

## **The Bedouin Hunting Routes of Rum (part 2)**

**Tony Howard and his partner Di Taylor were, together with Mick Shaw and Alan Baker, the first climbers to thoroughly explore the mountains of Wadi Rum in the south of Jordan. Since then, and with the co-operation of the local Bedouin, the Ministry of Tourism and Her Majesty Queen Noor, they have written three climbing and trekking guides to the area and helped train Bedouin Mountain Guides in the UK. They are particularly pleased that their explorations have contributed greatly to the economy of Rum's indigenous people.**

**This article, the second of two, covers their own initial explorations of what have since become world famous Bedouin climbs:**

Rum village, in the deserts of south Jordan, was predominantly a Bedouin camp when we arrived in 1984. The access road was poor. There was no electricity. Water was from the spring of Ain Shelaali, where T. E. Lawrence had bathed in 1916. Brass pestles and mortars chimed in the early dawn, announcing coffee, whilst curls of juniper smoke rose lazily into shafts of warm morning light piercing the gaps between the mountains. Tourism was almost unknown.

Defallah and Sabbah and their father, Sheikh Atieq, welcomed us. They introduced us to Hammad Hamdan, son of Sheikh Hamdan, the man who had led two English women to the summit of Jebel Rum thirty-two years previously, whilst Sheikh Atieq had been hunting ibex with one of their companions.

It was from them that we learnt about their hunting routes and other ways into the mountains to collect medicinal herbs, or for special fodder for their livestock or for water in times of drought. They climbed alone and bare footed and were keen that we should repeat their climbs and invite others, quickly appreciating that it could bring extra income for them as guides. As they took us through the desert, they pointed out deep canyons and precipitous ridges up which their routes went to the summit domes. The climbs sounded fascinating and looked amazing.

Whilst gathering firewood with our new friends for a circumcision feast, they showed us a spectacular natural arch, at that time unknown to all but the Bedouin. We reached it by two Grade 5 (Very Severe) climbs up the mountain's 300 metre east face, but it was the discovery of the Bedouin route by Di Taylor and myself in 1985 that led to the Rock Bridge of Burdah becoming one of the local community's best assets.

Our new friends also told us of various routes to the top of Jebel Rum, the area's most famous mountain. Above the black tents of the village, they showed us a huge cave, high in its east face. "That's the way to the top," they said. Adding, "It's easy. It will only take you four hours. You won't need ropes." Well, it didn't look that easy, but we were yet to learn that they had a climber's sense of humour! We decided to take one rope between the four of us, 'just in case' and were not surprised when the initial pitch turned out to be a VS crack. Then, as we climbed higher, we became lost in an immense canyon. Eventually, we continued up through steep, exposed cracks and chimneys, marvelling at the Bedouin's ability to climb alone in such wild and exposed surroundings – and climb back down with an ibex on their back!

It was after midday when we emerged from the massive cave and reached the top, to discover that it wasn't the true summit. After climbing some domes, it was visible a kilometre away over complex terrain. With little time left, we down-climbed most of the route, a time consuming process ending in a forced and waterless bivouac. When we returned to camp next morning it was to be greeted by our smiling friends – round one to them! (Actually, they were right, once you know the way, four hours is the correct time, but only the Bedouin climb and descend this 400 metre VS without ropes!)

When asked which of their routes went to the highest point, they directed us to Al Thalamiyya, 'The Dark Place of the Djinn', a massive cleft cutting into the east face. It seemed an unlikely starting point, being almost two kilometres from the summit, but it proved fascinating. Like the cave climb (which we later named The Eye of Allah) it provided continuously interesting climbing. It was also technically harder, even more complex and extremely long. It was on this climb that we found some Bedouin 'tricks of the trade' such as piles of stones, cut holds and branches wedged in cracks to pass difficult overhangs. Here also, we discovered their system of cairns: the occasional single, anomalous pebble to mark the way, a few stones at a turn in the route and a 'wall cairn' marking a no-go point. We were eventually forced to return, once more within view of the top, by the seemingly impassable canyon of the Great Siq. Mysteriously, there were Bedouin footprints leading to it's edge then, when we were on its other side a few days later, we found the same footprints there also. A year later, I abseiled through with Mick Shaw, which is now the normal way, but the Bedouin still maintain it can be down-climbed.

Finally, our friends revealed the secret of the direct way to the top, up a climb used by Hammad. It enters The Great Siq from the east, whereas his father's way, Sheikh Hamdan's Route is from the west. Once deep inside, it exits by the vertical south side up some Grade 5 rock with a dead juniper tree for aid, jammed in place by Hammad – more Bedouin tricks! Emerging from the cathedral-like rock architecture of the Siq, and after some complex route-finding, we then struck directly along a line of domes for the summit ridge. There, some mini-siqs briefly threatened our success but were bypassed by bold leaps and enjoyable detours before we finally arrived at the summit.

At 1754m and only 700m above the desert it was a hard-won top but, thanks to our Bedouin friends, in reaching it we had learnt a lot about their climbs and their mountain. We enjoyed the reward of the panoramic view to the full, extending as it does out towards Saudi Arabia and Sinai over a colourful vista of sand and mountains, hiding remote Bedouin camps that we were beginning to call home.

Our exploration of these hunting routes continued, sometimes in the company of our Bedouin friends, often simply following their hints and trying to discover their ways for ourselves. In 1985, we climbed the dramatic sweep of Sheikh Kram's Hunter's Slabs and the magnificent Rijm Assaf (The Tower of Assaf). Its crux was a bold pull over an overhang from a tottering Bedouin cairn balanced on the edge of space. Later, Di and I followed Sabbah Atieq up a route on Jebel Khush Khashah, from which a Bedouin woman had fallen to her death when descending with water. We also climbed with him over Jebel um Ishrin through the challenging and complex canyons of Mohammed Musa's Route.

Sheikh Hamdan's Route, up which he had led 'the English ladies' to Jebel Rum's summit in 1952, proved to be delightful. From the top, we descended by his son Hammad's

Route – a magnificent mountain traverse “of alpine proportions” and now a sought-after classic. Also from the west, we climbed Sabbah Atieq’s Route with its exposed traverse above the void to reach the summit domes. Then, in 1995, Di and I reached the top by the Thamudic Route, perhaps the world’s oldest known rock climb, still marked by the inscribed names left by the two hunters “Kharajat, son of Sa’adan” and “Jahfal, brother of Taym” over 2000 years ago.

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Rum is acknowledged as “one of the world’s best desert climbing areas”. The Bedouin routes have achieved the ultimate accolade as being “amongst the world’s best climbing adventures”. Our Bedouin friends are prospering as desert and mountain guides. The hospitality that they gave so freely to four strangers almost twenty years ago has reaped its deserved rewards.

**Guidebooks:**

Treks & Climbs in Wadi Rum, Tony Howard. Cicerone Press, latest edition 1997.

Walks & Scrambles in Wadi Rum, Tony Howard & Di Taylor. JDA, Jordan, latest edition 2002

Jordan – Walks, Treks, Caves, Climbs & Canyons. Tony Howard & Di Taylor, Cicerone Press, 1999. American edition entitled Walking in Jordan. Interlink Books, 2002.

For more info on Jordan and the mountains of Rum, see: <http://www.nomadstravel.co.uk>

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