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**British Nampula Towers, Northern Mozambique  
7 July – 31 July 2001**

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Dave Turnbull

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the BMC, MEF and the Shipton Tillman Award for supporting the trip financially. The trip would have been difficult or impossible (due to costs) without this support.

Logistical support from Alard Hufner, Mark Seuring and friends was also indispensable whilst in Southern Africa. Thanks also go to Mr and Mrs Hufner for accommodating the team whilst in Johannesburg.

## **The Team**

The team comprised five Brits and five South Africans as follows:

### **UK Members:**

Dave Turnbull, 36, BMC Officer.  
Ben Bransby, 21, Student.  
Andy Donson, 35, Research Biologist.  
Leo Houlding, 20, Climber.  
Pete Robbins, 20, Student

### **South African Members:**

Alard Hufner  
Peter Martin  
Matthew Munting  
Mark Seuring  
Isak Steyn

## **Background**

In 1998 leading South African climber Ed February initiated a highly successful exchange trip between the Mountain Club of South Africa (MCSA) and the BMC. Dave Turnbull, Ben Bransby and Pete Robbins visited South Africa as part of the British component of the exchange whilst Alard Hufner was one of the South African climbers who visited the UK. Between 1998-2000, a range of potential follow up trips were discussed between BMC and MCSA including Namibia, Cameroon and Mozambique. The decision to visit Mozambique was made on the basis that no British climbers were known to have visited the country and also because Alard Hufner had clear objectives in mind following two previous visits.

The trip was scheduled for July as this would offer the best chance of consistent dry weather. Nampula Province is subject to high annual rainfall and the dirt roads were known to become impassable after heavy rain.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The main aim was to explore a little known area of granite inselburgs (called Merupi) near the village of Lilaua in Nampula Province, Northern Mozambique. The area lies approximately 300 km east of southern tip of Lake Malawi and contains extensive domes and pillars rising out of generally flat landscape of forest and scrub vegetation. The towers at Merupi were photographed in 1998 by the only climbers known to have visited this region, South Africans Alard Hufner and Mark Seuring, who were unable to access this area due to lack of a suitable 4x4 vehicle. The towers ranged in height from 500-1000m.

The secondary aim of the trip was to make first ascents on the 700m east face of Mlema3 and the north arête of Mleme1 situated 15km from the village of Mlema – again in Nampula Province. These towers were first climbed by the same South African climbers in 1998 and 2000 and have only one route each to date - 'African Light' 700m, 22, A1, on Mlema3 and 'The Whites must be Crazy' 675m, 20, on Mleme1. 'African Light' took Hufner and Seuring 4 days to climb.

A team of talented climbers was brought together with the aim of attempting high standard free ascents without the use of bolts.

### **Itinerary (actual)**

7 July	Depart UK (Manchester – J'burg).
8 July	Arrive J'burg.
9 July	Preparation (vehicles, food, finances).
10 July	Leave J'burg in two 4x4 vehicles (Toyota doublecab and 1976 converted Land Rover) heading for South Africa/Zimbabwe border. Head gasket blows on Toyota 20kms from border.
11 July	Peter Martin stays at border crossing whilst remainder of team (9 members continue north in the Land Rover.
12 July	Driving. Sleep in bush in Harare.
13 July	Drive through Tete corridor of Mozambique and arrive at Blantyre, Malawi at 11pm.
14 July	Leave Blantyre at 5am heading north and then east into northern Mozambique. Extremely poor quality dirt roads. Arrive Mlema 12pm.
15 July	Leave Mlema heading for Lilaua (approx 200km). More dirt roads, journey time 15hrs.
16 July	Access negotiations with Head of Immigration in Nampula city (13hrs round trip on dirt roads). Peter Martin arrives at Merupi after 3000km solo drive.
17-23 July	Explore and climb in Lilaua area. Drive back to Mlema.
24 July	Attempt African Light on Mlema towers. Leave Mozambique.
25 July	Drive to Cape Mc Lear, Lake Malawi.
27-31 July	Drive to J'burg with two days cragging on route.

### **Travel details.**

The journey between Johannesburg and Lilaua, Nampula was 2200 miles each way and took five full days of travel in each direction. The use of a modern 4x4 would cut this down to just over 3 days assuming 15-18 hours of driving time/day. The roads in South Africa and Zimbabwe are sealed tarmac of generally reasonable quality. These deteriorate in Malawi and most of the roads we used in Mozambique (both in the Tete corridor and in Nampula province) were dirt. The stretch between Mlema and Lilaua is very poor quality and would rapidly become impassable during heavy rainfall. There are several stream/river crossings on route. Police road blocks and check points were experienced on 5 or 6 occasions. Border crossings would have been very problematic without the presence of the South African team members. Few people speak any English in Nampula – basic knowledge of Portuguese is desirable and a phrase book is recommended.

Money is required in US \$ or Rand. US \$ is preferred by money changers in Malawi and Mozambique.

Mosquito's were not a problem during the time of our visit. A number of snakes were encountered (including one at the base of Merupi) and a 10cm Scorpion was discovered during the ascent of Merupi. No large game animals were seen – according to the locals most animals were shot for meat during the Civil War.

# Route between Johannesburg & Lilaua.



## The Climbing

Access difficulties were immediately experienced on arrival at Liliuaua. The team was informed (in Portuguese) that access to the towers was not permitted because the area was ecologically sensitive. After several hours of negotiation with village administrators, Hufner, Seuring, Turnbull and a local official were required to drive to Nampula city (approx 6 hrs each way) to seek approval from the Head of Immigration. A tense afternoon was subsequently spent in Nampula before permission eventually given.

The first day was spent exploring the area with the help of up to 50 village children who followed us everywhere we went. The main tower proved to be around 2.5 hrs hard walk from the village. On first impressions it appeared to be covered with usual solution pockets although close inspection revealed that these were in fact grass tufts. Once the climbing gear was transported to the base of the cliffs, the team split into two 3's and two pairs to attempt a variety of lines.

Munting and Steyn opted for a multi day aid line on the impressive 1000m+ west face of Merupi. Bransby and Donson, exhausted from the walk in, opted for the easiest looking line – a enormous gully system on the south east face. Houlding/Hufner/Suering and Martin/Robbins/Turnbull opted for centre lines up major groove and corner systems in the central section of the south face.

All parties failed on there routes on the first day of climbing. Bransby and Donson came closest to success after climbing the gully system (which proved to be 5.11, E4 off-widths) only to be turned back 25m from the summit due to fading light and poorly protected 5c/6a slab climbing.

Martin/Robbins/Turnbull had gained around 80m on there line when Robbins took two long falls whilst attempting to pass a blank section. On the second fall, caused by the collapse of a large grass ledge, Robbins fell head first into a into a small tree before continuing past several overhangs until level with the belay 16m below. No doubt his father would be proud. The team abandoned the line after Martin – attempting to aid past this problematic section – ripped a sky hook placement and took a further fall. Meanwhile Houlding/Hufner/Suering were also experiencing difficulties, principally related to the lack of gear. At one stage Houlding climbed 35m of protection-less and dirty 5c slabs only to be faced with no belay options and more blank rock above. A complex retreat was then arranged and the line abandoned.

Munting and Steyn also abandoned their line after Steyn took several lengthy falls whilst trying to fix a bolt ladder. The last fall resulted in a deep cut on Steyn's right hand.

The following day the team re-grouped and it was decided that Houlding/Hufner/Suering would try to complete the gully/slab line attempted by Bransby and Donson while Martin/Robbins/Turnbull would explore the east ridge leading to the same summit slabs. Martin/Robbins/Turnbull reached the summit 15 minutes before Houlding/Hufner/Suering. The crux slab section was climbed at E4 5c after Robbins found a crucial Rock 3 placement. Seuring came across a 10cm long scorpion whilst seconding this pitch.

**Routes ascended:**

The two routes climbed on Merupi were:

- The South East Gully, 600m. Comprising 250m of Severe scrambling, 300m of chimneys and off-widths (E4) and 75m of slabs (E4 5c). Overall grade E4/5 6a.
- The East Ridge, 650m. Consisting of 575m of moderate to VS scrambling (with one 5c section) and the same crux slab section (75m) as described above.

## Costs and Income

### Expedition Costs:

Travel -	Flights	£2960
	4x4 hire, fuel, ins (23dys, 7200km)	£1900
Food and Stores -		£1200
Peak Fees, Liaison Officer -		N/A
Accommodation -		£240
Insurance -		£650
Equipment -		£250
Other (vaccinations, visa's) -		£750
<b>TOTAL:</b>		<b>£7950</b>

### Income

BMC	£1000
MEF	£540
Shipton Tillman	£2400 (\$3500)
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>£3940</b>

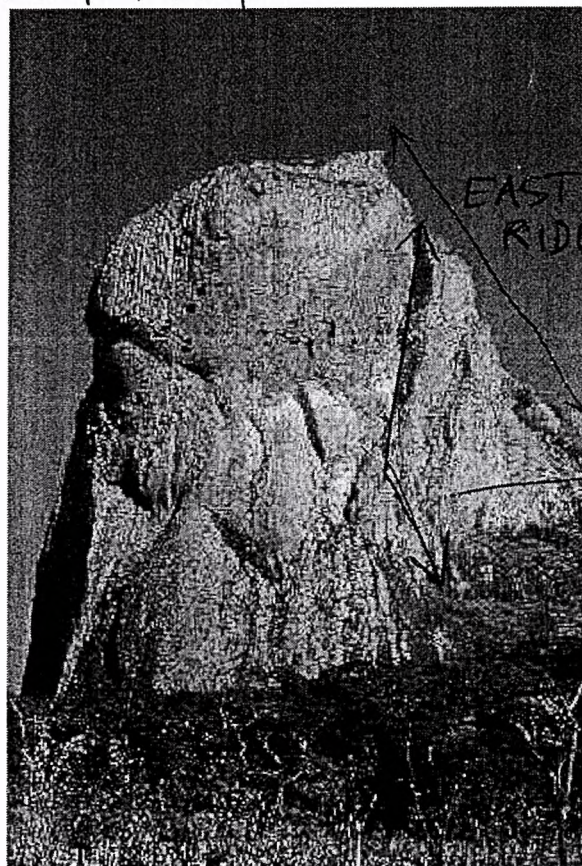
**Personal Contributions: £4010 or £802/person**



## Conclusion

Great place to visit - classic African overland adventure - beautiful scenery, but if you want to get much climbing done take plenty of time and money, an extensive gardening kit and don't expect to find much natural protection.

Merupi, Namputa



South East  
Gully .