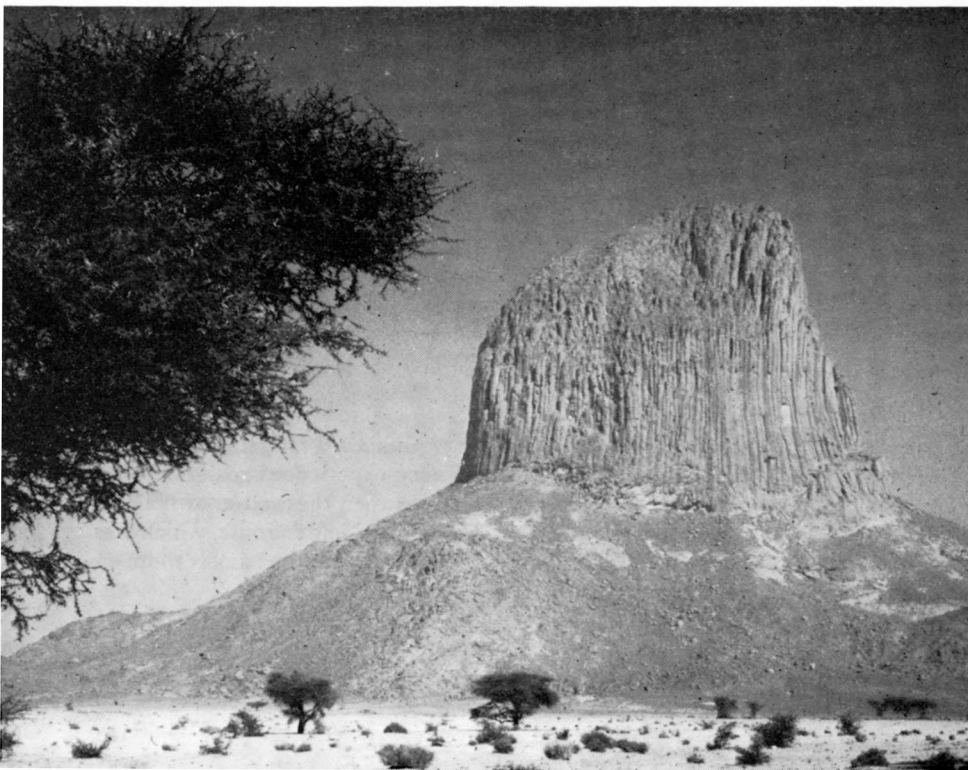


in 1947, 62 years later, was Nefdt's route finally repeated by an exceptionally strong party of rock-climbers from Cape Town.

The attraction to climbers from Cape Town is still present, despite the marathon slog and 5000-ft ascent up scree slopes, and last year Keith Bell, an Australian who had taken part in the second ascent of Ball's Pyramid near Lord Howe Island, and I climbed five new routes on the two summit towers, and all except one was easier than Nefdt's route.

Last year, over the Settlers' Day long week-end, I was there again with a party of friends from the Mountain Club of South Africa, and we climbed the E turret in heavy snow and ice conditions. With the blood painfully returning to frozen fingers after each pitch of climbing, we made a near-Alpine ascent of this peak of contrasts. Some hours later, we stood on top amidst the piles of stone cairns. Encrusted with coruscating ice-crystal shells they sparkled in sunlight, piercing the clouds swirling around overhead. Breathless we gazed into the filmy depths below us at the phenomena of halo rainbows and spectral shadows known in the mountains as Brocken Spectres. Moments like this on top of a mountain are not easily forgotten, but then, neither are those six-hour-long moments of endless toiling trudge with heavy pack on the back just to be able to get there!



# In the heart of the Sahara: the Hoggar

Isabelle and Henri Agresti

(Translation: H. Pursey)

The mountainous regions of the Sahara appear to be little known to British climbers, even though they are active in most other parts of the world. Because this area of Africa was until recently a French colony it had for many years been principally explored by the French. We will not in this article be discussing the Aïr, the Tibesti, the Adrar des Iforas or the Tassili n'Ajjer which although largely neglected are nevertheless of undoubted interest to alpinists. We shall confine ourselves to the best-known area of Saharan mountains; the Hoggar.

Two thousand kms to the s of Algeria, in the middle of the Sahara, there is a high plateau (375,000 km<sup>2</sup> in area) bordered by the crumbling cliffs of the Tassili; to the n extends the barren plain of the Tidikelt, while to the se and the w there are the desert plateaus of the Ténéré and Tanezrouft. This isolation makes the Hoggar a unique, separate world. The very ancient geological structure is comprised of crystalline rocks mixed with granites. The fauna, although in decline, is still quite rich; gazelles, moufflons, jackals, foxes, hyenas, wild cats, *cynhyiènes*, rodents, birds, and reptiles. The flora is more varied than that of the Sahara; it can be found in the ravines; wild olives, oleanders, artemisia, 'takamezout' of the Touareg, various kinds of acacia and Saharan plants such as palms, fersig, drinn and so on.

Numerous archaeological remains testify to human occupation back to the origins of mankind. More recently the Hoggar has become famous for the Touareg, 'the blue men', who were for a long time considered mysterious by explorers of the region. However the Touareg are not the only inhabitants. Several different ethnic groups live in the Hoggar; the whites include the Touareg, of Berber race, and the Arabs who can be divided into Mozabites, Chorfa and Chaamba; the negroids include the Iklan (Sudanese) and the Harratin (Saharan Sudanese). One finds also a fair number of half-caste Arab-Touareg or Touareg-Negro. The Touareg are nomadic shepherds, while the Arabs are sedentary shepherds or merchants. The Harratin are farmers, artisans or labourers. The Iklan are the domestic workers of the Touareg. The Touareg are organised in a very rigid caste system. The noble tribes, among which the Kel Rela are the most important, provide warriors and the Imrad are their dependants or vassals. At the time of Algerian independence in 1962 each tribe still had slaves bought or seized from the Sudan, who were an integral part of the tribe. But the tendency for the nomads to settle down is continuing and this marks the end of a culture and civilisation which derived its strength from its nomadic character.

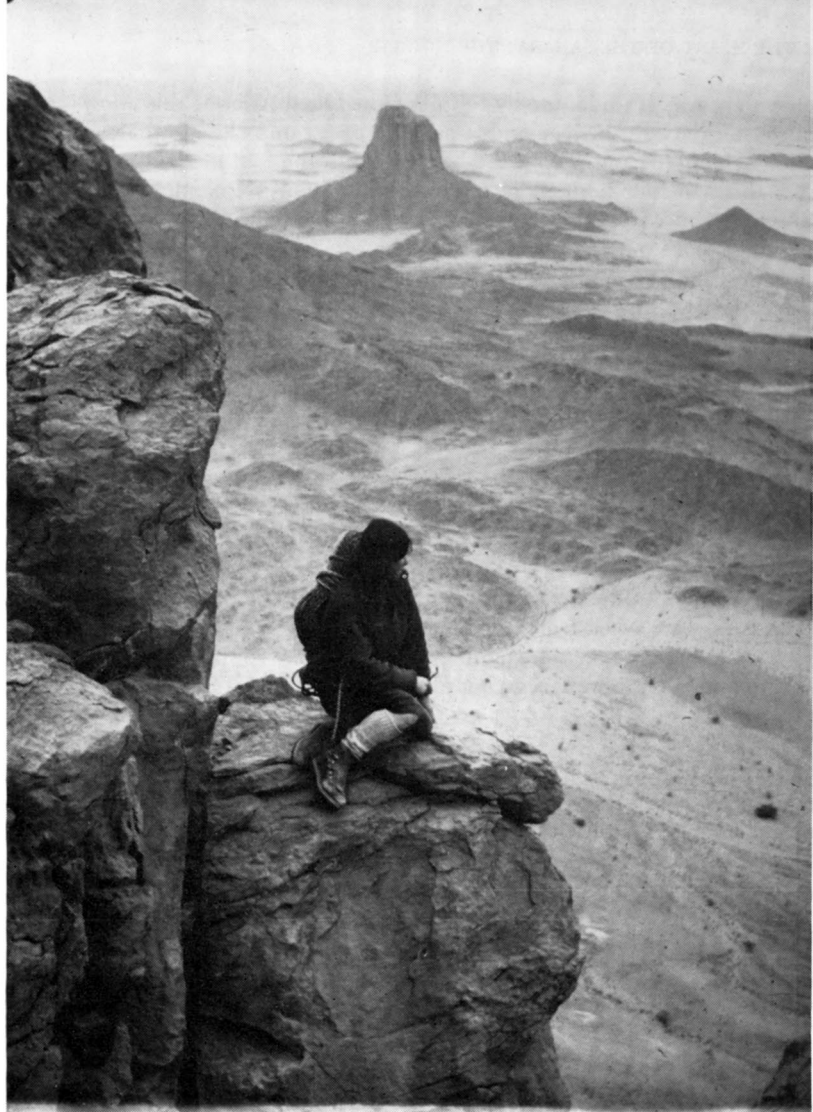
The exploration of the Hoggar by alpinists goes back to 1935, the year when Ilamane, Garet-el-Djenoun, Saouinan and Iharen were climbed. This period

lasted for three years and was followed by a gap until 1948 when a further period of ten years activity ensued. This was a time of intensive climbing, during which several successful expeditions took place each year, and most of the classic routes were opened up. In December 1952 a British team went out<sup>1</sup> and in 1957–8 there were several organised groups of some 50 or 60 persons, under the aegis of the Club Alpin Français, presaging the present era of tourism in the Hoggar. After a gap of over five years due to the war, activity in the Hoggar recommenced in 1965. The last major difficulties were solved with the ascent of Takouba and of the N arête and the W face of Garet-el-Djenoun. At the present time almost all the natural routes have been opened up on most of the summits, but even so the era of 'first ascents' is not yet completely over. But the Hoggar is becoming increasingly a tourist area. At Christmas or even at Easter, Europeans go there to enjoy a spell abroad in the sun. This influx of tourists has soon changed the attitudes of the native population, who seek to profit from the new situation and the traditional barter system based on a closed economy is being supplanted. At Christmas 1972 several coach loads of tourists were to be seen at Assekrem. One may ask with some foreboding whether the ecology of the Hoggar will not be damaged by these crowds, hungry for space and unspoiled places, who often leave indelible traces behind them; the rare watering points are fouled, the scarce dead wood used extravagantly, the animals disturbed and sometimes killed and piles of rubbish are allowed to accumulate in the most frequented areas.

There are several mountain ranges to attract climbers. The most accessible and also the best known is the Atakor to the N of Tamanrasset. A motorable track enables one to make a complete tour of this range, starting from Tamanrasset (1400 m) and reaching the Assekrem, where a walk via the Iharen Daouda and Tezoulaig leads to the hermitage of Père de Foucauld (2804 m). From Assekrem the track descends to the foot of Ilamane and then returns to Tamanrasset. There follows a short selection of some of the most attractive routes of the Atakor.

The silhouette of the Adriane rises at the back of the Tamanrasset plain. It can be reached on foot from Tamanrasset (6 km). The W face offers a climb (D, 170 m) which is interesting although on poor rock. The Issekrar by the S pillar (TD inf, 200 m) is a pleasant climb in Saharan surroundings. The Daouda, or Pic Jacquet, is a remarkable volcanic peak, with very steep faces. The very fine Cauderlier-Vidal route (TD 150 m) climbs rock of excellent quality. The extraordinary belvedere of Ilaman is a summit well worth climbing for its own sake. The traverse, up the SE arête and down the N arête in three abseils is a pleasant climb on a rock with plenty of interesting problems. The Saouinan or Pointe de Foucauld is a small, very spiky summit at the foot of the Assekrem. The N dièdre offers a steep and very beautiful climb. The Tezoulaig alone are worth the trip from Europe to the Hoggar. Their high volcanic columns remind one of organ pipes. On the N side of Tehoulag the SW face

<sup>1</sup> This team comprised Fraser, Sutton and Wrangham. They climbed in particular the NW face of Daouda (third ascent), the N face of Adade (first ascent), the N summit of Ibaharen by the S face, the S pillar of Issekrar (second ascent) and the S face of Iharen (sixth ascent).



41 *Hoggar landscape, from Issekrar looking towards Iharen* This and next photo: H. Agresti

(TD inf, 220 m) is another very beautiful route. Three abseils are needed from the summit. There is also a wide choice of fine free climbs on the s side of Tehoulag, such as the well known Cauderlier-Vidal route (TD inf, 300 m) or the Pâques route (TD sup, 300 m).

To the n of the Atakor the chain of the Tefedest stretches for 150 kms, comprising a great many worn granitic summits. Also a superb summit stands apart from the rest and its vertical granite faces rise 2327 m above the plain of the west Irharhar. The Garet-el-Djenoun, or 'mountain of genies' is one of the most beautiful of the Hoggar and both the approach and ascent leave unforgettable impressions. To reach the foot of the mountain, the most

convenient way is undoubtedly to follow the Oued Ariaret; this allows one to approach the Garet by jeep and to set up a base camp close to the water holes which seldom dry out. From the base camp to the foot of the mountain face takes three to four hours. The feeling of isolation is tremendous while struggling for hours across the chaotic labyrinth of the wadis. The summit seems to be a high place outside this world. A few rare bushes grow unexpectedly in these desolate regions. The view seems to extend to infinity across a lunar landscape of yellowish-green.

There are several very beautiful routes which lead to the summit. The Frison-Roche route on the sw face is a shortish, easy climb which can be used equally well for ascending or descending. The Takouba spur (D sup, 300 m) is an interesting route offering fine views of the Takouba itself. The broad N spur route (ED inf, 500 m) has lines of striking aesthetic quality. The superb wall of the w face was climbed in 1970 by the dièdre in the middle of the face. This is an ED, 400 m climb which has not been repeated.

There are many other climbable routes, without mentioning those not yet opened up. One week from Tamanrasset back to Tamanrasset is needed to discover and appreciate this mountain, which offers so many intense impressions to climbers, as well as giving pleasure to less ambitious walkers.

One other summit of the Tefedest attracts climbers; it is situated high in the Mertoutek wadi and is called the Pic In Acoulmou (2369 m). The first routes have only recently been opened up, and many new ones remain to be discovered among its smooth rounded slabs. To the N of the Tefedest on the edge of the Tassili rises a large wall of sandstone, the Amguid wall, above the deserted village of the same name. During recent years several routes have been opened here.

North-east of the Atakor, the Tazrouk region, while less well known, has a definite interest for the climber. Two of its finest peaks are Immerous, the most difficult in the Hoggar, and the Aiguille de l'Aokassit. Much remains to be done in this area.

Here are some practical points which may be of little interest to climbers who have experience of mountains in desert regions, but which will nevertheless be useful to newcomers. The Hoggar can be visited at almost any time of the year, although one would be well advised to avoid high summer, particularly near Garet-el-Djenoun, where it is already becoming too hot by Easter. The best time is from December until March or April. Tamanrasset is easily reached from Algiers. By road it takes four or five days; the road has a tarmac surface for over 1000 kms and then becomes a track which is quite easy for an ordinary production car. It is certainly much quicker by air, but also much dearer (900 French francs, or about £75 at 1972 values, for the round trip). There are normally two flights a week, with a few additional ones at Christmas and Easter. In winter a reservation must be made two months in advance. At Tamanrasset it is possible to hire a Land-Rover or for a large party a lorry, which is less expensive. One should write in advance to the Tourist Office at Tamanrasset.



42 *Tehoulag Sud, Voie de Pâques*

Regarding clothing for either climbing or walking, the standard gear for warm mountain regions is perfectly suitable. In certain places such as the Tezoulaig, where the approach is very short, rock-climbing boots would be suitable, but for example at Garet-el-Djenoun where the approach is much longer one would do better to wear mountaineering boots. A quilted jacket is essential in winter for anyone intending to go to any height. Also sun-glasses are necessary both for protection from light as well as from dust and sand. Headgear of both the hard and soft variety is useful, for the latter an ordinary cotton *chèche* which can be bought in Tamanrasset would do. One or two water bottles per person are essential and for camping one should have some larger bottles or jerry-cans for taking water from the nearest water-hole to the camp site. There is water in all parts of the Hoggar, but one should always ascertain the precise location of wells and water-holes as well as their condition, which can change very quickly. Always carry enough water for basic needs; in hot weather at least ten litres per head per day should be available solely for drinking purposes.

Wood is becoming increasingly scarce, particularly at Assekrem and if a fire is needed one should learn the method of the Touareg, in which very little

wood is used. For bivouacking it is as well to have quite a warm duvet, because there is often a considerable difference in temperature between day and night; in winter even if the days are pleasant the nights are particularly cold, especially at Assekrem where it can freeze. A foam mattress and a ground sheet give good insulation and will protect against sand and stones. Finally one or two tents are useful for shelter against sun and heat. Regarding climbing equipment, the most frequently used items are angle and flat pitons and *coins de bois*. The classic routes are almost entirely equipped. It is best to have a large amount of line of one's own, since that found in place is often in poor condition. The quality of the rock is not always good, especially on s faces. The n and w faces, less subject to variations in temperature, are generally in quite good condition.

As far as food is concerned, all the normal necessities are available, but it is advisable to organise rations for the climb or any special foods required, before leaving Europe (cooked meats, wines and cereals are unobtainable locally). At Tamanrasset one can even buy a live sheep which will accompany you on your travels and will eventually make a splendid barbecue. Don't forget to ask your driver to make some mint tea which is really delicious. Finally for the medicine chest there are no special requirements and standard first-aid kit should suffice. The legendary scorpions are very rare; in four trips to the Hoggar and the Aïr we have not seen a single one. However one could take an anti-scorpion vaccine just in case. Something to relieve diarrhoea would be useful since the drinking water is sometimes rather suspect. Here as elsewhere it is always best to be prudent.

Clearly, for the alpinist and particularly for the climber, the Hoggar cannot compare with the Dolomites or the Yosemite; there are no great rock faces and even the climbing itself is not always interesting although certain of the routes have considerable beauty. The great interest of the Saharan mountains lies elsewhere. In the first place, one is certain of fine weather, especially in winter when conditions are difficult in Europe. In addition there is the sense of being in a completely foreign place and, as each trip to the Hoggar is a minor adventure, it is still possible to exercise initiative and ingenuity. Lastly and by no means least the alpinist may perhaps discover a universe which is as fascinating as high mountains; the desert.

## Bibliography

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 'Méharée alpine au Hoggar' by Odette Bernezat (*La Montagne et Alpinisme*, October 1971). An article describing the life and atmosphere of the Hoggar  
*Les Annales du Groupe de Haute Montagne* (1968 and 1970) Contains details of several new routes

Here are the names of a few French Alpinists who can give exact information on various parts of the region: Claude Aulard; J. L. and O. Bernezat; J. M. Lhoste (the entire mountain range); L. Audoubert (In Acoulmou); M. Bertinotti (the Tazrouk area); J. Ramouillet (Amguid).

