



AAC Publications

Jebel Rum, New Routes

Jordan, Wadi Rum

Jordan's desert is famous for its sandstone formations, and the history of climbing in Wadi Rum is long—some of the sport's legends have been active here. Local Bedouin climbed the rocks to find natural water reservoirs long before climbers and tourists followed. The area is not as remote as it was 20 years ago, since the city of Aqaba is only 1.5 hours' drive away. This makes it an ideal winter escape. The village of Wadi Rum offers enough comfort to serve as base camp for single-day trips, or you can get a ride to more remote areas. Climbing close to the village, listening to the muezzin calling Muslims for prayer, is a mystical experience.

The Wadi Rum area is well known for adventure climbing, with the descents being almost as demanding as the climb itself. Most routes offer no fixed gear and need to be protected with cams and nuts. Bolted routes hardly exist. The reason for that, other than the local climbing traditions, is the quality of the sandstone. Many first ascensionists have reported that placing expansion bolts failed, as the holes did not have the proper dimension after drilling, and thus the bolts could not be tightened. In the past, pitons were hammered into these holes instead. While this isn't a good solution, it enabled a first ascent to be made ground up. This was also the case on the east face of Jebel Rum (1,754m), one of the region's prime walls for climbing, with the highest quality rock in the area.

In February, two teams—Chris-Jan Stiller and I, and a French group led by Jonathan Crison and Arnaud Petit—opened long bolt-protected routes in Wadi Rum. Each team had a different approach to solve the problem with the soft rock. The French planned to use removable bolts (Petzl Coeur Pulse) during their ground-up ascent, replacing them later with permanent glue-in bolts. Our idea was to use expansion bolts thicker and longer than the 10mm diameter ones commonly used in harder rock types, increasing the contact surface between steel and rock. In a cellar at home, tests were conducted on pieces of poor-quality sandstone to ensure if this solution worked.

In the end, we brought 110mm-long and 12mm-wide bolts. The strategy was to bring drill bits with a different level of wear: one brand new (12.5 mm), one well used (11.5 mm), and one really old and very worn (10.8 mm). As a backup, we brought two cartridges of epoxy adhesive to glue in the belay anchors and some bolts if these could not be tightened.

After warming up with Rock Empire (485m, 7c) and 55 Steps to Hell (300m, 7b) on Jebel Rum, we headed into the desert to find a wall of our dreams.

We spent many days in the desert exploring different walls and testing the rock quality, but none of them came even close to Jebel Rum. The rock on the mostly vertical walls was too soft to climb or place a bolt. After three days, we returned to the village. The last option was a line on the left side of Jebel Rum, which Arnaud had pointed out to us.

The proposed line would start on Towering Inferno (300m, 7a) before splitting off to the right for another four to six pitches. After two pitches on Towering Inferno, we realized that the proposed line and the rock quality was indeed better than anything we'd seen. Carrying the drill and bolts, we immediately started to make our way up new ground.

After the first day of bolting, we fixed the rope we had and returned to the ground. The next morning, we came back to finish the route to the top, ultimately establishing ten new pitches. We also wanted to find an alternative to the Towering Inferno start, as the first three pitches of that route are always busy and require a full trad rack. While rappelling the route, we scouted for an independent start, even though the rock quality was not amazing. On our redpoint day, we bolted these first two pitches ground up and continued to free Queen of the Desert (450m, 7a+) in a five-hour push.

Overall, we placed 110 bolts on the route and at belays. It is to be noted that our success is only due to the fact that we brought the worn drill bit with a diameter of 11.5mm. The 12.5 mm drill bit was used on rock with black patina, but in soft rock it would leave a hole much too big to tighten a 12mm expansion bolt. We used 10mm x 130mm glue-in bolts for the rappel anchors. With our new route, it is now possible to climb Jebel Rum with only some quickdraws and two or three small cams.

Editor's Note: The author's blog post on this expedition includes extensive photos as well as a Dropbox link to his helpful online collection topos from Wadi Rum.

– Tobias Wolf, Germany

La Voie du Coeur: The large French team led by Jonathan Crison and Arnaud Petit completed their new route, a direct 12-pitch line starting to the right of Towering Inferno and Revienta o Burilla, in February. La Voie du Coeur is completely bolt-protected and goes at 7c+ (7b obligatory), with sustained difficulties in the first seven pitches. The French reportedly had difficulty with both their expansion bolts and their glue-ins in the softer rock on the upper half.

Images



Testing drilling techniques at home in Germany.

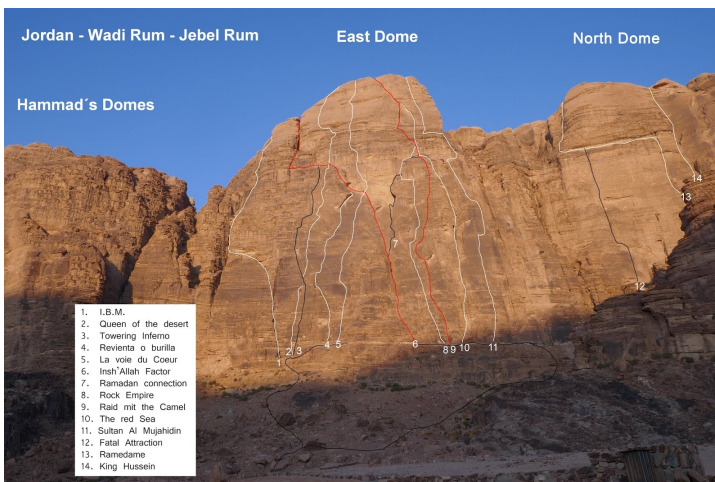


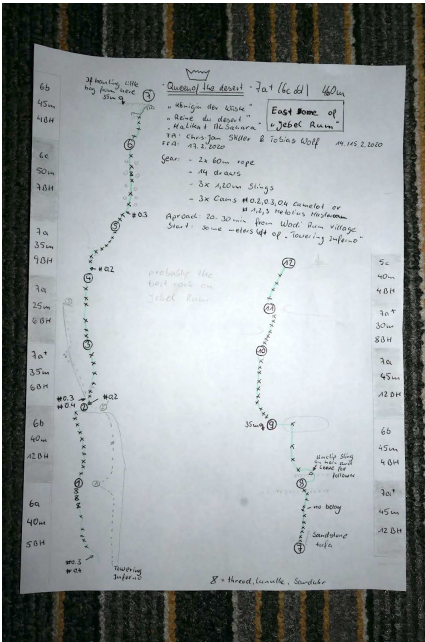
Photo topo of routes on the east face of Jebel Rum, including the new routes Queen of the Desert and Voie du Coeur, climbed in February 2020.



Bolting on lead during the first ascent of Queen of the Desert.



Partway up Queen of the Desert on the east face of Jebel Rum.



Topo for Queen of the Desert (12 pitches, 7a+) on the east face of Jebel Rum.

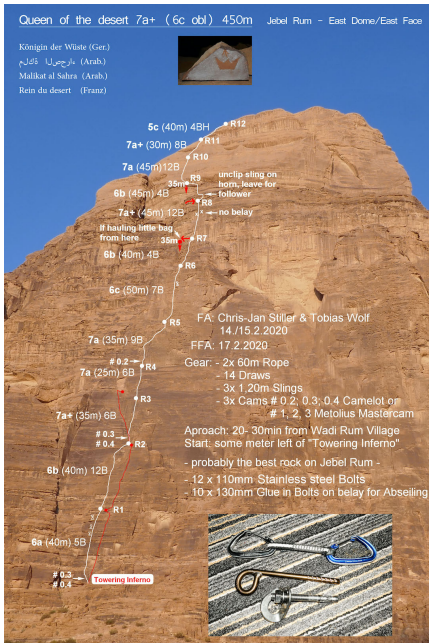


Photo-topo for Queen of the Desert, east face of Jebel Rum.

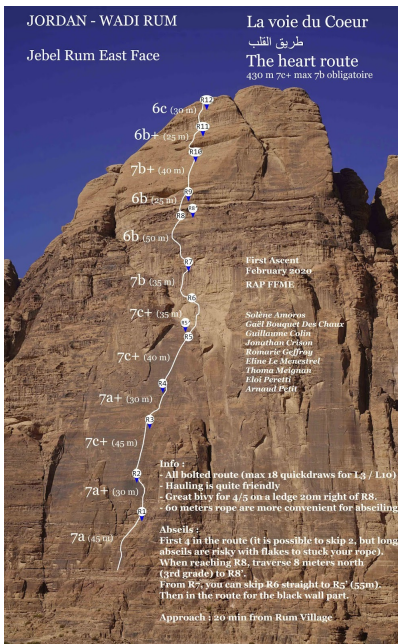


Photo-topo for Voie du Coeur, east face of Jebel Rum.

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