

Imperial College
BIG WALL EXPEDITION
Taghia Morocco 2008



Expedition Report

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Introduction

Morocco offers a relatively accessible location for big wall climbing compared to the greater ranges. Our team climbed in the Taghia Gorge area, which is situated about 200km to the East of Marrakech. Taghia was first developed by a number of French climbers in the mid 1970s. Since then the area has undergone sporadic development but its relative inaccessibility (compared to other climbing locations in Morocco) means that there is still a wealth of unclimbed rock. In 2003 the area was firmly placed on the rock climbing map by Michel Piola and Arnaud Petit with their extremely tough “Les Rivieres Pourpres” (500m, 7b+). This set the tone and style for future development; long hard routes climbed using a mixture of traditional and aid climbing, then sparsely bolted and free climbed. Since this route was set many top climbers have visited the area to repeat it and other similar routes. The area has been described¹ as: ‘the best multi-pitch rock climbing in the world’, ‘the ultimate big wall experience’ and ‘the possibilities for new pioneering are awesome’.

The best months for climbing at Taghia are May to June and September until mid-October¹, September being one of the best for rock climbing². Some people go to climb north faces and canyons even in summer³. We spent the month of September in the area.

Members

Hal Watts – 21, British, Student. Hal has been on rock climbing trips all over Europe, including several climbing trips to the Alps – climbing up to TD. Last year he led the Imperial College Quimsa Cruz Expedition to Bolivia, where he and the team climbed ten new rock routes up to 4800m.

Virgil Scott – 21, Canadian, Student. Virgil has climbed long multipitch routes all over Europe. He has been on several climbing trips to the Alps – climbing up to TD. Virgil was also a member of the Imperial College Quimsa Cruz Expedition last year, where he climbed multipitch first ascents up to E5.

Juha Kauppila – 22, Finnish, Student. Juha is well acquainted with long rock routes around Europe, he recently returned from Norway where he climbed the Vestpillaren (E2, 500m) amongst other routes in the area.

Luke Bennett – 22, British, Student. Currently working part-time as a climbing instructor, Luke climbs regularly around Britain up to E2, Scottish IV, and in the Alps he has climbed up to TD-.

Kunal Masania – 23, British, PhD student. Kunal has climbed extensively in the UK and abroad, including France, Spain, Norway and India. He climbs Scottish IV, WI 4 and f7a.

¹ Dave Pickford (Leading British climber, climbed in the area on 3 expeditions)

² Adrian Pollard (Finish Guide who has worked in the area)

³ David Kaszlikowski, Poland (2 expeditions to the area and established the hardest route.)

Expedition Diary

25th Aug

Flights don't really work out and two of us end up sleeping at the airport while the others fly out to Marrakech.

26th Aug

We get a flight and meet the others at the airport only to find out that our bags have been lost. We buy the generator and all the other supplies we need in Marrakech.

27th Aug

Our bags arrive at the airport. We go and pick them up and head out in the jeep. Because of the bags we leave late and spend the night in Zawyat Ahancal because it's too late to go to Taghia that day. We have a very long debate at Yousseff's hut about what we are going to do the next day.

28th Aug

We head out pretty early after a good breakfast and walk through Taghia. We meet Said on the way on his donkey and have tea at his gite before continuing up the gorge between Oujdad and Ta'oujdad. We get to the top and get a view of our route. We also meet 2 Spanish climbers who say that it's rained every day for 10 days straight.



Initial view of the famous Taghia gorge cliffs

29th Aug

Get up at 5.30am and leave at 6.30am with the donkeys. It is a long walk to the head of the gorge where we set up camp on the plateau. It looks like a long way to the line. We decide to scout out an approach. We shelter from a passing storm in a cave and then continue down the gorge way past our route. We get back to camp very late.



Our route is just visible on the buttress in the right hand side of the photo.

30th Aug

Virgil and Hal go to the summit of our planned route to check out the line and Juha goes to the opposite side of the canyon to see what its like from that side. We spot loads of potential lines whilst hiking around the area. Hal and Virgil get invited in for tea by some nomads, who then follow us back to base camp to ask for money.

31st Aug

Hal, Virgil and Kunal go to where Juha was yesterday and a bit further along to check out the lines. The corner of the main face looks incredible! We try to abseil into the gorge, error! We walk back in the dark. That evening we decide to move camp to the bat cave in the gorge and attempt the huge line on the main buttress.

1st Sept

We spend the day moving kit to the cave. We abseil down into the gorge to speed up the moving process. We decide to go for a wash and get caught in a huge storm that floods the entrance of the gorge. Virgil and Kunal go to look for the rope and drills that we had left in the gorge. The water level rises really fast. We realize that it's just getting dark and we decide to try and get back to base camp. We arrive in the dark.



The 'Bat Cave' that was our base camp.

2nd Sept

Virgil, Kunal and Luke go to get the fuel and generator that are still at the entrance of the gorge. We then take some loads down the gorge and set up advanced camp. Juha and Virgil start climbing. Juha ends up doing some hard aid and takes a 9m fall, glancing off a ledge, hurting his leg. Hal and Kunal go and use sat phone as it doesn't work in the gorge. Juha finds a piton from the 1980s line. A massive debate ensues about the validity of our line.

3rd Sept

We decide to stick with the line as it's significantly separate and does not overlap with the 20 year old, unrepeatable, Spanish route. The others only manage to lead 5m through the really hard section that Juha fell off to the anchor by the tree. Now we are really psyched to push it tomorrow.

4th Sept

Over the day we lead 160m including E3 and A2. We finish just as it gets dark, bolt an anchor and abseil.

5th Sept

Luke and Juha get up a bit late and leave at 9. Hal and Virgil get up and start bolting 3rd and 4th pitches. On the walk back to base camp Hal manages to fall down a huge hole in the river bed and knocks himself out for a while but makes it back to base camp with only cuts and bruises.

6th Sept

Juha gets back to camp and tells us they completed another 140m yesterday. Due to a lack of head torches they had to bolt in the dark on top of the pillar. Luke and Kunal bolt the next pitch (5th). Virgil heads off to stay with Kunal at the base of the route.

7th Sept

The stove won't work properly so breakfast is tricky. Juha sets off with a massive pack to the cave at the bottom of the route. Hal and Luke walk round to the other side of the gorge to get photos of Virgil and Kunal climbing. They get some good photos and meet a shepherd. They get back before dark. The stove still won't work so we make coffee on the fire. Virgil drops and loses his shoe whilst climbing and the aid involves quite a few pitons and takes forever. Kunal was also hit by falling rock. There was loads of thunder in the late evening.

8th Sept

Juha sorts out the bolting on the first 2 pitches and then leads 50 from high point (pitch 2 above the pinnacle). They don't find the bivy cave we had spotted from the other side as it is too far to the left. Hal, Virgil and Kunal pack food and kit for 5 nights. The tension is in the air at the advanced camp (cave at the bottom of the route) that night as we all go to sleep with the prospect of a big commitment to the wall for the next few days.

9th Sept

At 6am Hal, Virgil and Kunal eat some pears and get on with the 300m of jugging to the point where we need to continue equipping from. Juha and Luke pack and start hauling up behind us. Hal and Virgil mark out bolting positions and then Kunal drills the bolts. We manage to equip all the way to the pinnacle. We then head back to the grassy ledges in light rain and help the others haul the last pitch. We set up camp in the dark on 2 portaledges and Virgil sleeps on the ledge above.



Waking up on portaledges at the top of pitch 6

10th Sept

Kunal and Virgil set off quite late to continue leading whilst Hal, Luke and Juha plan to haul our whole camp up to the pinnacle for high camp 2. Hauling is rubbish! Half way through the haul a massive storm hits. We get totally soaked and hit by some rocks. The

chocolate waterfall develops on the opposite face and we realize that retreat into the gorge is impossible in these weather conditions due to flooding.

Kunal drops his belay jacket whilst belaying Virgil and by the time he makes it back to us he is looking pretty cold! We descend back to the ledges and all sit under the fly until the rain stops. We then light a fire and try and get dry and warm. We decide that it's too much effort to put up portaledge and we'll be wet and cold so we all sleep under a portaledge fly which makes for a really bad night. We get soaked by the condensation.

11th Sept

Get up at 8am after very little sleep. Virgil and Luke go to lead whilst the rest of us pack up and haul. Luke knocks off a rock the size of a freezer in an attempt to kill us but only Kunal gets hit by some small pieces. We make it to the pinnacle in good time. Juha shoots off ahead to take the yellow static to the lead team so they can fix. Hal and Kunal set up camp for the night and dry out everyone's kit that got soaked yesterday.

The weather looks bad and we set up a portaledge and get in. The others get back and shelter under the ledge through one of the biggest storms we've ever seen. We experience the joy of using a piss-bottle for the first time.

12th Sept

Woke at 6.30am, didn't sleep to well but the view is incredible and some how we feel fairly full. There is a cool cloud inversion in the gorge. Kunal and Juha go first and plan to lead out to the top to get more water. Hal and Virgil go right behind planning to strip the lines and drop the 200m static down the main face to bolt it. This much ascending and hauling is hard work. Kunal tops out through easy ground and meets Yousseff on the summit. Hal goes up to speak to him.



Cloud inversion as seen from our portaledges.

It turns out people were killed in the storm 2 days ago, their bodies were washed down the gorge and they thought it might be us. The village has been badly damaged by flooding. He has just spent 48 hours looking for us!

Juha and Kunal head off to base camp to get more supplies. Hal and Virgil abseil and have a bit of a Tyrolean traverse mission to get back to the pinnacle. It starts to thunder in the distance and we just make it back to the portaledge as it starts to rain. The storm is colossal! The sky is purple, there is non stop thunder and the rain and hail never ends. We assume that the others will stay at base camp only to find that they turn up half way through the storm because they'd started to abseil before the storm started! Juha gets back first and then we have a 15/20 min wait that seems to last forever before Kunal turns up. We strip him and put him in a sleeping bag to warm him up. Hal and Virgil cook and they bivy as Kunal and Juha are trashed.

13th Sept

Hal, Virgil and Luke head up the trad line to strip it whilst the others start to pack to haul up the yellow static line. Half way up Luke knocks a rock off and cuts his hand fairly badly. We send him back down to the others and continue stripping the route. We then go and help the others haul.

We all make it to the grassy ledges and it's a beautiful evening with no rain. We bivy untied and without harnesses - which makes a nice change. From here we can see our base camp. Hal dropped his helmet over the edge.



Crossing from the pinnacle to the main face

14th Sept

We get up at 6am still at our incredible bivy 120m bellow the summit. We've just spent our 5th night on the wall and we're all feeling really tired. Virgil and Kunal drop another abseil rope down to start bolting. Hal goes to strip the yellow rope which requires the use of a retrievable lower out system so as not to pendulum. The others pack and start hauling out to the summit and then head back to camp and get water. We finish bolting. We get back to camp in the dark utterly tired. We cook up the biggest meal any of us have eaten in weeks and decide to double ration and rest for the couple of days before our free attempt.

15th Sept

Get up late, go for a wash in stream and get some water to fill up our reserves.

16th Sept

Second rest day. Run the generator to charge batteries and cameras. Everyone seems to be feeling the pressure of the imminent lead, knowing that we have to lead the whole thing clean in one push and that we don't have time or food to have more than one attempt. If we get bad weather during the day we will not be able to free the route at all. We leave for the bivy with plenty of time to avoid any potential storms. We arrive to find that its been demolished by the chocolate water fall. We would have been in no way protected had we been there. We'd had 3 days of good weather by now and we really hoped it held up for the next day.

17th Sept

We climb all day and everything goes really smoothly, the weather is immaculate and we lead the last 2 pitches of climbing in the dark and decide to sleep on the grassy ledges 120m bellow the summit. A truly awesome experience!

18th Sept

We get up in the morning to find that it's completely overcast and spitting. The weather looks bad so we decide to get out of there ASAP. The weather looks really bad so we get a trot on all the way back to base camp leaving the ropes at the entrance of the gorge. Before leaving the summit Hal calls Yousseff to arrange pick up a day early and he says there is a massive storm brewing. We get back to camp and Kunal and Luke decide to head to advanced camp to get the pots so we can have a big meal despite the terrible looking weather. They almost get hit by a huge rock fall. The weather seems to improve and I head out to call Jamal to make sure the jeeps are coming on the right day.

19th Sept

There was a huge storm in the night and it looks like we might have trouble getting out of the gorge as the water levels are quite high. We pack up all our stuff and start ferrying it to the entrance of the gorge to meet the donkey guys. We start to think they aren't going to turn up as it starts to get late, but eventually they do. The weather takes a turn for the worse and it rains and gets really windy.

20th Sept

We pack up the donkeys and leave. The walk seems easy at first but by the end we all feel really bad – totally exhausted. Back at the gite we eat all the food we can get our hands on until we feel sick. Several of us get eggy burps – and sign of digestive infection.

21st Sept

Several of us feel quite ill.

22nd Sept

Jeep turns up and its goodbye Taghia. We get back to Marrakech and start feasting on market food.

23rd Sept

Luke gets stomach problems. We go around the markets. Virgil gets ill in the evening.

24th Sept

Juha has the illness now. Hal and Kunal decide to check out the royal palace and tombs, pretty average.

25th Sept

Fly home.

The route

1. 35m 6a+ Follow the overhanging arête up its right side, be careful of loose rock near the bottom.
2. 30m 7a Move back onto the arête and follow it up before moving left onto the face to belay bellow a tree (crux in the last few moves).
3. 25m 6a+ Again gain the arête and then a crack which peters out (crux) then follow easier ground.
4. 30m 6b Some tricky moves through the roofs and directly above to gain easier ground.
5. 40m 6b+ Tricky moves up a groove/corner followed by easier ground to the right. Belay at a tree.
6. 35m 6b+ Hard start and sustained first half. Going left at the start may help. Finish at 2 grassy ledges which may serve as a good bivy.
7. 25m 6c Beautiful technical pitch. Strenuous start followed by delicate moves. Don't forget to shake out your feet!
8. 30m 6a+ Very pleasant slab climbing, tricky section in the middle.
9. 45m 6b+ Sustained good climbing up the central finger, hard to clip the fourth and a few too many bolts after that (17 total).
10. 35m 6b+ Traverse rightward with incredible exposure. Important to find the good holds or it feels a lot harder. Finishes at the top of the pinnacle which provides adequate bivy space.
11. Make a short abseil followed by an easy scramble to regain the main face. This could be tricky to retreat. Make sure your ropes don't get caught!

12. 40m 6b Head straight up the slightly overhanging face.
13. 30m 6a+ Continue up the face to belay between 2 bushes.
14. 25m 6c Go straight up the overhang, short but pumpy.
15. 35m 6a Move out to the arête and continue up the face and corner.
16. 45m 5+ Traverse on easy ground to the left to gain the first bolt.
17. Continue straight up to a chimney and climb this to gain the anchor.
18. and 19. Walk across some grassy ledges (good bivy) and gain easy ground on the right end of the ledges. Continue up 120m of easy ground (4) to reach the summit. This is a similar exit to the 1980 Spanish route.

Route description

The route was set as a mixture of aid and trad climbing. The hardest aid climbing was A3+ and the hardest trad climbing was E3. Whilst on lead anchors were bolted which were then used as the anchors for the sport route. Only four bolts were placed that did not end up on the final line due to the need to retreat from an oncoming storm. The climbing is of extremely high quality and apart from the first and last pitch the rock is solid and generally reliable. The climbing tends to be mostly face and slab climbing with some over hangs.

Once the route had been set it was climbed clean, ground up with most of the pitches being on sighted. All members of the team did not lead all the pitches as time as weather conditions did not allow for this – the seconds jumared rather than climbing. It should be noted that from the top of pitch 10 there is a small abseil required to regain the main face. This would be very difficult to reverse in the case of a retreat.

Weather conditions

Our initial concerns regarding the weather were that it would be extremely hot. This was only true for the first day or two of the trip. After this the conditions were extremely volatile, with rain or storms on the majority of the days. Bad weather would tend to come in around 4pm. It was generally possible to judge if bad weather was coming simply from the wisps of cloud in the mornings. Some of these storms, especially in the second half of the trip were extremely violent causing the gorges to flood within 20 minutes of the storm starting. This meant that travelling from base camp to the route or to fetch water was impossible at certain times due to the water levels but also due to the large amounts of rock fall caused by the storms. After such storms the water sources did not become clean again for up to 48h. It would have been possible to collect water with a massive amount of filtering.



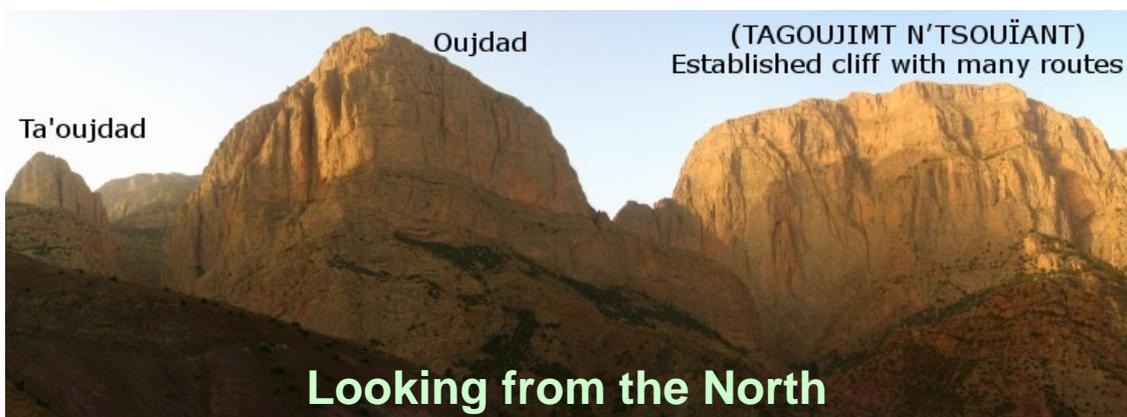
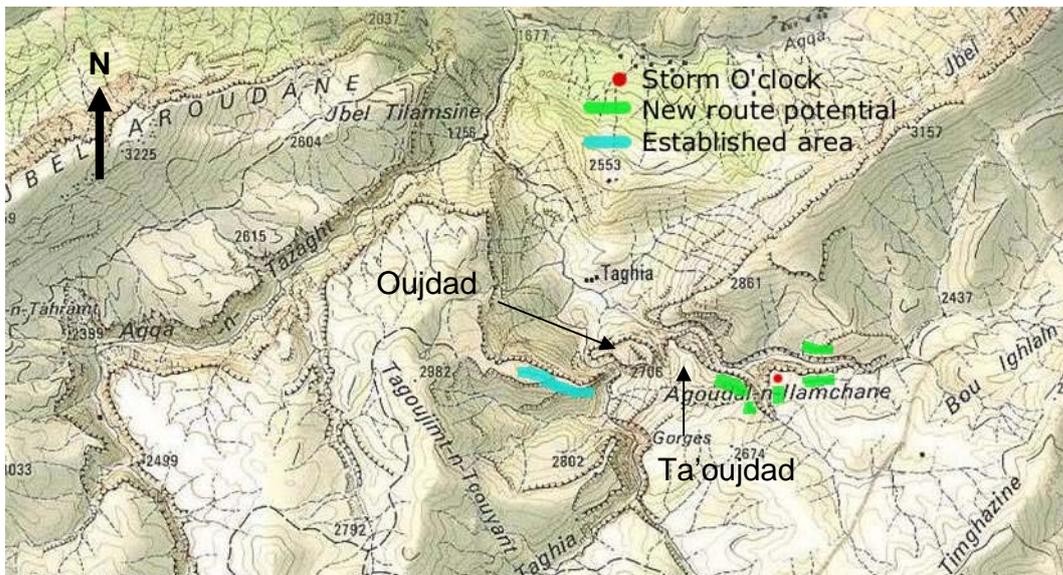


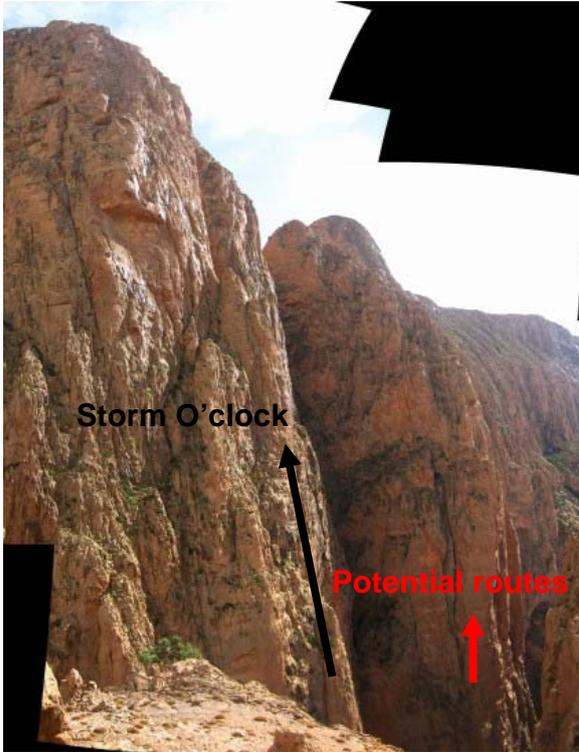
<i>Accomodation</i>	
Marrakech	424
Taghia	230
<i>Transport</i>	
Flights+excess	2168
Jeeps	440
Donkeys	336
<i>Other</i>	
Food	345
Generator	112
Equipment	6965
Sat Phone	105
Misc	160
Total	11286

New route potential

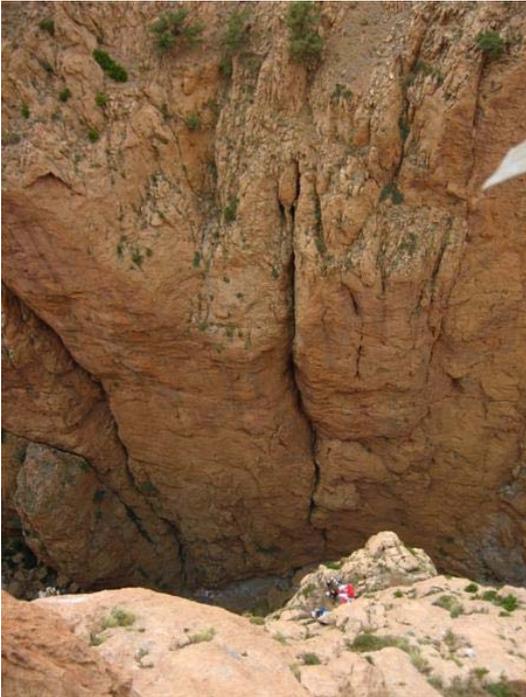
In spite of a popularity boom over the past ten years the Taghia area retains a massive amount of unclimbed rock. If you intend to climb a new route in the area it is advisable to obtain the recent guidebook called Taghia, Montagnes Berberes written by Christian Ravier. New routes are generally written up in a logbook in the Gites in Taghia. As of September 2008 the vast majority of routes in these logbooks were included in the guidebook. In the established areas there is often potential to find an attractive line in between existing routes.

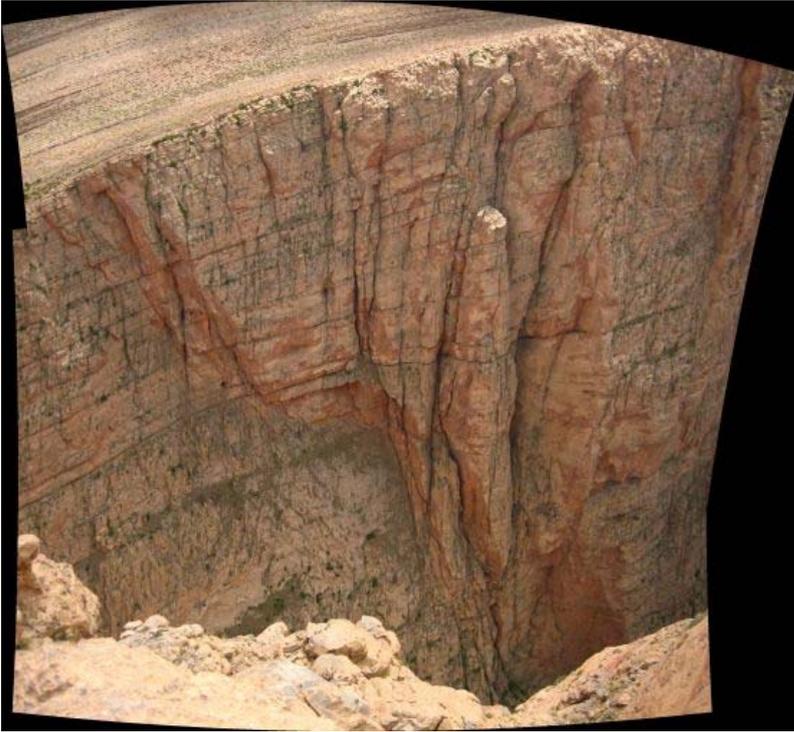
We spent time exploring the potential of the Agoudal N'lamchane area. The map below shows the areas where we found excellent new route potential (in green) relative to Oujdad, Ta'oujdad and Tagoujimt n'toouyant (blue established area – also known as Tagoujimt N'tsouïant). Please note that different maps and websites often use slightly different spellings for local landmarks and towns. Oujdad and Ta'oujdad have numerous existing routes – however we believe there is still good potential for more. See the guidebook or www.onaclimb.com/taghia for info on individual routes.





Above: The cliffs adjacent (to the West) to our route looked attractive, with very steep, long clean faces up to around 500-600m.
Below: The opposite side of the gorge from our route had a large stretch (several hundred metres wide) of steep walls of around 200-300m high.





Above: Closer to the East entrance of the gorge the walls are impressive, having many inspiring lines up to 350m.

Below: Very steep and very smooth walls near the East entrance to the gorge, roughly 400m.



The Taghia area remains a goldmine for high quality new routes from 300-600m long on excellent quality limestone. Most of the more easily accessible areas, including Oujdad, Ta'oujdad and Tagoujimt N'tosouiant, have been well travelled and already have numerous established routes – in spite of this there is certainly potential for more routes. The eastern gorge in the Agoudal N'llamchane area is several kilometres long and is home to vast stretches of attractive walls. Walking down that gorge is truly awe inspiring.

However access is somewhat more challenging compared to the more established areas. It takes roughly 6 hours to hike with donkeys from Taghia to the East entrance of the gorge. The gorge itself provides challenges for a heavily equipped team. Path finding is time consuming and some sections are steep, making it awkward with heavy bags. Furthermore, the gorge is prone to flash flooding – during a severe storm it could become impossible to travel in the gorge within 30 minutes. Rock-fall becomes frequent and violent waterfalls and narrow sections block retreat. One of the larger waterfalls (which only flows in the event of a storm) deposits directly into the gorge where Storm O'clock begins. If you experience a heavy storm whilst on the route it would not be advisable to abseil retreat into the gorge.

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