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Recon: Jebel Misht

Forty Years of Adventurous Climbing on Oman's Massive Limestone Mountain

I WAS RETURNING from a tough winter expedition in Nepal. It had been badly planned and badly executed, and all I had to show for it was some very cold bones. As I checked in at the Kathmandu airport, I asked for a window seat on the right side of the plane, as I fancied watching the sun rise as we flew along the southern coast of Iran. This was the pathway taken by Alexander's depleted army on its return from India.

I enjoyed that view, but my eyes really popped out of my head when we crossed the Strait of Hormuz and the plane banked over the Western Hajar mountains of Oman. In front of me unfolded a vista of limestone walls, thousands of feet high, as far as I could see.

Back home in England I started my research. This was 1999 and the Sultanate of Oman had thrown open its doors to tourists for the first time. By various means, a few climbers had made their way to the Western Hajar earlier, but the biggest walls had barely been touched. Eleven months after that plane flight, Susie Sammut and I flew into Muscat and started our own exploration. Over the next two years, we made repeated trips to Oman with British and American climbers and cherry-picked many of the obvious lines on the three great monoliths of the Western Hajar: Jebel Misht, Jebel Kawr, and Jebel Misfah.

These three peaks are comprised of a hard rock known as Exotic Limestone, eroded to produce complex mountain faces on all aspects. Kawr is nine miles long and three miles wide in places, with walls up to 3,000 feet, and Misfah has two long walls up to 1,500 feet high. But the jewel in the crown undoubtedly is Jebel Misht.

Misht is Arabic for "comb." As you look at the four-mile-long ridgeline topping Jebel Misht's southwest, south, and southeast faces, you cannot fail to notice the pinnacles running the length of the mountain—a ridge of comb teeth. The heights of these faces start at 1,600 feet, at either end, and top out just short of 4,000 feet in the central section.

I have always been a disciple of the great explorers of the Italian Dolomites—climbers such as Ettore Castiglioni and Bruno Detassis, who roved across the range climbing up to three major new routes in a week. This was our opportunity to walk their path but in a newly developing, Dolomite-style range—and one with even more potential. The crown jewel of the Italian Dolomites, the Marmolada, is two miles wide, 2,600 feet high, and has well over 100 recorded routes. Jebel Misht is twice as wide and half again as high, and has fewer than half that number of routes. This canvas still has big spaces to be filled by those willing to brave the heat and unrelenting glare of the Arabian sun.

EARLY EXPLORATION

The French Pillar is the Nose of Arabia. A curving line that separates the two greatest faces of Jebel Misht, it was the target for a team of French guides led by Raymond Renaud in 1979. At that time, the French dominated climbing developments in the Sahara and the Middle East. The route was climbed over a three-week period with extensive use of fixed ropes and camps.

Other climbs in this period were made by climbers working or living in Oman. British climber Mike Searle spent his teenage years exploring both the Western and Eastern Hajar, making first ascents with whatever soldiers or oilmen could be persuaded to join him. After graduating as a geologist from Oxford University, he returned to Oman repeatedly for work, and some of his climbs were the first forays onto the main faces on Misht. His 1983 route up the 4th Tower of the south face, climbed with Dana Coffield, Peter King, and Daniel Mithen, set a precedent for ground-up, single-push ascents that has largely been followed ever since.

In 1988, British desert climbing specialist Tony Howard received permission from the Omani government to carry out a mountain-tourism assessment project, and in the company of Alec McDonald he climbed the southeast pillar on Misht at 350 meters and 5.8. British expat Jerry Hadwin and Garth Bradshaw made the second ascent of the French Pillar in 1994, then added Southern Groove (1,100 meters, 5.9) up the right edge of the southeast face. This was the biggest route yet to be climbed ground-up and the first to breach the southeast wall.

These were the only lines climbed on Jebel Misht until just before the millennium.

GOLD RUSH

The teams of British and American climbers that I lured to Jebel Misht from 1999 to 2001 were extremely productive, sometimes climbing several new routes in the same week, and always in a lightweight style relying on passive protection and no aid. More than a dozen long new routes were climbed over these three years.

During this period, the Cockscomb (southwest face) received its first attention, resulting in many free routes of 5.8 or 5.9 on a 500-meter wall. Easy access meant this wall became the place where many climbers would find their first footing on Misht.

These same teams climbed additional routes on the south face, with Threading the Needle (Paul Ramsden and Paul Eastwood), Madam Butterfly (Hornby and Aqil Chaudhry), and Snakes and Ladders (Hornby and David Wallis) weaving 700- to 750-meter lines among the broad towers on the upper face. Snakes and Ladders was named after Wallis was bitten on the ankle by a viper on the first attempt, while on the successful second attempt we were chased across slabs by vipers several times during the descent. During the first ascent of another route, Chaudhry and I had to dodge a large viper as it slithered down the crack we were jamming—a bit of a moment for both of us. If you climb here, you will almost certainly leave with your own snake story. My advice: Shout or sing to the cracks before you put your hands in them.

The pride of place in this period must go to the three imposing lines climbed on the 1,000-meter high southeast face. First blood went to Ramsden and visiting American Tom Nonis, in 1999, with Eastern Promise (5.10). Ramsden, Eastwood, and Chaudhry then produced the Empty Quarter (5.10). Not to be left out, Hornby and Wallis added the final obvious groove line of Intafada (5.9+). These same climbers also ascended the major pillars on neighboring Jebel Kawr during the same period.

MORE AND MORE CLIMBERS

The publicity about these climbs in European magazines brought the first wave of interest from Swiss and Austrian climbers, initially organized by Oswald Oelz. He invited Albert Precht and Sigi Brachmeyer (both prolific developers of climbing in Wadi Rum in Jordan), and they climbed a number of new routes in late 2001. They in turn introduced Jakob Oberhauser, a young Austrian mountain guide, to the area. He fell in love with Oman, began working as a trekking guide, and became the driving force behind the next phase of development, eventually writing a guidebook to climbing in Oman, published in 2014.

Now the game shifted up a gear: harder grades, faster ascents, very bold leads, and eventually the introduction of a few pitons and bolts to protect the harder new routes.

In 2001 and 2002, two difficult routes went up adjacent to the French Pillar, incorporating steeper ground and more difficult climbing on the lower southeast face. The powerful British team of Pat Littlejohn and Steve Sustad climbed Icarus (1,000 meters, 5.10) over several days in March 2001, at the very hot end of the winter. Pat describes removing his rock shoes at every stance due to the heat being absorbed through the black rubber.

The next year, Oberhauser climbed his first major new route, the English Arête (5.10), with Brian Davison. It went up between the French Pillar and Icarus in an impressive 12-hour car-to-car blast up the highest part of the face. With the help of friends, they introduced a creative logistical tactic to deal with the 12-kilometer walk from the base of the north face descent back to the campsites on the south side: One team would drive a jeep and drop the climbing team off early in the morning and then pick them up on the north side at the end of the day. The next day the teams would swap roles. Oberhauser later pioneered a shorter descent between the southeast face and the Organ Pipes, but the north face remains the easiest way down in the dark. I've done it a dozen times, often hitchhiking back on school buses or other vehicles.

In 2003, a five-man German team led by Jens Richter produced a strong line up the southeast face with Make Love Not War (7b/5.12b). This was the hardest route on the mountain for many years and the first to make use of significant numbers of protection bolts, though the great majority of the pitches have few or no bolts.

Meanwhile, Oberhauser and Sepp Jochler were busy on the high right end of the south face, producing the very long Paradies der Fakire (1,500m, 5.10). The limestone here is so sharp that it cuts the hands, and leader falls could be a skin-shredding experience.

Three years later, in 2006, a pair of experienced desert climbers from Tyrol, Helli Gargitter and Paul Trenkwalder, added the modern classic Shukran (1,000m, 5.10+) up the middle of the southeast face. With clean rock and a logical, direct line, this is now the most commonly climbed route on the highest walls of the mountain—it has probably had 10 ascents to date.

In 2008 it was the turn of Slovenian climbers Pavle Kozjek and Dejan Miskovic, who raced up a new 5.10+, Yah-lah Sadikie, on the wall right of Make Love, reaching the summit in just nine hours—though they needed a full moon to make their way down the far side and back to camp. Miskovic then turned his attention, with Matej Knavs, to the big wall left of the French Pillar; they produced Kabir Hajar (5.11), topping out the 15-pitch route at 1 a.m., having used no hammered protection on either of the new routes.

Oberhauser had also tried a new route on the big face left of the French Pillar, climbing with Sepp Jochler; they reached a point about six pitches up in two different attempts, in 2003 and 2005. Oberhauser returned in 2008 and joined forces with Hansjörg Auer and Thomas Scheiber to complete the route: Flying Pegs (5.11+). Auer then came back the following year with Much Mayr and found a much harder route in the same area as Flying Pegs, starting farther left and finishing to the right. With two pitches of 5.13 (some bolt and piton protection but mostly trad), Fata Morgana is the mountain's hardest climb.

Jebel Misht seems to have the power to draw climbers back over and over again. In 2009, Miskovic returned to Oman and added two 1,300-meter 5.10s to the central part of the south face: Curry Power and Chilly Power, while Richter returned in early 2017 with Philip Flämig to climb Mitten ins Herz ("Straight to the Heart," VIII-/5.11c) through steep ground immediately left of Fakirs. Gareth Leah, who attempted a new route on the right side of the southeast face in 2010 but was badly injured by rockfall, returned in late 2017 with Sergio "Tiny" Almada to complete the line. Throughout this period, I joined Paul Knott and many others to add new routes to the various sectors of the mountain.

CLIMBING POTENTIAL

The four different faces of Jebel Misht are cut with grooves and hung with pillars that should provide new routes for the next two generations of climbers.

The very steep, roughly 300-meter section of wall that forms the right edge of the southeast face has been attempted several times by teams lacking the preparation or firepower to make the route. The first of these attempts resulted in the creation of Riddle in the Sands, a zigzagging line that was the logical escape from the difficulties of the unclimbed wall—and as a result has been repeated several times.

The broad 500-meter-high wall on the east face, above the village of Al Jil, has only eight routes in a mile width of rock. Known as the Organ Pipes, this is where some first-time visitors have added routes before stepping onto the mountain's bigger features. There is almost unlimited potential—enjoy the gaps at a grade to suit you.

For the 5.9 climber, there is a lot of potential for independent lines in the central and left-hand sections of the south face. The existing routes currently run to 900 meters and 5.8 to 5.10. Most routes follow logical grooves and crack lines, but there are many options for direct lines, as Tyroleans Simon Messner and friends discovered recently when they blasted a route straight up the left end of the south wall in just seven hours.

There are a significant number of fierce pillars and headwalls in the mile-wide big wall between the French Pillar and Curry Power on the south face—in particular, the steep face and headwall right of Curry Power and the faces left and right of Kabir Hajar.

Perhaps direct lines on the southeast face, using a mix of trad and bolt protection, will be the new direction for harder lines on Misht. The Czech team that added Boys Don't Cry (1,000m, 7c+/5.13a) through the middle of the face in January 2016 showed the vision for a direct and independent creation, using 35 protection bolts in 21 pitches.

LOGISTICS

Oman is a stable and welcoming country. Indeed, the word “welcome” is probably the most commonly used in any meeting with Omanis. If you observe a polite dress code (long sleeves and pants in villages and towns) and behavior, refrain from overt use of alcohol, and follow low-impact approaches to camping, you will have no problems.

Commercial flights from any direction in the world will take you to Muscat, the capital of Oman. The city occupies a coastal strip that now extends for 50 kilometers, but your arrival into the international airport at Seeb places you conveniently at the start of the road to the interior.

Airport car rental agencies can provide both regular vehicles and 4WDs, while the adjacent supermarkets will provide all the food, water, and equipment you might need for extended camping. The nearest hotels to Misht are in Ibri and Bahla, about 50 kilometers away.

The road from Seeb travels over the Sumail gap, separating the Western Hajar mountains from the Eastern Hajar, before descending to the ancient interior capital towns of Birkat Al-Mauz and Nizwah and then passing Bahla. Provisions can be replenished in these towns. The road between Bahla and Ibri passes beneath the splendid walls and towers of Jebel Kawr before turning right into the valley of Al Ain. There's a stunning photo opportunity just as you pass the turning for Old Al Ain village as a line of 5,000-year-old beehive tombs provides a foreground image with Jebel Misht's south face in the background. Driving time from the airport is about four hours. Approaches from the United Arab Emirates can be made through Ibri.

All the faces on Misht are now accessible by paved road, but a 4WD will get you a couple of kilometers closer to the walls, which in turn allows you more privacy when camping. There are no regulations for climbing or camping in the area, nor is there any rescue service. Leave no trace practices should be the norm at the campsites and on the cliffs.

The climbing season is late November through late February, with December having the least chance of rain. All of the cliffs hold sun for hours—the southeast face starts heating up at the crack of dawn, while the southwest face catches the sunset's rays. Dealing with the heat and carrying enough water are significant challenges. My teams usually carry four liters of water per person, intending to finish the first liter before starting up the route. Start your approach two hours before dawn.

Climbing in Oman, by Jakob Oberhauser, includes descriptions and topos of all routes completed through 2013. The Oxford Alpine Club (oxfordalpineclub.co.uk) will producing a comprehensive guidebook to the limestone walls of Misht, Kawr, Ghul, and Misfah later in 2018.

About the Author: Geoff Hornby is a British adventure climber who has made 450 first ascents around the world, including 12 new routes on Jebel Misht. He splits his life between lecturing on safety engineering to universities and engineers in the U.K., working for the United Nations on specific projects, and living a mountain life in the Italian Dolomites.

Images



The local water supply.



Arnaud Petit on the sixth pitch of Shukran, established in 2006 by Tyroleans Helli Gargitter and Paul Trenkwalder. With 1,000 meters of climbing and clean rock, the 5.10+ route is considered a modern classic.



Sunrise at a no-shade campsite about two hours' walk from Jebel Misht's southeast face.



The author (lavender shirt) waits for sunset and ifthar, the evening meal that breaks each day's fast during Ramadan, with residents of the village of K'saw.



Much Mayr (leading) and Hansjörg Auer on Fata Morgana.



The massive southwest, south, and southeast faces of Jebel Misht span about four miles. (A) The Towers sector. These formations and the Coxcomb to their west gave Jebel Misht its name—Misht means “comb” in Arabic. (B) South face, home to Fata Morgana (see previous photo) and many other serious routes. (C) Southeast face. The French Pillar tops out on the central prow. The steep face below is taken by Icarus, Shukran, Boys Don't Cry, and other major lines. The left side of the huge amphitheater at right is climbed by Physical Graffiti and Bayan Massir. The amphitheater's steepest face has never been climbed. (D) The Organ Pipes.



Village elder in K'saw

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