

Vanessa O'Brien: The banker who conquered K2

It is known as the 'savage mountain', but Vanessa O'Brien swapped a top job in investment banking to climb K2 — aged 52. She tells Melissa van der Klugt why

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Vanessa O'Brien: "I thought, 'Only 12 women have ever made it to the top?'"

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When Vanessa O'Brien set off to climb one of the most dangerous mountains in the world — K2, in Pakistan — she had not even reached base camp before her greatest fear came true. She was told that the weather was too bad to take the short flight to the mountain and she would have to make the journey from Islamabad, the capital, by road. "It went right through Taliban territory," she says.

With 90 tonnes of provisions and equipment, O'Brien — a former finance executive who until a few years before had been more used to climbing the corporate ladder in London and New York than mountains — covered hundreds of miles by bumpy road. It took another two years, several avalanches and training injuries to reach the summit. When she stood on the peak, last summer, she made records as the first American and British woman — and at 52, the oldest woman — to do so.

Poised, with long blond hair, maxidress, immaculate make-up and glowing skin, O'Brien, now 53, appears comfortable on this autumn day as she sips tea by the fireplace in a club in St James's Square, London. However, she says she's terrified by her next challenge — sitting at her desk, writing a book. She wants not only to tell her story, but also to explore why she thinks women make good mountaineers and expedition leaders. As she insists frequently, unlike offices, "mountains have no ceilings" — or as the great Italian climber Reinhold Messner once said: "Mountains aren't fair or unfair, they're just dangerous."

Four years ago, O'Brien, who had walked out on her job at Morgan Stanley during the financial crisis to attempt what she thought would be a one-off climb of Everest, was in her flat in New York looking for her next mountain when she read that six women had reached the summit of K2 in 2014, doubling the total. "I thought, 'Are you telling me only 12 have ever made it to the top?'" She immediately wanted to make it one more.

In fact, at 8,611m (28,251ft), the second-highest mountain K2 has had only about 350 people reach its summit since it was first climbed in 1954 — compared with 8,306 who have successfully ascended to the top of Everest. Known by those who tackle it as the "savage mountain", K2 has claimed far more lives too. "It's like a child's drawing of a mountain — a perfect triangle," O'Brien says, forming its shape with her hands.

There are no traverses or flat sections. The remote location in the Karakoram range, on the border of China and Pakistan, is another reason that so few attempt it. Unlike routes to Everest, there's little infrastructure — and until recently it was embroiled in the war on terrorism. As O'Brien began to research for her expedition she was shocked to read of the ten foreign climbers who in 2013 were executed by a group of Islamic militant gunmen while they waited at one of the base camps. However, by then it was too late: K2 had "got under her skin".

After her first two attempts in 2015 and 2016 were wiped out by bad weather and avalanches — on one occasion she lost all her stores and oxygen supplies — her new obsession began to seem more like a death wish to her family and friends. "People thought I'd gone too far with K2," she recalls, taking an elegant sip from her cup. "They did ask if I was taking too big a risk."

She was injured twice during training — she still can't lift one arm straight — and when she went back in 2017 she knew it was her final attempt. She faced deep snow, the sight of buried dead bodies and frozen carcasses of mules from former expeditions, high winds and temperatures of minus 40C and below. Nearing the summit even her specialist protein gels froze and, with barely any appetite, she ate mixtures of rice and noodles.

On the day of her ascent the snow was so heavy she could hardly see and her head torch soon ran out. “The last section is like Dante’s *Inferno* — every 100m is like going into another circle of hell,” she says. “Then at the top was this blue-sky day.” As she took it in she knew that the worst might be yet to come — for every four that reach the summit of K2 one person dies on the treacherous descent.



Vanessa O'Brien at the summit of K2

Despite her achievement and subsequent acceptance into the mountaineering fraternity — she counts Chris Bonington among her friends and has not returned to her “day job” — O’Brien never meant to be a climber. She had an outdoorsy childhood in Michigan, but, after her brother was killed in a boating accident, she was left, aged 16, to fend for herself by her distressed parents. She says she could have gone off the rails, but she instead focused on studying and getting a job.

At first, she was with General Electric (GE) as a young MBA graduate, then, over the years, she was an executive with a string of big international banks. She met and married her British husband, Jonathan, who works for a law firm, in London 19 years ago and they moved to Hong Kong. When the recession hit, O’Brien was 43. With no children, she decided it was time to take a break from the City. “I was looking around for a challenge and a friend joked, ‘Why don’t you climb Everest?’,” she says.

She has spoken about how, unable to have children, she focused her resources on mountaineering; a bid for a summit can cost tens of thousands of pounds and last six to eight weeks. “It’s a hot potato,” she says of the subject. Pointing to Alison Hargreaves — the British mountaineer and mother of two who reached the summit of Everest and K2 before she was killed on her way down K2 in 1995 — she says that motherhood should be irrelevant when it comes to becoming a climber. However, she does admit that her story has inspired other women who might be childless. “I want them to feel there are opportunities — you’re not half a person,” she says.

Part of O’Brien’s success — her team on K2 was the only one to make the ascent during the 2017 season — is that she turned to “learning” about climbing as diligently as she would prepare for any corporate job. She became a student of K2 climbing history — 58 per cent of K2 summits have been between July 20 and August 1 — dates of which she reminded herself when choosing to make her final ascent (July 28). She even quotes the advice of an old boss, Jack Welch, the chairman of GE, that she finds applicable to the mountain: “Speed, simplicity and self-confidence.”

When her first big climb in 2010 to Camp 2, on Everest, was a disaster after she got ill with altitude sickness she went home and took a course in high-altitude medicine. She also changed from building big muscles to building leaner ones. In 2012 she took on Everest again and reached the summit. She then entered Guinness World Records for reaching the highest peak on every continent in what was then the fastest time set by a woman, 295 days — and skied to the North and South Poles.

However, she says that there's one thing that's hard to teach and is essential to any summit — “The mental strength has got to last.” She has seen young, fit climbers breaking down mentally near the summit. And this is where she believes women have an advantage. She feels women are better in their “down time” — the long, lonely hours when waiting for weather windows — whereas some of the men she came across needed more entertainment and things to do to keep up morale. She would read books, drink tea or do laundry. “I’m good at rearranging a tent,” she jokes. Getting her boots and socks dry and warm was a favourite activity. She would put them on her shoulders to warm up while she cooked.



O'Brien on her ascent

She also believes women are more collaborative as leaders. On days when the weather was bad in base camp, she organised a quiz for all the separate expeditions and made popcorn with her cook. In charge of a team of a dozen people, she liked to cook dinner and discuss problems and fears rather than let them fester. And she's full of tips for other women — after the requisite crampons, her failsafe piece of equipment is a device for going to the loo without taking off layers of clothes. For a wash, she swears by wet wipes with tea-tree oil.

In fact, O'Brien is refreshingly outspoken on most subjects around mountaineering. She shoots down criticism that climbing has got easier. "Yes, kit and equipment are better, but the challenge now is climate change. You have to deal with rock falls and a lack of snow." As a baby-boomer on the edge of Generation X, she experienced some unexpected modern frustrations: "All the millennial Sherpas and climbers . . . on their screens." Rather than ego, she's full of modest humour. "I can lie on a blow-up mattress in a tent for weeks, but there aren't spiders up there. Get me back to a house in London where there are and I'm terrified. I can't explain it."

Her life off the mountain is in many ways unchanged. She splits her time between New York and London with her husband, whom she calls every day when on a trip. She walks up smaller peaks whenever she can, but in the city she swears by climbing stairs, not gyms. She used to train by mounting the 1,210 steps inside a 55-floor Manhattan skyscraper. In London she walks on Hampstead Heath. And when it comes to diet she's not fussy. "When you're doing a summit day that's 15,000 calories," she says. "I'm not even sure how many cheeseburgers that is."

She has also fallen in love — despite her misgivings — with Pakistan. She became so attached to the northern region around K2 and its people — her cook used to make her special K2 bread and cakes to celebrate climbs — that she decided to restore a memorial to the dead at base camp and collected bone and skin samples for those looking for loved ones who have died on the mountain. She has also lectured around the country and was named an honorary goodwill ambassador by Pakistan's last ambassador in London.

On her final ascent of K2 — having picked up cigarette butts on previous trips — she went a step farther into science, photographing glacier recession and collecting samples for scientific research. She has just been made Explorer of the Year by the Scientific Exploration Society in London. For her next mission she wouldn't mind a different direction. "New frontiers exploring space or discovering the deepest parts of the world's oceans," she says. She smiles as we finish our tea. "No one thought it would go this far."