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THE BRITISH WESTERN HAJAR TRAVERSE EXPEDITION 2000

MEF Reference 04/07 EXPEDITION REPORT

A mountaineering expedition to the Western Hajar mountains of Oman

20th December 2003 to 14th January 2004

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Geoff Hornby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Geoff Hornby

Supported by : The Mount Everest Foundation
The British Mountaineering Council

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Introduction

During 1947 through to 1950 Wilfred Thesiger criss crossed the Empty Quarter with the Bedouin on camels. He tried on many occasions to reach the Western Hajar mountains but was repeatedly turned away on pain of death whenever he tried to approach.

At an RGS dinner, Mike Searle found himself sat next to Sir Wilfred Thesiger, and Sir Wilf explained that his one regret from his travels was never having reached the summit of Jabal Shams, the highest point of the Akdar (green mountains).

Mike explained that he had visited the summit on half a dozen occasions. Discussions with Mike fermented and idea to retrace the last journey of Thesigers, from the Wahiba Sands to the foot of the mountains, and to then traverse the entire range, climbing new routes wherever possible to finally reach the highest point and to then descend to the sea.

This would entail a continuous traverse of approximately 600 kilometres. Our plan was to achieve this on camel, foot and bike. Our route across the mountains would encompass, Jabal Kawr, Asait, Asala, Misfah and Shams.

I later had lunch with Sir Wilfred and he was hugely supportive of our plans. He said that any desert crossings on camels was potentially just a stunt, but that our traverse of the mountains, linking new routes on steep rock walls, was truly impossible by mechanical means and therefore was really exciting.

Finding people with enough time and enough madness to travel for a month in the Arabian sun and to do huge amounts of physical work was not easy. Eventually I assembled a team of 4, all of whom had experience of climbing in Jordan or Oman before.

We were jerked around by the Omani Government officials continuously. They ended up giving us zero support and only sort to try and stop us with bureaucracy and home made rules. We ended up being completely tied to a one month tourist visa which really squeezed the expedition hard for timing.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go to all the individuals, companies and organisations that helped us.

Our thanks to the following Companies and Organisations that supported us :

The Mount Everest Foundation
The British Mountaineering Council
Tilley Hats
Camp helmets

Objectives and summary achievements

Objectives

To cross the Wahiba Sands from South to North, by camel using Bedouin support and camels.

This was achieved.

To cycle from Al Minitrib at the North of the Wahiba Sands to the base of Jabal Kawr, following the route taken by Wilfred Thesiger. The route went via the Bedouin villages of Sinaw and Adam and the Ancient Castle of Jibreen.

This was achieved.

To traverse the Western Hajar mountains on foot climbing new routes on the big rock faces.

This was achieved, however the summit of Jabal Kawr was not reached due to bad weather.

Summary achievements in order (see diary for more specifics) :

The first ascent of a new route on the South face of Jabal Kawr.

The first ascent of a new route on the North face of Torre Hibshe.

The first ascent of a new route on the East face of Jabal Asait.

The first ascent of a new route on the West face of Jabal Asala.

The first ascent of a new route on the West face of Jabal Misfah.

The South North traverse of Jabal Shams.

Team

Geoff Hornby

The expedition leader and planner. Geoff made his 6th expedition to the Western Hajar mountains of Oman.

During this time his teams have achieved the following successes :

- a. 7 new routes on the great South face of Jabal Misht
- b. First ascents of the two big pillars on the South side of Jabal Kawr.
- c. 8 first ascents of new routes on the satellite peaks of Misfah, Ghul, Asait, Manzoob, Mistal Tower and Namwash.

He also led the first climbing expedition to the big walls of the Musandam peninsula.

He has also made over 300 first ascents around the world including over 45 in the mountains of Wadi Rum in Jordan.

In addition to this, Geoff has led four Himalayan expeditions, the highlights of which have been the 1st ascents of Laspa Dhura, Nandakhani & Nandabhanar and repeat ascents of Tharkot and Tharpu Chuli.

His alpine record includes the first free ascent and in winter of the Direct start to the Supercouloir, the 1st British ascent of the Lalidererspitze North face direct, the Walker Spur and the Matterhorn North face.

Elsewhere in the world, Geoff has succeeded on the 2nd winter ascent of the Diamond couloir direct, the 1st winter solo of the Ice Window route and the 2nd ascent of Behemoth on the East face of Kishtwa Tembo, he has climbed extensively in Norway, the Tatra in winter & Ecuador .

His big wall experience includes ascents of the Nose, Zodiac, Watkins South face and the NW face of Half Dome (in a day) in Yosemite and the Troll Wall in Romsdal.

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David Wallis

An experienced himalayan guide and alpine climber. He previously made first ascents on Jabal Misht (2) and in the Wadi Bih. His new route 'Intifada' on Jabal Misht was climbed with Hornby and takes one of the best lines on the highest part of the South face.

He has also climbed first ascents in Alaska and Norway and made an expedition to Greenland.

Susie Sammut

An experienced desert climber with 10 first ascents in Oman. A member of the first climbing expedition to the Musandam peninsular.

Climbed new routes in the Western Hajar on Jabal's Asait, Manzoob, Ghul, Namwash and Misht.

Climbed extensively in Wadi Rum and in Norway with over 50 first ascents to her credit. Has also climbed first ascents and new routes in the St Elias mountains of Alaska.

Mark Turnbull

An experienced desert climber with first ascents in Wadi Rum. He was active in the exploration of the mountains to the North of the Disi road.

His new route on Jabal Misht, climber with Hornby and Sammut, 'Sorely Misht' was climbed in a preparatory trip to Oman whilst organising this expedition.

He has also climbed extensively in Norway with a number of hard first ascents to his credit.

This was not the strongest climbing team every to leave these shores, but they all had the experience of climbing and travelling in Oman and the desert and knew what they were letting themselves in for. That was important as the dryness of the climate and the punishing heat could easily have caused inexperienced individuals to lose the desire.

Unfortunately David Wallis left the trip half way through after being notified of a medical condition with his new wife.

Diary

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 17.12.04 | Flew to Muscat. Organised food, jeep hire etc. |
| 20.12.04 | Left Muscat for the coast South East of the Wahiba Sands and the meeting with the Bedouin. |
| 21.12.04 | Continuous traverse of the Wahiba Sands by camel with Bedouin guides. Started at the Indian Ocean at Qahid by the only tree for many miles. We then followed the wells from South to North for 140 kilometres in the company of two bedouin. |

We saw only one person in the first four days, and he was an old man out looking for a lost camel. It felt very Thesiger like.

- 26.12.04 Arrived at Al Mintirib after 6 days. Backsides were raw and bleeding from the basic camel saddles. But everyone was almost distraught to stop. It almost felt like we could continue for another 2 weeks, still another year and another trip may be born from this.
- 27.12.04 Rest day, collect the bikes say goodbye to the camels.
- 28.12.04 Started cycling from Al Mintirib in the afternoon. Cycled towards Sinaw 50 kilometres. Cycling through opheolite hills of brown rock and scrub. Camped in the desert.
- 29.12.04 Cycled through Mudaibya and then Sinaw. Sinaw is a wild village full of desert folk come to town to trade. South and West of here the land is almost lawless with Shifta's from the Yemen rove around the desert in jeeps robbing people. Rested for lunch and through the heat in Wadi Adam where Thesiger hid for several days whilst his companions went into Sinaw to buy food and check out the route to the mountains. Cycled on to Adam in the afternoon. Hard going direct into a desert wind. Camped in the desert. Cycled 90 kilometres.
- 30.12.04 Cycled from Adam to Jibreen for lunch, then cycled to the foot of Jabal Kawr in the afternoon. Cycled 85 kilometres. Camped at M'Seeb.
- 31.12.04 Rest day in M'Seeb, a two family encampment below Tower of Kawr. The approach gully to Kawr was a water channel that routinely flash flooded in rain. The farmer had lost 20 goats the previous winter, and he should know the territory.
- 1,2,3.1.04 Heavy cloud, low cirrus, intermittent rain. Growing concern about the weather affecting our timetable. The crew wanted to get onto the mountain but I urged caution because of the flash flood potential. Eventually, against my better judgment we agreed to set off at dawn the next day regardless of the weather.
- 4.1.04 Climbed new route on Jabal Kawr South face. Umbarak pillar D. 5+ 400 metres. Arrived on summit ridge in a storm, descended North to Sint valley to escape the bad weather. 15 hour day. GH, SS, MT, DW. Everyone was completely punished by this outing. Lots of fear

with respect to flash floods in the descent wadi's.

- 5.1.04 Walked from Sint to the Hibshe Oasis. David Wallis discovers his wife is unwell and leaves the expedition to return home.
- 6.1.04 Explored the approaches to Jabal Manzoob. Selected the Torre Hibshe as the means of getting back onto Kawr, unaware that this feature had been climbed by an Austrian expedition one month previously.
- 7.1.04 Climbed a new route on the North face of Torre Hibshe. Sabbyah 350m TD inf 6A. GH, SS, MT. Beautiful slab and wall climbing up a hidden face. No way through above to Jabal Kawr summit. Decision made to forgo this summit as time was pressing.
- 8.1.04 Climbed a new route on the East face of Jabal Asait. Shamsah 445m D.Sup 5. GH, SS, MT.
- 9.1.04 Rest day in the village K'Saw. Checked approach to Jabal Asala.
- 10.1.04 Climbed a new route on the West face of Jabal Asala. Armina 500m D. 5. GH, SS. MT too tired for this outing. Dropped down to camp in the small village below the West face of Misfah.
- 11.1.04 Climbed a new route on the West face of Jabal Misfah. Salmana 300m D. 5+. GH, SS, MT. Traversed the summits of Misfah to descend to the East and the Shams summit road. Got lost on the descent, although GH had been on this mountain twice before. End up making multiple raps down an overhanging wall straight into the village below. The locals loved it. Walked in the evening across the whale back slabs of Shams to a bivi at the edge of the Nakl canyon. Another 15 hour day, completely knackered again.
- 12.1.04 Climbed Jabal Shams by the South side regular route, a tough walk for six hours. Descended and got hopelessly lost to the North for 2200 metres, eventually finding Wimjah village in the dark. Bivied in a dried river bed with mules and foxes for company. GH, SS, MT.
- 13.1.04 Walked from Wimjah village out to the entrance to Wadi Abyad. Civilisation all around. We felt a little lost and

claustrophobic. Everywhere there are 4 wheel drive tracks.

14.1.04 Walked through Wadi Abyad to the coast near Al Sawadi. The wadi bed is full of running water and pools full of fish. Emotionless at the sea again after 24 days.

The journey was over and now we had nowhere more to go.

15.1.04 Washed, rested, felt disoriented in the big city. Flew home.

Started planning how to finish off the traverse of Jabal Kawr and where to go next with the Bedouin.

Accidents and injuries

The members of the team were involved in no accidents during this expedition.

More foot blisters than you could throw a stick at. An object lesson in skin protection and repair.

After the expedition, the three members who completed the journey, all agreed that they were physically exhausted for a month afterwards.

ACCESS AND TRAVEL

Access is very easy to this mountain range.

Fly to Muscat, hire a jeep and pick up a map and go there. All the villages are now connected by drivable tracks and tarmac is being laid as fast as the boys can do it.

Moving in the desert and in the high country is harsh and tiring. Water is the key. The methods for being fast and efficient cannot be explained in a report such as this but 'Do Not Underestimate the Mountains'. Take twice as much water and move twice as fast as you normally do.

Geoff Hornby holds a comprehensive set of all the route descriptions for routes climbed in the Western Hajar. A copy of this document is available given a small contribution Cancer Research. Currently 10 people have taken up this offer.

EQUIPMENT

CLOTHING

Baggy disposable cotton clothing. It gets hammered and torn to pieces by the sharp limestone.

Good walking shoes, lightweight. We took two pairs each to take turns to reduce blister potential.

Warm jumper for bivouacs and fire side evenings

SLEEPING

Old tents, the UV wrecks them. Cheap tents are available in Muscat from Carrefour. Keep the tents zipped up to keep out snakes and scorpions.

Lightweight sleeping bags.

COOKING

Gas stoves and full kitchen stuff available at Carrefour in Muscat..

CLIMBING

Double rocks and set of Friends.

2 x 50m 9.2mm ropes (the rock is so sharp and abrasive that we always climb on slightly fatter ropes).

Slings and tape.

FOOD

Standard food, nothing fancy or clever, all bought or buyable at a Carrefour in Muscat. We drink bottled water as much as possible.

Pasta and rice dinners cooked on a pressure cooker.

No alcohol but lots of fruit juice.

We always take extra fruit, or a big bag of rice or vegetables, to give to the villagers and the shepherds. Every time we enter someone's area we start off with a gift of fruit in a box. The children usually get it and it is appreciated.

COMMUNICATIONS

We carried a satellite telephone but found that the spread of mobile phone technology meant we could talk to anyone just as easily that way. In future years, mobile phones should suffice.

CONCLUSION

We made the traverse of the Western Hajar as supported by the BMC and MEF. We made 5 first ascents of new routes along the way but were denied two ascents of previously unclimbed summits, once by marauding Austrians who got there a month before us and once by time pressures. This second summit will be rectified this coming winter.

We made the SW to NW crossing of Oman from the base of the Wahiba Sands to the coast at Al Sawadi under our own steam. 3 members finished the journey without major injury.

Unfortunately Sir Wilfred Thesiger passed away before we completed the expedition so we were unable to sit and talk about camels and deserts.

This expedition feels for me as if it still unfinished. I will return next winter and gain the summit of Jabal Kawr via a technical new route. Also I will attempt the unclimbed summit I have alluded to in this report.

Anyone requiring further information on this expedition, or on how to mount an expedition such as this, or would like to discuss some objectives in this range are very welcome to contact Geoff Hornby as follows :

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PHONE 01773 831915, FAX 01773 833151.

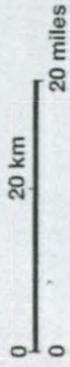
However I will be moving house this summer so it is better to contact me
by email - geoffhornby@yahoo.co.uk

MAPS and PICTURES

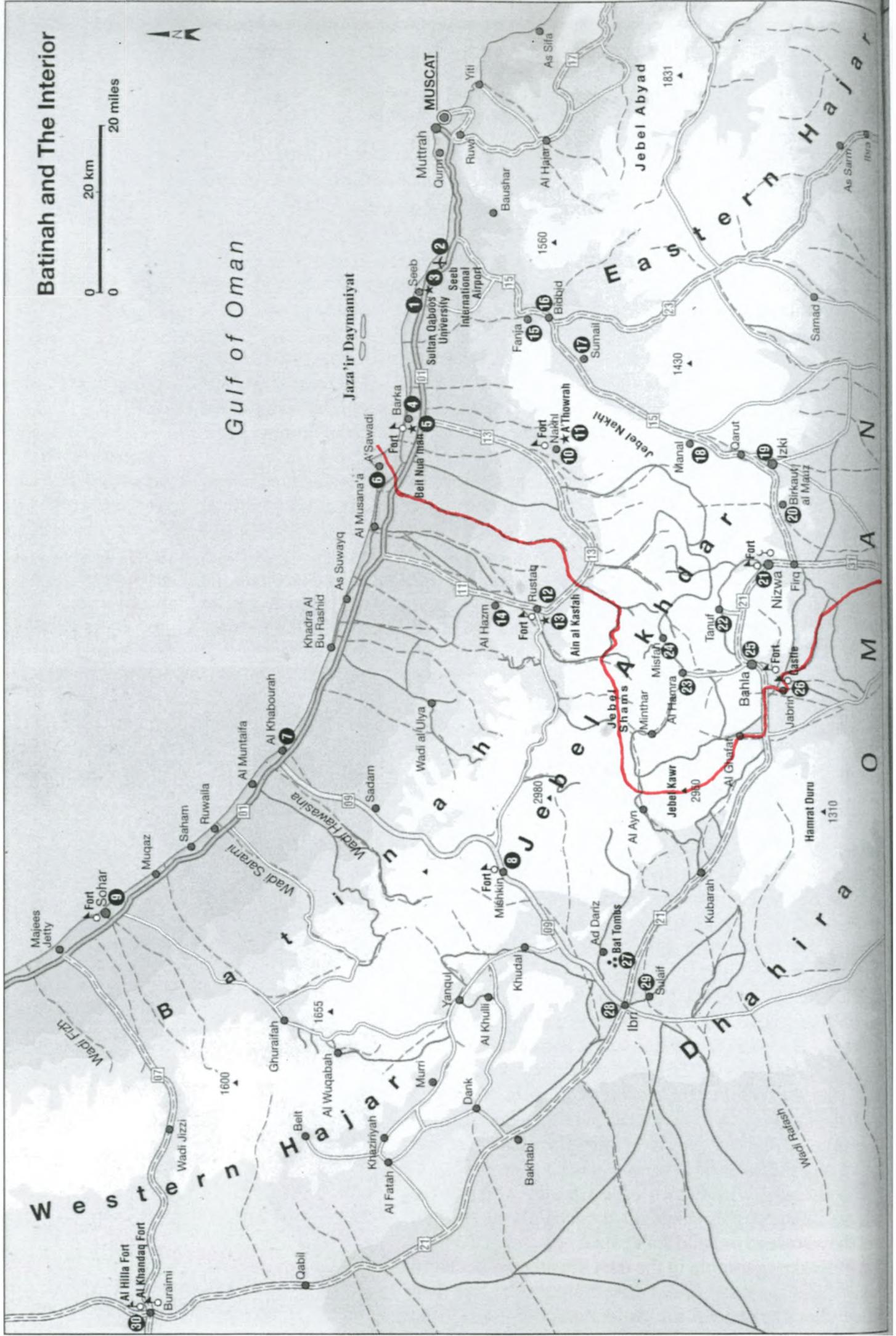
1. Old map of Oman with Thesiger's journeys marked in red.
Our journey is marked in black.
2. Bigger scale map of the Western Hajar and the Batinah flank with our route marked in red.
3. The mountains of Hibshe, Asait and Asala. Individual features marked in red.
4. Picture of Asait's West face with our route marked.

Further and more detailed maps or pictures and route topo's are available on application.

Batinah and The Interior



Gulf of Oman



KAWR →

MANZOOB

HIBSHE

HIBSHE
OASIS

ASAIT

ASALA

K'SAW



ASAIT
EAST FACE

