

The Aqaba Mountains: Jebel Mahat al Hathra Range & Jebel En Naber

Jebel Mahat al Hathra Range. *Info Brian Hodgkinson, Nov, 2016.*

The route does not entail climbing of a high technical standard, but the ability to move safely over often loose and exposed rock is required, together with good general route finding and mountaineering capabilities. 700m of ascent and descent and 7 to 8 hours duration.

Location (all elevations are taken from Google Earth)

Heading out of Aqaba in the direction of Amman, a large car park will be reached on your right hand side, approximately 1 km before the Wadi Yutom Interchange and 15 km from the Møvenpick Hotel Aqaba. The Jebel Mahat Al Hathra mountains lie to the South of the Amman highway and railway, and Jebel Baker the highest mountain in the vicinity, with it's jagged summit at around 1500m lies directly opposite to the North of the highway. A few km prior to reaching the aforementioned car park, the starting point for "The Black Snake Route" is passed. This route reaches the lowest of the Jebel Mahat Al Hathra summits at 972m.



Above: Looking up the approach valley

Below: the view across the col from the middle peak to the main



Route Description:

From the car park at elevation 430m walk across the wide dry river bed on obvious tracks, towards the railway. Cross the railway, taking care to look both ways, then follow the track 100 m further uphill, until a smaller track is reached branching to the right. (29deg 32' 54"North, 35 deg 07' 33.64"East). From this point you can look up an impressive valley with three prominent peaks in the distance and rocky ridges running down each side. On any given day this valley will be passed by the occupants of numerous vehicles traveling along the Amman, Aqaba highway, the majority of whom probably only give the mountains a cursory glance and therefore miss the opportunity to gaze at the awe inspiring nature close by. A walk in this valley will provide more adventurous individuals with the opportunity to discover a wild and rugged area visited by few people, and yet easily accessible to those in the know.

Continue on sandy tracks up the valley bottom, soon passing a small Bedouin encampment. For the first hour the walk is easy and straightforward, following gently rising sandy tracks bearing the imprints of many animals. At an elevation of 648m there is a prominent Y fork in the valley. Take the right hand fork towards a long low man-made wall (hunters hide or animal shelter?), (29 32' 45 66 N, 35 06' 40.73 E).

Continue up the valley, which becomes increasingly narrow, steep and filled with jumbled stone blocks. The sharp middle summit is now in front, and the aim was to climb as

directly to the top as possible. Unfortunately the summit cone is comprised of very loose weathered rock, and therefore it was considered safer to move out slightly to the ridge on the South side where firmer ground was encountered. Time to the summit at 1031m (29 32' 33.01N, 35 05' 59.53 E) should be around three hours and you will be rewarded with magnificent views in all directions. The lower summit 972m (Black Snake Route) is slightly to the North, with Jebel Baker beyond, while to the South across an imposing Col a higher summit can be seen.

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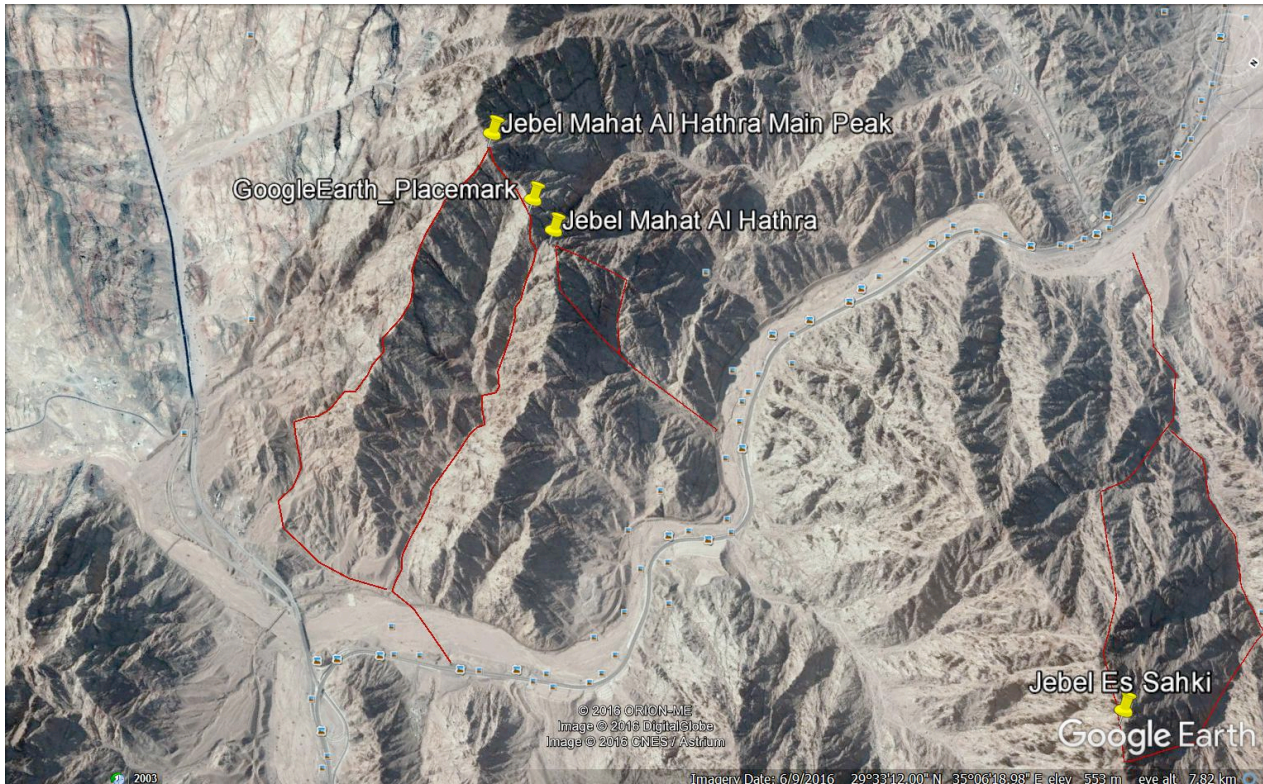


Descending from the Main Peak along the East ridge

Descent: Either retrace your steps back down the approach valley or continue as follows: Cross the exposed and rocky Col, taking care not to get blown over the edge, by the wind tunnel venturi effect, then up over sharp basalt pinnacles to reach the higher summit 1145m in about 30 minutes (29 32' 19.30 N, 35 05' 52.18 E) from where even more impressive views can be enjoyed. To the West two further slightly higher summits can be seen, but bearing in mind the relatively short Autumn daylight hours, I decided against attempting them on this occasion.

To descend, follow the ridge line to the East, with the approach valley on your left hand side. The port road from the Wadi Yutom interchange can be seen far below and to the right. In parts the ridge is very

sharp and narrow and in other parts blocked by large towers of rock which can be by passed carefully around their bases, always making sure to get back onto the original descent ridge afterwards, as you can easily find yourself on spur ridges which can take you away from the intended route. At an elevation of approximately 840m (29 32' 24.10 N, 35 06' 57.84 E) the way is blocked by a minor summit, and therefore to continue following the ridge would entail climbing up again. Alternatively gullies run down towards the approach valley on the North side and towards the port road on the South side. After a bit of deliberation I decided that that the South side gully was the marginally less loose of the two, and was still enjoying a bit of



afternoon sunshine, and so followed this down towards trees at the bottom. Most of the way down was over steep loose blocks, but with a couple of tricky drops requiring a bit of down climbing. Near the bottom of the gully bear left over the shoulder of the hill until a power cable pylon can be seen. Continue towards the pylon and from which a track leads down and joins the original starting point near the railway. Cross the railway and retrace your steps to the car park.

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Jebel En Naber

Name given by Defallah Atieq of Wadi Rum, route info from Brian Hodgkinsn, 20/11/2010



View south to Jebel en Naber from the Desert Highway not long after passing the Wadi Rum junction

Approach If approaching from Aqaba drive past the customs post and out to the HGV weighing station where you can turn back towards Aqaba. Alternatively when adjacent to the mountain you can do an unauthorized U-turn across the central divide, which is fairly flat and easy to negotiate at this point.

As the mountain has a crenellated crest it is not immediately obvious from the road which is the highest point, but during the approach the second peak from the left which looks like a blade becomes the obvious contender for the title. The mountain faces East, and gets all the morning sun therefore a warm ascent is assured, but you can look forward to a more shady descent as the sun sinks over Aqaba.

The route The walk up to the foot of the rocks is a bit of a slog, and at first follows vague tracks past the remains of Bedouin encampments and a rough line of trees until a shallow sandy bottomed wadi is encountered. Follow the wadi which winds round to the North parallel with the crags, and then eventually turns West back towards the mountain. Break out of the wadi and ascend the steep rocky hillside in a diagonal line towards the buttress, which lies below the highest peak and where two prominent fingers of rock mark the bottom of the route.

Ascend the buttress for 100m (Grade 3 or English Diff with one move V. Diff half way up). At the top of the buttress it becomes apparent that it is split from the summit tower by gullies on the North and South sides. Descend 30m to reach the Southern gully, and then continue up this gully which runs up the North side of the summit tower for 100m. At this point a prominent finger of rock can be seen on the face to the left. Climb the face to the right of the finger and then up into a smaller gully beyond (50m Diff).

Cross the gully and climb the North Face of the summit tower (25m 3+, V.Diff), remembering that it is necessary to reverse this part of the climb on the descent as the other sides of the summit tower are far more precipitous and would provide a far greater challenge (unless you want to fix an abseil bolt). From the summit you are rewarded with spectacular views which include Jebel Ahmad Bakir and Jebel Es Sahaki to the South, and Jebel Rum to the East.



The route goes up the buttress which casts its shadow heading up left from the scree



View from the summit to Jebel Bakar

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The descent Reverse the summit tower and the section which passes the prominent finger, until the gully is reached. Descend the gully as far as the top of the first buttress and then climb over a small shoulder which marks the start of another gully running down the North side of the buttress. Descend the gully to its bottom (easy with no big surprises), then retrace your steps down the rocky hillside, followed by the sandy wadi, and tracks leading back to the road.

Time The ascent was 4 hours from the road to the summit, ½ hour for picnic on the summit and 3 hours for the descent. No special equipment was used on this solo ascent, however depending on the ability of those who may wish to repeat the ascent, a rope and protection devices may be a wise precaution for the summit tower.

Having now made a few ascents of the Aqaba mountains certain common factors should be noted:

- 1) The rock is very variable and the euphoria of climbing on good sound rock is frequently countered by disappointment of having to contend with very loose sections.
- 2) The Aqaba mountains are larger than they appear, and time taken to get from A to B is surprising (or maybe as I rapidly approach my 68th birthday I'm just not that fit any more). I have been caught out twice as a result of not completing routes by night fall, once having to overnight on a small ledge, and on the descent of Jebel Es Sahaki covering the last three hours by moonlight and with the aid of a wind up torch.
- 3) Route finding can be complicated as the faces are intersected by criss-crossing gullies, and what may appear to be a continuous face from below, seldom is.
- 4) De-hydration is a real hazard and the amount of water which needs to be carried presents an extra burden during the climbing. My ascent was made on 17/11/2010 however the mid day temperature was still around 30 °C and with the dry mountain air it was thirsty work.
- 5) I originally thought it might be a good idea to traverse the entire ridge, but I would probably still be up there now if I had attempted it, as on closer examination there are some tricky looking sections between the various peaks.