

MOROCCAN ANTI ATLAS

Somebody heard that the likes of Joe Brown, Chris Bonington et al had been spending their holidays in southern Morocco and climbing their socks off. They are considerably older even than we are, so if it works for them, it must be good enough for us. The original plan was for four of us to go there for a week's climbing in March, but the word got out and in the end sixteen members and guests enjoyed a superb trip to a fascinating and still relatively remote area.

We stayed in the local town of Tafraoute, about 100 miles SE of Agadir, at the Hotel les Amandiers. The town was dusty, dirty & busy. The hotel was cool, clean and comfortable, plus it served beer and wine, which of course had no bearing at all on the decision to stay there. It is the meeting place for climbers and there is a large new routes book behind the reception desk. We ate some meals in the hotel, relatively expensive at about £10 for dinner, and some in the town. Local restaurants were cheaper but it has to be said that a week is plenty long enough to get bored with tagines & couscous.

We had five cars so everyone was able to fit in pretty much what they wanted. One car was permanently allocated to the climbers (well it was our idea) and the others ranged far and wide, accessing splendid scrambling ridges, spectacular walking, deep gorges, pretty villages and historic buildings. The people were very friendly and seemed genuinely pleased to see us. Apart from a couple of rather intrusive carpet sellers we were never pressurised to buy things - it was all very relaxed.

THE CLIMBING

There are so many crags here it defies description. Without a bit of helpful guidance you could spend a week wandering about never making your mind up. Luckily Claude Davies has written a guidebook. This excellent publication gives directions to some of the better crags then just gives an indication of the lines of a few routes and the maximum difficulty to be expected. After that you're on your own. This means that every route is an adventure and when the going gets hard, the apprehension levels can get quite high.

The climbing is on quartzite, like Gogarth on Anglesey, generally hard and very solid but, like Gogarth, with occasional bands of scary stuff. Approaches and descents were memorable for the profusion of wild flowers, date palms and Argan trees. The cliffs are big, some of them very big, and everywhere you look there seem to be even bigger ones. The climbing is not always of star quality but the situations are superb and the whole mountaineering experience unforgettable. A classic example is the Tizgut gorge - like White Ghyll on steroids. The climbing is only average but the surroundings are awesome. Adrian and Tim had a rather dry mouthed descent involving a long traverse and a big abseil. Glynne and Neil ended up on the other side of the gorge after a long walk. The descents from some of these cliffs really need to be planned out ahead.

We climbed every day except Sunday when we joined Mick and Hilary, Sue and Adrian Dixon to ascend Jebel el Kest. Michael Smith joined us on Monday and Thursday. On the Monday we drove round to the north side of the Jebel where the crags rise up, tier upon tier, in even greater profusion than on the south side. There is just so much to do. If you want to make new routes, all you have to do is walk a bit further than everyone else and find yourself a new crag. We climbed on a roadside crag called Ksar Rock which looked about 150ft high but was nearer 500ft. Between us we climbed three severes, a VS and two HVS. On the top of the rock, as on many other tops that people visited, there was a cistern and odd kettles and glasses lying about. Clearly the locals are in the habit of walking up hills for recreation and a social chat.

Two climbs stand out above the rest. A huge crag above the village of Anergui, the starting off point for Jebel el Kest, contained a VS called Grandad's Groove. With a name like that, Adrian and Tim felt obliged to climb it. It started off with an overhang of what appeared to be stones stuck into mud and continued on better rock with minimal protection & belays for 800ft. Not brilliant climbing but a great line and a character building experience. Glynne and Neil climbed a parallel line called Naseby at HVS, which turned out to be on excellent rock & altogether a much better route. They didn't get nearly as frightened as we did though. On the last day, Glynne and Tim climbed an HVS called The White Tower. Very steep, direct and exposed, it was a fitting conclusion to a splendid week.

Climbers: Adrian Bridge, Tim Josephy, Neil Grant (G), Glynne Andrew (G)

Tim Josephy

JEBEL EL KEST

The venue for this Spring's Morocco meet was Tafraoute in the anti-Atlas mountains. It was a fascinating area to explore - geologically diverse with very varied landscape, culturally on the cusp of Westernisation in some places, but deeply traditional in others, with friendly people who liked to talk - especially to tell you which British climbing celebs they knew - and even the carpet touts weren't too persistent and took the hint eventually! Morocco at this time of year is full of splashes of colour. Wherever it is possible for a flowering plant to take root, it will do. The result is a patchwork of rich colour and, if you know your plants, botanical variety which changes completely with geology and altitude. The contrast with the pink quartzite of the Jebel-el-Kest range or the inverted sedimentary rocks nearer Izerbi is the contrast of patches of jewel colour against a stark sculptural background. And the sun shone. It was a wonderful trip and we were all privileged to be there.

Tafraoute itself is the Leeds of the region, although not much bigger than Ingleton, and more interesting than either unless you have a huge need for Harvey Nicks or Inglesport. The immediate environment is of red wind-carved granite that sits precariously in piles like a red Brimham Rocks. Jebel-el-Kest (2359m) is the highest peak in

the immediate vicinity of Tafraoute and, as such, had to be climbed. I think we pretty much all did it over the week - attacks were made on various days in various combinations. We decided that we would give it a go early in the week. "We" was Mick Borroff, Adrian Dixon, Sue Bertenshaw (guest) and me - Mick's wife, Hilary Tearle (also, obviously, guest). The approach to Jebel-el Kest is eased by the existence of a road to the last village of Anergui. "Road" is a generous term not to be confused with tarmac or two lanes or any such girly nonsense. This is a concreted track of single car width which snakes back and forth, up and down, eschewing passing places and gaining 600 metres of height from the valley floor but rewarding the intrepid with amazing views and a sense of wonder that the villagers could have been enterprising enough to put this road in at all.

There is a tiny car park in the village and we found that the climbing party of Tim Josephy, Adrian Bridge, Neil Grant and Glynne Andrew had beaten us to it. As we put our boots on, a Berber couple were walking up to their pastures accompanied by their very pretty young goat which was clearly a pet and used to attention, playing to the audience with skips and jumps and getting stroked on the head for reward. Mick, who had previously thought to exchange me for camels, was very much taken.

The start of the route took us up a valley between steep cliffs of pink quartzite to the first col. The valley lay in shade, mercifully, at that hour of the morning and we walked up the zig-zag path through meadows and endlessly varied flowers. The climbers had preceded us heading for the imaginatively named Crag A. However, as we dropped down the other side of the col, it did seem rather as though they were catching up with us and were way off route for Crag A. It transpired that they had abandoned the climb for the moment due to injury and had decided to join us on the walk instead. They went back to climb it later.

The route threaded its way along a cliff side above that rarest of things - water - before turning up the hillside beside a thin waterfall, then via rocky outcrops to a scrubby hillside that needed crossing to the next col. Route-finding is a challenge because although there are cairns and goat-paths, this isn't recreational landscape - the cairns and paths are there usually to mark territory and to facilitate the agricultural use of the land. So we made our varied way to the main col and eventually on to the rock band at the base of the "summit lump". There were two ways on - a walker's route (in the guide-book) and a scrambler's route (that wasn't). This, in my view, is where it pays not to have climbers in your party. They went AWOL and before I knew it, we were all committed to the scrambler's route. This is not my milieu and I usually emphasise that by liberal use of Anglo-Saxon. However, the name "Adrian Bridge" is now engraved on my heart for standing between me and the drops of at least 1000 feet (More like 10 feet! Ed.) so that, to my surprise, I did get up the scramble and emerge on the top alive. At some point in this I challenged these climbers to a swim in the hotel pool as a quid pro quo for the horror I was undergoing. Did they swim? I have to tell you, dear

reader, they didn't. (In fairness, the only person who thought the pool was warm was Albert and although I went in 3 times, it was an acquired taste. The Moroccans certainly thought we were mentally unsound for bothering.)

The top was furnished with shepherd's huts built against rock walls and a water cistern to collect rainwater. A group of local men who had come up for a day out were cooking lunch on a wood fire in a large tin pot. The day was hazier than we would have liked but we still had views of ridges of lower hills stretching away and Tafraoute lying dwarfed in the distance. We sat for ages in the sun, eating lunch, gazing and chatting, eventually making our way off down the walker's route via the secondary summit (to see if it was higher - it wasn't) and ultimately back to the village. That just left the drive back down that road....!

Hilary Tearle

TASGUENT AGADIR

Many of the party visited Tasguent agadir, one of the best preserved examples of a fortified granary in the Anti-Atlas, situated some 50km to the northeast of Tafraoute, near Tiguermine. The agadir is a 1,000-year-old tradition, which began when the southern Berber tribes were nomadic. Communal granaries ensured a supply of staple produce when crops failed or supplies ran low, and afforded security against theft. In times of peace, they also served as market places; in times of unrest, when tribal and clan conflicts might pitch one valley against another, they became bolt holes to which entire communities could take refuge.

Tasguent Agadir is stone built and set high on an isolated hill above the three villages it serves. The agadir has the external appearance of a fortress and is said to date back to the thirteenth century. It was built in three stages, as the surrounding villages prospered and expanded. The interior of each section is built around a central elongated courtyard. One is long and narrow, another deep and shaft-like, but all are open to the sky. Projecting slabs form steps to access the higher doorways of small store-rooms on six levels built into the fabric of the building - several hundred cells in total. Secured by locked wooden doors, some are patterned with traditional symbols to ward off the evil eye.

Cats, it seems, were kept to control mice; and of the agadir's tiers of cells, the middle ones were generally favoured: the lowest rows could be damp and the top ones likely to leak with the occupiers liable for repairs; and a hole in the ceiling could funnel grain through a neighbour's floor.

In its heyday, the agadir was protected by five guards. Today, the building is still watched over by a guardian, but when he climbs onto the roof, he no longer scans the hills and valleys for brigands or marauding tribesmen, just tourists, yet he still lives in a room deep within its walls, apparently reliant on water brought up by the villagers.

We also visited Tizourgane Kasbah, an ancient fortified village, being renovated by its owners as a guest house. We

enjoyed mint tea and home-made almond biscuits on the roof terrace with its spectacular view towards the distant north side of the Jebel el Kest range.

Mick Borroff

THE SCRAMBLING

For some climbing was their intention. For others it was walking. But most got involved with the 'third way' - scrambling - and were well rewarded for their efforts. Many of my memories of scrambling in the UK involve long rough approaches to scrappy routes, wet weather and greasy rock. Taфраoute scrambling was nothing like that - sustained scrambling with excellent friction on generally sound rock nicely warmed by the sun! Here are couple of the longer routes.

Above Tizi ou-Manouz

Driving south past the granite tor of Napoleon's Hat and the turn off for Belgian artist Jean Veran's painted rocks, the road climbs to a col above Tizi ou-Manouz and a hamlet with a small school decorated with Disney comic characters (~1220m). Parking there we crossed the road and the streambed, picked our way through 100m of terraced fields and we were on the sun-kissed coarse-grained granite. This ridge ran east then curved north to a col below the higher top of Tasselt (1971m). The distinct ridge was initially narrow and rising then horizontal with gendarmes before broadening towards the col before Tasselt. The rock was generally sound and despite the guidebooks warnings of scorpions in cracks, we found none.

Scrambling can be slow progress but we soon made the first top which some chose to approach via an open corner topped by a couple of metres of ancient and precarious dry-stone retaining wall. In a nearby rift was a cistern. There was much conjecture over who stayed here, when and why. It was an ideal lookout for the plains to the south and a low line of hills bordering the Sahara.

The crest line was steep enough in places to challenge everyone, but all difficulties could be turned. We each found our own routes and kept regrouping to appreciate the views. A lunch stop was declared at the cairn marking the end of the ridge. We were diverted first by a shepherd's hut below the summit obviously used for tea-making by guided groups and then by repeated courting displays by a pair of what were almost certainly Barbary Falcons. In a sheltered spot out of the cold wind we were warm and in danger of sun burn.

From here on another day some ascended and descended Tasselt via a gully penetrating the southern ramparts, but the first group turned back west and descended the parched valley north of the ridge back to the cars. If we'd had the energy we could have continued up the other side of the col and tackled the ridge there which eventually merged into Adrar ou-Oumerreksou (2154m).

East of Tizert

Towards the head of the Ameln Valley just north of Taфраoute lies the agricultural village of Tizert below a gorge

and the quartzite cliffs prosaically named T,Y and U. Parking in the quiet village, we assumed everyone must be at the Wednesday souk in Taфраoute. Wandering up past traditional houses we passed the village water supply at the foot of the ridge. Allegedly Joe Brown was one of the first Europeans to traverse the ridge.

The scrambling soon lived up to its Claude Davis grade of 'Interesting Moderate' and there were bold moves up steep slabs and pinnacles - even a bit of back and footing through an eye to traverse round a bulging wall. Often the descents from pinnacles were as demanding as their ascents. Routes off the main crest sometimes had the additional hazard of thorny vegetation. Those who chose to bypass some difficulties on the right (the left invariably being steep or overhanging) had a harder time of it than those on the crest. Their attempts at a high traverse were repeatedly thwarted by gullies and buttresses.

Again, high on the ridge were cisterns and walling indicating occupation and terraces high up the slopes. Those flower filled terraces gave a workable line of descent from the large top at the far end of the ridge gently descending back to the village. An excellent short day.

Returning to the car we were invited by two girls to visit the women's agricultural cooperative. The chatty lasses used French and English to put us right on political, couture and cultural matters as they escorted us across the orchards to a modern building. This housed a small office, a meeting room and in a kitchen-sized room, an oil extraction press, filtration and bottling facility. They demonstrated its use with the help of a few women then sold us argan oil for culinary use and soaps and creams made from it. The oil is made from the goats' undigested pits from the berries of thorny argan trees and makes a nutty-flavoured salad dressing.

The whole area offers ample opportunities for scrambling. The above are just two examples giving hours of sustained scrambling. The 'walks' up Jebel el Kest (2359m) from Anergui or Tagdicht and up Adrar Mkorn (2340m) from Ayerhd both gave plenty of scrambling. One party starting from Anergui completed a direct scramble to the top of the Jebel from the col to the south; others mixed scrambling with the tourist path.

Other Snippets

The Tachelhit Berbers in the area mark on some roadside rocks, signs or buildings. This is aza, the distinctive final letter of their alphabet. It is symbolic at a personal level of freedom and the Berber deity. In red, representing the essence of life and resistance, it has political connotations of their independence and proud heritage. Occasionally we saw which I'm told stands for their country Imazghen as it is rendered in the Tamazight dialect.

Within a kilometre or so of the hotel was the village of Tazka with a rough pasture beyond the mosque where lay a fallen granite rock. On the smooth rock face is a 2m tall petroglyph of a gazelle supposedly of Neolithic origins. Above it stands another similar one on a vertical rock face

but this is perhaps modern. Also in Tazka is a traditional Berber house open to visitors with a simple guided tour. Many of its rural artifacts were practically identical to those seen in Yorkshire farm heritage museums. Outside young lads dared one another to trigger a rusty spring rat trap with their fingers, while girls sat watching. Adolescent lads played football but were happy to break off and talk when approached. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Michael Smith

Eight team members, following a recommendation in the Cicerone guide, drove approximately 30 Km south from Tafroute on the way to Izerbi to find a ridge which directly overlooks a very small village at a col. "The ridge offers a very enjoyable scramble to a summit with spectacular views to the south and to the Sahara Desert." It provided almost continuous scrambling to the summit at a range of levels and angles from easy to challenging.

The way was led by Duncan Mackay, Michael Smith and Philip Dover taking a direct line whilst others sometimes followed an easier route. It provided an opportunity for Howard Humphries to give much appreciated guidance to Sarah and Paul Dover on some of the more difficult pitches. Meanwhile, Albert Chapman took a low level route and recorded the teams climb on his video. Alan Linford kept his usual considerate eye open for any members who got behind. After lunch on the summit and a debate as to the best way down we returned to a col below the summit which had a good line of cairns across the ridge and proved to be the start of an easy descent. Sadly visibility of the Sahara from the summit was obscured by haze. All agreed that the ridge provided a classic scramble.

Paul Dover

PHOTOS

Right - Napoleon's hat, Tizourgane Kasbah, Ledge traverse on Jebel el Kest and Adrian Dixon climbing Jebel el Kest and scrambling.

Left - climbers on White Tower



ATTENDING

- Adrian Bridge (President)
- Tim Josephy
- Neil Grant (G)
- Glynne Andrews (G)
- Mick Borroff
- Hilary Tearle (G)
- Alan Linford
- Michael Smith
- Sue Bertenshaw (G)
- Albert Chapman
- Howard Humphries
- Duncan Mackay
- Sarah Mardon (G)
- Adrian Dixon
- Paul Dover
- Phil Dover

