



AAC Publications

Icarus

Oman, Western Hajar, Jebel Misht

THERE WAS STILL only one route up the center of Jebel Misht's highest face by March 2001 when Steve Sustad and I arrived in Oman, hoping to climb the very steep wall to the right of the original French route (1979). A 600-meter wall laden with overhangs leads to the base of the great pillar high on the cliff, which the French route skirts to the right. We reckoned that finishing directly up that pillar would give a great finale.

In Muscat we rented the cheapest 4WD vehicle we could find and headed straight for the mountains. The last 10 kilometers was a dirt track up to a farm, then it was real off-road over jagged scree and water-worn gullies to a camp spot just a couple of hours from the start of our intended line. On our first afternoon we lugged climbing gear to the base in ferocious heat and climbed through the first rock barrier to the base of the main face.

Studying the wall above, it seemed that all natural weaknesses were blocked somewhere by overhangs, so all we could do was pick the most promising line and give it a try. Once climbing, we were pleasantly surprised that the rock was basically excellent and well weathered, offering plenty of scope for natural protection and giving hope that even the more imposing sections might be climbable. Over two days we pushed the line for about 10 pitches. Looking ahead, there seemed to be a way around the left side of a huge roof 65 meters above us, as long as we could get to it. Feeling excited and optimistic, we abseiled off and walked back to camp in the dark.

Next day we needed to resupply, so we drove to the town of Ibri. We were back by the early afternoon and were invited into the farmstead below our camp to share their barbecue, a superb feast of roasted goat kebabs smothered in honey and butter and eaten with chapatis. It was the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr in Oman, and everybody was home with their families, having a good time. Fortified by this wonderful meal, we set off in the evening to bivouac below the face. We had three days of food and water with us and were going for the top.

An hour before first light, we forced down some bread and water and crossed scree to the start of the route. We climbed with packs because it was faster than hauling, but the extra weight made the pitches seem much harder, and it was after 2 p.m. before we reached our high point. Steve led off across an impressive wall, up some steep flakes to a stance in the middle of nowhere. The next pitch was clearly going to be harder, so I left my sack to haul later and set off across a compact wall. It was great limestone face climbing: little pockets and flakes with enough small wire protection to keep fear at bay. A hard groove led to the big crack system going round the overhang, and once there I knew the line was going to go.

Steve led a long, hard chimney while I looked nervously at my watch. By the time I was following the chimney pitch, it was dark. So far there hadn't been a single bivouac ledge along the route, and Steve's stance was no exception—just a couple of small footholds. To spend the night there would have been hell, so I grabbed the gear and led on through in more or less complete darkness. I was surprised how well you could get on by feeling all the footholds by hand, then using them from memory as you groped upward with your hands. Luckily it wasn't too hard, and by the time I was high on the pitch a big moon had come out and I was confident we could press on. By 9:30 p.m. we had reached the broken ridge taken by the French route, located a bivy site, and crashed out, exhausted.

Surprise, surprise, it dawned another fine day! (You get a lot of them in Oman.) The top didn't look far away, but this was the dreadful foreshortening of Jebel Misht. Three easy pitches took us to the base of the final pillar, a superb buttress more than 300 meters high. We considered different lines and opted for one that looked like it would have the fewest offwidth cracks. Some great pitches, mostly HVS/E1 (5.8–5.10), occupied us through the heat of the day, until about 80 meters below the top the rock got very compact. I tried to reach an obvious groove but ended up being forced left onto an open face. There was hardly any gear, and the climbing was sustained 5c (hard 5.10), but the pitch obviously had to go. It finished with a bold and airy section right on the crest. Steve got the last hard pitch, which also had its moments, and then we shot up easier ground to the wonderful summit plateau and—wait for it—a bloody great microwave tower!

We thought we were in with a chance of getting down by nightfall. The local farmer who had been so hospitable told us he had climbed Misht via a huge couloir system overlooking our camp. We figured if he could get up it, we could get down, especially with a few abseils. As we peered over the precipice, which was still well over 600 meters high at this point, we saw something moving at speed across the rocks. It was a tahr, a rare breed of mountain goat for which Jebel Misht is an important sanctuary. Now I've watched a lot of goats move on rock and a fair few chamois, but this creature was in a class of its own. It shot across 200 meters of terrifying terrain in a few seconds, then seemed to disappear into the mountain.

To cut a long story short, we tried every which way to get down the couloir and eventually gave up and settled for the long way home, down the north side and around the whole mountain. After another night out and six hours of trekking in crackling heat, we made it.

Icarus was the first route to breach the steep left side of the southeast face. The 1,000-meter climb was graded E4 5c (run-out 5.10+/5.11-, more or less). Pat Littlejohn is a well-known exploratory climber and was the longtime director of the International School of Mountaineering, based in Leysin, Switzerland.

Images



Pat Littlejohn starts one of the key pitches of Icarus: "little pockets and flakes with enough small wire protection to keep fear at bay." Night fell soon after Sustad followed the pitch.



Littlejohn (left) and Sustad on the summit.



Steve Sustad launches up 5.10 terrain on the first ascent of Icarus in 2001.

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