

Moroccan Rock

By Guy Robertson

*Somewhere cheap and hot, yet brimming with culture
Somewhere easy to get to, yet exotic and mysterious
Somewhere with clean, solid rock, yet full of adventure*

If these are the sorts of criteria you apply to your annual rock-climbing trip, then look no further than Morocco. The place has it all, from short, well-bolted desperates to long, not-so-well bolted not-so-desperates, but best of all in my book, acres of pristine, virgin rock that's ideally suited to a ground-up approach. Throw in a practically rain-free climate from October through March, near legendary local hospitality, and you have nothing short of a trad-climbing "Mecca". I exaggerate not.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine why Morocco was actually "Plan C". Plan A was an attempt to free-climb the mighty El Gigante – a stunning 1000m rhyolite cathedral in the frontier fringes of northern Mexico. However, a comment from two Slovenians that it was "miraculous" no one had yet been injured by loose rock was enough to put us off. Plan B was for multi-day, exploratory granite action in Lofoten - the Magic Isles off the north coast of Norway - but a nasty slip from a Dubh Loch horror the week before our departure date rendered me temporarily out of action. And so it was, after a brief flurry of internet research, Trev Woods and I settled on the Anti-Atlas mountains near the town of Taфраoute. The enthusiastic response to my inquisitive post had read something like "lots of 500-2,000 foot crags of excellent orange quartzite; almost limitless potential for hard new routes" – with a tip-off like this, the decision was easy.

We opted for what was perhaps a slightly unorthodox approach – we flew to Marrakech, picked up a hire car, and then drove cross-country. Our rationale was this – arriving in Marrakech would afford us a brief taste of Moroccan 'city life', and the overland approach would mean we could check out other climbing areas if the urge came upon us. This worked well, and although we ultimately decided to forego the fleshpots of the city, we did pay a visit to perhaps the only well-known and established climbing ground in Morocco – the Todra Gorge.

Driving across the endless plains, east to west, on the southern watershed of the great Atlas Mountains, nothing prepares you for your arrival at the Gorge itself. From the bedraggled townscape of Tinherir, a single-track road winds slowly through the heady foliage of a vast, green palmery, sucking you ever deeper into the mountains. And then, just when you're wondering what all the fuss in the tourist brochures was about, a 1,500-foot gash soars up to the sky from a cluster of ramshackle hotels nestling below.

We spent a week enjoying the heavily weathered, rough brown mountain limestone of Todra, on grossly overhanging single pitch sport routes to multi-pitch affairs in the main gorge itself. All in all, this place is a must – a truly stunning natural wonder. Just try not to get too heavily involved with the music scene that rumbles through the caves by night...

After our heady week in Todra, with our heads numbed by the heat (and the local music), we set off on the long haul south to Taфраoute. A long haul it is – some 450km - but one that gave us a wonderful insight into the vastness of this country; a profusion of remote but always welcoming villages composed of archetypal 'Kasbahs' scattered across mile upon mile of windblown desert peaks. At one point, sitting lunching under a lone tree in the middle of a typical 10km stretch of arrow-straight tarmac, we nearly died of fright upon realising that the thundering buzz permeating the air around us was in fact a million giant bees infesting the branches above!

Like Todra, our arrival at the top of the Ameln Valley above Taфраoute was a jaw-dropping moment. After a good three hours of switch-backing south east from Agadir, the on-coming traffic often forcing us out to the yawning brink of a crumbling, single-track road, we turned a final endless rise and came face to face with a sea of rock. What a mouth-watering sight! In an instant we started to piece together lines, the steepest blank walls captivating our imagination - this was what we had really come for.

We soon settled in to Taфраoute, and were instantly befriended by a beguiling number of hugely hospitable locals. Other than the brief pandemonium of the Wednesday 'sihk' (an open market to you and I) Taфраoute is a lazy, tranquil but engaging place, the majority of the locals spending most of their time either running a small shop or chilling out in the cafes. Things were looking good.

The area around Taфраoute is a trad-climbers dream, so it's not surprising that the likes of such stalwarts as Joe Brown and Chris Bonington have been frequenting the place for some time. Claude Davies recently produced the area's first guide (it should be on the shelves by the time you read this). The main climbing is

found in the two valleys on either side of the area's highest peak, Jebel Um Kest, the most prominent feature of which is a peculiar rock formation called "The Lion's Face". No prizes for guessing what it looks like! There are quite literally kilometres of clean, solid orange quartzite, generally with good protection, and offering potential for routes ranging from single pitch wall climbs to huge, rambling, alpine-scale ridges. As if this wasn't appealing enough, the majority of the climbing is only an hour or so from the road head (be warned, however, that even though the 'road head' may not look far from the main road on the map, getting to it often involves an exciting test of one's driving abilities). Imagine the finest Beinn Eighe quartzite, but much bigger and with more in the way of pockets and features, and your beginning to get the picture.

After a brief visit to the "Hotel Les Amandiers" (where Messrs Brown *et al* had been kind enough to leave details of the routes climbed to date) our first foray was to the temptingly named High Crag on the north side of the valley. This was unfortunately something of a disappointment. The crag is not quite the 300 metres claimed by the pioneers, and our attempt to tame the very steep unclimbed central section of the crag ground to a halt in a 'weatabix grotto' some 70 metres up. Although somewhat perturbed by coming across unacceptably loose rock, we salvaged an acceptable two-pitch E2 on an adjacent outcrop, and vowed to keep the 'positivity' levels high. Surely the legendary Brown hadn't come back here year after year for the likes of this?

Our next venture was far more productive, and in fact the next three routes alone were easily good enough to justify our trip. As we only had ten days, we were looking for something big and steep, especially as we had foregone both Mexican big walls and the granite monoliths of Lofoten. One particular photo in amongst the scraps and notes in Les Amandiers captured our imagination - the exotic-sounding "Assandar", to the north. Only a handful of lines were marked up on what looked to be a super-impressive 350-metre dome of pristine rock. The line we picked out from the photo took on the challenge of the huge, smooth black-streaked wall low down, before gaining and following a monstrous bulging arête direct for the remaining 150m to the summit.

Although the weather was perfect, with a thin veneer of cloud obscuring the burning sun, our day started badly. We couldn't for the life of us find the village after which the crag had been named, marked anywhere on the map. With emotions running high in the face of another abortive day, we picked up a local hitcher and asked his advice. Not surprisingly, he didn't speak a word of English. Despite this, he seemed confident that where he was going was where we needed to be, and in the absence of any rational alternative we decided to 'roll with it'. What happened next was nothing short of Divine Providence. After forty minutes of white knuckle driving along a seriously dilapidated and frighteningly steep single-track 'piste', with no idea where we were going, and our new companion gesturing wildly and shouting constantly in Arabic, we arrived - at the very foot of the crag we had seen in the photo!

The hitcher got out of the car and was promptly greeted by a large crowd of apparently expectant friends wielding dead goats and fruit. We, on the other hand, turned to the huge crag looming above us, and confronted our destiny. It looked absolutely stunning.

Unlike High Crag, Assandar was fully 300 metres of vertical or overhanging rock, with a bit of easier angled ground at the top. With no need for discussion, the two of us jogged the ten minutes or so straight up to the start of the line. It quickly became clear that not only was the rock here impeccable, but also that our proposed line was going to call upon our innermost strengths right from the word go. After the customary drawing of twigs, Trev started to climb.

I have to admit that at this point I wasn't optimistic - the first thirty metres or so overhung so much that the route above was obscured! It looked like a wonderful, smooth and pocketed pitch, but extremely difficult to pioneer, with not only the angle and shortage of good holds causing problems but a confusion of possible lines into the bargain. Twenty feet up, Trev started to pump out, but with typical guile, cunning and flair he padded on up, pawing leftwards then right, and fiddling in tiny nuts and friends into perfect slots. It was a most impressive display of on-sight climbing, and took all the strength and gusto I could muster to drag body and rucksack up from behind. Hard, intricate E5 6a - what a way to start a 350-metre route!

The next sixty metres were easier but still intricate and sustained up the middle of the big wall at 5b/c. This was adventure climbing at its best - plundering our way up the centre of a vast untouched crag, the protection adequate, the climbing superb and the rock perfect. I belayed comfortably in a little niche, with an ominous black wall above. True to form, Trev tackled this head on - avoiding a horribly loose groove away to the right - but he soon ran out of puff above marginal gear at halfway. Up and down he went, four or five times, each successive attempt yielding progressively less in the way of commitment and vigour. Eventually he retired, lowering back to the belay, his efforts on the first pitch taking their toll. And so it was my turn.

I'm never that confident going where Trev has failed before, but this time there was much at stake. More importantly, I had still to put my oar in properly after Trev's outstanding endeavours lower down. Off I went. It didn't take me long to reach Trev's previous high point - a few 5c balance moves on crimps led up to a good undercut where the wall steepened sharply. Neither did it take me long to realise what the problem was - just where the angle became unfriendly, the protection ran out and the holds all went sideways.

I moved up, tenuously spragged on tiny opposing layaways above the gear, the next obvious feature appeared to be a flat hold some three feet out of reach. Good protection would have encouraged a more flagrant approach, but in this case discretion was the better part of valour, and the right sequence had to be unlocked. On the third attempt it clicked and I nudged across to the flatty, only to find it sloped most alarmingly. Too late for retreat, I clamped down hard as my body weight released opposing footholds and I swung out left. Now well above the gear, with only one option, I breathed like a free diver and ploughed back up right, feet smearing optimistically as I punched a series of small, sloping edges. My self-awareness dissolved as the taste of real uncertainty trickled down the back of my cotton-dry throat. Five metres later, the situation now critical, my fingers finally curled round a Thank God jug – the second crux was in the bag.

After perhaps the finest VS crack pitch this side of Stanage, we gained the big upper arête. It was like a dream come true. After two of the hardest trad pitches either of us had pioneered, we yelled and whooped our way up endless immaculate walls, corners, edges and slabs, never harder than 5c but never easier than 5b, with dramatic exposure all the way. We couldn't have imagined a better and more varied route; this was our Adventure Beyond The Ultraworld.

We were so stunned by this initial foray on Assandrar that we simply relocated to the base of the crag for a few days and knocked off another two great routes. The first of these weaved a steep line to the left of our previous route, the highlight being a stunning fifty metre tapering white slab, sustained at 5b/c but with marginal protection. The second was based on a huge orange wall low down and further right, which provided a brace of exceptional E3 pitches up some very unlikely territory. Like our opening gambit, both were climbed entirely on-sight with natural protection – a testament to the quality of the rock. It must also be said that the locals here were even more welcoming than the immaculate orange rock, their mischievous banter and endless vats of steaming traditional casserole invariably providing the perfect end to the perfect day.

After some deliberation, we agreed to leave the enchanted delights of Assandrar and head back to the north side of Jebel um Kest for the last few days. We weren't disappointed, and our visit to a huge blank wall down right from The Lion's Head yielded yet more top quality traditional adventure. After two days of effort and considerable emotion, a scintillating 150m line up finger cracks, flaky walls and delicate ramps produced our toughest challenge of the trip - The Flying Scotsman (E6) was born. The route name refers to my 'personal best' airborne manoeuvre, recorded during the second day when a hold broke on the crux pitch. Despite a split head and burnt fingers from arresting my fall, Trev once again displayed tremendous skill and spirit to take over the reigns and pull-off the on-sight. Now that's what friends are for!

For the last few days we moved our attentions to the intriguing Tizgit Gorge at the west end of the Ameln valley. The biggest established crag in the Gorge, some 70 metres high, is home to the awesome Tizgit Crack (E2), the quality of which first ascensionist Jo Brown has compared to a similar but rather more well known test-piece in the Llanberis Pass. Our focus was on the stunning thin crack line up the wall to the left. After a day's recce, taking in some repeats of some of the other routes, we dealt with the wall itself. An abseil inspection resulted in the trundling of a number of loose blocks, before the route was dispatched at hard E4 to give yet another immaculate three star pitch. With our very own local 'travelling chef' chopping salads to order at the bottom of our route, the two of us cranking it out in the afternoon sun, it was a fitting end to a wonderful trip.

And there you have it. I could rave on about the awesome untapped potential in this area, where to go and so forth, but you're best advised to do what we did and simply go there and find out for yourself. Suffice it to say there are few places I know of that offer so much reliably dry, accessible, and high quality virgin rock as the mountains around Tafraoute. But I couldn't just sell this place on the basis of its climbing potential – this is a stunning place to visit, with something on offer for everyone. The trekking, mountain biking, paragliding and even the skiing are no doubt equally rewarding for those of an exploratory disposition.

We had some great times in Morocco, mostly roped up and clinging dearly to the rock face, but perhaps my greatest memories are of the people. At a time when the apparent divide between Islamic and Western cultures was as intense as it's ever been, our Moroccan friends were, quite simply, amongst the warmest we'd ever met. And that's something that will always make me smile.

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Footnote:

A local contact for the Anti Atlas and the High Atlas, recommended by UK mountaineers, is Ei Aoud Ali, known to his many friends as Ali. Ali can help with logistics including organising mules etc, advise on itinerary, guide, manage camp and cook as required. He is based in Taroudant. For further details visit the website: <http://trekmorocco.squarespace.com>

