

Libby Peter's Climbing Essentials

No. 8 : Deep Water Soloing

Deep water soloing (DWS) is a pure, yet fun branch of climbing that combines the freedom of focusing on a sequence of moves without the distraction of fiddling in runners, with the appeal of a dunk in the shimmering blue after your efforts. The sea is your soft and absorbent crash pad so you don't need to find someone to patiently hold your ropes, but more often than not it's a social activity with clusters of climbers heading to a crag to egg each other on, as well as keep a close eye out for each other. DWS is becoming increasingly popular, especially on the south coast of England where on any fine summer weekend day there'll be dozens of climbers in search of excitement and exhilaration. DWS has been demystified and its popularity boosted by the publication last year of the Rockfax guide *Deep Water* by Mike Robertson, which



DWS can give a little skin trouble. Tim Emmett here, with a severe case of orange trenchfoot.

incidentally is a Banff award winning work of art and labour of love. If DWS has never appealed before it will do once you get your hands on a copy – be warned!

Where are the best spots to get started?

For your first forays into DWS, choose a venue with easy access to the start of the climbs and good viewing, so you can both suss out the routes and watch out for each other. Somewhere with clear, deep landing zones is essential, as well as a nearby water exit point and a spread of grades so you can warm up gently before you go for it.

Conner Cove (near Swanage) is probably where it all started and has the right ingredients for your first taste of DWS. The water-depth is more than adequate (9m at least) so you hardly need worry what the tides are doing and it even has a perfect, though popular first route, *Troubled Waters* (5). Cave Hole on Portland has short routes, a good spread of grades, massive ledges and easy access, but you will need to catch it on high spring tides (more of this later). Barrel Zawn, near St David's in Pembroke, is yet another good one to seek out and is a great venue at most states of the tide though a high neap tide is best.

What are the hazards?

The hazards are obvious. Falling awkwardly can be disastrous so being practised at jumping and falling is crucial before you tackle routes that you might be popping off.

Hitting the water badly can result in

winding and bruising which in turn may make getting out of the water tricky. Being comfortable in the water is crucial. If you climb with the terror of taking a swim in your mind you'll be tense and climb badly, plus be more likely to panic when the inevitable happens. If you think you might come in this category – go for a swim before you start and rehearse the swim-out.

Even a small amount of sea-state or swell can make clambering out difficult unless you've done it many times. Minor scrapes and cuts are commonplace.

Being able to cope with a longer than expected swim out in choppy sea is essential unless there is a rescue boat to hand.

Getting to the start

The majority of venues have a scramble or easy down-climb to access the routes but it can be wise to fix a knotted rope to use as a handline to make this easier and safer. Others have a short abseil to a ledge where your harness can be stashed on the rope and pulled up after.

Gear

It's not a long list: boots (not your very best ones) and chalk bag (partly filled) are the only essentials, but take several as both items dry slowly. Harness and a small rack plus some short lengths of rope for abs and handlines may be needed in some areas. Swimwear, quick drying clothing or specialist surfwear are all appropriate. A wetsuit is tempting but will severely restrict your movement unless it's full-stretch and lightweight.



Meilee Rafe on the classic DWS arête of Vista (F6a+), The Castle, Pembroke. All photos: Mike Robertson.



Julian Lines entering the ocean, arms out. This method prevents a deep entry, but is not recommended for longer falls.

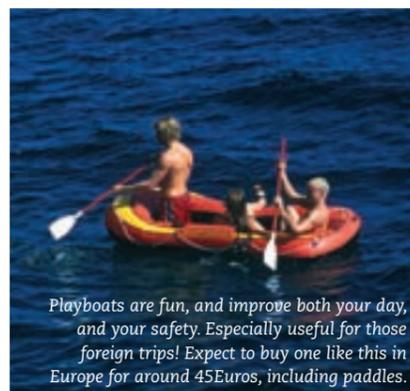
Grades

DWS were originally given either British trad grades or a technical grade plus XS prefix. Indeed many DWS routes followed existing climbs so took their grade from these. *Deep Water* has adopted the system of French/sport grades for both new and existing routes, which fits the nature of the climbing best. These grades give you an idea how hard AND how sustained the route is and is understood worldwide. The guide has also added an S grade between 0 and 3 to indicate the seriousness or likelihood of injury in a fall. For example an S0 has ample water at most tide states and a low crux, whilst an S3 would seem

like a crazy prospect for all but the most hardened DWS devotee, with shallow or limited deep water (even at high tide) and a high possibility of getting it wrong!

Tides

Understanding how tides work and more importantly how they affect the venue are crucial. Some venues require high spring tides, these give the highest highs and lowest lows and occur during full and new moon phases (sun, earth and moon all in line), whilst at others the approach or start of the route may be covered during springs so a high neap tide is preferable. Neap tides occur during the first and



Playboats are fun, and improve both your day, and your safety. Especially useful for those foreign trips! Expect to buy one like this in Europe for around 45Euros, including paddles.

third quarter of the moon when the sun and moon are at right angles to the earth creating less of a gravitational pull. Many diaries give this information, but if not look at the tide heights as well as the times when you check the tide-tables. This can be easily done on-line before you head out or in a cheap booklet bought from local climbing, fishing and newsagent shops. One of the curiosities of tides gives us spring highs early and late in the day and neap highs in the middle of the day so you'll need to set your alarm accordingly.

Sea conditions

In addition to getting the tides right so you have good water depth you'll also want to know how rough the sea is, to avoid making a wasted journey. Again this can be checked before-hand by looking at the inshore waters forecast from the Met Office, which will outline wind speed, visibility and sea state. Sea-state is obviously linked to wind speed and uses an adjectival system to describe the size of the wave movement.

A 'slight' sea-state describes a wave height between 0.5m-1.25 and is normally associated with a wind speed of 3 on the Beaufort scale (9knots). This is plenty to be dealing with when you're bobbing around in it under a jagged cliff. A 'moderate' sea-state (waves from 1.25 to 2.5m) will feel



Those Turkish boats can be dead useful for hanging your wet gear off! Note the various dry bags in use.

very rough and should be avoided.

It's worth noting that inshore forecasts don't always give a true picture of underlying swell. In other words you can get low-wind days with a big swell running, so a surf forecast close to the climbing area will help here (magicseaweed.com is great).

Wind direction is also significant, as an offshore wind may mean you can find calmer conditions than expected under the cliffs, whilst even a slight on-shore wind will magnify any amount of sea-state. In sheltered bays and channels you may at times escape the worst of the roughness but at others the swell may be magnified.

Make an educated prediction of conditions but be prepared to change your plans if it looks too rough for your team once you're there.

Remember that tides and sea conditions are constantly changing so assess things anew before each route you attempt. The sea has a track record of being unpredictable and of catching out the unwary.

Sea temperature

UK sea temps are at their lowest at the start of April and highest in mid September. July to October is considered the DWS season unless you're particularly hardy or are planning to wear a wetsuit. If you're not a regular sea swimmer it's worth taking a dunk before climbing just so you know what to expect.

Falling off

If you know a splashdown is inevitable don't cling on till the last moment. Take a moment to line up for a jump. If the rock is only vertical cast yourself away from it by pushing gently. If it's overhanging and you fall mid-move you may need to work hard to get into vertical body position. Use your arms to stabilise your flight most of the journey but make sure they're tucked tightly in by your sides as you enter the water. Remember also to close your eyes, clamp your legs firmly together and keep your head up too, otherwise you'll be for an uncomfortable experience.

Getting back out

Always know where your preferred exit point is going to be, this may be around



There are many types of dry bags for the genre. Here Mr Lines is seen sporting the 'rucksack' variety, which is especially useful for a scrambling/swimming combo.

the headland in the next bay or it might be on the cliffs you're climbing on. Take the time to find a spot with holds both above and below the water line so you'll have hand and footholds. Work with the swell so it carries you onto the earmarked holds and be ready to cling hard to them as the wave drops back down. Then make a swift exit before you get dragged back in. If you don't make a clean exit fist attempt it's best to push off away from the rock, re-assess it and then come in for a second go. Using your feet to fend off if you're getting washed around helps avoid lacerations. Teamwork is often the key for awkward exits and for repeated exits in tricky spots a rope can be left dangling to pull on.

Final word

The pictures you see always convey the fun and non-serious side of DWS but accidents can and do happen. Be respectful of the potentially serious environment you're playing in and consider your plan of action in the event of someone being injured. □

Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she is a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and IFMGA Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK. Her base is North Wales from where she runs the guiding outfit Llanberis Guides (info@llanberisguides.com)