

# Adventures with the Mercurial Mr Liprot

by Andy Stewart

“**mer·cu·ri·al**” - Adjective: (of a person) Subject to sudden or unpredictable changes.

Noun: A drug or other compound containing mercury.

The only friends I have introduced to the Club have both been duds, failing to stump up the dosh when it came to the crunch, and both were rapidly removed from the mailing list as *persona non grata*. Maybe I'm a poor judge of character or just hang around with the wrong sort of people; it certainly caused me some discomfort, embarrassed by proxy, and probably ruined my chances of ever being the Club's Treasurer. One of the censured individuals recently asked me on Facebook if I wouldn't mind proposing him to rejoin the Club. I couldn't even be bothered to tell him to get stuffed in cyberspace.

This article traces my friendship with one of these dodgy geezers through some of the memorable trips we undertook together.

## Gibraltar – New Year 1992

We had cleaned ourselves up a treat in the airport toilets. It made up for the hangover and being woken in the night by an army patrol that left us alone once our nationality had been established. Lippers stuffed his festering footwear into a plastic bag and strode across the tarmac in bare feet, to the amazement of a BA air steward.

'I'm sorry sir but you're going to have to put your shoes on.'

'Well I only took them off because they're really smelly.'

'I'm afraid I can't let you on the plane like that.'

'Why not?' A brief pause for thought.

'It might cause offence to other passengers'

'Okay then.'

I pitied the woman who sat next to him with the reek of unwashed, wet, stinky trainers assailing her nostrils. She positioned herself as far away as she possibly could without actually falling into the aisle. I could smell them from where I was sat several rows away.

A week previously we had strode up the tarmac road to Imlil on our way up Mt Toubkal in Morocco. At every village we were pelted with stones by the local children, which was a little unwelcoming. Stocking up on supplies in Imlil I had feebly attempted to barter for the pile of vegetables that was to sustain us on our trek. The shopkeeper laughed at me, closed the shutter and headed for the nearest teashop. Unfortunately he had us over a barrel as the proprietor of the only vegetable store in town, so I ate humble pie while he finished his mint tea and paid full-whack for his potatoes, carrots and turnips.

We headed off up the valley to the disapproving looks of various people standing in shop doorways looking vaguely monkish in their thick hooded winter robes. The snow was getting deeper.

‘Piolets?’

‘Non.’

‘Crampons?’

‘Non,’ followed by a weak smile. This elicited tutting and head shaking, which we ignored outwardly. Inwardly I swept a little nagging seed of doubt under a carpet of stubborn resolve.

At the last village we were seen off by a crowd of locals standing on their flat roofs laughing and gesticulating at the two idiots who had ignored their warnings about waist-deep snow through which no-one had yet blazed a trail, not to mention a locked refuge at the head of the valley.

Two hours later we were both truly knackered, and had progressed less than a kilometre. We had climbed up a rocky step to the upper valley, leaving the village thankfully out of sight. What we thought was the refuge was a distant speck in a sea of impassable whiteness. More ritual humiliation seemed inevitable if we were forced to slink back with our tails between our legs. The carpet of stubbornness was unravelling to expose a blossoming herbaceous border of doubt. We sat on a rock panting after heaving unreasonably heavy rucksacks out of impossibly soft snow.

As luck would have it providence was on our side (I don’t know why? We certainly hadn’t done any good deeds on our journey so far. I had paid for a couple of 13-year-old lads at the cinema to see a western, which turned out to be a soft porn movie with some disturbing S & M scenes. The GTC ought not to know about that).

In front of us we could make out a dark hollow in the fading light. On closer inspection it turned out to be a plane wing that formed the roof of a shelter just big enough for two, and only half full of snow. To us it might as well have been a five-star hotel.

Next morning we set off with renewed vigour taking it in turns to wade through the snow. It was terribly slow going and by lunchtime we had had enough. Again providence smiled down for whatever reason. Three approaching specks grew into the hut warden on skis, a climbing guide breaking the trail, and an English guy who had obviously paid them a lot of money to go to all that trouble to facilitate his need to be on top of a mountain.

Greeting them enthusiastically, we gave them a head start before following at a discreet distance, reasoning that since they had followed our trail for at least a fraction of the way it would be OK for us to use theirs. Christmas Eve was spent in the freezing hut. My fuel bottle had leaked leaving the vegetables nicely marinaded in paraffin. The Primus was working at about 30% power (this was the last trip before I threw it away in disgust). It didn’t take long to crunch through an unsavoury, sooty meal before retiring to our soggy pits at 7pm. Next morning I had a hell of a job putting on my M & S jogging bottoms, which had frozen to the consistency of plywood.

Later, as dusk fell we stumbled triumphantly back into the village and into the shop where we had been warned against our foolhardy enterprise. The proprietor was effusive in his praise. ‘Ah très fort, très fort!’ Lippers

stood there steaming slightly, an impassive pocket Hercules, while his biceps was squeezed just to reinforce the point.

### Wadi Rum – Christmas 1999

I emerged late from my tent, to the sound and smell of camel business going on nearby. Arianne was a 'looker' for a camel, but I had refused a ride on her for two good reasons: my knee was playing up and I suspected it wasn't going to be for free. Hassan, the camel's owner, stood on the far side of a low wall dividing the campsite sand from the general tourist action sand. He looked down at my pants and then at me.

'When you leave Wadi Rum will you be taking those?' Bloody Hell mate you'll be after the shirt off my back next! I shot him a look between surprise and affront.

'Your friend he left in a hurry this morning leaving his things?'

There was no trace of Lippers other than a patch of flat sand. I assumed he had split with his gear, but he had other more pressing matters on his mind than taking his 'shit' with him. His dirty (and I mean dirty) Ronhills had no doubt been assimilated into the local Bedouin wardrobe. Before long it would be like Blaenau Ffestiniog in 1989 with half the population sporting tracksters for some bizarre reason (they do dry quickly after rain). It hadn't rained in Wadi Rum for more than a year at that time.

My head was still fuzzy with the effort and disappointment of yesterday's route. Why we had tried to do Raid Mit the Camel in late December I don't know? It was bound to end in failure or a bivvy, but I didn't really care as long as we got to the top. It was not the type of rock route you attempt casually, taking an uncompromising line straight up the steep wall on the Jebel Rum side of the Wadi. It was a sluggish start in early morning gloom, and I was maddened by our slow speed on the initial pitches. How were we going to get up twenty pitches when it goes dark before 5pm? My impatience must have shown, because we stopped laughing and joking. The route loomed ahead to our left up steepening rock. Possessed by a climbing demon I stormed up the hard pitches feeling like I was clawing back an opportunity. An Austrian team had semi-bolted the route in a style that was out of character with most of the established lines in the area, but enabled harder climbing in positions where there was not much natural pro. Mark arrived looking sheepish and smelling slightly. 'I think I've shit myself' he mumbled morosely, bowels loosened by falafels and fear. There wasn't much to be done other than press on, although it now seemed like a doomed enterprise.

Higher up the rock deteriorated and I led a pitch where the gear was spaced and the rock was carved into beautiful delicate fountains of rotten desert sandstone, reminiscent of the worst that Yellow Wall has to offer at Gogarth. I climbed with the utmost care, trying not to apply anything more than the minimum pressure to very hollow and insecure lumps of loosely bonded rock. Lippers, by now beyond caring, was oblivious to the need for a delicate approach. The first of several disintegrating holds threw him roughly onto the rope. A crack and a small cloud of dust silhouetted him

for a brief moment with his arms thrown wide in surprise. By the time he reached the belay I could tell he had had enough.

‘We’re not going to do it are we?’

‘No.’

‘Well at least if we head down now we can have a pint.’ It was the best cure for the sullen silence that had been trailing us for some time.

Back in the resthouse the beer provided some solace and the cooks were dancing and singing to the beat of an Egyptian drum. Lippers had been called over to the phone by the manager. After a long time he came back looking worried.

‘I’ve got to go tonight. I need to get back to England’, he said tersely.

‘Why what’s up? How are you going to get to Amman at this time anyway?’

It took some time to winkle the story out of him, and I won’t go into the sordid details, but – (the next bit was removed by the censor).

### **The Final Straw: 2002 – Bowfell Buttress.**

Lippers had led Air on a Bowstring in fine style. The rope went tight and I was desperately trying to cock my leg onto a high foothold at the start of the route. It wasn’t going to happen. My bad back had stuffed me good and proper, and it was no use trying to pretend otherwise. Feeling miserably frustrated I called for a tight rope.

A couple of weeks later there was a knock on the door and there stood Lippers bearing gifts: a bouldering mat and a rope, cut through to the core ten metres in.

‘Here you go mate. I won’t be needing these now I’ve given up. I was sick and tired of frightening, unpleasant experiences. It’s your fault!’ - All delivered with a bright smile in a cathartic blink of the eye. His partner Carol stood next to him radiating beatific approval. I took possession of the items, tainted by association with a past better forgotten.