

summit

september / 1972 70¢





The Mountains of Iran

By Arlene Blum

Demavend (18,593 feet), the highest peak in the Elburz Mountains, Iran.

Climbing in the Iranian mountains.

Dear F.,

The Elburz mountains of Iran were our first stop in Asia. Climbing wise, this part of our trip was much less successful than Africa, probably because we were here a bit before the climbing season. Some of us did succeed in climbing Demavend (18,600'), a large extinct volcano, and some minor peaks in the Alam Kuh range. We'd hoped that spring climbing here would be as delightful as in the States. Instead we found winter conditions: heavy unconsolidated snow both on the slopes and in the air. The periods of brilliant clear weather were characterized by high winds and cold, encouraging sloth and discouraging climbing. We were told that this was the worst winter in twenty years in Iran, so perhaps spring climbing here would be better another year.

In any case, I'll tell you a bit about our climbs. Iran is a reasonable place to stop on the way to the Himalayas as the Elburz Mountains provide good conditioning and some acclimatization. The Mountaineering Federation of Iran is helpful and generous in letting visiting climbers use their vast store of equipment. Still, arranging to climb here is relatively difficult due to language and cultural problems. Our experience may have been somewhat unfortunate. Of our twenty-eight days in Iran, we spent eleven in the mountains, and many of the rest hassling with details of transportation

and supplies. To avoid this situation, get out of Teheran as soon as possible and into the mountains where things are relatively simple.

Our first climb was Demavend, about sixty miles northeast of Teheran. We'd heard that climbing Demavend in summer involved a long dry slog up scree and hoped the climb would be more pleasant in April. The Mountaineering Federation lent us short skis and we looked forward to some good skiing.

The variety of food available in Teheran is not nearly so great as in Africa and relatively expensive. Still, there are numerous supermarkets and most things, including cheesecake mix, can be purchased for a price. Best bargain is pistachio nuts; our progress in the mountains was marked by a trail of nut shells.

To get to Demavend we took a most exciting two-hour, fifty-cent bus ride to Reneh. Our driver was continually passing other vehicles on steep, blind curves and in tunnels. We realized that we were indeed in the land of mystics, for the survival of our bus could only be explained by clairvoyance of the driver. Traffic is incredible in Iran: many cars, no rules, no order, chaos. Bus riding and street crossing here have undoubtedly been the most dangerous parts of our trip.

The road to Reneh went through spectacular mountain country somewhat reminiscent of the Sierra. However, the terraced farms and mud huts assured us that we were indeed in Asia. Our hearts sank as the road went lower and lower for we knew that tomorrow we'd have to walk to a shelter at nearly 14,000 feet. We were at about 4,000 feet when the bus turned up one of the steepest dirt roads I've ever seen. The switchbacks seemed at least twenty-five degrees.

About two miles later we were in Reneh at 6,500 feet. The village was mostly mud huts with one magnificent building, the shelter of the Mountaineering Federation. This shelter—chalet would be more appropriate—consists of four rooms: a living room decorated with mountain photos and posters, modern electric kitchen, bedroom with cots and mattresses, and bathroom with eastern and western toilets. Sheer luxury! We were served

copious quantities of hot tea and other goodies by Mr. Ali Faramarz who will guide parties up Demavend for about \$10.00 a day.

We left at 7:00 a.m. for the Demavend shelter, 7,000 feet above. Mules were to carry our packs to snowline which was unfortunately only about 9,500 feet this April. A road can be followed nearly this high by anyone with a car, making the walk to the shelter considerably easier.

At our insistence, the muleteer tried to pull the mules through the first snow we encountered, as there was much dry trail beyond. The unhappy mules sank to their chests. No way! We put on our packs and began the long slog up to the shelter. Late spring is certainly a pretty time to climb Demavend. The neighboring peaks, drab in the summer, were elegantly attired in their white coats. Magnificent views lessened the drudgery of the long walk with heavy packs.

The shelter, large enough for about fifteen people, was full of snow when we arrived. Apparently we were the first party to climb Demavend this year.

Next day everyone felt lazy and we sat around watching the snow fall. We planned the traditional early start for our climb. However, it was still snowing heavily when we awoke at 3:00 a.m. so we went back to bed and didn't start until 6:00 when, surprisingly, it was clear and sunny.

Another very long day: the 18,600-foot summit was 5,000 feet above us. We moved slowly in the cold and wind. Clouds soon swirled in, obscuring our views. Dave, who had just joined us from the States, and I went slowly to 17,000 feet and turned back while Joel and Toby went to the top, which they said was rather unpleasant due to cold, sulfur fumes, and fifty mph winds. Somewhat disappointed, we glissaded back to the hut in the falling snow.

Next morning, it was still blizzarding, but in about five hours we managed to find our way down to Reneh and the warmth and hospitality of the Mountaineering Federation chalet.

About a week later, we gratefully quit the traffic and turmoil of Teheran for the Alam Kuh mountains. We'd hoped that May would mark the

beginning of spring but found severe winter conditions. The bus ride to Marzanabad, nineteen miles south of the Caspian Sea was inexpensive and spectacular. The road followed a narrow canyon carved by the roaring Chalus River, climbing steeply to Kandaian Pass (9,000') and then plummeting down to Marzanabad. Fortunately this bus driver was much more concerned about survival than the last one, leading to a more relaxing journey.

From Marzanabad we took a minibus to Rudbarek from where we would start walking. On the way we passed through several other Iranian villages. Dress was somewhat formal; nearly all the men were wearing suits and the women wore long pants and brightly colored skirts at the same time. School was letting out and I noticed, to my dismay, that nearly all the students were boys.

At Rudbarek we were ushered into another luxurious mountain club shelter, the home of Safar Naghavi, the local guide. Our room contained beautiful Persian carpets and cushions. We felt like Oriental royalty as we consumed huge quantities of excellent Iranian tea, warm fresh bread and eggs.

Next day we began the long walk to the Sarchal Hut (12,400') Again mules would accompany us to snow line. We walked through a green fertile valley full of pink blossoming trees and the first wildflowers of spring. This beautiful lush place is known as the "Valley of the Assassins." In medieval times, the valley was occupied by a dissident religious sect known as the Assassins. Supposedly under the influence of hashish, this sect terrorized the countryside for two hundred years, until 1256 when the valley was conquered by Mongol invaders.

The tightly constructed houses and jagged peaks looming nearly 10,000 feet above give the place a decidedly Swiss flavor. The residents are mostly from Kurdistan and look somewhat European. However, we were not in Europe. The Galsh shepherds in large black square hide cloaks present a startling appearance reminiscent of Batman, the roofs of the snug houses were

weighted down with stones, and the few trail markers were in Farsi.

This time the mules made it to about 9,000 feet where we leveled a campsite on a pleasant grassy slope bordering on the edge of a narrow steep valley. A storm that threatened to blow down the tent kept us awake most of the night.

The morning was clear and fresh. We followed a carpet of green grass and wildflowers to the snow. Spring at last? Unfortunately not. Soon the clouds came in and we were slogging through deep snow. And so it went during our six days in the Alam Kuh. Clear early morning would be followed by a day of snowfall.

We were the first party to reach Sarchal this year, and again the hut was full of snow. After shoveling it out, we slept soundly on three layers of thick foam.

From the hut porch we looked out on a vista of jagged peaks. Most outstanding was the north face of Alam Kuh (15,900'). There are about nine routes on this vertical face ranging in difficulty to several multiday 5.8, A4 routes done by Polish, French and Iranian climbers.

Safar had warned us against climbing Alam Kuh this time of year due to avalanche danger, so we decided to attempt Takht-i-Suleiman (Soloman's Throne, 15,600'), the second highest peak in the range. We traversed to it along the ridge from the north, climbing Siah Gug (14,700') and Rostam Nisht (14,960') on the way. The summit of the latter was marked by a sign advertising "B. F. Goodrich tires." Most peculiar.

The snow, firm in the early morning, got softer, and we were soon wallowing in it. The unpleasantness of breaking trail, and possible avalanche danger led us to turn back a few hundred feet below the summit. The daily blizzard began and we groped down to the shelter.

Next day, those with the fortitude to vacate their sleeping bags started out for a better look at the north face of Alam Kuh and a possible climb of Mian Sechal (14,800'). We quit at a saddle (14,500') when the day's storm began. The following day was finally clear; brilliantly beautiful, though very cold and windy. We slogged

around in the unconsolidated snow but still did not manage to climb anything.

We retreated the next morning in yet another heavy snowstorm. Oh misery! The green flower carpet we'd followed on the way up had turned white. We'd heard Iran was a desert country, but as we descended and the snow turned to cold rain, we found this difficult to believe. Several mud glissades later we reached the hut of some local farmers who fed us hot tea and bread and let us dry off before their fire.

The world seemed a better place. And even better when the rains stopped, the sun came out, and the Valley of the Assassins became a glorious place again. Green grass and pink blossoming trees soothed our storm weary eyes.

Down we went to the warm hospitality of Safar who fed us more delicious tea and assured us that this was a bad time to visit the Alam Kuh. And so it was as far as climbing was concerned. I do think climbing in the Elburz would be more enjoyable later in the season when conditions are better. Most of the better climbs are done in August or thereabouts. Spring is certainly more beautiful in the valley and should be a good time for ski touring. The Zagros mountains, which extend to 15,000 feet in western Iran and contain many relics of ancient civilizations, would be another interesting place to visit.

We could find no good topographic maps of the Elburz but the Mountaineering Federation (Fisher Abad Ave., Teheran, Iran) is helpful with advice on routes and locations of huts. Taking mules to huts seems a good idea as they're cheap, the muleteers are delightful fellows and know the locations of huts, and the walks to the huts are rather long.

Expenses for climbing here were much less than in Africa as there are no hut fees or park fees. Our four-day trip to Demavend cost \$10.00 each, and seven days in the Alam Kuh about \$25.00 for food, mules and transport from Teheran.

Now we're going to the Caspian to lie in the sun and should be in Kashmir in a week.

Sincerely,
Arlene

"The mule could go no further, and we had to take our packs on our backs."

In April, the mountains were well-covered with snow.

