

Bedouin climbing in Jordan

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BEDOUIN CLIMBING IN JORDAN

It all started in summer 2019, during our yearly multi-day tour in Chamonix with our regular guide Nicolas; he'd told us that he had been invited to join a colleague to guide a climbing group in the Jordan desert the previous winter. "So, how was Jordan?" I ask. He turns around with sparkles in his eyes: "C'était génial!!" (It was awesome.) One second later: "I'm definitely going back in winter. You guys should come, I'd love it!" So it shall be: we went, and we loved it.

Jordan is a small middle-east country, an island of peace circled by Israel, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Its economy relies heavily on tourists, who come by the thousands to gaze in awe at the wonders of the antic remains of Petra and the desert of Wadi Rum. Since a couple of decades, Wadi Rum has started to be visited by an increasing number of rock climbers. The formations of Wadi Rum (called Jebels) are about 200 to 400m high and are made of several kinds of soft sandstone. The rock has been hardened on the top by the little rain dropping every year and is carved on its side by the wind; this gives the cliffs their distinctive mushroom shape. Bolts don't hold well in such rock, but there are plenty of cracks to put friends and wrapping slings around sand columns also offers great protection – when the columns hold (more on that later).

These were our holidays and we just wanted a good time climbing; therefore we spent some extra money to have all the planning and logistics taken care of by our guide. We landed in Aqaba in the middle of the night, met our guide there and reached Wadi Rum after about

one hour cab ride. That's definitely the best way to reach the desert, as the only alternative is to fly to Amman (Jordan's capital) which is then a five to six hours drive away on not-so-great roads. The village of Rum hasn't much to offer besides its guesthouse for tourists and – increasingly – for climbers. The more interesting areas are some kilometers away in the desert where Bedouin families own and manage desert camps where they host tourists who come for tours with camels, 4x4, or for hiking. We however spent most of the week in our host's camp.

The climbing days in Wadi Rum are simple: you pick a climbing route, someone drops you off by 4x4 near your start, you agree on a pickup time, you climb, someone picks you up, you're welcomed back at the camp with extra-sweet sage tea and biscuits, you do some star-gazing before the moon rises, then comes dinner time. Eat, sleep, repeat. Awesome.

Bedouins have been climbing the Jebels for generations. They found ways in the labyrinth of couloirs, canyons, and gullies that eventually lead to the top. Climbers have re-discovered these itineraries and explored new ones, more vertical, following beautiful cracks and chimneys. The area is filled with great multi-pitch trad climbs, not too long (often about 300m), mainly in grade 6 and 7. The main challenge is however not the technicality of the climbs, but rather the route finding and – it must be said – the uncertain quality of the holds. In Wadi Rum, you don't bump on a flake to see if it holds; you pat it gently and slowly put weight on it while hoping for



Noémie on Inferno (photo Romain Jacob)

Romain napping on top of Al Maghar after climbing Desert Rats (photo Noémie Frezel)



the best. And, as with all good trad climbing, sometimes there isn't much to use for protection, so you need to keep your head cool. All in all, climbing in Wadi Rum is a real adventure, following great natural lines, surrounded by a surrealist landscape. Scary sometimes, but totally worth it.

Currently, there is only one guidebook from 1997 which is not very clear and quite outdated. Many new routes are being opened every year in Wadi Rum; mountain guides exchange pictures of hand-drawn topos which they carry with them in impressive thick folders. An updated guidebook is supposedly in planning which would make autonomous climbing in

Wadi Rum much more practical and fun. Until then, some inside knowledge is definitely a plus to make the best of a climbing trip in Wadi Rum.

Noémie Frezel, Romain Jacob

List of climbs (favorites with *):

- Day 1 Um Ishrim - Beauty
- Day 2 Barrah Canyon - Star of Judaidah
- Day 3 Barrah Canyon - Les Rumeurs de la Pluie, Merlin*
- Day 4 Al Maghar - Desert Rats*
- Day 5 Khazali - Atayek's route
- Day 6 (break, visit of Petra)
- Day 7 Rum - Flight of Fancy*, Inferno*

RED ROCKS OF OMAN - CLIMBING AND EXPLORATION IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

The call to prayer, loud and clear, reached our ears from the village of Al Hayl. The last day of 2019 was coming to an end, while my wife Saule and I set up our bivy on a ledge midway the Jebel Misht – the highest rock wall in the Al Hajar mountains. We were on a route called “Shukran”, which means “thank you” in Arabic. Indeed, we had plenty to be thankful for: earlier that day we had climbed beautiful red and yellow rock, following crack systems, with a stunning backdrop. The night was going to be warm and we needed only a thin sleeping bag to cover us. Our biggest worry was that we had forgotten our forks for dinner and we had to use a nut-tool to eat our tuna. The next day we were greeted by a crazy morning light and were

excited to start 2020 this way – it was going to be bright and wild!

While 2019 hadn't turned out the way we had expected, the coming weeks in Oman proved to be very enjoyable. After finishing “Shukran”, we travelled around the country to swim in the wadis, visit the desert fortresses and sleep at the seaside. We then came back to Jebel Misht and climbed a new route on the southeast-facing wall of the massif. While the line we picked was elegant and fun, the upper wall provided some surprises: what looked like hand cracks from the bottom turned out to be squeeze chimneys and in certain bits we had to attach our backpacks to the