

RAPID DROP

How one of the world's most extreme kayakers paddles into incredible danger and survives

Text by KEITH GORDON

There's no way to win this battle. Gravity always comes out on top. As Aniol Serrasolses paddles closer and closer to the rushing edge of a monstrous waterfall, he passes the point of no return and his fate is sealed... he's going over the precipice.

You or I would likely be overwhelmed by the natural fear that comes with a death-defying drop from heights of 100 feet or more, but for Serrasolses, it's a moment of clarity, a few seconds of purity and absolute focus. The world around him doesn't exist. It's just him, his kayak, and the hope that his skill, experience and planning are sufficient to let him float away safely after an epic descent. It may look like insanity, or even a death wish, but for Serrasolses, it's the only rational way to live.

Serrasolses was born and raised in Catalonia, Spain, not exactly a hotspot of kayaking. When his older brother first took him out on the water when he was 12, Aniol was hooked. "Since the very first days I knew I wanted to spend my life kayaking around the world," he recalls. "I was a small kid with big dreams."

But kayaking isn't a local activity, it requires travel and resources to attempt the most challenging, and exhilarating, white water rapids and waterfalls on the planet. But Aniol is special, and it didn't take long for brands to take note. "As soon as I got my first sponsors, kayaking became a sustainable activity for me," he says. "Signing with Red Bull when I was only 20 took things to the next level."

Since then, Aniol, now 28, has traversed the globe, seeking out the most challenging white water rapids and waterfalls, in some of the most remote locations imaginable. In fact, simply reaching many of his expedition destinations can be as strenuous, and dangerous, as his on-river antics. According to Aniol, "part of the experience involves being exposed to extreme weather conditions and wildlife, walking for days carrying your kayak fully loaded, having limited access to communications and sometimes even accepting that rescues are not possible."

At times, Aniol's day-to-day existence seems more like a Bear Grylls expedition than an athletic adventure, taking the young Spaniard to the edge of civilization and beyond. "The Amazon, it's a beautiful but challenging destination," Aniol admits when asked about his

most treacherous expedition. "We paddle into the wild. If you are out of supplies you only eat what you hunt, conditions are favorable for the transmission of tropical diseases and you can expect close encounters with the revolutionary armed forces."

If snakes, tropical diseases and armed militia are the obstacles to reaching a river, perhaps Aniol's lack of fear when on the water is understandable. After all the uncertainty of the trip, the kayaker is in his element once he starts paddling, removing any uncertainty on the water with extensive planning and preparation.

"Kayaking is an extreme sport that involves multiple risks," he explains. "As a professional athlete I take my career seriously and practice it with great responsibility. Aside from having specific physical training and continuous courses on apnea, first aid and rescue to name a few, I strongly suggest scouting every challenging section on the river. I always do a risk assessment before going for a new descent: What is the best line? Which are the ideal spots for safety kayakers? Is the pool deep enough? Where are the eddies? Are there big holes, siphons or undercuts?"

That may seem like a lot of effort and unpleasant preparation hiking up and down a river, but the potential consequences of getting things wrong couldn't be greater. "This one time I was stuck in a very deep gorge in Mexico with a group of friends," Aniol soberly remembers. "We had rushed into a section of white water following our leader and dropped off a 90-foot waterfall by accident. We all survived the landing but couldn't find any exit routes afterwards. Some were injured by the impact and the only option out was paddling downstream and dropping off another waterfall without scouting possibilities. I had to take the risk and run it. I managed to climb the canyon right after and throw a rescue rope to get one by one out of that scary situation."

While he and his team escaped that situation with their lives, Aniol has paid a heavy price for his career choice. He broke his back dropping a 40-foot waterfall in Norway when he landed on a rock hidden under the waterline. He has dislocated his shoulder twice and broken ribs multiple times. "Injuries are part of the game," Aniol says. "But having patience to rest, discipline for rehab and a



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Simply getting to the river can be a challenge, as Aniol treks with his kayak before descending the Noguera Pallaresa in Lérida, Spain.



Serrasolses drops an 80-foot waterfall during the first descent of La Leona on Río Claro in Chile.



positive mindset make a good formula to overcome injuries when they occur.”

While he has made perhaps his biggest public impact with his descents of white water rapids and waterfalls, he’s also a competitive kayaker, winning competitions like the North Fork Championship in Idaho last year. Winning the world title again is a current goal of the Catalonian phenom, making his accomplishments even more jaw-dropping when you consider that he’s dominating his sport in both racing and freeride kayaking.

But it’s in the remote, unforgiving wilderness where Aniol finds his purpose, and the calm required to attempt a potentially fatal rap-

ids or drop-off. “For me it’s about experiencing the wild with close friends and pushing the boundaries of the sport to new heights. Expeditions are my favorite: you pack your boat with only the essentials and you adventure in to the unknown. You forget about the outside world and live in the present moment.”

And as for the moment that you, I, and most sane people would paddle frantically to avoid – going over the edge and into the abyss of an angry, violent waterfall – Serrasolses finds himself the epitome of calm and most at peace. “It is the best moment. I reach the lip of the fall and time stops as I contemplate the most breathtaking view. I no longer feel fear. I’m aware of each movement. Everything is worth it.”



Top left: Aniol reaches the point of no return, about to drop a stunning waterfall in southern Iceland, one of many far-flung locations that have drawn in Serrasolses and his kayak. Top Right: Even the calm moments in Serrasolses’ descents can be jaw-dropping in its beauty, such as here in the Ashlu Canyon, located near Squamish, Canada. Bottom: Another section of the Ashlu near Squamish, Canada proved less accommodating for Serrasolses, the white water rapids sending the adventurer airborne even without a waterfall.