

# Red rocks of Oman : climbing and exploration in the Arabian Peninsula

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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Currently, there is only one guidebook from 1997 which is not very clear and quite outdated.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\*

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## 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

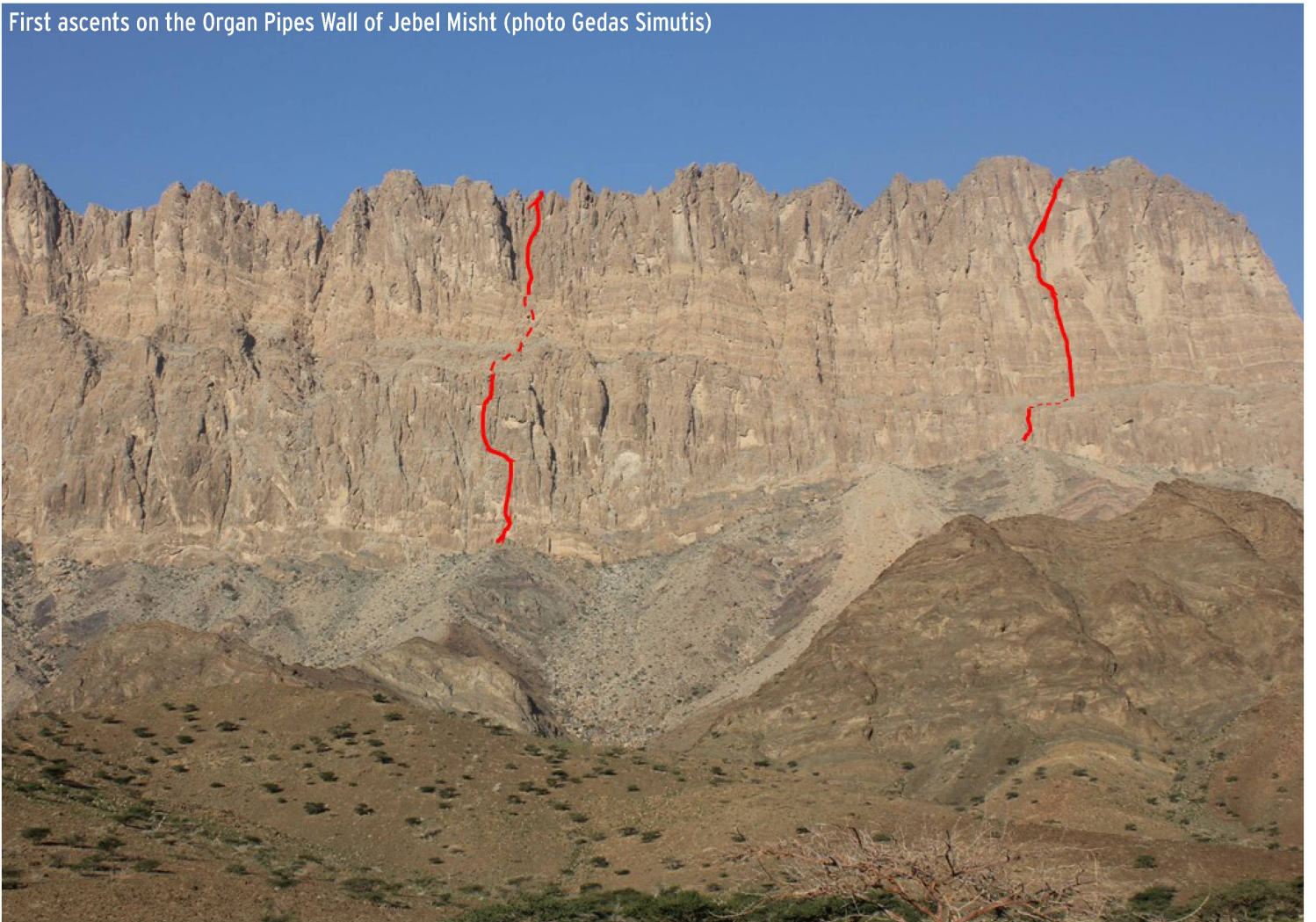
excited to start 2020 this way – it was going to be bright and wild!

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

Campsite in front of Jebel Misht (photo Gedas Simutis)



First ascents on the Organ Pipes Wall of Jebel Misht (photo Gedas Simutis)



harnesses with slings in order to wiggle upwards. On the summit we were rewarded with another sunset and then had to run to our car, since Saule's flight was only a few hours away.

My friend Cyrill Boesch joined me for the second half of the trip. First, we had an attempt on another new line on the southeast wall of the Jebel Misht, but retreated midway as we were climbing too slow and had too little gear with us. While resting the following day, we saw clouds starting to cover the sky that had been so clear since my arrival. We subsequently found out that it was the day when the well-liked sultan Qaboos bin Said passed away. During the first year of his reign, he had abolished slavery in Oman and then went on to expand the healthcare and educational sectors, in addition to getting even the smallest roads paved, as compared to the six miles of asphalt in the whole country at the beginning of his reign.

Little did we know that in addition to the three-day mourning announced by the state, the country was going to be washed by one of the biggest storms in recent years. The mountains were even covered by a blanket of snow, as if to commemorate the changes.

Once the snow melted, we finished our route on Jebel Misht and felt ready for checking out the rock in the canyons. Fortunately, we had some inspiration: before the trip, Saule had bought the "Field Guide to the Geology of Northeastern Oman" and while flicking through it, I almost dropped my jaw after noticing a picture that looked like it had been taken at the Black Canyon of Gunnison. The place was called Wadi al Ala. It took us a few days to find a good way down to access the walls, but eventually we found a secret passage of downclimbing, with a few short abseils that took us down to the bottom of the canyon.

The line we picked was a mixture of excellent steep rock and some loose flakes. Fortunately, a roof that worried us when we were scoping the wall from the opposite rim of the canyon turned out to have a perfect hand-size crack that got us through to the upper part of the wall. We were soon out of the canyon, sunbathing and enjoying the views. With nowhere to rush this time, we took a last swim at the base of the wadi and started planning new adventures – it remains to be seen when we can realize them.

*Gediminas Simutis*