



AAC Publications

Ben Amira and Other Domes, New Routes

Mauritania, Adrar

The granite dome of Ben Amira has climbing routes up to 500 meters long. Photo: Les3corbiers | Wikimedia

I founded the nonprofit organization Médecine et Montagnes du Monde (MMM) in 1995, with the aim of practicing medicine and developing climbing in regions with limited tourism, in order to provide work opportunities for the local populations. We have worked in many countries in Asia and Africa, focused on opening and equipping routes, training local guides, and donating equipment, all to encourage visiting climbers.

I have known for a long time about the existence of three huge granite domes in northern Mauritania, including Ben Amira (a.k.a. Ben Amera), one of the largest monoliths in the world. Since Mauritania is one of the safest countries in West Africa, I decided in 2020 to explore the possibility of climbing on the three monoliths: Ben Amira (ca 560m), Aïcha (ca 400m), and Haddad (ca 343m).

Our sponsor, the charter company Le Point Afrique, offered us four plane tickets to Atar airport, located four hours by 4WD from Ben Amira, and put us in contact with Kadi, the manager of the local agency Mauritanie Voyages. In February 2020, four of us arrived at the base of Ben Amira (21°13'56.0"N, 13°39'46.2"W). Our group consisted of Jean Kanapa, Maxime Groppo, Anne de Belinay, my wife, and me, all from France. We didn't even know if climbing would be possible.

To our surprise, everything exceeded our expectations. The granite was of excellent quality, and the huge slabs in varied inclinations allowed for the possibility of opening routes at all levels of difficulty. Why had no routes been opened until now? A mystery! In truth this was surely due to the place's isolation.

Ben Amira is located in the middle of the desert, 650km east of the country's capital, Nouakchott, and roughly 10km south of the border with the disputed territory of Western Sahara. The airport of Atar is only served by chartered flights during the coolest season, from December to April. We also assume tourists may have associated Mauritania with the terrorism risks of its neighbors (such as Mali), even though it is actually very safe.

On our first stay in 2020, we opened three routes: Point Afrique Ouvre la Voie (400m, 6a) and Mauritanie Voyages (500m, 5a) on Ben Amira, in tribute to our sponsor and outfitter, and Même les Chameaux Meurent de Soif ("Even Camels Die of Thirst," 350m, 6a) on Aïcha, in memory of a very long day of climbing where we ran out of water!

After ten trips to the region, MMM has opened more than 30 routes on Ben Amira, Aïcha (21°17'39.1"N, 13°41'47.4"W), and Haddad (21°16'03.4"N, 13°36'40.8"W), from quite easy to 7b (5.12b); they are equipped with bolts, though there often are long runouts. We have also trained three local guides and provided climbing and rescue equipment. We created a website (escalademaauritanie.com) that provides extensive information on climbing in the region, including descriptions and topos for the established routes; contact MMM via our site for help finding plane tickets, climbing permits, transport, and lodging.

—Jean Louis Lauféron, France

Images



Climbing on the granite slabs of northern Mauritania.



The granite slabs of Ben Amira and nearby monoliths hold more than 30 routes, ranging from very easy to 5.12.



The extraordinary view from the granite domes out to the open desert of northern Mauritania.



The granite dome of Ben Amira has climbing routes up to 500 meters long.

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