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Morocco 2005-2009

This report covers developments on the **north side of Jebel El Kest**. The Cicerone Guide *Climbing in the Moroccan Anti-Atlas* by Claude Davies describes climbs around the market town of Taфраout (or Tafroute – most names inevitably have multiple spellings) and above the Ameln valley i.e. to the south of the Jebel el Kest massif. Since the publication of the guide (2004), increasing numbers of climbers have visited the area and many additional climbs have been discovered as the new route books in the Hotel Les Amandiers testify.

The true north side of the massif received no attention until March 2005 when Geoff Hornby and Susie Sammut climbed several routes on the impressive but easily accessible slabs at Dwawj and these have seen considerable activity since that time. However, the major development of the north side did not start until 2007, when Steve and Katja Broadbent started developing the crags close to the idyllic village of Annamer and Lower Eagle Crag was subject to assaults by teams made up of Ben and Marion Wintringham, Paul Donithorne, Emma Alsford and Steve Findlay, Chris Bonington and Dave Absalom, Derek Walker, Mike and Marjorie Mortimer and Jim Fotheringham. This was the start of extensive exploration that has continued apace to the present day, aided by the new road between Idagnidif in the east and Tanalt in the west.

The rock of the massif is composed entirely of an excellent quartzite, highly suitable for climbing as it is generally firm, well supplied with holds and readily takes natural protection. Drilled protection is unnecessary as is the carrying of pitons and hammer. Although most crags are vegetated to a greater or lesser extent, it is usually possible to climb clean rock with little or no gardening. Many of the crags are not particularly steep so those expecting routes in the modern idiom may be disappointed, although a few routes of around E5/E6 have been found recently. The emphasis is on adventure with routes of up to 800m of climbing on the largest crags and the discerning eye will spot many possibilities for further exploration. Inevitably, the crags that have received most attention have been those close to the road, very few being more than 10 minutes' easy walk. However, there are many attractive and presumably virgin crags for climbers not afraid of one or two hours of toil in the Moroccan sun.

The north side is situated about an hour and half's drive south-east of the popular holiday resort of Agadir (regular flights from the UK and readily available car-hire) where very comfortable accommodation is available at the spectacular Kasbah Tizourgane close to Idagnidif. The Kasbah has the advantage of close proximity to the crags but it lacks the amenities of the



193. Jim Fotheringham on *Dream of White Butterflies*, Waterfall Walls, Jebel El Kest, Morocco. (Mike Mortimer)

traditional centre of Tafraout, 50 minutes drive further south, where the favoured hotel is Les Amandiers. The climate of Jebel El Kest is that of a semi-desert region and as such good weather for climbing is generally to be relied on, the best months for the north side being March, April and October. Summer is far too hot and the winter months are likely to be rather cold for the north-facing crags.

As only a handful of routes have had second ascents the following account is inevitably a personal account of the longer climbs that have been made. Details of climbs can be found in the Amandiers route books and an on-line guide by Steve Broadbent is available at <https://sites.google.com/site/quartziteclimbing/Home> Ben Wintringham is also planning an on-line guide.

Lower Eagle Crag is the finest of the crags readily accessible from the new road with a fair spread of grades and easy descents at either end (the goat herders' path at the west end is well worth seeking out and the start is clearly marked with cairns). As one approaches from Idagnidif the 200m north-east facing wall of the Sanctuary is very obvious with two vertical black stripes giving spectacular climbing (*Saladin*, 200m HVS and *Otello*, 200m E1) whilst further right is the challenging Bon Courage Wall (*Bon Courage*, 200m, E1). The most attractive looking line on the main part of

Lower Eagle takes another black streak (*Black Beauty*, 250m E1) but there are many excellent climbs hereabouts.

Just over the ridge to the north of the Eagle Crag group is the incredibly beautiful valley in which is situated the communities of Tamza and Tmdkrt (or Tamdakert). Abundant water supplies (by Moroccan standards and especially after the exceptional rains of the last winter) mean that the hillsides together with the valley bottom are lush and green: terraces with fig trees and vines as well as cereal crops and well-stocked vegetable gardens are not unusual here. The contrast with the multicoloured cliffs that tower above the valley has created a magnificent and unusual climbing environment. The valley, which does not appear to have a name but is often referred to (by us) as Shangri La, can be reached from the east by turning off the new road down a dirt track by a small mosque on the right about five miles from Idagnidif (I believe this is called Ighir). The surface of this track varies from year to year but is negotiable by two-wheel drive cars if care is taken.

On entering the valley, various attractive-looking rocks appear but the first of any size suddenly appears as the road bends left and starts to drop. The Tamza wall stretches for several kilometres and attains a height of 300m but boasts only a handful of routes. The wall is breached by a broad gully, Ice Box Canyon, which is taken by the Tamza-Annamer path. The north-facing wall, which gives the gully its name, is the home of some fine routes on excellent steep rock; the natural approach is from Tamza but the routes are most easily reached from the Annamer side. Right (i.e. west) of the Tamza wall is the Flatiron, a huge slabby monolith that has seen considerable activity with three great outings up the left side with the Wintringhams' *The Edge* (200m E2) looking particularly fine.

Beyond the Flatiron the track drops quite steeply to the heart of Shangri La, the community of Tmdkrt, dominated by the mighty Waterfall Walls and the great ridges of Aylim giving as romantic a location for climbing as one could wish for. In October 2007 Donithorne and Findlay made the first breach of the former when they fought their way up the forbidding looking *Continuation Corner* (600m E2) whilst Fotheringham and Mortimer, having been repulsed by smooth and protectionless black slabs right of the waterslide, consoled themselves with the mainly easy but potentially classic *Great Ridge of Samazar* (650m HVS) up the massive Aylim. Even longer and equally fine looking is the Broadbents' *Labyrinth Ridge* (800m AD) added the following year. Worth noting also are two routes up the east face of Aylim, *East Face Direct* (450m HVS) by the Broadbents and *Pipeline at the Gates of Dawn* (250m HVS) by Richard Hazsko, Bonington and Graham Little. Meanwhile Fotheringham and Mortimer renewed their acquaintance with Waterfall Right Hand to produce *Terminator Wall* (600m E2), a mountaineering route with some vegetated bits and a big atmosphere.

Right of Terminator Wall is The Pimple, apparently part of Waterfall Right Hand but with a true summit and an abseil descent (most unusual in Shangri La) and crammed with character-full lines most of which give superb climbing; *Lady in Black* (200m E1) with five varied pitches is well



194. Fig Tree Wall. (Mike Mortimer)

worth seeking out. The exceptional rainfall of the last winter meant that the waterfall was particularly spectacular and really added to the atmosphere of *Dream of White Butterflies* (550m E2) which takes the line of slim slabs and ribs right of Continuation Corner to give what may be the most beautiful climb in the valley.

Beyond the Pimple the road rises steeply in a series of hairpins to a col before continuing downhill to Tanalt. On the right of the col is the south face of Agouti sporting three pleasant looking climbs; the Broadbents' *Stairway to Heaven* (195m MVS) gives an entertaining route to a summit which is an exceptionally good view point. Opposite Agouti the attractive West Buttress of a Cloggy-like crag called Fig Tree Wall (actually part of Aylim) offers several fine routes and the Wintringhams' *Braveheart* (210m HVS) is another potential classic.

In summary, this is a great place to climb, adventurous but not overly serious, lonely but quite easy to reach with a wide variety of climbs and a unique ambience.