

*Martin Crocker making the impressive first ascent & deep water solo of **Total Eclipse of the Sun** (E8 6c F7b+), Ogmore. This is one of the longest and most serious deep water traverse/solos in the UK.*

Head Above Water

Water wings? Tide tables? If you thought that deep-water soloing had anything to do with deep water, then think again. South-west guru **Martin Crocker** confesses to a life of brine.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL RYAN

It's that moment again. The only time you'll ever experience anxiety on a 'deep' water solo. Poised 25 feet up beneath irreversible, overhanging rock, a shallow sea laps benignly below, concealing hidden dangers. It's that stressful moment of prevarication before you commit yourself for good. No ropes or gear to get you back in contact with the rock, no one to drag you out of the sea and no second chance. This is absolutely the last opportunity to quit.

So let's get back to being a responsible citizen for a while; and here we are again, hammering to work in the car, 10 miles into the 23 mile journey. Back and forth, day after day, forth and back. Forty minutes of rush-hour hell alongside every other poor sod who dreams of being somewhere else. Day in, day out, year after year. And for what? To steal moments of precious time, before we're reduced to another eight hours in the office, pinned down. Maybe I'm being extreme, but has anyone else noticed how afternoons drag? Got to shut it all out. Switch on the radio; there's a tune that we like. So maybe we're too old for dance music, but the stimulus to move is still too powerful to ignore: slamming bass, jazz chords, and – of course – the rhythm. Time to slip out of our cars, out of our shells, and maybe just a little bit out of our minds but it's difficult to break out dancing while driving at 70mph. There's no other option but to dream of an awesome undercut and overhung line of weakness through the roof of a sea-cave, too remote and wave-washed even for the hardest Portland bolters. The route's got to be hard, maybe French 7b. And the water's shallow, maybe only two to three feet in places. But what a line! I'd saved it up from last year, waiting for the perfect moment. And now it's arrived.

I abseil to the small ledge just above the reach of the waves on the opposite side of the cave. Time for those last-minute system-checks. Glasses secure and not likely to disintegrate; my daughter's armbands clipped either side of my harness, to reduce depth of immersion in these shallow waters – like hell; jumars dipping into the sea to save me from the half-mile swim out. It all helps to complete the delusion of safety that I need to get me through this.

Time to belly-flop along the narrowing ledge. The ledge runs out, so I start to hand-traverse left towards the back of the cave. It's new, unseen territory. The rock gets wetter and wetter, darker and darker. It's hard to see anything let alone get a grip. I reach a jug. I'm only four metres up but the sea is a mere skim over boulders of smooth, algae-coated rock: 'I must reduce my height!' I shout at myself, frustration echoing around the cave. But the only way to get to the dry boulders at the back of the cave is to jump. I think: "This little adventure is going pear-shaped," as I

struggle to get a boot off with one hand while hanging onto the jug with the other.

Somehow the boot comes free and I sling it to the back of the cave to keep it dry just as my elbow tendons say no more! I



The Author looking suitably pleased after his ascent of Buzz Arena.



half-fall and half-jump, splash-landing on the boulders. 'Owww!' Not perfect, but not quite a twisted ankle. One boot is wet. (*And I do so like to be in control.*) I scuttle into the back of the cave to dry out, massage my ankle and ego, and reflect for a while.

I have fond memories of climbing in Gower when I was 15. We'd rope up on a few Jeremy Talbot routes, but the real fun would begin when the tide came in. Leaving our heavy-weight clutter of hawser-laid ropes, hexes and steel karabiners on the top, we would solo aimlessly above the sea, oblivious to any consideration of danger. There was something alluring about the sparkle of sun on the soft, convulsing waters, mesmerised by the rhythms of the swell. Wavelets would reach for the soles of our boots as we scraped and bounced across ragged, barnacle-encrusted rock. We'd engineer collisions with the spray from breakers and find any excuse just to throw ourselves in, so irresistible was the lure

of the sea.

We were, of course, the first climbers to invent 'deep-water soloing' – along with all the other climbers who had been doing the same thing since climbing began. Naturally, soloing above the sea is now fully systemised: there's ethics, styles, grades, stunts as well as the recorded routes that you can take or leave. There's no right or wrong, or better or worse way of doing it. Some of the south-coasters like partying, while others like Crispin Waddy undertake solitary explorations for the full fix. That's the beauty of it. You do what you choose to do in your circumstances. At the end of the day, we all still want to be alive, buzzed-up or not.

I return to the cave-roof and spot the line of chalked-up pockets that lead to an enormous block jammed in the ceiling of the cave. The crux appeared to be the sequence to get to the block but I managed to swing in to top-rope this beforehand. Below the crux there seemed

to be a slight pit between boulders in the sea that might provide three, four, or even five feet of water should I fall. Falling won't come into it, of course, but you become programmed to go through this façade of systematic risk appraisal in order to delude yourself that you're not going to die. Doubt is the killer.

Back on the rock again, but the wind and swell have increased meaning I have to traverse steeper rock at a higher level to gain entry to a corner. Swell can be your worst enemy above shallow water; not because of the risk of being hit, but because of the troughs between waves that can effectively reduce water depth. Fall at the wrong time, into a trough, and you can hit boulders that were previously submerged. (At least what remains of you can then be cleaned up by the following swell. Now that's environmentally friendly! Best not to fall at all, that's my motto.)

I swing up into the corner, but it's soaking wet. Not from spray but from condensation, the bane of the deep-water soloist, especially on these overhanging routes at Portland. High humidity – yuk. Water condensing out of mild and moist sea air onto cold, impervious black chert spells *slippery* and *loss of control*. This is a serious and unplanned impediment and I wonder whether the chert-pocket dependent traverse will be viable. At times like this, it's hard not to get wound-up. You can wait months for the right complement of conditions-tide, water depth, wind, humidity, water temperature-and still get it wrong. Shit happens.

Squelching up to the roofs, soloing above rock, my heart pounds stronger and stronger in the usual psycho-physiological run-up to the moment of commitment. A narrow wall sandwiched between huge roofs runs rightwards to the first of the chalked-up pockets ten feet away. I'm rarely so hesitant, but normally things are not so unexpected. I stop for a while, hoping that something within can deliver me from the tedium of reason and reservation. And while I debate how the risks of being spiritually demoralized if I retreat are probably greater than the threat to physical health if I carry on, something marginal presses the on-switch.

This is it. I reach the pockets and get pulled into the momentum and sheer joy of the



Martin Crocker making the first ascent of his new route **Buzz Arena** (E6 6c F7b+), Tiger Bay, Ogmere, South Wales.

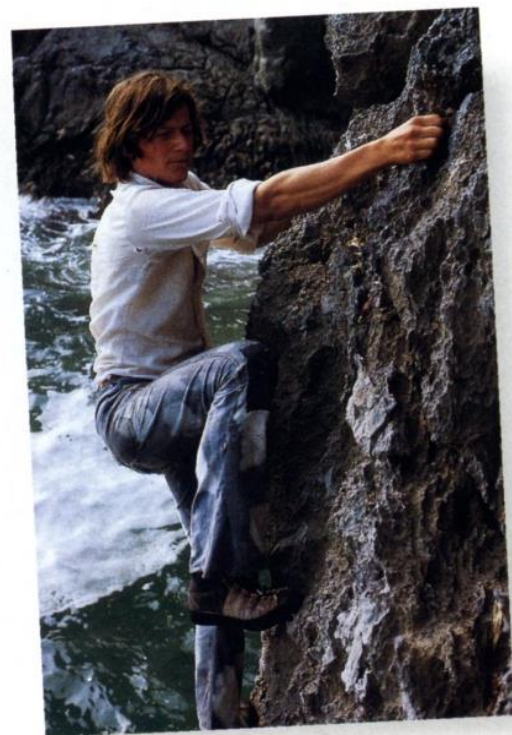
Fall at the wrong time, into a trough, and you can hit boulders that were previously submerged



rhythm. It's more like dance than mountaineering. You expand into your own micro-environment, head-back, flowing and powerful, conceived mainly as a wild dream, but now simple reality. From pocket to pocket, high above the water, until that awfully long, but familiar, reach above the lip of the cave gains the block. Exulting, as I heel-hook the block, my naked spine exposed to the expressionless boulders waiting just beneath the two-faced surface of the water. Curiously, there is no fear; there never is any fear. (But then there is no finer master of delusion than the sea.) Jonathan Cook once said that this game 'is an expression of freedom'. It is, but, more than anything, it is the freedom from the impasse of self-satisfying restraint and 'calculated risks' that you leave behind the door of commitment. Here, you enter a new world of dangerous dance, choreographed spontaneously by rock and sea.

With the cave roof behind, it's easier ground now, but it's high, steep and a little loose: time to seek help from rational man. The shakes of success are starting, and two minutes later I top out with the customary grunting and strutting around; in a sweat of adrenaline, just like coming off stage after a really good gig. That was the fix. But it doesn't end there. Like every genuine addiction, you need another, and another, and another – chain soloing, perhaps. Thank God for low tide. Six or seven solos later, more and more boulders have emerged and seaweed floats on the surface. The fishermen are packing their bags, as the sea level drops, squeezing the players out of the picture. But you've sensed already that statistically you've gone as far as the probability of not dying will allow that day. Addicted or not, you know it's the right time to quit. Responsible, rational man awaits.

SUMMARY: This article is based on the first ascent, solo, of *Borstal Bash* (F7b, E6 6a) on the east coast of Portland, July 2000.



"Wavelets would reach for the soles of our boots as we scraped and bounced across ragged, barnacle-encrusted rock." Martin Crocker in 1973. PHOTO: CROCKER COLL.

Martin Crocker on site soloing the first ascent of *Hired Gun* (E4 6b) at Ogmore, South Wales.