The Bedouin Hunting Routes of Rum (part 1)

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 first of two, covers the period before their explorations of what have since become world famous Bedouin climbs:

The formidable hulk of Jebel Rum rises from the desert like a huge upturned battleship imbedded in the sands, ten kilometres long and two wide. The plunging five hundred metre sides of this Behemoth have guarded its hidden summit plateau since the softer surrounding rocks were eroded away millions of years ago to become the multi-coloured sands of Rum. Only the dark chasms that split its sides seem to offer any hope of access to this high 'lost world' where the myriad white domes of sandstone conceal a maze of small deserts offering a relatively protected eco-system to their inhabitants.

Here, long-lived junipers send their snake-like roots in a quest for moisture across the sands. Thorny shrubs cluster in shady corners. Small carpets of flowers bloom in the spring and patches of grass grow in recesses where pools of water linger long after the winter rains. This secret world is home to the eagle and its prey, the smaller birds and desert rodents, including the ubiquitous rock hyrax. It is also home to the ibex whose sharply incised cloven-footed trail can still be found despite millennia of hunting.

Over two thousand years ago, two such early Bedouin hunters, Kharajat, son of Sa'adan and Jahfal, brother of Taym climbed barefoot up to the high plateau. They moved nimbly across the contorted three hundred metre cliffs of a deep canyon on the west side of the mountain. Like their fathers before them, in whose footsteps they followed, they knew the summit domes and the concealed rock pools intimately. Lying in wait, the two watched a small group of ibex coming to drink, the sweeping curve of their knuckled horns silhouetted against the blue of the sky. Their silent arrows hit home – one ibex fell and the others scattered across the cliffs. The deed was done.

Returning with the butchered carcass slung over their shoulders, they stopped briefly in the shade of a gnarled juniper growing from a rock bowl on the lip of the canyon. Rested, they continued across a series of foot and handholds two hundred vertical metres above the canyon floor to reach the safety of a broad ledge beneath overhangs. Exhilarated by the success of their hunt, they stopped again and carved their names into the soft sandstone using symbols later identified as Thamudic script. Anticipating their welcome back at their family's camp, they set off down the final short but steep descent to reach the canyon bed, beyond which easier terrain took them down into the desert. That night, whilst they recounted the details of the hunt, they and the occupants of the camp feasted on the fresh rich meat of the ibex.

Though other tribal groups came and went, this climb and other hunting routes to the mountaintops of Rum remained the secret of the nomadic peoples for another two

millennia. Last amongst these, the Huweitat Bedouin arrived in the area in the early1800s, migrating north from the Hejaz mountains. Some continued around the head of the Gulf into western Sinai, pushing the Ma'aza Bedouin into Egypt's Red Sea Mountains. Others stayed in the mountains of Rum where perennial springs of clear water trickled from the fern fronded interface between the sandstone towers and their granite plinth. Burton, in his book The Land of Midian, 1879, says that the Huweitat are "the aggressive element in the Midianite family of Bedawin" and that their genealogy derives from "some of the noblest of Bedawin blood." According to G. W. Murray in The Sons of Ishmael, 1935, the Huweitat say, "The human race was divided at the beginning into three classes; the tent makers, the agriculturalists and the Haweitat." Murray suspects that they considered "the first two classes were created exclusively for the support of the third."

Of those that stayed in the Rum area, the Zuweida faction based their camps around the springs of Disi to the east, near the foot of the great plateau which rises to the heights above Petra. The Zalabia families settled in proximity to the springs around Jebel Rum and the other great mountains. They too learnt the old hunting ways and became masters of their desert and mountain environment, but the area still remained remote. Only the occasional traveller such as Richard Burton passed through the area, commenting that "The fountains flow in winter, in summer the wells are never dry; the people, especially the Huwaytat, are kind and hospitable".

This continuing traditional life was disturbed briefly in 1917 when the Arab Revolt recruited fighters from amongst the Huweitat, most famously, Auda abu Tayi, described by T. E. Lawrence in his Seven Pillars of Wisdom as "The greatest fighting man in northern Arabia". From Rum, they harried the Turkish railway from Saudi Arabia and took their fortress in Aqaba. Lawrence was overwhelmed by Rum's spectacular mountains, calling it "Rum the magnificent … vast, echoing and godlike … a processional way greater than imagination." Camping close to Jebel Rum, he bathed at the foot of the mountain's east face in the spring of Ain Shelaali. There, from "hidden crannies of the rock, issued strange cries; the echoes turned into music, of the voices of Arabs watering camels at the springs which there flowed out three hundred feet above the ground."

Thirty years later, three members of a British Mission to Saudi Arabia travelling with the protection of Glubb Pasha set off to climb Jebel Rum from the vicinity of what is now known as 'Lawrence's Spring' at Ain Shelaali. One of the trio, StJohn Armitage, stopped before the summit. The other two, Major Henry Coombe-Tenant and Lance Corporal 'Havabash' Butler made it to the top – the first unguided and non-Bedouin ascent of any of Rum's mountains. A couple of years later a British Survey team arrived, a few of whom made it to the top with Sheikh Hamdan Amad al Zalabia. Despite these intrusions, when another British party arrived in 1952, the indigenous people were still the only ones with an intimate knowledge of their mountains.

In this latest group, were Tom Longstaff (one of the greatest of the early Himalayan explorers, including the 1922 Everest Expedition) his wife Charmian, his daughter Sylvia and her husband John, who was in Glubb's Arab Legion. The previous year, Sylvia and John had been half way up Jebel Rum, hunting ibex with a young Bedouin. John said "it had been hair raising … poised between heaven and hell … never again would he set foot upon those ghastly cliffs". Consequently, when Sylvia and Charmian decided to try again, they also took Sheikh Hamdan as their guide. Like the earlier Thamudic hunters,

he chose to climb via the west face, by the route up which he had taken the survey team, most of whom had turned back. The route ascended a huge rift now known as The Great Siq, which completely splits the mountain. John went off hunting ibex on another mountain with Sheikh Atieq, the man who was to welcome us to Wadi Rum thirty-two years later.

Climbing the canyon's southern wall, Sheikh Hamdan's party reached a series of ledges, separated by difficult steps, then a steep chimney with a crevasse directly beneath and a two hundred metre drop on its other side. Finally, they reached the domes of the high plateau, through the maze of which Sheikh Hamdan led them to the summit. "Hamdan climbed with bare feet as surely as a mountain goat", Charmian Longstaff wrote in the Ladies' Alpine Journal. He was obviously also impressed by his two companions, "You English women" he said, "are as strong as men". They were certainly competent, as they climbed the canyon in two hours, taking "another hour up and down the complication of white domes to reach the summit"; a good time that is still rarely bettered. These three ascents of Jebel Rum remained the only known non-Bedouin ascents of any of Rum's major mountains until we arrived on our quest for new rock to climb in 1984.

The story continues in the next issue, describing Tony and Di's first meeting with the Bedouin and their discovery of the Bedouin hunting routes now reputed to be "amongst the world's best climbing adventures".

Bibliography

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

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