

Notebook

DISPATCHES FROM A WILD WORLD

PLUNGE RIGHT IN

Mallorca's cliff-lined coast is the peak playground for deep-water soloing—as grippingly demonstrated by the emerging sport's top climber.

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ixty feet up an overhanging limestone face striped orange and blue on the edge of Spain's pleasure isle of Mallorca, American climber Chris Sharma pumps once, pumps twice—then launches himself up the rock without a rope. His fingers tickle the next handhold, but can't quite latch on.

Sharma plummets. But the free soloist isn't about to die. The landing isn't dirt or talus or scree, but forgiving, sapphire-blue water.

Introducing deep-water soloing (DWS)—in Spain they call it “psicobloc”—an esoteric climbing discipline built around free soloing above water. Lose

your grip and you're taking the plunge, but no harm done. Most likely.

Sharma, a California-raised rock-climbing legend who set a new standard in the sport, began deep-water soloing nearly 20 years ago. Though he didn't invent the form (Sharma credits Spain's late Miguel Riera as “the godfather” of DWS, with roots stretching back to the mid-'70s), he's taken it to new heights. Specifically in Mallorca. And more specifically along a notorious route called Es Pontàs that snakes along the underbelly of a free-standing arch above the frothy Mediterranean. Sharma estimates he hit those waves 100 times before completing the first ascent in 2006.



Sharma at the office. Several “soft” landings preceded this successful ascent.



Typical DWS hangout in southern Mallorca. Below: Lose your grip and it's not all over.

For climbers (who can swim), the appeal of DWS should be obvious enough. “It has the adventure element of alpine climbing, but you’re out there in swim shorts,” says Sharma, who grew up surfing in Santa Cruz.

“When I first experienced DWS, it totally revolutionized my view on climbing. It’s like pure spontaneous interpretation of nature.”

Mallorca, with its laid-back island vibes, is home to some of the world’s best deep-water soloing spots. According to Sharma, it’s a veritable DWS laboratory—for those mad enough.

Now Sharma is preparing to take his DWS love affair mainstream. Teaming up with longtime friend and *Justice League* star Jason Momoa (a capable climber himself), Sharma is co-creator of *The Climb*, a competition-format show debuting on HBO next year which will likely feature a deep-water solo segment in Mallorca, one of the filming sites.

Shining a light on “relatively safe” DWS, Sharma thinks, could help break down the glorification of risk that films like *Free Solo* have conferred upon the sport in recent years. “What Alex Honnold did is incredible and deserves all its



recognition,” says Sharma. “But it isn’t particularly representative of our sport.”

Then again, deep-water soloing is risky in its own right. Last fall, two American climbers drowned in Mallorca doing it. “The most dangerous part isn’t necessarily the fall, but exiting the water—especially when there are big waves and you’re tired,” says Sharma, who has bailed from as high as 80 feet.

At its best, psicobloc transcends the narrower prescriptions of modern climbing.

“The freedom of being over the water is unparalleled,” says Sharma. “Some of the coolest experiences I’ve had are exploring at my limit on these cliffs out here.”

PRIME-TIME CLIMB

Slated to be aired in early 2023, HBO’s *The Climb*—hosted by Chris Sharma and Jason Momoa—aims to do for rock climbing what *The Great British Bakeoff* did for scone reinterpretation. The show will feature a dozen amateur climbers vying for top-dog status on some of the world’s most challenging ascents. If recent filming in Mallorca is any indication, a likely DWS segment should factor high in the lineup.

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