

Monique 40-metres up Fish Eye (8c or 33) at Oliana, Spain.

ORSUM OLIANA

MONIQUE FORESTIER'S EPIC BATTLE WITH FISH EYE, HER FIRST 33.

PHOTOGRAPHS: SIMON CARTER

It's late, very late and yet again I find myself standing at the sink filing layers of dead skin away from my hands with a coarse foot file, which I'm sure was meant for a horse. The seams between my first and second finger digits have burst open and when I rinse away the suds there are red gashes staring back at me. This has become the norm – permanent weaknesses that can spontaneously erupt, mid-climb, without warning, sort of like the San Andreas Fault, but not quite. My worries are caused by the incredibly dry air in Spain, not tectonic movements.

While unsavoury weather batters northern Europe, the Spanish winter come spring has been one of the driest in years. These exceptional conditions have lured climbers from their training hovels to fondle the fantabulous lines at Margalef, Siurana, Terradets and Oliana – which seems to be the flavour of the month.

The atmosphere at Oliana is electric, super-charged, with international names sending Oliana's test pieces in rapid-fire succession. It's a particularly positive scene with no short supply of encouragement. Local lady, Daila Ojeda sent Mind Control (34) just before our arrival and soon after we were lucky enough to witness Caroline Ciavaldini (France) and Sasha 'The Dispatcher' DiGiulian (USA) gobble it up for breakfast. The graceful Evgeniya Malamid (Russia) snaffled up Fish Eye (33) then onsighted La Marroncita (31) and Humildes pa'Arriba (30). But the most extreme climbing I witnessed was that of Adam Ondra and Chris Sharma

throwing themselves wholeheartedly, yet precisely, at the hardest route on the cliff. A project, a line so 'perfect and pure' as Adam puts it, 'that it has just enough holds, nothing more, nothing less, to get you to the top'. So minimalist in fact, that the only line I could see was the line of quickdraws guiding the way. When this project goes down it is whispered to become the world's first 9b+ (38).

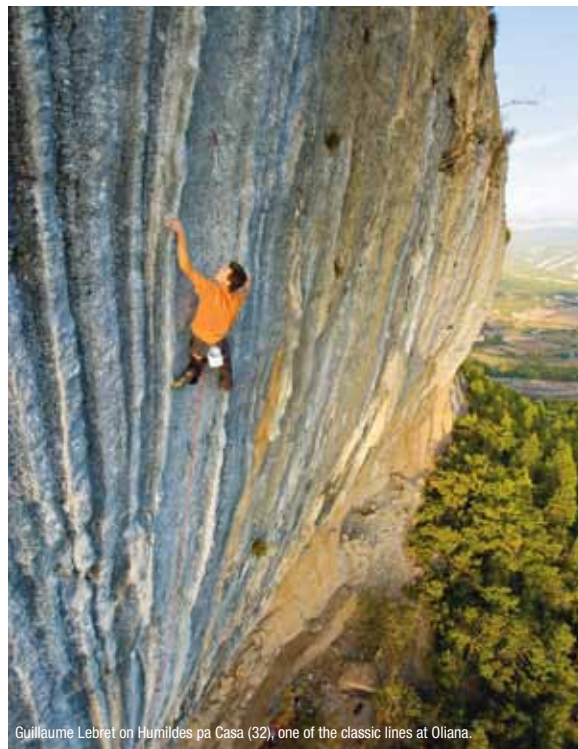
My husband Simon, daughter Coco

home early for sore tips or lack of skin; here your entire body gets pummelled. I love that there is a lot of climbing in a route; you are in for a long fight. You have to stay completely focused, never get sloppy, have to really want it, and keep pushing and pushing no matter how pumped you are. This is what I find very satisfying.

The route that lured me in was the stellar Fish Eye. It is a 50-metre line that blasts all the way up the centre of the steadily over-hanging cliff. Chris Sharma established it and he said he named it so because of the 'fisheye' perspective bowing the cliff when he stood beneath it, unlike my theory that it was named after the 'fisheye-like' pocket at the top crux. In a nutshell, Fish Eye starts with 28 metres of physical punchy climbing and then you reach the first crux – made up of 13 hand moves through blue rock, which incorporates a series of under-clings, long spans and a deadpoint throw to reach the rail. Here you need to work really hard to gain a rest if you're to get anything back. Following a solid move off the rail, it's sustained running between pockets until you gain the final open hand grapefruit rest before the last crux. Like the fruit, it's a slippery sucker making the rest not so much of a rest. Now you're at the 42-metre mark and from

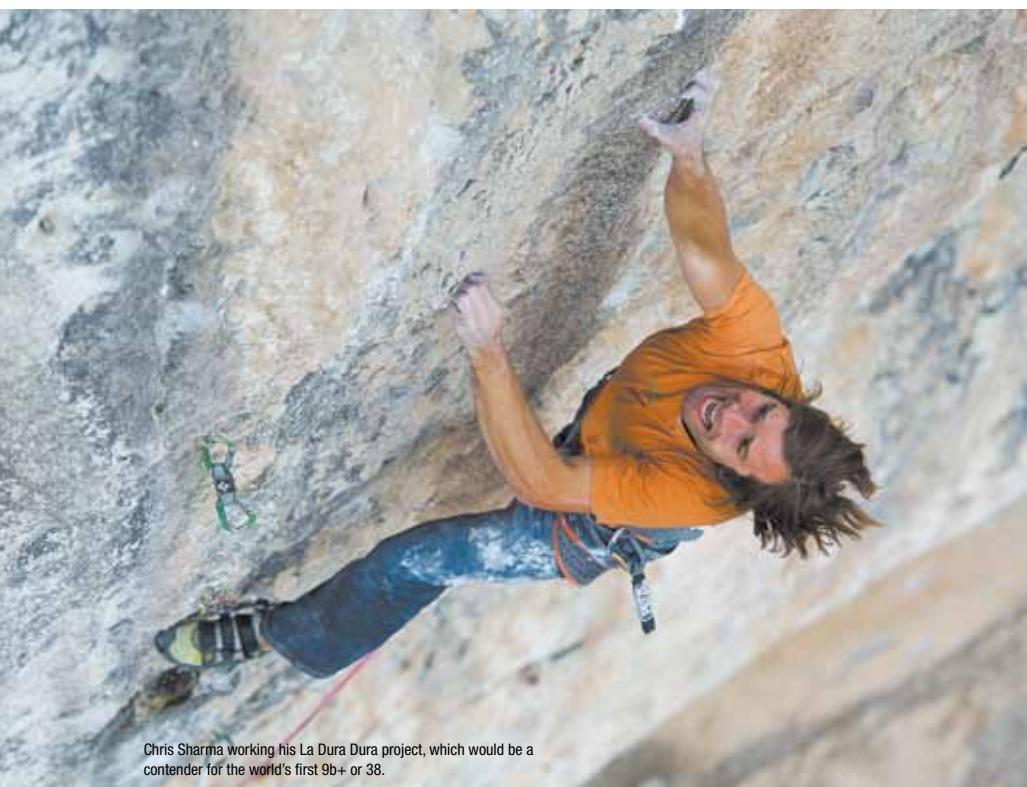
there its 14 hand moves to the anchors, skipping one clip along the way.

My first time on Fish Eye was last October. I spent two days working the route and didn't get higher than the rail. Humbled, I turned my attention elsewhere, but wasn't inspired. I retuned my attention back to Fish Eye,



Guillaume Lebret on Humildes pa Casa (32), one of the classic lines at Oliana.

and I climbed here for weeks earlier this year. I hadn't realised it before, but I'd been searching for such a place most of my climbing life. I enjoy all aspects of climbing, but technical and gymnastic sport climbing I love most of all. Oliana is my nirvana; here resistance and super-endurance count for a lot. You never go



Chris Sharma working his La Dura Dura project, which would be a contender for the world's first 9b+ or 38.

determined to get to the top in any fashion just to sample what it was like to try a route of this calibre. When I finally dogged my way to the top I was hooked, line and sinker. When my last day came around I had made progressive gains and linked to the last crux. I didn't know if I would return to Spain anytime soon but none the less I trained like a mad women possessed for three months just in case.

Then earlier this year I returned to Fish Eye. I reached my high point, or the last crux, after only four days. I was very surprised to say the least. I pretty

much knew all the way up that I didn't have the fitness to see this thing through to the anchor. But I was climbing it and therefore in with a chance; a slim chance, but I was there all the same. Some days I didn't get through the lower crux or make it much higher than the rail, so the second time I reached the last crux was another surprise. In fact it was my warm-up burn and I felt so good on the bottom that I just decided to keep going. I was carrying a cold pump but the whole cliff was yelling 'venga, venga' and it motivated me to keep pushing. When I left the last rest I felt pretty fresh but when I went to crimp, my fingers refused to bend – they just laughed back at me. I did not try this tactic again.

I cannot recall anything special about the third time at the last crux, only that I fell off – again. After some more dogging I thought I'd solved the puzzle. I was psyched and charged with new hope that I could send the route with this new sequence. But at the same time, I had an inkling that I'd changed the sequence unnecessarily.

The fourth go up at the last crux I rushed the moves and didn't seat my fingers in the shallow pocket properly. The tape slipped and so I fell off once again. The fifth go up at the last crux I held the pocket, got my hips in, reached up tall for the crimp, got it, but got it badly. My next foot placement was out, my arse sagged and so I fell off



Monique climbing through the lower crux, 28-metres up Fish Eye.

screaming, again. It was frustrating. The draining nature of the route and the short afternoon redpoint window, meant that I only got one shot each day when I made it that high.

By now I'd reached the stage where I thought it would go down the next shot for sure. It sucked me in. I kept trying it, but I debated in my mind whether spending so much of my trip on the one route was the best thing to be doing. But then again I knew I wouldn't be back in a hurry. What I should have done is step away for a while to give my poor fingers a chance to heal. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

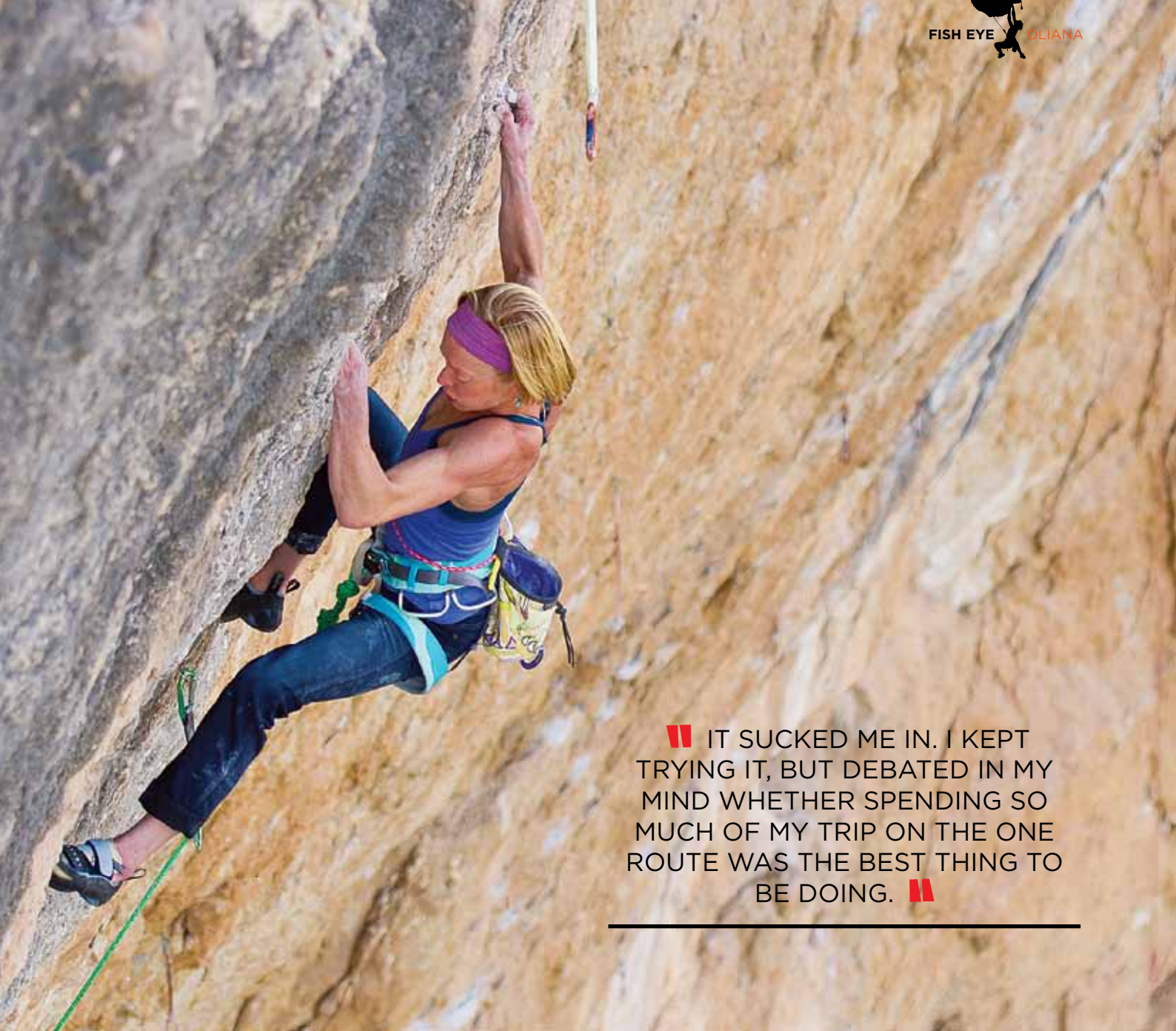
The sixth go up at the last crux I had three fingers taped with deep splits underneath. It was just a 'see what happens burn' and surprisingly, all of a sudden, there I was staring at the last crux again. I could smell the rain in the air, the



Coco Carter, Daila Ojeda and Sasha DiGiulian sharing beta for Mind Control (8c+), Oliana, Spain. IMAGE: Simon Carter



Coco Carter inspects Chris Sharma's tools. IMAGE: Simon Carter



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wind picked up and I felt the rain falling. I rushed from the rest before I was ready. Again I came off screaming and a flood of bitter disappointment washed over me.

When the rains came, they threw everything they had down on Oliana for three repugnant days. Then as quickly as they arrived, they stopped and the sun reappeared signalling the resumption of my private battle with the unyielding face. The seventh go up at the last crux I was fresh and I thought this time for sure. But it was not to be. I don't know for the life of me what I did wrong or didn't do right, but I had already decided to walk away and try other routes.

When I came back to Fish Eye a few days later I was psyched again and hungry to succeed. It was day 20 on the route. I charged through the bottom of the route feeling stronger than ever and made it up to the last crux for the eighth time. I

adjusted my foot placement only slightly (as I'd planned, back to the original sequence), drilled into the shallow pocket, grew three inches, crushed the next crimp, squeezed the life out of the right pinch and continued to the top in what seemed like effortless slow motion.

Clipping the chains was a release. It was an emotional moment, perhaps the most personally satisfying in all my years of climbing. It had been quite the journey, all the more rewarding because it hadn't gone smoothly. In fact, when I think about it, I'd waited a long time to push my climbing like this. Years ago my climbing had been progressing nicely. Then in 2007, while in Madagascar, one day out of the blue I felt burning pain down my arm and was barely able to function. I don't know what triggered it, perhaps impingement from by

backpack, but more likely a reaction to a vaccination or a hereditary condition. Later it was diagnosed as acute Brachial Plexus Neuritis. It's a nerve condition that basically 'turns off' some of the nerves – and in turn the muscles – of the shoulder. This turned out to be the first of three episodes, with each bout taking months or years to sort itself out. So, it had been a long road to get to this point with my climbing – and to have the opportunity to try harder and satisfy the inner voice that had been niggling me for years. Thank you Fish Eye for the good times.

Monique has been climbing for 15 years. She is 39, a mother, and lives in the Blue Mountains. She is sponsored by Aussie Bodies, Black Diamond, Scarpa and Sterling Rope. Her website is: www.moniqueclimbs.com.au