



THE RAG

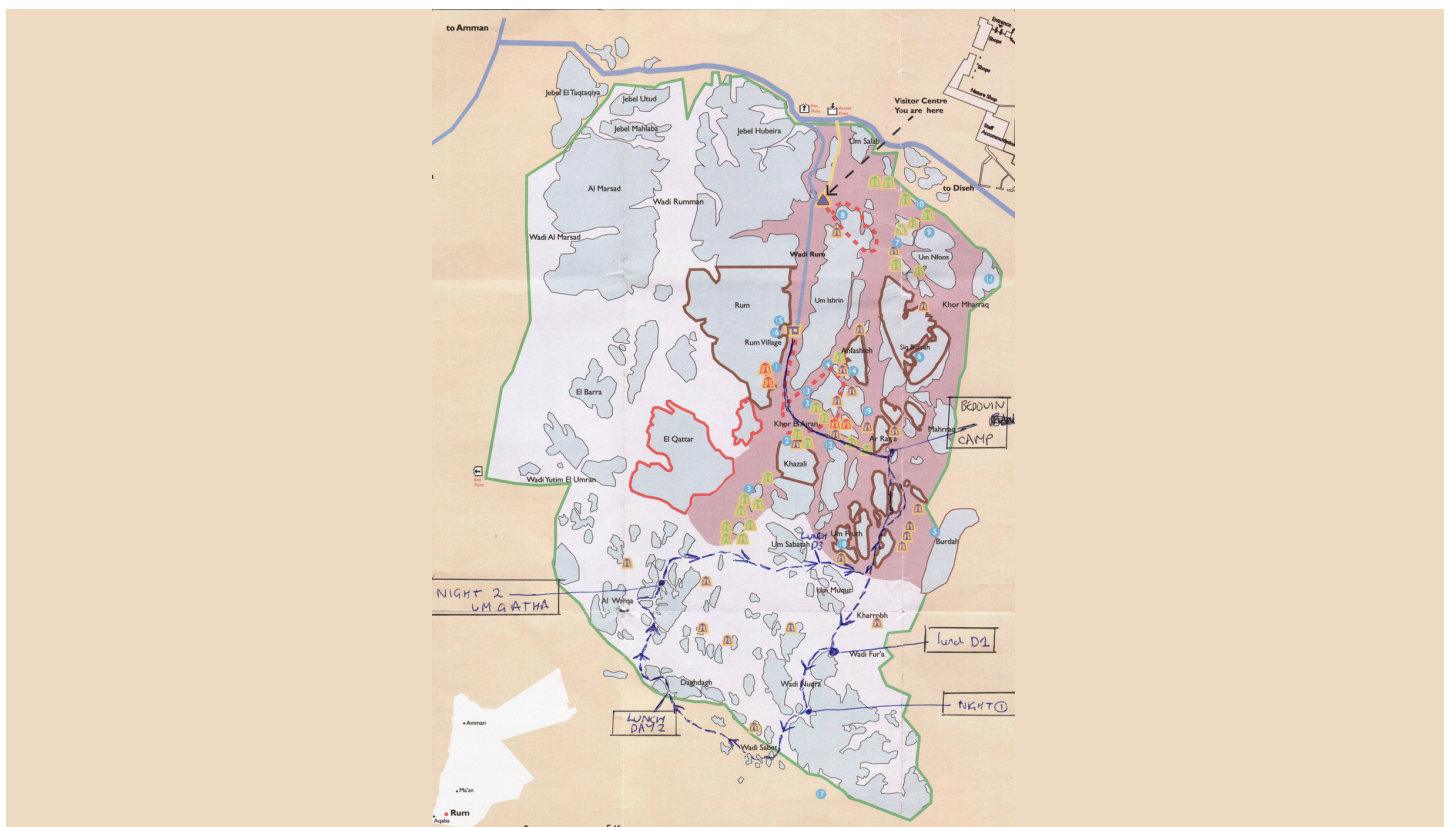
ARMY & NAVY CLUB

In the Footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia: The RAG Adventure Circle Inaugural Expedition to Wadi Rum, Jordan.

In mid-May, eleven pioneers of the RAG adventure circle, led by Duncan Schofield, travelled to Jordan all ready to face the challenge of a 55km camel trek through the desert. The team, all Rag members, and aged from twenty seven to eighty eight - Ollie Masterson being the baby of the group and Barry Armstrong the grandfather. Members had travelled from Canada (via Rome), Geneva, Saudi Arabia and Ireland, as well as the UK, to enjoy this amazing opportunity.

En route, although not officially part of the expedition itinerary, many enjoyed the opportunity to visit the world Heritage site at Petra a place that undoubtedly deserves its place as one of the 'modern' seven wonders of the world.

We spent the first night in Ali Eid's Bedouin camp a few kilometers south east of Wadi Rum village at Ar Rak'a, humans all looking forward to seeing some of the Wadi Rum protected area (UNESCO World heritage site) and the wider desert outside, bonding and discussing the adventure to come. The camels at that stage were penned away and ready to be brought forward the next morning.



Meet the mounts....

The next morning the camels arrived and we were date matched with our mounts. Ian Annett immediately formed a love bond with Sheilan, Andy MacDonald described Zoba as having a 'relaxed attitude and short legs', whilst Jon Perkins initial introduction to Asalan was much less smooth.... Camels have a very curious way of sitting down and to mount needs a fast and purposeful swinging of the leg around the back pommel. The rise from sitting to standing can be disconcerting for the unaware, the trick is to lean back initially as they use their back legs first, causing a violent forward tilt, then the front legs follow making the camel tilt backwards and the rider should lean forward to maintain balance. For the first couple of hours riding, the camels were tethered into a train before we were deemed competent to control our own individual mounts.



Rhythm of desert life...

Over the first day we trekked to Wadi Nugria, stopping en route for a few hours to avoid the heat of the day.



Towards the end of the day we made camp in a secluded ravine in the wadi. Each night we rough-camped under the stars, sleeping bags and camel blankets as mats. In the evening we climbed a few hundred feet up the rocks to an incredible view point west to watch the sunset over the desert and the Saudi border.



Our trek cook, Hussein Eid, produced an aperitif of Arabian tea and coffee followed by a delicious shared plate of chicken and rice. Before eating we all carefully selected plots of sand, choosing softer areas and being careful not to sleep too close to the rock face where snakes may be lurking. After dinner those who still had the energy sat around the camp fire chatting whilst others retreated to their sleeping bags exhausted. To fall asleep outside in a desert under a clear sky with a full moon and canopy of stars is a serene experience.



The rhythm of the days followed the same pattern. On the second day the trek took us West outside the Wadi Rum protected area and into the wider desert. Meanwhile, the camels were beginning to reveal their true nature. Asalan was determined to bite Jon; Ollie's camel, Wagat (nickname Fufu) established himself as the leader of the train and we certainly saw Fufu cantering on more than one occasion. Belinda Lehrell's camel, Hisnan, rolled and slightly bent her phone. Sarah Galbraith's camel, Alian (whom she pertinently nicknamed Alien), a racing camel of uncertain disposition, was muzzled to restrict his food intake and energy....it didn't stop him trying to roll on her. Overnight the camels were free to graze, albeit with their front legs hobbled to restrict how far they could wander.



A camel ate my toothbrush.....!!

Andy Macdonald, expedition official photographer, unwisely left a bag with his toothbrush, toothpaste and some nuts on the sand near his sleeping bag. The next morning the toothbrush, toothpaste and nuts had vanished leaving only minimal evidence but with a camel size bite to some adjacent packaging!

A family business....

On the second evening we were joined by Ali's sons, Faisal (11) and Talal (3) who stayed with us for the remainder of the trek. There can be few stranger sights than a small child being carried by his father's camel in a saddle bag with his head poling out like a little joey in his mother's pouch. Faisal, very competently, took on the lead of the train and proved a highly competent camel master.



The Senior Service...

Camels are called the ships of the desert, perhaps that is why the majority of our group were from a range of Naval backgrounds.

The trek takes its toll...

By the third day aches, pains, abrasions, blisters and bleeding from unspeakable places, in one case, were starting to tell. It was probably the most challenging day in the saddle, but with the prize of a solar shower back at the Bedouin camp the team was determined to press on, only stopping briefly en route to explore a pre-Nabatean cave.



A convivial final night....

You become very close when living in the desert, and a fun final night in camp awaited. Despite our tiredness the group dined like Bedouin royalty eating freshly slaughtered goat, rice and fermented yoghurt sauce, Mansaf, the signature Jordanian dish. Ollie was in his element scooping out the brain via the base of the skull!!



BACK ROW L-R:

Dunc Schofield (Samhan); Jon Perkins (Asalan); Andy Macdonald (Zoba); Vern Archibald (Aidan)

MIDDLE ROW L-R:

Barry Armstrong (Shaida); Sarah Galbraith (Alian); Matt Shouler (Joker); Belinda Lehrell (Hisnan); Peter-Carlo Lehrell (Hadaj)

FRONT ROW L-R:

Ollie Masterson (Fufu); Talal Eid; Ali Eid; Ian Annett (Sheilan)

Later that final evening we were deeply honoured when Ali presented each of us with an authentic Bedouin knife hand made in the village by Faris.

The expedition was an amazing experience thoroughly enjoyed by all those lucky enough to take part. It was an honour to be hosted in his home by Ali and his family, proud upholders of Bedouin tradition, stewards of the protected area of Wadi Rum, wonderful hosts and friends to us.

Finally... a huge thank you to Duncan Schofield who pioneered the Adventure Circle, and with Ali Eid his close friend (www.cameladventures.com) turned a fleeting idea to reality. We hope that this will be the first of many Adventure Circle expeditions. If you are the adventurous type and have an idea you would like to pursue then do tell Dunc and the Club team – your dream could become reality!

