

Grasp the Moment

Di Taylor and I booked our flights to Jordan back in early January not long after the Corona Virus first began to spread in China late 2019. It'll be OK we thought. Soon after, it was reported that the virus was rapidly spreading but Jordan is far from China and by late February we were in Wadi Rum. Jordan was virus free and anyway, our plans were taking us deep into the desert, beyond the fringes of Rum and 'far from the madding crowds', close to the border with Saudi Arabia. We might be okay we thought, optimistically.

Sabbah Eid, one of our Bedouin friends from the Zalabieh tribe in Rum village, drove us south and west across what was new country for us. With skills that would be the envy of any off-road driver he casually summited a high top along it's narrow ridge, obviously enjoying our nervousness at the steep drop-offs on either side. Further west, dark, ragged, granite hills tumbled towards the Gulf of Aqaba hiding the route taken by the last days of what had become the award winning Jordan Trail which we had scouted with Jordanian friends four years ago. On the southern horizon a view of the dark two hundred metre cliffs of Jebel Maghrar brought back memories of a climb we did in 1986 aptly named Desert Rats in the Shade.



View south to Jebel Maghrar

To the south east, Jordan's highest top, Jebel um Adaami, 1843m, rose prominently above the far edge of the remote desert valley of Wadi Saabit. Defallah Atieq, another Bedouin from Rum, had drawn our attention to it back in 1992. He had been helping an Italian archaeologist, Professor Borzatti, to identify sites of potential interest and, whilst studying the map, he noticed the summit had more contours than Jebel Rum which, at 1754m was believed to be Jordan's highest top. Actually it had been until 1965 when Jordan and Saudi Arabia concluded an agreement that realigned the boundary to give Jordan more coastal access. In so doing, Jordan not only gained 19 kilometers of land on the Gulf of Aqaba but also 6,000 square kilometers of territory in the interior, including Jebel um Adaami. Defallah had driven us and his brother Sabbah Atieq to the foot of it's east face and we climbed it together, an enjoyable, initially complex route winding through cliffs leading to a breezy ridge scramble and superb summit views. There was no high point marked on Defallah's 1975 French map but its highest 20m contour line was at 1820m, so we guessed it must be around 1830m and listed it as such in the 1994 update of my Rum guidebook - there was no GPS in those days.

But I digress. This time we were on a quest for an alternative route to its summit and our friend Sabbah Eid knew one, but first he drove us west across desert mountains to the remote village of Titin. Originally in Saudi Arabia, Titin is now in Jordan following the 1965 border changes, so it's residents, Bedouin of the Huweitat tribe, now had dual citizenship, able to travel freely in both countries. Tea and talk was, of course, *de rigueur* but with time passing we were eager to go and alarmed to find Sabbah's Toyota Landcruiser had a flat tyre. With no spare, and no garage, it could have been a major problem, but undeterred, they took the wheel off, then removed the steel tyre rim with pick axes and a crow bar and fixed the puncture. In fifteen minutes they had it back on and we were on the move.



Di in the entrance canyon of Jebel um Adaami

Twenty kilometres later, arriving at the foot of the north side of Um Adaami,

Sabbah pointed to a gash in the cliffs and said to me, “You say you can find your way up Bedouin routes. I’ve been up that canyon. It’s one and a half hours. I’ll take the car round to the other route and go up to meet you on top”. Having said that, he drove off. An interesting challenge! And we weren’t sure if he meant an hour and a half to the top, or to the upper end of the canyon. If the latter, how far from there was it to the top? And it was already almost midday, would we make it before dark?

We soon reached the first expected impasse but bypassed it easily up bulging slabs on the right. Then came another which was less obviously circumvented up cracks a short way back on the left. Then on and up, twisting through increasingly wild scenery until forced up right again. Beyond, we had a choice, scramble back down left to the temptingly flat sandy canyon bed which continued to another bend, but then what? Or stay up where a small cairn seemed to indicate a route along the canyon side. We chose the latter and managed to scramble along and up without too much difficulty though wondering about our choice of route with steeper cliffs ahead whilst the easy sandy canyon still continued temptingly below. But we made it out into a high and delightful mountain amphitheatre. Two hours had passed so we had exceeded Sabbah’s hour and a half and we were still far below the summit. Sabbah was already sitting nonchalantly on a rock half way up the long steep hillside above us. He had been to the top and come down to see if we had found the way. We could have followed the canyon, he said, and joined the original route to the top. Now, instead, we followed him up right to reach the summit by its south ridge. And what a wild and rocky ridge it is, climbing and descending two minor tops above a steep 400 metre drop down a chaos of decaying cliffs, boulders and ravines on the east face before reaching the main summit, now proudly topped by a Jordanian flag frayed by the wind. The GPS read 1843m.

To the north all the peaks of Rum were spread out before us with the profiles of Jebel Rum and Jebel um Ishrin easily identified on the horizon whilst far to the south in the heat haze of Saudi Arabia, the 2,580m high pyramidal peak of Jabal al-Lawz was also visible. But time was passing. Having quenched our thirst, we descended by our 1992 route. There had been no path there then, though like today’s summit climb it had been a joy, as always, to be on new terrain. But what a difference 28 years makes. Being Jordan’s highest top and reached directly from Rum village by a delightful desert drive past remote sandstone domes and down through the superb desert canyon of Nogra, the ascent of Um Adaami had become a popular day out. As a consequence, where we had scrambled all those years ago up a hillside dotted with flowering plants and heather-like bushes, all had been eroded away to a broad expanse of scree. Down in its lower reaches where we had found a way through cliffs, a confusion of cairns now indicated what seemed like various possibilities. Obviously many people had enjoyed it, and it has undoubtedly benefited the Bedouin economy, but it hadn’t been good for the mountain.



Sabbah Eid leads the way high on the south ridge



Sabbah Eid with Di on the summit

A few days later, after a couple of climbs and being guests at the wedding of one of Defallah's nephews, we decided to catch the local bus over to Petra to visit other friends. Having packed that night, we woke up to hear the news that some international airlines including one to Aqaba were closing down due to the virus. Wondering if we were going to be trapped in Jordan, a swift change of plan took us to Amman. By the time we arrived, there had been an announcement that there were now some cases of the virus in Amman and all flights from Jordan would stop in two days. Like others, the following morning we were at the office of Turkish Air when it opened. "Leave your phone number on this list and we will contact you", the receptionist said. Unconvinced we also contacted the British Embassy who simply advised us to do what we had already done. By 3.00pm and with only one day left to leave the country we had heard nothing so we went back to Turkish Air. It was bedlam. The guy behind the desk was doing his best, remaining unruffled and polite, despite being bombarded by angry questions and demands from a room full of people. It was bedlam.



Sabbah Eid with Tony after the climb

"Calm down", I said. "One at a time. He's trying to help."

Looking over to me, he asked, "Where do you want to go to?". Surprised, I said, "Manchester, England".

"See what you can do for this couple", he said to the girl at the desk. Two minutes later we had our tickets for 2.00.am the following morning, the last day of flights out.

"Be at check-in for 10.00 tonight", he said. We were, and by 10.00 the following morning we were in Manchester, three weeks early but not complaining. It had been a good trip, unexpectedly short, but we had met old friends and been in a mountain area new to us as well as climbing a previously unknown Bedouin way to Jordan's highest summit, so no complaints.

Footnote. As I completed this story four days after arriving home a message came in from Jordan, "Citizens will be officially banned from moving in all regions of the Kingdom, from 7:00 am tomorrow, until further notice". Next day nearly 400 people were arrested for violating the curfew which meant people leaving their homes even to purchase food were punishable with up to one year in jail. Lucky we got out!

Tony Howard, March 2020

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