

MOROCCO ROCKS

Hazel Jones

This is a story in four parts.

Part 1 Morocco 2009

My first climbing trip to Morocco was a big learning curve. I went at the invitation of GT, who had been several times before. We were based in the small bustling town of Tafraoute on the south side of the mountain range of Jebel el Kest. We were welcomed with Moroccan tea and cakes on the terrace of our guest house the 'Tête du Lion', with the famous Lion's Face peak as a dramatic backdrop. The landscape is stark and impressive, with acres of golden quartzite rock. It was February and a cool time of year, with spring flowers emerging, and herds of goats under the watch of shy but friendly Berber farmers.

What did I learn?

I learnt not to wear shorts. Quite apart from avoiding cultural insensitivities, the argan trees particular to the area have vicious thorns that shred your clothes and pierce your flesh.

I learnt about testing holds. On my very first climb I pulled off a hold which hit me on the cheek. Fortunately I was seconding so I was merely bruised, but it was unnerving.

I learnt about route finding. The Claude Davies guide book that we were using is rudimentary; routes are drawn with blunt red lines on small crag photos and given a single technical grade. So a 300m route gets '4c'. This maintains the 'adventure' feel to the climbing - climbing by numbers it was not.

I learnt about useful things to carry in your first aid kit. Mid-week we set out to tackle a 300 metre route on Crag X (the crags are imaginatively named). GT was about 10 foot off the ground, and suddenly a hold the size of a football broke off and he fell. I was belaying to one side but was dragged in to the rock and bashed my elbow. From our respective first aid kits we cobbled

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together some ancient steristrips and tape to hold the wound together for the day. Gaffer tape would also have done the job.

I learnt about carrying and using abseil tat. The first aid ministrations had delayed us, which meant we didn't complete the route, necessitating an abseil retreat from half way up the cliff. It was obvious others had bailed from the same spot, so a web of in-situ tat had to be inspected, suspect faded tape removed - it deteriorates fast in the strong sunlight, and a new length of sling of our own added.

In five days of climbing we saw no other climbers, until the last day, which added to the serious feel of the place. What if I or GT had been more seriously injured? Who would come to our rescue and how on earth would they have known where Crag K / X / P was?

Part 2: Morocco 2012

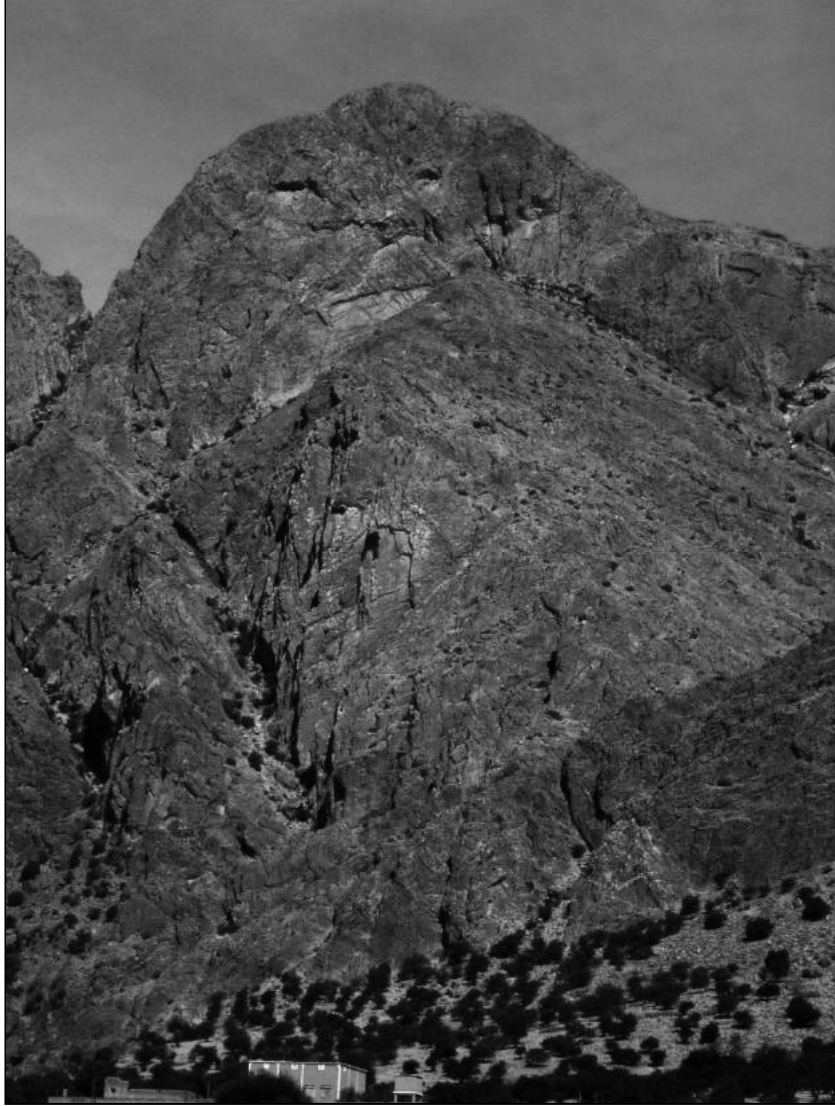
I had a better idea of what to expect on trip number two. The scenery and sense of adventure were as impressive as ever, but this time we were a more reassuring party of four: GT and I were joined by fellow Pinnacle Club member Valerie Partington and her climbing partner Steve.

What did we learn?

We learnt that it is not enough for there to be others in the party, you also need a means of contacting them if you need to.

GT and I set out on the third or fourth morning for our Big Climb of the week - the 350m *Eagle's Beak*, an inviting 350m line graded '4c'. It was the only route (in the guide book at the time) on 'Crag A', beyond the village of Anergui in the Anelm valley. The road to Anergui is an 'exciting' crazy drive and an adventure in itself. For the route, all we had to go on was a wiggly red line on a crag photo, but no description of the descent. But it looked possible to join a walkers' descent path from the peak of Jebel El Kest, which could not be that difficult to find.

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*Tête du Lion in the Moroccan Anti-Atlas near Tafrouote
(Photograph by Hazel Jones)*

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We parked at the top of the village, and after a pleasant walk to the crag through neglected almond tree terraces and argan trees, the first challenge was to find the start of the route. The minimalist topo was little help, but by asking the million-dollar question, 'if I could climb anywhere on this crag, where would it be?' we eventually identified a clean rib and impressive crack line. By 11.30 we were on the first pitch, on largely solid rock. The second pitch required some route finding, with a couple of bold moves across a wide crack, but still heading up and left, we made solid progress in increasingly impressive positions.

Five pitches of no more than 4c climbing got us to easy ground from where we picked up the ropes and scrambled alpine style to the top.

We topped out around 5 o'clock and set off to find the path. We spotted wild daffs, gentians here and there, and random cairns, but no path, no gentle col, no sight of the village, in short no path. We did find a gorge, which we scrambled steeply down, guessing it might lead to the path, but disappointingly it led instead to a vertical drop. Neither of us were inclined to abseil in the dwindling light, so our only option was to retrace our steps up the boulder strewn gorge. By this time we had our head torches on and a sprained ankle was becoming a serious risk. So as we passed a wide flat rock we considered our options - the rock looked an inviting place to stop the night.

When I say inviting, I mean it had its pros and cons. Pro: a wide dry flat rock to sleep on (no chance of rolling off); con: the rock was cold, with only a climbing rope as a poor substitute for a karrimat. Pro: a clear night sky with an almost full moon; con: no way of switching off the floodlighting of the moon. Pro: I still had six jellybabies left; con: I only had a mouthful of water left. Pro: Valerie and Steve knew roughly where we were, con: I had left my mobile in the car and had no way of contacting them to stop them lying awake worrying. Pro: I had three layers of clothing on; con: they were thin, and my knee-length trousers

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left my shins bare, so I wrapped them in loops of rope (hoping I would not need to leap up in a hurry). Pro: it was not cold enough to die of hypothermia; it would make a good story.

We survived of course. As daylight started to appear at 6am, we had a quick breakfast of a jellybaby each, then set off to locate this path, which we found within 30 minutes. In another 30 minutes we were down at the car.

As we happily glugged water, an excited man approached us from a nearby house. He'd been wondering whose car had parked next to his house and was relieved to see we were safe and well, and by the way, 'Your friends have just set off up the path to search for you!' Fortunately Valerie and Steve had not gone far, and we were able to call them back. Sure enough they'd had a sleepless night, and got up at 5am to come and look for us. The welcoming Mr Said invited us in for 'just' a cup of tea, followed by coffee, bread, soup, oranges. It was Anergui's answer to Pete's Eats.

Sure enough it makes a good story. (And I still had two jellybabies left).

Part 3: Morocco 2013

This time our party increased to six with the addition of Cristina Gardiner among others. This time, armed with not one but two new guide books to the north side, we made it a twin location trip: five days on the south side, six on the north. The south side was as adventurous as ever, with route-finding and descents still a major challenge, but the markets and cafés of Tafraoute provided relaxing evening diversion, and the terrace of the Tête du Lion with its dramatic Lion's Face backdrop as welcoming as ever.

Moving to the north side, accommodation was at the Kasbah Tizourgane, a remarkable mediaeval fortified village, which was gradually being renovated by the owners. But our climbing plans were interrupted almost immediately by several days of torrential downpours. These were greeted with joy by locals

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who had not had rain for nine months, but washed away the road that led to the majority of climbing areas. But the road became driveable again and so much climbing opened up! Compared with the south side, the north is practically roadside cragging.

Part 4: Morocco 2014

This time we spent a mere three days on the south side, to concentrate on the north, where there was so much rock to be climbed. We were back to four again, this time Valerie, Steve and I were joined by Ann Blandford.

I had been so enamoured of the Anergui area, and the *Eagle's Beak*, in spite of our unplanned night out, that Ann and I set off to do a new VS route *Ride the Wild Wind* on the same crag. This time, with the benefit of a new guide book, and forearmed with experience to avoid benightment, we were convinced that we would find the descent path, but packed warm clothes just in case.

We never got that far. Was the route an unverified sandbag, or had we lost all route-finding ability? The first pitch of our route felt so much harder than the supposed grade that we made a strategic decision to make an abseil retreat. We went for a delightful walk instead.

We had better luck on the north side, in terms of both weather and route-finding. On our first day we ventured for the first time down the Samazar valley including 9 kms along an unmade road in second gear. It was well worth the effort. We arrived at Dragon Buttress, which provided us a spectacularly positioned long Severe - *Dragon Ridge*, on which to get acclimatised to the rock and environment.

After that there was no stopping us - we devoured the adventure of the mountain routes, with route-finding and loose rock still keeping us on our toes, but revelling in the views and the wildness. Even though there were more climbers around than a few years ago, we often spent the whole day with the mountain to ourselves (and a few herders and their goats).

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This story is unfinished. Part 5 onwards are still to come.



*Relaxing on the terrace of the Tête du Lion with the Lion's
Face in the background
(Photograph by Val Partington)*