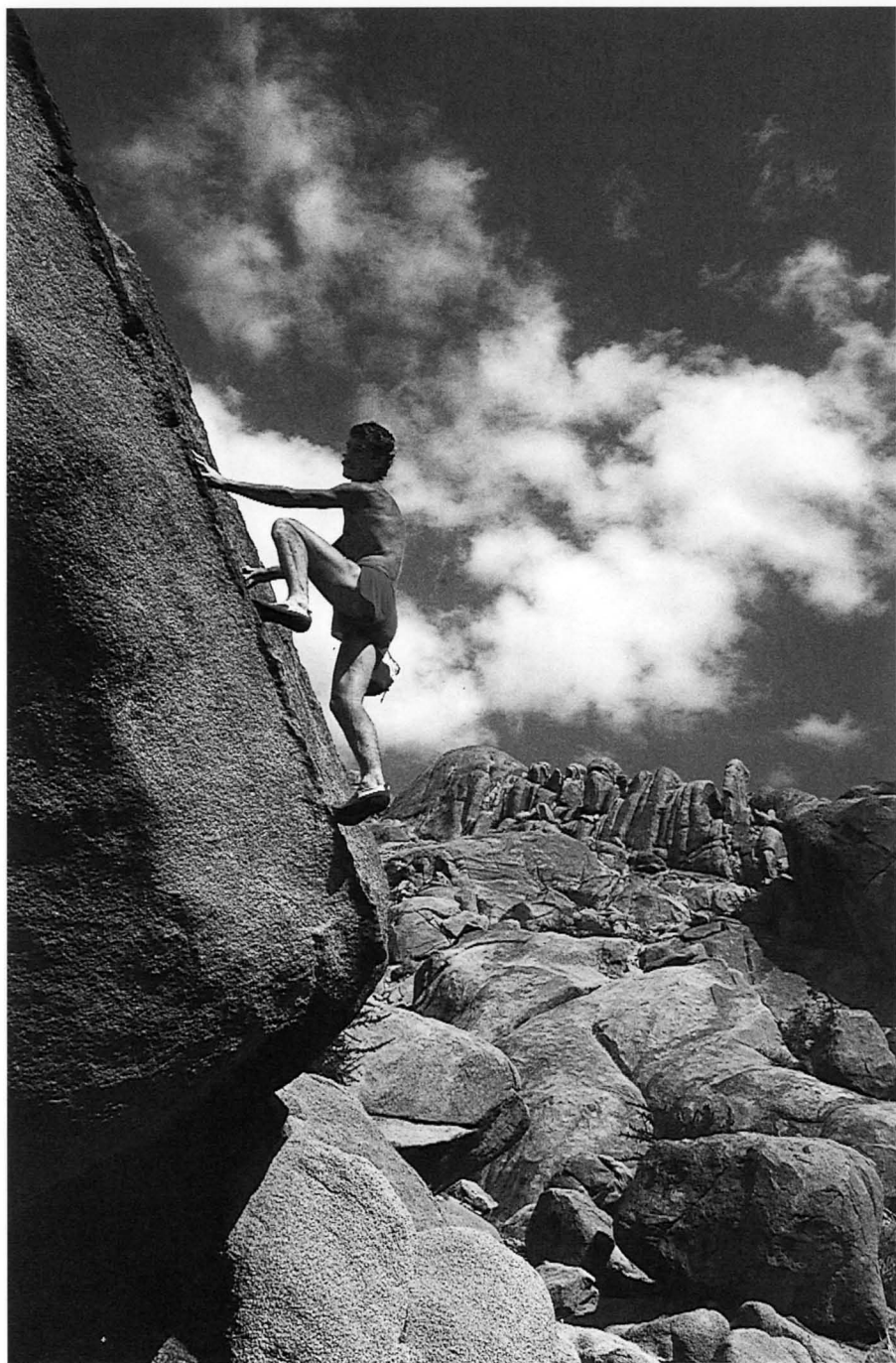
My own favourite area in Morocco is the still unspoiled Sarho mountain range. You can trek there for days on end and apart from locals, never see another human being. These mountains lie between the Dades and Draa valleys and can be approached from either Boumalne in the former or Nekob in the latter. Again, it is best to start from Marrakech over the Atland and once you are down off the Tichka Pass the mountain scenery changes to desert oasis, palm tress and kasbahs, or villages built from pisé mud.

I have been to the Sarho six times leading treks, and on each occasion my guide was Alilouch, a member of the Ait Atta tribe. A nomad who lived in a goat-hair tent with his three wives and children, Alilouch is a 50-year-old man with the physique and stamina of an Olympic middle-distance runner. The Sarho are a range of jagged peaks, high desert plateau and deep valleys, and the rock-climbing potential of the area has hardly been realised. During our treks we climbed three mountains, Amlal, Bou Gaffer and Amalou n'Mansour, the latter being the highest at 2712m. While the other two might be dismissed as mere slogs, Bou Gaffer is a beautiful granite mountain reminiscent of Buachaille Etive Mor in Glencoe.

It was here that the Ait Atta made their last stand against the French in 1933, one of the great battles of modern history. Only a thousand tribesmen, accom-panied by their womenfolk and children, faced a large force of 83,000 soldiers of the Foreign Legion, with air support from four squadrons. In the end, after many weeks of fighting, the tribesmen surrendered, but only after the offer of a treaty of friendship under whose terms they still live today.

There are huge limestone cliffs beneath Amlal and on the plateau of Tadaout n Tablah in the Bab N'Ali region there is an area of spectacular conglomerate towers. Few of these have been climbed and if they have, it is only usually by their easiest route. The same is true for Bou Gaffer itself, a fine peak with many challenges remaining. Bear in mind that its flanks might be warm in the winter sun, but at night, camping at its base, water will freeze inside the tent. In summer it is crucifyingly hot, too hot to climb and you must know where the wells are. The locals are friendly and will always help if you are in trouble or need and there are a surprising number of them about either herding their camels or goats.

When I first became interested in Morocco, I read every book I could about the country and one writer in particular impressed me more than any other. The American Paul Bowles still lives in North Africa, in Tangier. One day I was reading something he had written when my eyes became riveted to this sentence: 'The area around the Tafraoute Oasis is like the badlands of Dakota only writ large, with fingers of granite and high peaks all around.' I looked this place up on the map and found it on the south side of the Anti Atlas range, an old Foreign Legion post on the edge of the Sahara. I decided to check this out at Christmas 1987 and set forth from Yorkshire, travelling by bus to London, then on to Paris, down through Spain, across to Morocco, arriving in Tafraoute several days later.



39. Ron Fawcett bouldering at Tafroute, Morocco, in 1988. (*Dennis Gray*) (p120)

I have never been more excited than at the sight which greeted me as the bus from Tiznit rolled down what is now the old road, across the Tafraoute plateau and into the Oasis. For many kilometres before we arrived we had passed cliff after cliff, some several dozen metres in height and the whole area littered with boulders in front of a backdrop of the Djebel el Kest rising to 2395m above the Ameln Valley to the north. I asked the locals if they had ever seen anyone climbing in the area but no one had.

Initially they thought I was crazy, running into the desert each day to boulder and solo out there on my own. I just could not believe my luck. I had discovered a major new area, which I now realise is almost on a par with Joshua Tree in California, which I visited in 1995. The difference is that there are many more boulders to develop at Tafraoute than at its American counterpart, and you can live in southern Morocco for a mere fraction of what you need to spend in the USA.

I returned to the UK intending to keep quiet about this extraordinary place but I did mention it to a friend, the wilderness photographer John Beatty, particularly praising the painted rocks and showing him some of my pictures of these. Immediately he wanted to go there. In 1984 a Belgian artist, Jean Verame, working in the desert a kilometre or so from the Oasis, covered a huge area of rock faces, pinnacles and slabs with primary colours, using 18 tonnes of paint. This was an amazing feat, because of both the weather conditions and the inaccessibility of many of the rock features. When I was first at Tafraoute this action was relatively unknown but ten years on they are a tourist attraction, despite the fact that the colours are now fading. Several magazines in Europe and the USA subsequently carried pictures of rock athletes in action on red, blue or purple-coloured pinnacles.

In March 1988, Ron Fawcett, John Beatty and myself spent just over a week in Tafraoute exploring the area, bouldering and taking pictures. The resulting published articles and pictures about our trip encouraged several other parties to visit the Oasis. Among the most regular of these visitors has been a group led by my old buddy Joe Brown, and including the late Trevor Jones, Les Brown and Claude Davies, Paul Ross and most recently Derek Walker.

They have been developing the huge quartzite cliffs in the Ameln Valley on the flanks of the Djebel el Kest, and at the time of writing they have pioneered between them over 60 new routes! The best of these have now been written up in a new-routes book kept at Les Amandières, the government tourist hotel in Tafraoute. My most recent visit to the area was at Easter 1997, accompanied by my young friend Nigel Scarth, aka 'Jumper'. During an eight-day visit he pioneered some outstanding boulder problems, and led several new routes including one gem, a hand-jam crack which would have felt at home in Yorkshire! We called this, tongue-in-cheek, the Supercrack of Tafraoute as there are hundreds of similar beautiful pitches all around the hillsides. In fact, many thousands of such beautiful pitches are just waiting to be climbed at the Tafraoute Oasis, enough to last a lifetime of climbing. And the scenery is breathtaking, especially the sunsets.

Tafraoute is best approached from Tiznit, south of Agadir. There are charter flights from the UK to this destination. Another climbing area I discovered in the late 1980s can also be reached from there. This is a line of limestone sea cliffs on the Atlantic coast, close to the village of Mirleft. On my first visit there I soloed a beautiful ochre slab, 25 metres straight out of the sea, which was Severe in standard. Just up the coast from that feature was an amazing stack formed like a sea horse, sticking out of the ocean about 40 metres high, and it had always been an ambition of mine to return and climb this formidable pinnacle.

I returned there last winter with Jumper, and after an epic ascent, carried out in wind and rain and with some of the highest seas running I have ever seen, we reached its summit. But getting off again was harder than the ascent, for neither of us had equipment to set up an abseil. And so we climbed down the route and Jumper excelled himself, descending the wet, greasy limestone safely as I took in the rope. With the waves almost crashing over us, I began to wonder what might happen if he did fall, but it didn't bear thinking about for too long. There was no one around, and no climber within hundreds of kilometres.

This kind of pioneering climbing is still to be found in Morocco and is suitable for anyone of whatever ability. I have been there myself on fourteen occasions, and can confirm that going there regularly is likely to result in an obsession with the place. There are plenty of other good places to climb, for example in the north of the country on crags in the Rif mountains. However, as this area is now the centre of the hashish trade, it may be best avoided. There are bolted cliffs in the Ait Bou Goumez valley close to the Moroccan National Mountain Centre, the instructors at which are French guides. There are even some Fontainebleau-style bouldering circuits near to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden, again the work of French climbers. Whatever you seek among mountains, you should find it in the Maghreb.