

A person in a blue shirt and tan pants is climbing a vertical red sandstone rock face. The climber is positioned in the center-left of the frame, with a rope visible. The rock face is surrounded by dense green evergreen trees. The title 'Spinning IN THE Vortex' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# Spinning IN THE Vortex

One man's quest (or not) to tick "The List,"  
the Top 10 crack pitches in the choss capital  
of the world—Sedona, Arizona.

Story by **Chris Kalman**  
Photos by **Blake McCord**

Zach Harrison, co-architect of "The List" (see page 52), on *Where the Wild Things Are* (5.12d), Arizona. All the cracks on The List are 5.12, unless they aren't; and all are on the decomposing, red Schnebly Hill sandstone in Sedona proper, unless they aren't, as with this climb in neighboring Oak Creek Canyon.



**ABOVE:** Joel Unema and Zach Harrison on a typical Sedona approach—steep, ball-bearing slabs with a heavy price to pay (a backside full of cactus) should you biff it.

It was Friday in Flagstaff, Arizona, and I didn't have a partner lined up for Saturday. Probably because the weather looked like garbage—a rare departure from the typically perfect conditions. I scrolled through the mental Rolodex to Zach Harrison, who's always down to climb, and gave him a ring.

"Hey, dude, looks cold and windy, but want to get out anyway?"

"Sure. Let's go do *Alpine Follies Hangover*. It stays out of the wind and is south facing," Zach said.

"Which route is that?" I asked.

"One-star choss crack. You'll love it. It's on 'The List.'"

"The List,' eh," I mused, not knowing what Zach was talking about, and not actually caring—and so I didn't ask. I didn't need to. I knew that if Zach thought it was good, it was going to be good. Zach is a jack-of-all-trades: a carpenter-cum-homebuilder-cum-finefurnituremaker for work, and a meticulous route developer for play. He has one of the most impressive memory banks of any climber I've met. I once showed him a picture of some random wall in Sedona that I didn't even think had been climbed, and he instantly knew not just where the wall was but also which crack systems had been climbed, when, by whom, the rack, and what the cruxes were like. I've long since learned not to question Zach's taste in routes—if he suggested we go do *Alpine Follies Hangover*, then by God, we were gonna go do *Alpine Follies Hangover*.

And so on a dismal gray morning, Zach and I drove off the precipitous edge of the Mogollon Rim and switchbacked down to Sedona. It's a road I've traveled so many times in the two and a half years I've lived in Flagstaff that I sometimes forget to notice how beautiful it is. The road zigs and zags through massive Oak Creek Canyon, cutting through Kaibab limestone, a layer of basalt, then three different kinds of sandstone, losing 2,500 feet in 15 miles.

The transition from the pleasant canyon to downtown Sedona is jarring—from pristine nature to a dizzying array of Pink Jeep tour operators, bars-and-grills, crystal shops, aura-reading clinics, and various other peddlers of New Age arcana. This early, the normally thronging hive was empty—the tourists likely sleeping off energy-vortex hangovers—and we slipped seamlessly through lights and roundabouts that by afternoon would be wall-to-wall traffic.

This would be a good day because we weren't going to climb on choss—a rare occurrence in the Sedona area. At least, not *total* choss. In fact, I'd argue that the first—and likely the last—thing you need to know about Sedona is that it's all choss, at least to some degree: Wave after wave of suspect rock rising above a harsh desert landscape, threatening to tumble down at any moment. If you squint just right, you can imagine you're staring at a vast expanse of Indian Creek Wingate or Zion Navajo sandstone. But look again, pilgrim: Sedona is no promised land.

It took me a while (and quite a few of the area "classics") to realize this. Don't get me wrong: Tower summits are super cool. And I actually don't mind loose rock. But I can't in good faith say that Sedona's Schnebly Hill sandstone is *quality*. Not on *Mars Attacks*, not on the *Original Route* on the Mace, not even on *Dr. Rubo's Wild Ride*. Sure, the rock is *good enough*. You just press down on the holds instead of pulling out. And you get used to sand in the eyes, decomposing footholds, tat anchors, ancient Star Drive bolts placed in mind-bogglingly stupid locations, stacks of death blocks perched delicately next to your rope line, etc.

And yet, there are a few heavenly exceptions to the chossy rule. Not many, but some. Ten, apparently, according to The List (keep reading). It's fitting, because good, clean cracks in Sedona make as much sense as energy vortexes and Pink Jeep tours—which is to say, no sense at all.

But that doesn't mean they don't exist....

**Zach and I parked below the Chapel of the Holy Cross**, across the road from some gazillionaire's mansion. A coyote trotted across the pavement—unnoticed by the horde of seekers (of Christ or Insta-fame, one can't be certain) ogling the peculiar church hewn into stone—then disappeared into the carefully manicured yard. He'd leave, perhaps, a deposit on the front porch; or bathe in the swimming pool. Zach and I smiled at the wily interloper, and then held our breath as we walked



**ABOVE:** Harrison on his Sedona nouveau pseudo-classic *Apocrypha* (5.11), Church Wall. As Harrison wrote on Mountain Project, this mixed route features "scuzzy rock quality typical for Sedona red stuff," and tackles a silty mini-corner to a leaning tips crack up steep stone. It is not on The List.

past the pale, likely COVID-exhaling hominids on our way to the trail.

A few minutes later, we left the well-worn path and cut up a typical Sedona approach—a straight shot uphill through cat's claw and prickly pear and other aptly named plants amid footing as solid as sand dunes. Winded, I stopped to look at the walls rising above us.

"That looks good," I said, pointing to a crack system that was undoubtedly choss. "What's that?"

"These are not the droids you are looking for," Zach said.

He'd say these same words to me at least five times that day. He had to. I kept asking if this was good or that was good, and the answer was always the same. The goods are rare, and usually where you least expect them. If it looks like a crack from far away, it's too wide to be fingers, and on Sedona's rock if it's not a finger crack, it's probably choss.

We finally arrived at the "warm-up," a steep hand-crackish thing called *Genesis* at the Church Wall that, at 5.10-, is equal parts sandy and

**“One-star  
choss crack.  
You’ll love it.  
It’s on ‘The  
List.’”**

sandbagged. It's good by Sedona standards, and later, I'd join the 41 climbers who gave it a consensus three stars on Mountain Project. I cringed to imagine a gym-rat-cum-Indian-Creek-sport-tradder from the Front Range or Salt Lake coming to this Sedona pseudo-classic. Actually, I didn't (*cringe*). I don't care, and it wouldn't matter if I did. Because...wait for it...it's Sedona! Nobody from the Front Range or SLC is ever going to climb this pitch. Ever.

We moved on to the next offering nobody will ever climb, Zach's recent addition to the crag. During his time in Flagstaff, Zach

has established approximately 1,726.48 new pitches within a one-hour drive of his house. Many are actually quite good. A few have even been repeated. On this one—*Apocrypha*—I got the honors of the second ascent (third if you count a toprope send by Zach's longtime partner, Kate Sanderson). I made it to the top without crumbling too many holds or falling, enjoying a mix of new-school bolted face and old-school flaring-crack sorcery. "Fun cragging pitch, but some scuzzy rock quality

## THE LIST

### ***Ultimate Finger Crack* (5.11d+)**

**FA:** Tim Coats, Jim Haisely, John Mattson / ULTIMATES WEST: Wild zigzagging face splitter in an air-conditioned corridor. Starts with No. 0.2s, and then goes through the sizes all the way to No. 3s at the finish.

### ***Alpine Follies Hangover* (5.12-)**

**FA:** Eric Foster / UPPER RELIGION WALL: Aesthetic tips-to-fingers splitter up a face to a corner. Don't punt before the chains.

### ***Watchtower* (5.12-)**

**FA:** Chris Dunn, Jim Erdman, 1992. **FFA:** John Mattson, J. Burcham, 1998 / LOWER RELIGION WALL: A finger crack with no fingerlocks. Seriously. Harder than *AFH*, right above it. Spicy.

### ***The Magazine* (5.12 PG-13)**

**FA:** Matt Swartz, Lor Sabourin / BEEF WALL: According to Zach Harrison—"Climb 20 feet of choss, then do the same hard move over and over again, plugging at least five green C3s through a couple cruxes to the chains."

### ***Southwest Face* (5.12; three pitches)**

**FA:** Steve Grossman, Jim Haisely, Paul Davidson, Larry Coats, early 1980s; **FFA:** Jeff Snyder, 2013 / KING CRIMSON, MARG'S DRAW: Spectacular corner pitch. Just ignore the death flakes lodged precariously in the crack.

### ***Tina's Hot Tips* (5.12)**

Unpublished—probably for a good reason.

### ***Synesthesia* (5.12+)**

**FA:** Mark Hawthorn, Mark Geiken Joyner; **FFA:** Rodney Blakemore / OUTPATIENT CLINIC: The least chossy pitch at the chossiest crag in Northern Arizona (which is saying something). Wandery choss to a nice finger crack to a chimney/offwidth-finish.

### ***Where the Wild Things Are* (5.12d)**

**FA:** Wilson Cutbirth / OAK CREEK CANYON: The big kids' version of *Ultimate Finger Crack*. Impossible to find, unless you're with a local.

**Chief of Beef** ("5.12+"; two pitches) **FA:** Jeff Snyder, Zach Harrison; **FFA:** (P1) Lor Sabourin / BEEF WALL: Houdini corner-climbing sans holds in a crack made for baby fingertips. Sew it up.

### ***Aztec Gold* (5.13b)**

**FA:** Wilson Cutbirth / LOST MOUNTAIN: A perfect pitch on perfect stone, with a completely *jodido* parking situation—plus, like *Wild Things*, it's impossible to find without a local.

Amidst the lush greenery of Arizona's high desert, Harrison tries hard to not get burned by *Tina's Hot Tips* (5.12), at an unpublished zone.





**ABOVE LEFT:** Harrison on *Alpine Follies Hangover* (5.12-), Upper Religion Wall. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Anne-Mariah Tapp on the perfect fingers of *Synesthesia* (5.12+), Oak Creek Canyon. **RIGHT:** Harrison, plotting his next first ascent.

typical for Sedona red stuff...” Zach’s description on Mountain Project reads. I would later give the route three stars, too—another message in a bottle sent out into the Mountain Proj-o-Sphere.

**The Church and Religion walls comprise your typical Sedona anti-crag**—19 different routes all within a stone’s throw of each other, but spread out over three different zones that require an inconvenient amount of hiking or climbing in between. *Alpine Follies Hangover* is on the Upper Religion Wall, which is accessed by climbing a pitch on the Lower Religion Wall or by its own separate, bushwhacky approach. We chose the latter, in part because we had our dogs with us, an unfortunate situation as I watched Zach coax his bruiser of a hound, Captain, across an exposed slickrock step. My heart climbed into my throat as my six-month-old puppy stumbled after them above a 60-foot drop into talus and cactus.

We finally arrived at the whole point of this boondoggle into chossvile—*Alpine Follies Hangover*. It’s as elegant as any crack in Indian Creek, tippy-tips to fingers curving through a red- and white-striped wall to a thank-God hand pod, and a final layback race up a thin dihedral. The start is protected by triple zeros, but the rock looks



remarkably solid, and Zach assured me that there were footholds (which means wavy ripples that crumble only slightly underfoot, versus detaching completely).

Zach had already climbed the route, so gave me onsighting honors. Nervous, I started up, but after tick-tacking through the thin stuff, I got a good fingerlock and started to breathe again. Slammer fingers brought me to a welcome shake in the corner. I punched it through the final layback and clipped the chains.

“Nice job, cous’,” Zach said as I lowered. He then peppered me with compliments for climbing yet another route that he had first done who knows how many years before. That’s typical Zach. I don’t know if it’s faux humility or if he actually thinks he’s not a good climber, but he



seems convinced that he can’t climb 5.12 (in spite of ample evidence to the contrary), and he’s always super impressed when I do.

Just like that, the day was over. Well, the point of the day, anyway. One hour of driving and close to an hour approach, all for one pitch, all by noon. Later, we’d head over to a sport crag, the Planetarium, where I checked out the R-rated 5.13- *Fractal Universe*. It’s decidedly *not* a sport route, climbing 40 feet of garbage rock, with garbage pro, to a No. 000 C3-protected V7 on pretty good rock, to about 50 feet of runout climbing with OK pro in OK rock. Not a bolt on the pitch. Three fat Sedona stars—all of them shining.

But sitting beneath *Alpine Follies Hangover*, admiring the perfect architecture of this unexpected diamond in the rough, we channeled our energies into shooting the shit.

“So tell me about this list, cous’,” I said.

“Not *this* list,” he corrected me. “*The List*.”

The List was Zach’s brainchild. He came up with it not long ago on a similarly gray day in Sedona. New Year’s Day 2021, in fact, when he and Blake McCord (another prolific Flagstaff first ascensionist and the photographer for this feature) went out to try the Southwest Face of King Crimson, a 400-foot tower first climbed in the 1980s. Crimson’s first pitch—freed by Jeff Snyder in 2013—features splitter climbing from tips



**ABOVE LEFT:** Chris Kalman plugging cams on *Watchtower* (5.12-), a “finger crack with no fingerlocks,” Lower Religion Wall. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Harrison on the striated stone of *Where the Wild Things Are* (5.12d).

## What happens in the vortex stays in the vortex. And that’s the way it should be.

to hands, while delicately passing some (who’d a thunk it?) fragile flakes.

“It was one of these situations,” Zach said, “where you’re, like, ‘This is the best pitch in Sedona.’ And then your partner’s, like, ‘What about X?’ And you’re, like, ‘Oh yeah, and there’s also Y.’ And before you know it, there’s this list.”

As Zach and Blake constructed the list, they added a few rules: The climb has to be a finger crack. It has to be four stars. The crux lead has to be a single pitch, approached from the ground. And it has to be 5.12 (unless it’s 5.11+ or 5.13).

At first, I thought that to qualify, a route would have to be on the decomposing red stuff—the Schnebly Hill sandstone. But Zach quickly corrected me, pointing out a few exceptions.

“OK,” I said. “But surely it’s got to be in Sedona proper, right?”

“Well, no, because there are some pitches in Oak Creek Canyon, too.”

These inconsistencies bothered the closet mathematician in me, and I tried to make adjustments.

“Why don’t you just subtract the Oak Creek ones, and add a few more Sedona ones, and make it all red stuff?” I asked.



**ABOVE LEFT:** Lor Sabourin on the classic *Where the Wild Things Are* (5.12d), Oak Creek Canyon.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Schnebly Hill sandstone choss as far as the eye can see—Cathedral Group in the foreground, Oak Creek Spire in the distance.

“Because that’s not The List,” Zach said.

“But who made The List?”

“I did.”

“So if *you* made it, why don’t *you* just remake it in a way that makes more sense?”

I got the feeling that Zach wanted to wave his hand and once again say, “These are not the droids you are looking for.” But he didn’t, and I don’t remember what he did or said instead. Because...who cares? Who cares about The List, other than Zach and Blake and me? Who cares about 10 obscure finger cracks strewn throughout the Sedona hinterlands? Who cares about climbing in Sedona, period?

That’s what I love about Sedona. It really is a vortex, in the best kind of way. There are no gym rats, no pros, no Insta-fluencers (at least, not on the climbs). No poseurs or Sprinter vans or sponsored wankers or wobblers or dubstep playing on someone’s bluetooth speaker. You could fill a whole chapter in the *American Alpine Journal* with the routes Zach puts up on a yearly basis. But why would you? Why would Zach? Why would anyone? What happens in the vortex stays in the vortex. And that’s the way it should be.

As Hayden Kennedy wrote in 2013 for Patagonia’s *The Cleanest*

Line, “The ultimate alpine climb would be a spectacular line up a virgin face, no one nearby, with a good partner—and there wouldn’t ever be a word uttered about it. Stripping away all desires except the pure experience of the climb.” HK was talking about alpine climbs and clean faces, but I’d argue that this ethos applies to single-pitch splitters in a sea of choss, too—or to any climbing experience worth having.

In the end, I don’t care about Zach’s list, and neither does he. He claims he’ll never send The List (despite having already redpointed seven of the 10 routes) because there are a 5.13 or two on there, and as we all know, Zach can’t even climb 5.12.

“I don’t think I’ll ever really try *Chief of Beef* or *Aztec Gold*,” he said. “They would both take so much time for me to do. I would rather keep wandering around.”

And that makes sense, since sending The List is not the point of The List. The point of The List is to have an excuse to go out to all these random walls and sit around admiring the desert with a good friend. You get blue skies, seasonally blooming cacti, big, hairy tarantulas, bats flying around clicking in the gloaming, alligator juniper, Arizona cypress, and approximately 300 climbable days a year.

If that sounds up your alley, then come to town, hit up all the climbs on The List, and set an FKT. In fact, you can even safely spray if and when you do, because, in the vortex, all your spray will just vanish into the Arizona desert like a wandering coyote, never to be seen again.

Or better yet, just forget about The List. Forget about everything you read in this article. Forget about climbing in Sedona altogether.

After all...*these are not the droids you are looking for.*

*Chris Kalman is a climber of 20 years, a choss connoisseur, and the author of two climbing fiction books: As Above, So Below and Dammed If You Don’t. Visit [chriskalman.com](http://chriskalman.com) to learn more.*