

The French Pillar of Jebel Misht

a climbing guide



Toby Foord-Kelcey, February 2007

Disclaimer

Climbing is a sport where you may be seriously injured or killed.

Read this before you use this guide.

The inclusion of a climbing area in this guide does not mean that you have a right of access or the right to climb upon it. The descriptions of routes and grades within this guide are recorded for historical reasons only and no reliance should be placed on the accuracy of the description. Climbers who attempt a climb of a particular standard should use their own judgment as to whether they are proficient enough to tackle that climb. This guide is not a substitute for experience and proper judgment.

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Acknowledgements

Primarily this route description is based on my own attempts on the French Pillar in January 2006 and February 2007. I am very grateful to Mike Olver and Dan Donovan respectively for coming out to Oman with me on those occasions. I have also had useful advice on the route from Jakob Oberhauser, and general background on climbing Misht from Geoff Hornby.

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Jebel Misht from Jebel Shams

Overview

The 900m South-East face of Jebel Misht is thought to be the tallest cliff in the Arabian Peninsula. The 1979 French Pillar route follows the compelling central arete of the face and is undoubtedly *the* classic long climb of the region. This guide updates and corrects the description given in the 1993 McDonald guide "Rock Climbing in Oman".

Why should you want to do the French Pillar?

Whilst there are many other striking cliffs in Oman, nothing else discovered so far dominates the landscape as the French Pillar. Anyone who has passed under the cliff will confirm that it is a stunning line, a desert hybrid of the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses and The Nose of El Capitan; both climbs of similar scale. There are other routes of almost the same length on Jebel Misht, and other more conveniently shady routes on the cliffs of Jebel Kawr and Jebel Ghul nearby. But none has the same postcard-perfection of the French Pillar. The climbing is generally good and the rock – a robust metamorphosed limestone – excellent by local standards. It is true that the sustained sections are broken by a long section of ridge walking and scrambling but this is still very atmospheric and in places has the most dramatic exposure of the route. There is also some historical aura to the climb that sets it apart, with attempts and failures dating back to 1979, evidenced by remnants of bleached fixed ropes and rusty pitons. Despite that, the number of successful ascents remains single-digit and in-a-day ascents to date possibly only two. So it remains a mostly-untrodden – and BIG – adventure.



The profile view of the French Pillar

Approach

Jebel Misht is the obvious isolated triangular peak seen east of the Bahla-Ibri highway in Oman. Refer to a general guidebook like Explorer Publishing's "Off Road in Oman" for maps and guidance on reaching the base of the mountain. Black-top roads give access to the villages of Al Ayn and Al Hayl, on Jebel Misht's south side, from where the line of the Pillar is unmistakable. The north side of the mountain is accessible by taking a turn approximately 6km west of the village. This leads to another small village and a graded track that runs under the north face. It is worthwhile to drive all these roads before attempting the climb to understand the topography and descent issues. (See 'Tactics' and 'Descent').



The final 4km from the black-top road to the base of the route requires off-road driving and hiking. There are various possible access routes. This guide's recommendation is to locate a narrow wadi that leads directly towards the summit of Misht from opposite a large institutional building (school? army post?) about 5km east of Al Ayn. (UTM 498,835 E 2,568,215 N)



A rough track driveable in a standard high-clearance 4WD goes almost to the end of this wadi (2.3km from the black-top). Camp where the track ends. (UTM 499,912 E 2,570,423 N)

The base of the route is approximately 1.5km horizontally and about 500m vertically above the campsite across complex talus ridges and minor wadis. It is sensible to research the hike in daylight before the climbing day. (See 'Tactics'). At the time of writing (2007) a way out of the initial wadi and through the talus is marked with new cairns. Keep in mind that the start of the route is gained by a large ledge system starting about 500m to the left (west) of the base of the pillar. Head for the start of the ledge not the base of the pillar.



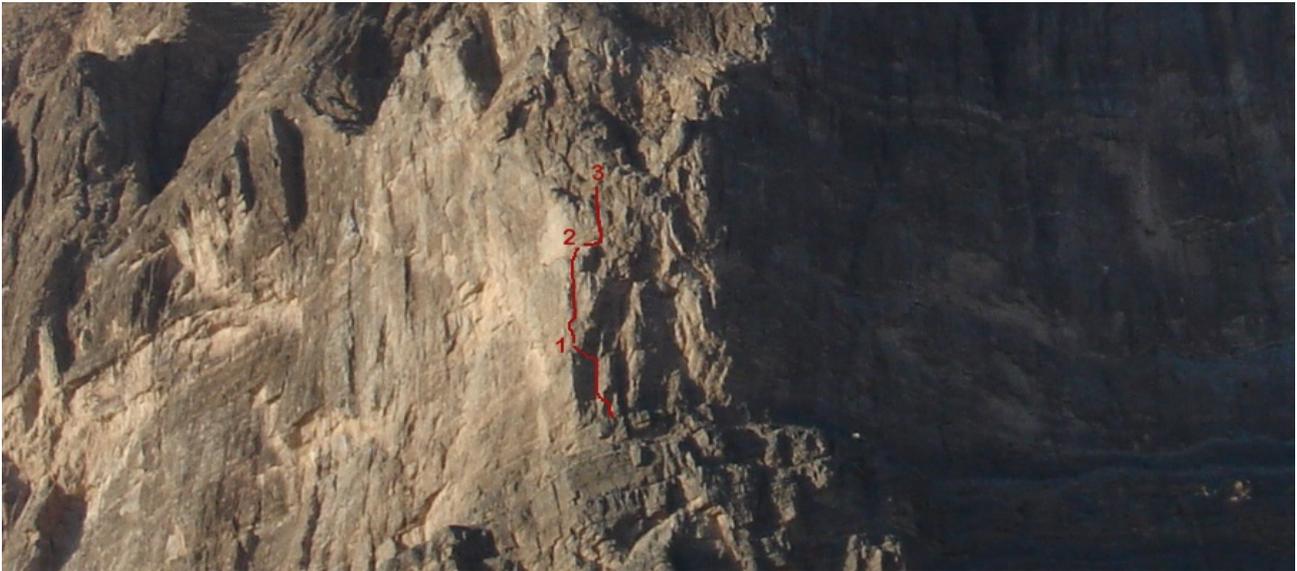
Descent

Walk directly down the north face of the mountain to the road below, if possible avoiding crossing any of the deep wadis that run down the face. Just below the summit area are several bands of small crags that obstruct progress. Ideally take time to inspect the descent from below and plan on having at least one hour of daylight remaining or a full moon. In total the descent should take no more than two hours, but be aware that the terrain is very rocky and awkward. From the base, the very tough and/or impecunious will now walk and hitch-hike 25km on the roads back around the mountain. Everyone else may prefer to pre-place a second vehicle (or, perhaps: well-hidden mountain bikes) for this purpose.



The Climbing – the First section

The initial three pitches are quite steep. The base of the pillar forms a blunt arete split by three large corners. Start below the first (lefthand) corner.



1. 60m F5+ (HVS 5a) The 15m face below the main corner is unhelpfully steep and blank. Find a way up to the corner from the right, using a short layback feature. Then follow the corner to a ledge under overhangs. Move leftwards for 8m and up onto a block forming an exposed stance on the arete. Beware rope drag on this pitch.
2. 60m F6b+ (E3 5c) Make a thin move straight above the stance to better holds then move diagonally up leftwards to an old bolt. Move 3m back right around a slight arete then straight up a shallow groove passing another old bolt and then a pair of bolts at a sloping ledge (about 30m in total above the stance). Straight above, climb strenuously past several worrying loose flakes (crux) to reach a ledge with old piton anchors. Congratulate yourself for completing the most sustained pitch on the route
3. 40m F5 Walk rightwards to the end of the ledge, then pull awkwardly around the right side of the overhang above into a hanging corner. Follow this more easily to a piton belay. The rock above is now much less steep.



The Ridge

The middle section is alpine in character on easy-angled but sometimes very exposed rock.



4. 250m F3

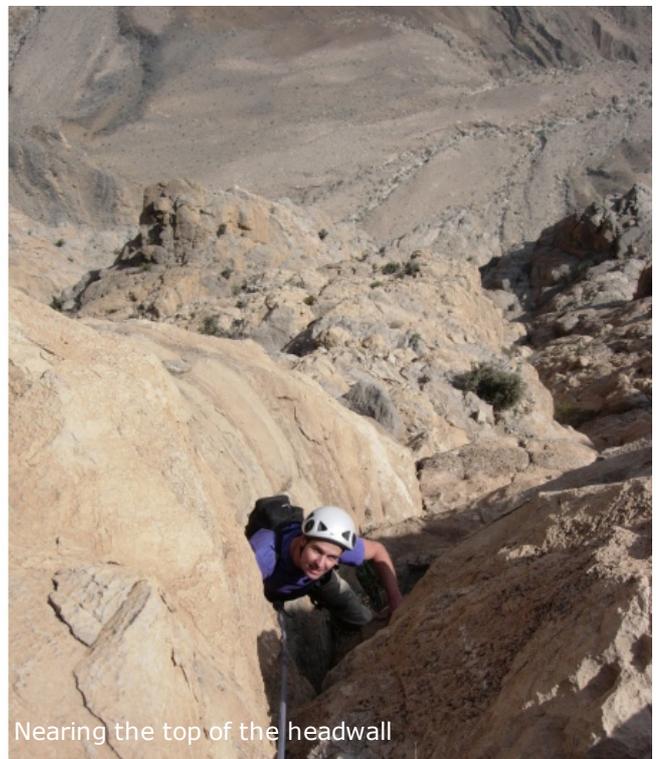
The 'Heart' feature, a large appropriately-shaped scoop of lower angle rock is now visible up to the right. The route is obvious. Climb easily up rightwards to ledges below the 'Heart' then go diagonally leftwards up the left side of the 'Heart' on slanting ledges and short cracks to the ridge on the skyline. Scramble onwards up the ridge crest (mostly walking) to reach a historic cache of now-rusty food cans. Perhaps an appropriate place for a brief stop?

5. 150m F3+

Beyond the food cache the ridge gradually narrows and steepens, whilst the 500m vertical drop down to the right becomes more dominant. Though fairly easy, this is the most spectacular part of the route. Stay close to the crest until obvious ledges are reached below and to the right of the final headwall.



The steeper section of the ridge



Nearing the top of the headwall

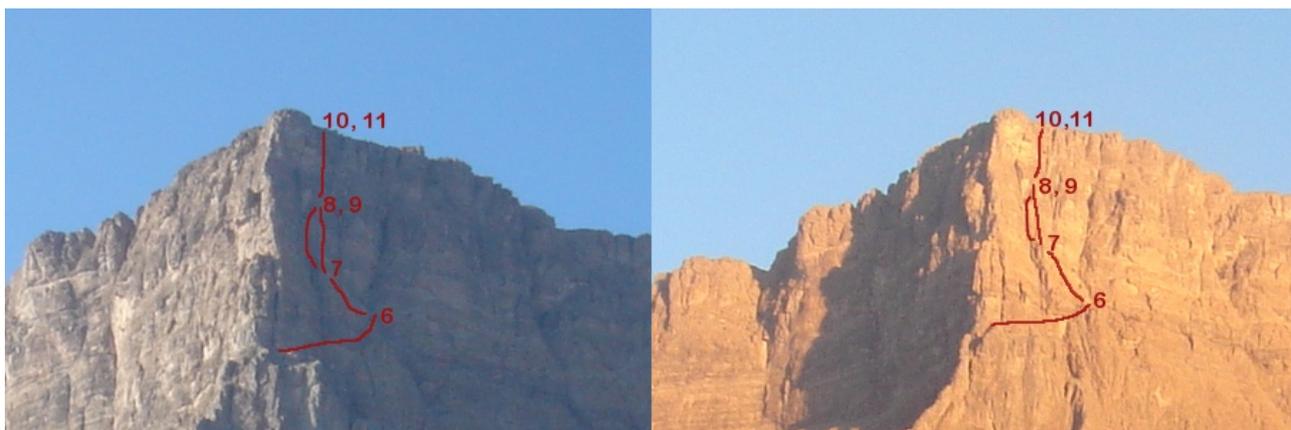
The Headwall

The final 300m headwall looks intimidating from the ground, but is friendlier up close with extensive ledges connected by cracks in good quality rock. There are various possible routes. It is worthwhile to spend time on the ledges under the headwall examining the options.

- First, identify the 300m crack/ chimney line which splits the entire headwall, to the right of the arete of the pillar itself, culminating in an overhanging crack at the skyline. No other visible crack/ chimney line runs the full height of the face. The 2003 route, Make Love not War (which gains the headwall by bolted climbing to F7b on the 500m wall below) follows this line for 200m before breaking out onto easier ground to the right to finish. The original 1979 French Pillar ascent may also have followed this line.
- Starting further over to the right, and around 150m higher, are two deep chimneys. The 1993 second ascent of the French Pillar seems to have followed the lefthand of these.

The route described here is a hybrid of these two options, using easier-angled rock to the right to avoid the first three or four pitches of the MLNW line.

6. 100m F4 From the initial ledges under the headwall walk rightwards on narrow ledges for about 50m under the MLNW finishing crack until easy crack systems lead up and rightwards for about 50m to higher ledges.
7. 70m F4 Climb easy-angled slabs heading slightly leftwards towards the left-hand of two deep chimneys in the headwall above. Belay to the left of the chimney where the rock steepens above the slabs. (This chimney seems to be the line of the 1993 ascent).



8. 65m F6b+ (E3 5c) Climb a short corner which leads to narrow ledges which run back leftwards into the main MLNW crack. Halfway along is a good hand-crack starting about 5m above the ledges. Make some bold face moves into the crack (crux) then follow the crack up to more ledges.
9. 50m F6a (E1 5b) Move slightly leftwards, then follow obvious crack and corner systems upwards to a belay with old pitons from the original 1979 ascent.
- 8+9 120m F6a? Or: an alternative may be to continue the traverse on pitch 8 to reach the MLNW line. Climb up this past at least one modern bolt and remnants from the 1979 ascent. This will likely be easier but less direct and slower than the two pitches described above
10. 70m F6a+ (E1 5c) Continue following the obvious linked crack and corner lines upward with a few awkward but well-protected crack moves interspersed with easier climbing passing occasional old pitons.
11. 50m F4+ The line broadens into a gully with various chimney or face climbing options, progressively easing until the summit is reached.

Tactics

The key issue for many long mountain rock routes is whether to plan on a bivouac. Carrying bivouac gear generally ensures that you will bivouac. Unfortunately, factoring in wind-chill, night temperatures on Misht could be low enough (sub-10°C) to make an unplanned bivouac very unpleasant. Another obvious challenge on this south-facing route is adequate hydration but carrying too much water will also guarantee a night on the face.

One option is clearly to carry everything required to cover any eventuality. In this vein, the first ascent in 1979 employed fixed ropes and lasted three weeks, whilst the second ascent attempt in 1991 used a helicopter for a supply drop at mid-height! The successful second ascensionists in 1993 climbed the route over two days as a three, with one man jumaring throughout with a large pack. However, their account in "Rock Climbing in Oman" hints strongly that this style was neither efficient nor enjoyable. This guide's recommendation is therefore to go fast and light and aim for a single day ascent. The route has now been climbed at least twice in this style. The following are some suggestions for achieving this:

- Schedule your attempt at the full-moon during the winter months (December-February).
- Arrive in the area at least one day before to pre-inspect the approach and descent.
- Leave camp early enough to reach the start of the roped climbing before dawn, ideally hiking by moonlight.
- Simul-climb the easier sections of the route. Practise this potentially-dangerous technique in advance on a shorter, less-committing route.
- Climb with a single long rope (70m or longer) and carry plenty of slings to avoid rope drag. Twin ropes may seem attractive in case of retreat but add weight and muddle on the easier sections.
- In case of benightment, carry a lighter. There is enough wood around on the upper parts of the route and descent for a fire to help stay warm.
- In case of accident, each climber should carry a mobile phone (with an idea of who to call).
- A good lightweight windproof and a beanie hat should be enough spare clothing. Consider wearing lightweight long trousers rather than shorts.
- Each climber should have a small sac and carry their own water (or better: isotonic drink). Three litres each should be enough, but experiment beforehand on another sun-baked route to gauge your personal requirement.

A standard trad climbing rack is adequate for this route. Take two sets of wires and one full set of cams to Friend (or equivalent) size #4 plus some duplicates in small and medium sizes. Specialist small cams, like Aliens, and micro-wires, like RPS, are useful in a few places. Don't rely on any fixed gear. The in-situ pitons and bolts are mostly old.

