

Desert storms. Wadi Rum Jordan
An article written for the book, Mountains are my Passion.



Rowland on one of the big groove

The cold, but dry, sand forced its way between our toes as we (Mark my son) quietly plodded our way through the village passing by the black tents of the Bedouin, their small oil lamps casting a golden glow which lit up the faces of the Bedouin as they huddled round the light in the chilly morning air.

Dawn – Wadi Rum

Dawn had not touched the sky yet but life begins to stir early in the desert to avoid the intense heat of the afternoons. Bedouin dog's rush out to warn us of their vigilance, this causes the occupants of the tents to look out and then acknowledge us with a blessing of the day.

We are soon through the village and out into the open desert. Slowly the horizon glows with the rising of the sun as a new day is born. Suddenly echoes bounce from wall to wall of the Wadi as the Bedouin start the days chant of prayers from the village mosque.



Dawn in Wadi Rum

By now the valley walls were gradually turning blood red as the sun starts its journey across a clear cloudless sky. The sheer beauty of this place just stopped us in our tracks: if there had been no climbing here at all it would have been worth coming to Jordan just for moments like this.

Mark and I where on our way to explore a possible new line up one of the back walls of the Abu Aina Towers. We had spied these walls when on our way out to explore and climb new routes in other areas

These towers, situated in one of the deep siqs (canyons) of Wadi Rum, seemed to have very impressive grooves and cracks leading

way up to the top of the wall and looked tempting enough for us to get up well before dawn to make the long trek into the Siq.



The walk out from Wadi Rum into the desert

This was my second visit to Jordan, as I had been here the previous year with a number of European mountain guides as guest of the Jordanian Government to promote the area as a new destination for climbers. At the time we had been informed that there would be accommodation and transport available for guides who visited the area with clients and this visit was to find out how all this would work out in reality. When Mark and I arrived in Wadi Rum we found the place devoid of climbers, transport or officials, and just the tents of the local Bedouins. After talking to the Bedouins it soon became clear that they would provide transport but at very high costs. This was too expensive for just the two of us, so most of the exploring was had to be done on foot.

Just over an hours walking found us at the entrance to a siq leading up up to Towers. A scramble up over boulders and loose rock eventually landed up at the base of the wall and the start of what we hoped would be a new route.



Standing below the impressive tower of Abu Aina.

The line we were to take was a continuous series of cracks and grooves ending up, so it seemed, at the very summit of the mountain. By now the sun had reached into the base of the siq as we started to gear up, what had been a cold mornings walk became pleasantly warm. When we had arrived at Wadi Rum , a week ago, we had been troubled by cold weather bring with it hail and snow. This had meant carrying what spare clothing we had on climbs. The Bedouin had promised us that it would soon change and this warm sunshine we hoped would herald that change.....

We started by soloing the first 70ft slab at about 5a (V1+). to the foot of a deep chimney. The whole face now started to lean outwards and the line we wanted to take disappeared with the verticalness of the wall. My first lead was up the chimney which at

70ft soon closed up. The rock becoming awful crumbling sandstone; rock which fills one with dread as it disintegrates around one. Fortunately a series of moves right landed me at the base of the first big groove with perfect rock, and good placements for gear. Fifty feet of this groove at ,5c (6b), and running out of rope, I reached a good foot hold with no chance of anything higher to belay on. I placed one bolt (by hand)to belay from. The rope was taken in and soon Mark appeared grinning all over his face. It had been a great pitch and this was just the start. He gear up for the next pitch, a continuation of the groove system, bridging, jamming and lay-backing up this superb line, the rock



still perfect. At the very top of this pitch some harder 6a. (6b+) moves up an open chimney lead to a good ledge and belays.

From here on we had two choices ; a crack line going left or a more direct overhanging crack straight up. My lead, so I elected to climb the direct line which fortunately turned out to be the correct one, the other one eventually ended up on rubbish rock and a blank section higher up. That's the way it goes on new routing; you can so easily choose the wrong one. The choice turned out to be an

excellent choice, a gently overhanging 45 meter hand to fist jamming crack 5b (6a). This ending at a perfect belay ledge, but the next pitch above didn't look at all promising , unprotected and looking very hard. The route ahead again was hidden by the overhanging wall above. From our approach walk in the line we hoped to climb looked like we should be on the left side of the wall but some how we now seemed to be in the middle.



One of the superb overhanging grooves.

Immediately above us was a short steep wall which lead onto a smooth steep slab ending what looked like an impossible overhang. Mark climbed the steep wall and onto the slab, managing to place two small RP,s . This being sandstone would be useless in any serious fall. At the top of the slab he disappeared leftwards around the edge of the left arête and out of sight. Suddenly there were whoops of joy and the rope started to run out steadily for its full length. My turn to follow. The slab really was delicate and very bold to lead when you think that you don't know what lies ahead.

Also we were the only climbers in Jordan with not chance of any help in case of an accident. This slab was about 6a. (6c). On reaching the overhang, at the top of the steep slab I repeated the move left around the arête: and there it was! Another perfect corner groove , with a perfect crack, soaring skywards for another 40 meters and at a steady 5c (6a); another superb pitch. From the belay another corner and crack forced its way between the steep walls above. again looking to be perfect rock. How lucky can one get? This climb was now turning out to become a fantastic classic rock climb.

The groove proved to be a bit harder than the one below 6a.

(6b+) but equally enjoyable as again there was no loose rock; hand jam passed hand jam, bridge move lead into delicate smears I reveled in the shear joy of this superb pitch. All too quickly Mark called up that the rope was running out, so I arranged a belay.

I had now reached to just below a chimney we had seen from below. From below this chimney had seemed quite reasonable and we hoped would lead us out to the top of the route. It proved to be at least five metres wide, overhanging 7 meters and a good 70 metres high with no cracks or possible line to climb. The only alternative was to try and climb the very impressive blank looking wall on the left. During the later part of the climb the sky had darkened , covering the sun. It had also become cold again just as it had on previous climbs. Darkness was only one hour away. We just might have enough time to reach the summit and find a descent. We felt fairly confident we could find our way back down the route again in the dark so decided to continue with the climb.

Mark now started the next pitch with spots of rain splashing on the dry rock around him. Just left of the belay was a slight groove leading onto the headwall. Mark climbed this then disappeared into a shallow depression later to re-appear higher up creeping his way upwards until he was out of sight again. When seconding this pitch I could really appreciate the fine job he had done . The pitch

was a poorly protected and at a grade of 6a (6c) was indeed a bold lead in the conditions. He had arranged a belay at the base of a series of grooves which seemed to head upwards in the direction of the summit. The rain now becoming a torrent. Before leaving this belay we placed another bolt as we would have to return here to abseil off down the wall. We had with us just two bolts and we had used all of them up. It was getting really quite dark now but fortunately the remaining pitched proved to be quite easy, two long pitches of 4c (V). and 5a. (6a-).

By the time we reach the summit the rain had stopped again but we were in complete darkness. Far below us we could make out the headlights of the Bedouin's vehicles(4x4s). as they travelled back to the village camp of Wadi Rum. To-day had been a holiday for them and they had spent the day racing through the desert far below us. We where later to find out that they had in fact been watching us all day.

The night was freezing, not really having the right kind of clothing for such temperatures we couldn't even contemplate staying out all night up here and we soon started on our way back down the route, soloing back down the easier top pitches to the bolt we had left, with the rain started to fall again. Saving weight we had decided on only bringing one touch(they where not light weight touches in those days). Mark belayed himself on after attaching himself ready to abseil. I then started the abseil with the touch searching the wall for our previous belays until the knot on the end of the ropes was reached. I then had to swinging left and right seeking out the belays we had used on the way up , many of which had fortunately been thread runners. I would then arrange the next abseil then shout up to Mark that I was safe. He would then start his abseil using the pool of light from our head torch as a guide. We descended back down the wall in this fashion getting wetter and colder at each abseil. Awaiting ones turn to do the abseil without the light was an eiry sensation . Around you the dark outlines of the mountains and the steady hiss of the rain as it hit

the rock. The ropes you are hanging from disappearing into the gloom, one hand constantly feeling the rope going down to Mark, making sure he was still on the end and fifty metres below a small pool of light swings around searching for the next abseil point. You started the abseil and the rope disappearing into the gloom seemed as if it wasn't there. The last abseil was going to be a challenge as this would end up going over the overhang we had passed of the left and we just didn't know if the ropes would reach the bealys. If they didn't it would mean a fifty metre prussic back up to the belay. As luck would have it the ropes just reached with not one meter to spare on the stretch. Finally after three to four hours of abseiling we were at the base of the wall and able to scramble down into the base of the siq. The rain had stopped but had left the boulders slippery and in the darkness we stumbled our way back down the siq, our touch had finally give up the ghost. We'd been travelling on pure guess work and using the outlines of the mountains on each side of us when suddenly the whole siq was lite up with a blinding light. The Bedouin, who had been following our progress up the wall, must have also been doing the same on our descent. They had drive their 4x4's up onto small hills in the desert so that their headlight illuminated the whole of the siq we were in. Although at times this light blinded us we did manage to pick our way back down to the desert floor where we were met by an enthusiastic crowd of Bedouins. Dayfallah, one of the Bedouin we had made friends with came hurrying towards us insisting on taking us back to his camp which was near by.

As we entered the low black tent Dayfallahs family was seated on the floor around the fire in the middle of the tent. Their faces turned towards us as we entered and without exception all had a friendly smile. The tent floor was covered by carpets, the fire being in the centre, with the family (all male) seated crosslegged around it. A large kettle was steaming over the fire. The whole atmosphere was one of friendship and warmth. No wonder the Bedouin have resisted the call of the Government to abandon their

wondering nomadic life style. We sat cross legged around the fire sipping small glasses of sweet tea and small snacks. Everyone wanted to know how our 'new way' had gone . (our new route). They were quite in tune to climbing and understood the challenges involved for many of the local Bedouins had found ' new ways' up these rock walls to go hunting. Many of these 'ways' being given the name of the persons involved in climbing them. They wanted us to stay the night but we needed to get back to our base camp in Wadi Rum as we could have been reported missing. Our visit was all to soon over and Dayfallaha transported us back to our camp in Wadi Rum.

Lion Heart was to become one of the classic rock climbs in Wadi Rum and has received many ascent confirming its grade and quality of climbing. During this brief stay in Wadi Rum we did a number of new climbs.

Lion Heart 360m ED inf. 6b.

Desert Sandstorm E5 6b/c.

Warriors of the Wasteland 450m ED inf 7b.

Animated Slab. 250m. T.D.

The previous year Rowland , with Breda Arkless climbed.

Flight of Fancy 6b.

Ziggurat 7a.

The walk back from Desert Sandstorm



