A Life On (and off) the Rocks.

Di Taylor

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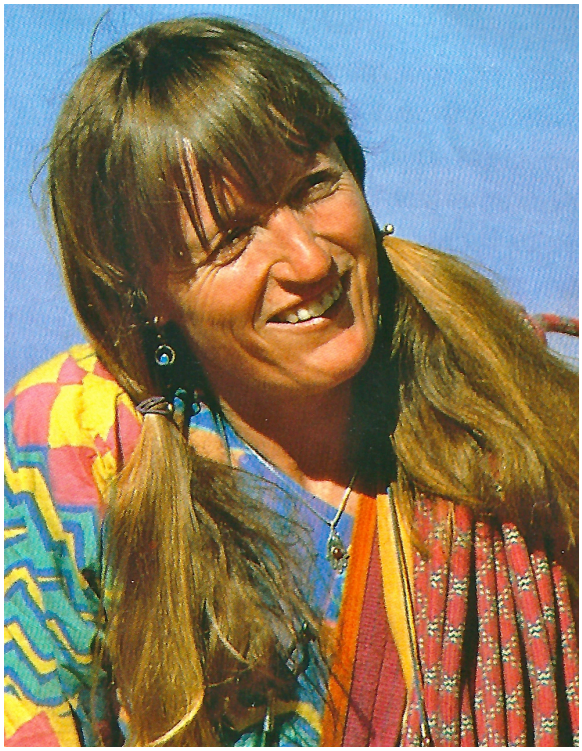
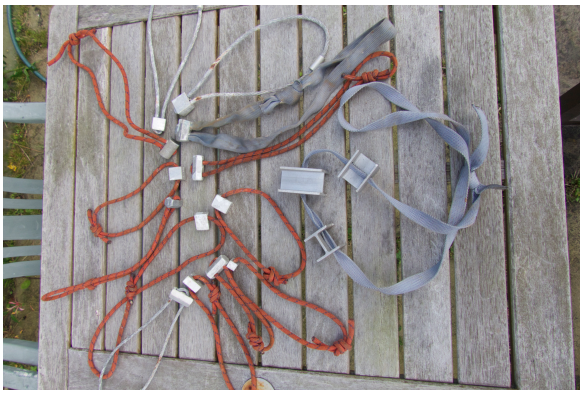


Above: Di Taylor in Wadi Rum, 1996
Below: Old style nut protection, late 1960s



I've just read the August OTE with Gill's editorial plea for articles from women climbers. I never really thought about it before, but I even though I don't climb hard I have had a lot of good times on the rocks. Perhaps my story will let people coming into climbing know you don't have to climb big E grades to have fun!

I first started climbing or at least going about with climbers fromThe Rimmon Mountaineering Club at the end of the 1950's. There weren't many girls in the club, mostly the lads' girl friends, and not many of us climbed at that time either. We used to go to the crag and watch the lads perform, it wasn't often that they asked us to climb. There wasn't much gear around in those days either - no harnesses, no rock boots, no nuts, though bits of cord with engineering nuts were just beginning to be used. It was all very macho stuff - old sweaters and big boots were the order of the day. We used to meet every week in the local pub to talk about what climbs we had done, and find out where everyone was going the next weekend.

I was sixteen then and I didn't do much climbing at first, just having a great time enjoying the scene at places like Ike's barn at Wall End in Langdale. There were new climbs being done all round the Peak District - half the crags in Saddleworth where we live hadn't been touched and places like Stoney and Cheedale were only just being discovered. It's hard to imagine now when almost every inch of rock has been climbed on. The club also got into the new route scene in Norway where they did a lot of first ascents including the Troll Wall.

On joining, the first thing I bought was a pair of very big heavy boots that I could hardly walk in. Even if we hadn't been climbing we used to go to the local dances in Saddleworth and places like Threlkeld with these boots on and jeans, it was part of 'the scene'. Club dinners were usually shared with the Manchester Grit. These dinners were always total mayhem - 'Gritstone Rugby' sometimes involved a human ball who *wasn't* a volunteer! We went on Club Meets all over the place, going to the pub at night seeing who could do the most pull ups or arm wrestling or gymnastics and feats of strength usually involving whatever was at hand such as beer bottles and furniture!

Often it would end in a battle with the locals. The Rimmon and Manchester Grit were notorious. Dave Cook wrote in his article 'True Grit' in 'Games Climbers Play' "There was a time in the 'sixties when it looked as if the ethos and traditions of gritstone were taking over everywhere. The big jamming fists, and the big jammed mouths of the Rock and Ice, the Alpha, the Black and Tans, the YMC and The Rimmon, proselytised by word and deed all over Britain, brainwashing everyone else into an acceptance of inferiority".

That's how it was. Everyone always thinks that the climbing generation they grew up in is the wildest and craziest, but the scene then at the end of the fifties and early sixties really was wild! Some of the Rimmon like Harpic (clean round the bend), Tony Howard and Roy Brown (a member of the old Chew Valley Cragsmen who started climbing there at the end of the '40's and had previously lived in a hen hut further up the hill), lived in a ten bob (50p) a week cottage in Chew Valley where life seemed to be a non-stop party!

The women were an odd bunch too - the Black and White Gnommes, Captain Pugwash, Eva Brick and her sister Avril Vulcan, Viv the Witch and The Mossley Boiler to mention just a few. When the lads did go off climbing, we sometimes went along but there were lots of new climbs to do then so if they bothered to climb with us it was considered a great honour! Mostly we went on classic Severes, but some of us got up to following Hard V.S., which wasn't bad at the time. Very few of the girls ever lead anything. We were the camp followers - our job was to brew up and provide other essential pleasures!

A Rimmon meet in North Wales, 1960s

I first met Tony about 1959 near Dovestones Edge: we were swimming in the pool below the end of the Ravenstones tunnel as it was a very hot day. These two raggy climbers came down from new routeing in the quarry, covered in dust and with ropes over their shoulders: they just dropped their climbing gear and jumped 15 feet down into the pool fully dressed, boots and all. I never thought that about 20 years later we would be climbing together.

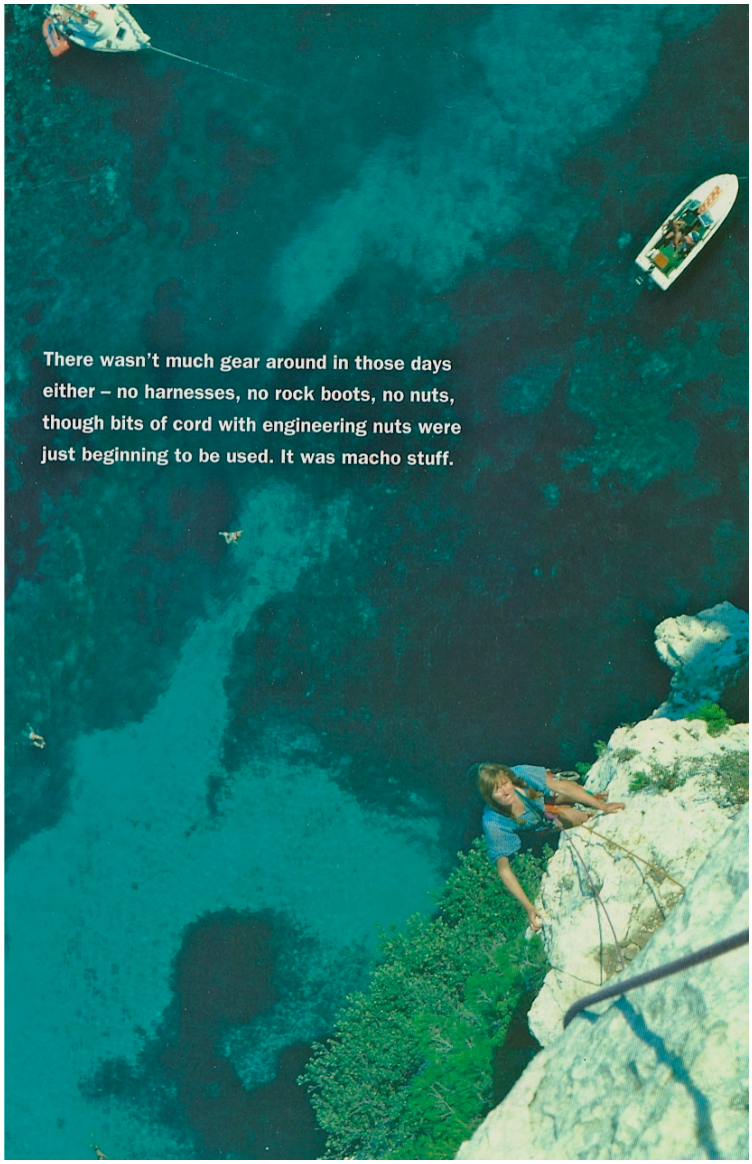
A few years later I got married to Ken Taylor, one of the Rimmon lads and lived on a small farm. I had three children and kept hens, geese, goats, a Jersey cow, and other animals and grew vegetables - living off the land you might say. Down in the village we were known as the hill-billies!I wanted to do things with the kids, so I was less involved in the climbing scene. That's just the way I am, but I don't blame anyone else who chooses to climb and leave their kids with someone else - each to their own. Anyway the good thing is, milking a cow every day gave me strong fingers, so when I started climbing again in the eighties I could follow 'Chalky' Smith and Tony up just about anything. I'm still not too bothered about leading - I just enjoy being on the crag, and the great places I get to when I go climbing. We had some superb days on Gogarth and down in the south west - I really love climbing over the sea with the sun, flowers, birds and the wild atmosphere.

Di on Cloggy, 1980s

Tony and his wife had split up by then and Ken and I were going our own ways though we have stayed good friends. I went to Morocco in 1979 with my youngest son and met Tony with his daughter and Mick Shaw. Tony and Mick had driven there and had been climbing in the Taghia Canyons. We did an unforgettable trip through the M'Goun Gorge in an area where not many Europeans went at the time. We hired a mule for the kids as they were only ten and trekked down this gorge which took five days, much of it walking sometimes waist deep in a river between big cliffs. It was a great trip and my first real adventure out of Europe in a remote area with big mountains and fascinating tribal people. I loved it.

When the kids were a bit older we went to the

Above: Ice climbing on Cader Idris, North Wales
Below: Sea cliffs, South of France



Dolomites with them and climbed a 1000 ft Grade 111 on the Third Sella Tower. I led one child up and Tony took two others. We met someone on the climb who asked if we had bred mountain goats as they did so well. I felt I was back on rock again at last which I must say felt great. Later on I started going climbing whenever I could; the children were old enough to look after themselves as they were in their early teens by then and I was able to devote more time to myself.

We went to to Great Rocks a few times - a very strange place! I didn't know why Tony wanted to go there till I started doing new climbs which was great fun, even going home at night and thinking of names for the routes! I got the bug off Tony - new climbs, new places and adventures: getting to the top of mountains. This is what it is all about for me.

Early in 1983 we went to the Sudan with Mick Shaw and his girlfriend Elaine. To get to Jebel Marra near Chad we travelled 5 days mostly riding on top of a train roof as it was so full. That was an amazing journey. The people were so poor but so friendly wanting to share their bits of food with us. We didn't find any climbing there, but crossing Jebel Marra was a really unusual trek in a wild and little known part of Africa - one village had only been discovered about 20 years earlier when a small plane crashed there.

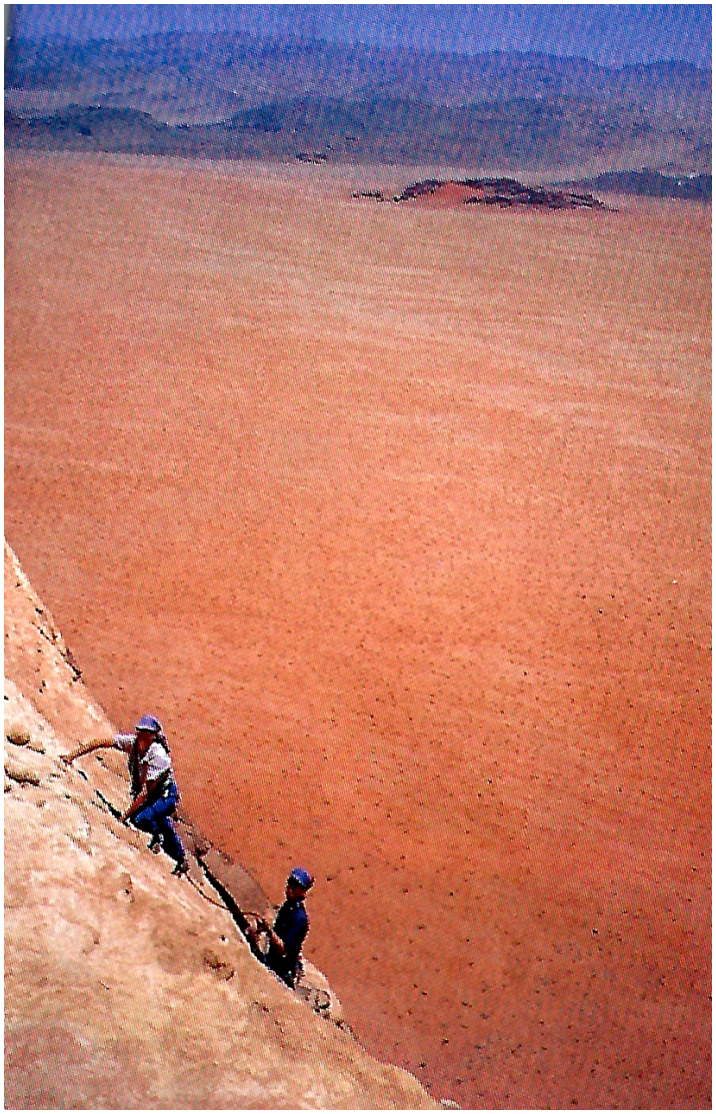
The Sudanese mountains near Ethiopia were completely different - big 1000 to 1500 foot granite domes, very impressive and really beautiful, rising over the oasis of Kassala. The rock was quite friable though, with the extremes of temperature and it was a bit odd moving up over crispy, creaky rock but I wanted to go for it. There wasn't much chance of being rescued in this kind of place but somehow this made it more exciting for me and I really enjoyed leading the last pitch up a big bald slab. The local people told us there is a tree on top and if anyone manages to climb up there and eat a leaf they will have eternal youth. It turned out to be a fig tree but we all ate a leaf anyway!

The face was covered in white ledges - it looked like someone had been using lots of chalk, but when you saw the birds that did it you didn't want to have an accident and be eaten by these giant vultures! When we

got to the top you could see all over the plains of Ethiopia. One day I knew we would be there, though it wasn't till 1995 that we made it, after the Mengistu regime had gone. We took some climbing gear again, but the rock was no good so we trekked in the Simien Mountains for eight days, going to the top of Ras Dashan, 4,620m. Getting to the top of a remote mountain which means a lot to me, especially having an opportunity to ride horses and seeing Ibex, Gelada Baboons and Lammergeyer along the way and strange flowers like Giant Lobelia and Aloes.

Back in the UK, we climbed every time we could, living in our VW van at weekends (We are still doing it.) Trips to places like Scotland to do routes like the Old Man of Hoy and the Old Man of Stoer are especially memorable. Working at Troll we usually go to the German exhibitions in the summer and this gives us the chance to climb in Europe every year, sometimes cragging in the Danube valley which is really beautiful, or at places like Arco and Samoens. Weather permitting we also get into the Alps or Dollies doing things like the the Aiguille Dibona, the Salbitchen W ridge and the Guglia di Brenta - anything big with a nice pointed top to it. (Hope that doesn't sound too phallic!)

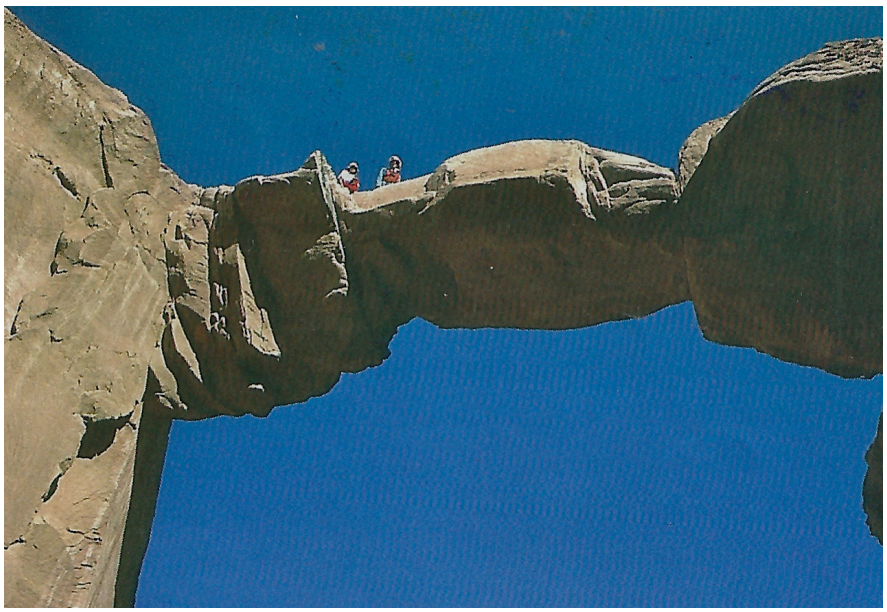
Climbing in the Dollies can be really weird - when we went to climb in the Brenta we walked past a little shrine not far from the Tower. I wanted to have a look in, but Tony said "I wouldn't bother if I were you". Of course, I went in, and it was full of plaques in memory of people who had died on the mountain. There were more at the bottom of the routes and a bell tolling in the wind when we topped out - really morbid, it made me feel quite spooky!



Di on a new route in Wadi Rum

On big routes, I don't lead that much but on Europe's valley crags it's different as they are generally bolted to some extent and we interlead more. We did a 24 pitch Mild VS in the Gotthard this year which I enjoyed. Although it was easy the bolts were really spaced - about 30 to 40 feet apart, so it made it more interesting to lead. Doing bolted routes is fun but doesn't give me much sense of achievement as even though they're usually hard they don't have the challenge and atmosphere of new routing or the sense of exploration that I enjoy most.

We went to Ladakh in the Himalayas once but only did a few climbs though I really enjoyed the trekking up there despite having our pack horses stolen by Bhakaval nomads when they tried to rob us! We also spent some time on a house boat on Dal Lake in Kashmir from where we could hear gun shots in the night. From there, we trekked through the Chandra-Baga valley and over the Sach Pass to Dharamsala, a Tibetan refugee village where the Dalai Lama lives. After this we trekked on our own with no porters,from Manali in the Kulu valley over to near the Manikarin Spires and down to a sacred village where some of India's best marijunana is grown. The place was full of stoned hippies who were so out of their heads I don't think they had a clue what a beautiful place they were in. We used to take our climbing gear on trips like this, but trying to look after all the rucksacks on buses and trains in places like India isn't easy, so nowadays we don't bother unless we know for sure we'll be climbing. On another trip to India, we trekked for five days in the Ghats above the west coast where I don't think many



T*ony, Mick Shaw, Alan Baker and me were the first non-Bedouin to reach the Rock Bridge of Jrebel Burdah in Wadi Rum*

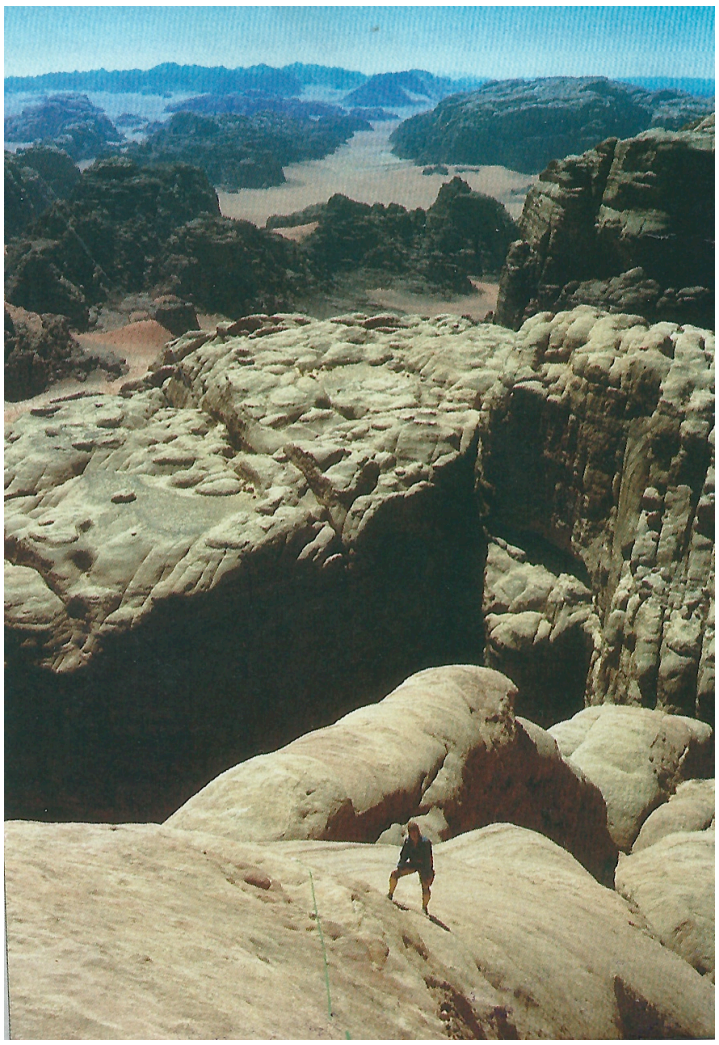
people other than Indians go. We walked through the mountains sleeping in ancient hill top forts, it's really beautiful up there with these strange ruins high above a landscape of forests and lakes, although unusually the locals didn't seem too friendly. As a consequence, when we camped near a village one night, Tony said he'd sit up for a while but in five minutes he'd fallen asleep, leaving me to wonder if we were OK.

In '84 we went to Wadi Rum in Jordan as guests of their Tourism Ministry. This is where I really got into new routing; no one had climbed there other than Bedouin hunters and there were fantastic mountains everywhere you looked with everything from short, single pitch climbs to 1500' long classics at any standard you fancied. The local Bedouin offered to help us with information for a guide book as they wanted more climbers to come. There were no other climbers around and often no more really knew where we were anyway so it was real exploration and felt quite serious. We've been back every year since. What more could you ask for: virgin rock, solitude, new mountains round every corner and friendly people. We got to know the bedouin really well, living out in their camps and, in later years, supporting them in their efforts to keep in control of their homeland as increasing outside interests threatened to destroy the area by pushing mass tourism. The Jordan trip gave us the idea to start N.O.M.A.D.S. (New Opportunities for Mountaineering Adventure and Desert Sports). We seemed to live like nomads anyway and we thought it might give us more chances to visit little known places, which it did, but it's hard work as we try really hard not only to give value for money to our sponsors but also to make our work benefit the local people and environment.

Not long after our first Jordan trip we were asked to do an Adventure survey in Oman. We were there for three months doing new climbs, trekking, camel riding, doing 4 wheel drive trips and caving. We did a very long cave with Paul Seddon and Wilf Colonna, a French guide, abseiling and swimming five kilometres. It was very exciting as it ended with long lake that almost touched the roof. Right at the end it did touch and we had to drive a few feet to go under the rock. The other worry was the weather which looked stormy and Oman has really bad flash floods, which would have filled the cave completely. A couple of weeks earlier we had been down another cave and when we emerged we discovered water in the entrance passage. What had been a dry wadi a few feet below had flooded and the desert we had driven across had turned into a lake that was so big you could hardly see the other side.

As far as climbing goes we did a few good new routes in Oman but the rock isn't generally very good. One of the best mountains with good limestone is Jebel Misht where some 1000-4000' routes have been done including one by Tony and Alec McDonald who wrote the guide to Oman not long ago. Unfortunately I missed out on this as I volunteered to take the four wheel drive to the other side of the mountain, to meet them on the way down.

In '96 we were sponsored by the Egyptian Tourism Authority to look at the coastal mountains along the Red Sea to see if there was any climbing there. They gave us a four wheel drive car for two weeks which was nowhere near long enough. We did a lot of research at the Alpine Club and R.G.S. and visited nearly all the big mountains but hadn't time to climb them other than for a spot of bouldering to check the rock quality. Some of it seemed quite good and some of the peaks and pinnacles are really impressive. Our driver couldn't understand why we wanted to stay in the mountains all the time instead of going to the resorts like Hurghada. After that we climbed a bit in Sinai then caught the boat back to Jordan and our Bedouin friends in Rum.



The same team of four were also the first people to reach the summit of Jebel Kharazeh in Wadi Rum

Later that year I was working in the garden when Tony shouted out of the window that Triple Echo wanted to do a film in Jordan for the BBC. I shouted back: “Who’s in it? When he replied “We are!”, I dropped everything! I couldn’t believe it! Anyway, as it turned out I needn’t have worried. It was really good fun working with the Triple Echo team and being able to involve the Bedouin and climb with them. I think their climbs are the best in the area and over the years we'd had great fun rediscovering them with the Bedouin testing us and laying little traps for us to see how good we were! The film was a new experience for me but it went very well, and we had a really memorable time, not too hard climbing but remote and quiet and with nice people: everything I like.

This year we were asked by a Libyan Tour company called Wings to do a survey of Adventure Travel for them. It's a beautiful place with lovely deserts and some impressive mountains and of course we took our climbing gear but the rock we went on was very poor. It was a great trip though: the desert and rock art are really worth seeing as well as the wonderful Greek and Roman cities like Cyrene and Leptis Magna. It's a pity no-one goes as the people are very friendly and are longing to talk to outsiders which I think is what brings the world together.

After that we went to Jordan as usual exploring canyons and caves above the Dead Sea. Whist there we arranged for three Bedouin to come over to the UK for a month to learn rope techniques and mountain rescue at Plas-y-Brenin and Troll so they could be guides. This was really rewarding and very hard work - having three Bedouin in your house for a month or more is bedlam! The nice thing was it allowed us to do something in return for all they've done for us and Queen Noor who sponsored the trip sent us a letter of thanks which I really appreciated.

So you see, you don't need to climb the latest Extremes to have fun in the hills. You can get just as much excitement and sense of achievement on Grooved Arete, Rosa Pinnacle or, for that matter, Sheikh Hamdan's Route to the top of Jebel Rum, whatever turns you on - all you have to do is go for it.