



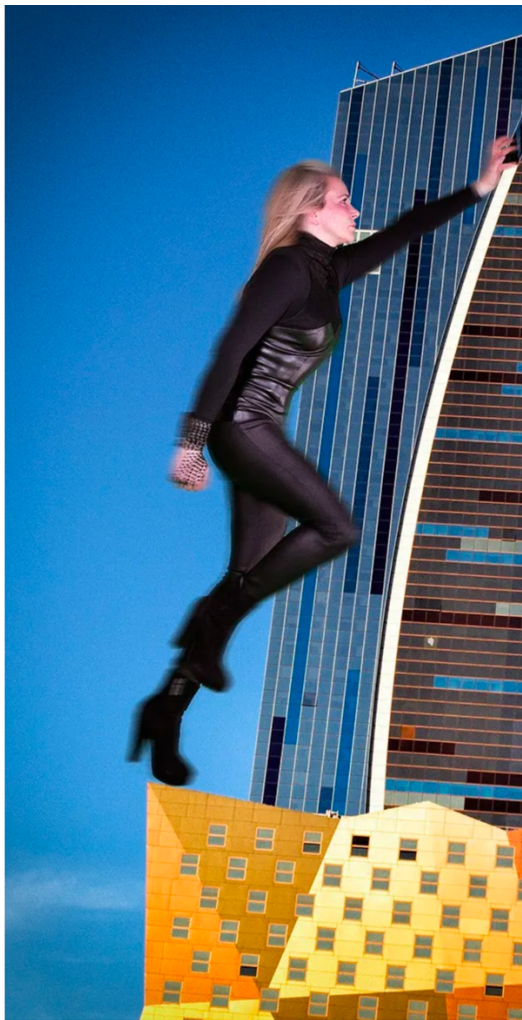
Vanessa O'Brien: Mountain Maverick

Beauty, brains and brawn. Bipolar (North & South) bad ass, climber/adventurer Vanessa O'Brien holds not one, but two female speed records for climbing the Seven Summits in ten months AND the Explorer's Grand Slam (the Seven Summits plus the North and South Poles) in eleven months. CBK scaled her into a climbing cat woman in an urban jungle. MeeeOW.

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Interview by Lora Wiley - Lora@citizenbrooklyn.com Photos by Icarus Blake



Bodysuit- wolford
Leather lace top-zara
Leggings-express
Black crystal glove- eugene welsh
Boots- dolce vita
Photo © Icarus Blake

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Fast Food Hero

Much like poverty, the problem of obesity is not just the fault of the individual, it is a problem of society. Changes need to be made.



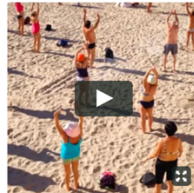
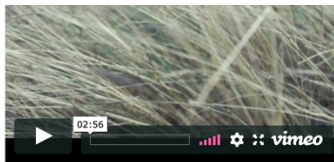
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I have never considered myself political or had much social commentary, but in hindsight, all my work was political and social commentary.



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photography has started to be consumed more rapidly in social media which has become a visual dump



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Citizen Brooklyn: Your previous career as a banker and your record breaking expedition achievements give climbing the corporate ladder a new meaning. How did you make the jump from one to the other and would you go back?

I left banking in London in 2009 in the midst of the global recession and headed to Hong Kong. On the one hand I was one of the lucky ones – I wasn't fired or laid off – but bonuses and business appetite for risk had all but fell by the wayside. The move to Hong Kong was fueled in part because of its generous income tax rates of 15% which allowed just one of us to work. So I starting thinking of something different to do for what I thought might be two or three years.

Being a typical Type A 'goal-oriented' person, I really wanted to do something in which I could 'measure' success – none of this 'I participated in this or that' or meandering along type of things. I almost didn't want to do it if I couldn't make a difference. I wanted something BIG, something I could really 'sink my teeth into' that would challenge me and occupy my time. One of my mates suggested (and I believe this to have been in jest) that I should climb Everest. We had a laugh, but later I had an idea.

Why not climb Everest? Yes it was insane as I had no climbing experience but I could go get that experience. I projected it would take at least 2 years to train for (having never climbed before), but it was something I could certainly measure success by (whether I reached the summit or the top of the mountain or not) and it certainly ticked all the right boxes for challenging and sinking teeth into...

As for going back into banking or finance I am not opposed. In fact, as you can imagine some days when the wind was howling 45 mph and the temperature plummeted to -40 degrees (F & C are the same here!) with an incline step up at some miserable 30 degree slope I would much rather have been in a business meeting having a chat about 'strategy', 'implementation', 'staffing' or 'risk management.' All with a nice large warm latte in hand! But in all seriousness, what would be tough if I did go back to business would be tolerating petty politics and unnecessary bureaucracy.

CBK: Which expedition was the hardest for you and why?

I would have to give this one to Everest simply because it is just so high at 29,035 feet – planes fly at 35,000 feet – our bodies are just not conditioned to be at that high of altitude so you have to work for it yet, as you can imagine, the views are breathtaking.

And Everest is tricky because the expedition is over 6 to 8 weeks and just when you think it can't get any harder – BAM – it does. All the way up to summit day which is the hardest. On summit day you leave Camp 4 or the South Col with two bottles of oxygen (mixed with ambient air) which you will need to last you up the final 3,000 vertical feet and back down. Your starting point is 26,000 feet which is also known as the death zone simply because this is where your body stops functioning properly. The effects of lower atmospheric pressure above 26,000 feet results in a feeling of breathing about a third of oxygen available at sea level. That is why if you ever watch Everest documentaries you see someone take one step, five breaths, one step and so on.

When oxygen becomes a limited resource your brain, lungs and heart must have this. Your brain is foggy, your lungs are struggling, your heart is pumping thick, oxygen rich blood that your body has cleverly manufactured from all of that acclimatization – but now that puts you at twice the risk of a heart attack or stroke. The steepness of the pitch in places is 50% – so steep, you become like a zombie moving forward. Furthermore bottlenecks of 'one-way' traffic like the Hillary Step near the top of Everest creates dangerous places when large groups of climbers find themselves gathered here, their oxygen running out while they wait increasing their risk of frostbite and even death. This last summit push is an endurance game – but much more mental/mind/attitude driven than physical. The physical conditions are awful – mind –45 mphs winds and -40 degrees. But whether you continue to go up and summit or turnaround and head down will very much depend on your sheer will power and determination. How much do you want it?



Bodysuit- wolford
Leather bra top-express
Leather leggings-zara
Boots-dolce vita
Photo © Icarus Blake

CBK: I understand you've spent significant time dragging a 50-pound tire around through sand to build endurance. What has been the most surprising thing about training for these expeditions?

Ha – that people think it's easy to rig a tire and pull it when you live in a City! I remember my guide saying, "Yeah, just pick one up, put a rope through and pull it". Right. And I get a used tire where, exactly? And which tool is going to drill through the metal plate within that tire ring (forget that rubber sucks itself back in when a hole is drilled). Oh, and where should I pull this tire – which City street do you think won't mind a giant skid mark running back and forth?

Well, the real surprising thing is that it's a great workout and useful not just for the North and South Pole but for two mountains that require pulling sleds too – Vinson Massif in Antarctica and Mt. McKinley / Denali in Alaska. It's great for your legs, core and lower back. I ended up going to an 'off the beaten path' beach just outside of Boston – 3 miles long and just pulled it back and forth. I started with a 19-inch car tire then switched up to a 19-inch tractor tire. Seagulls love watching it, dogs love chasing and barking at it, and children come up and ask for rides!

CBK: Describe some of the extreme physical changes your body goes through completing these challenges.

Your body takes a beating. It might have been ok if I hadn't done so many of these back to back or paced these things out but if you are doing 10 expeditions (7 summits + Carstensz Pyramid + 2 poles) in 11 months that doesn't give you a lot of time to train in between. Or said differently, a lot of your training becomes the other mountains.

If you are going to high altitude you want to focus on cardiovascular so knock off the heavy weights – think Marathon Man here – muscle is not your friend as it will compete for that limited resource – oxygen. I did consult with a Marathon coach for Everest and a Cardiologist who put me through some testing. Anaerobic and Aerobic conditioning is good and measuring (to improve) your VO2 max – how your body utilizes oxygen would be ideal.

If you are pulling sleds or doing something along the 'endurance' lines, long distance where you have to 'burn the midnight oil' over and over again, then you need some muscle and core stability. I would hit all the major muscle groups in the gym, add some pilates, and keep up the cardio. Don't forget to hydrate (always) and keep up your energy reserves. This is no time for a diet!

CBK: Past injuries, any permanent damage?

The only past and very minor injury I had was frost nip on 3 toes in Antarctica skiing to the South Pole. They turned purple, blistered, and were fine after about 5 weeks.

Permanent damage – maybe. Three months after finishing my last event at the North Pole I realized I couldn't 'smell' and had a few more headaches than usual. However, I have a love/hate relationship with caffeine (coffee) so I didn't think much of the headaches. Someone had mentioned an ENT doctor and suggested I go. This doctor took some MRI's and was horrified to find that 7 out of my 8 sinuses were completely blocked and filled with fluid – and infection. I had no idea... not when it started, how long I had had it... it had just become the new normal. I always sounded nasally when I spoke and frankly on every expedition I'd pick up some chest infection or something so I didn't think much of it.

So I had a one-day operation at Mass Eye & Ear – he fixed a deviated septum, cleaned out 7 (of 8) sinuses and I'm still recuperating. I'm hoping I'll regain my full sense of smell. So far no headaches, though!

CBK: Scariest "Into Thin Air" moment?

Well the scariest (that wasn't me directly) was when I realized my Everest teammate could lose his toes from Frostbite. He was evacuated from Camp 2 by helicopter after he summited. He showed me pictures afterwards and sure enough what started off purple became blistered, turned black (gangrene), and started a process of auto-amputation. All of his toes on his right foot were completely amputated six months later. He was an ultra-marathon runner.

For me (directly) it was climbing the Lhotse Face heading up to Everest. Usually teams climb this in a rotation for acclimatization but we were unable to because of falling rock that had killed one Sherpa fixing lines. To make up for this we used oxygen and headed up just one time only – one way.

The Lhotse Face is a 4,000-foot vertical sheet of ice which has some fixed lines that you can use an ascender and some footholds but mostly you are front pointing with your crampons. I kept trying to look down to see my feet for placement but having the oxygen mask on made it hard to do so. The first time I looked down it pinched the oxygen hose and cut off my air supply and I panicked... here I am suspended on this ice wall, my air cuts off while my crampons are dug in the ice and I'm hanging on a rope about 2,000 feet off the ground. I just freaked. What I didn't realize was all I had to do was look up to get the air flowing. But before I figured that out I had a mini panic attack. The whole psychological 'flight or fight' response the body goes through is awful. The chemicals that flow through your body, everything. And once you start panicking you can really lose control easily! This type of thing would happen only twice – another time rappelling down – but on a different 26,000 foot mountain!



Bodysuit- woldford
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Boots-dolce vita
Photo © Icarus Blake

CBK: Did you ever want to turn back and how did you overcome it?

Yes, I wanted to turn back three times on Everest summit day because it was much, much harder than anything I had ever imagined.

A number of things went wrong for me. I overdressed which took time to sort out (backpacks, oxygen tanks, etc. had to be taken off on route), my headlamp went flying off my face and down the mountain, my two water bottles AND thermos were all frozen yet I didn't want to drink from anyone because everyone was sick – gastrointestinal, bronchitis, pneumonia, chest infections, you name it. So I remained dehydrated which just slows you down and makes you weaker. My camera and spare batteries were all frozen.

So I remember a defeatist conversation I had with myself that went something like "I need to cut my loses and turn around." I even justified it by saying: "I was higher than I had ever been, that I didn't need to prove anything to anyone, that three out of 10 members of the team hadn't made it past Camp 3– including our lead guide – and that I was so, so tired I needed to turn around."

And then I heard it... first softly... then louder. "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall." I started singing that song. I have no idea where it came from. As far as I know I have never knowingly sang it before. And certainly not from 99 all the way down to 0. But it got me to an oxygen change at a place called The Balcony and I never looked back. In retrospect it is an interesting choice because it forces you to focus (and count) whereas say, "Row Row Row Your Boat", would not. It would be a circular reference. I've always been a slightly left-brained, analytical person and that must have been my 'defense' mechanism kicking in!

CBK: Funniest moment?

There are lots. But one that goes well with delusional exhaustion and climbing all day is this one. There was only one other girl, my tent mate Lisa. So she and I have a strenuous climb on Everest going from Base Camp (17,500 feet) to Camp 2 (21,000 feet). We are exhausted because we have had to navigate the Khumbu Icefall which is like a 3-dimensional moving maze with towering seracs and giant crevasses plus climb over the Western Cwm with its rising glacial valley that gets extremely hot when the sun beats down at you.

We arrive in our tents exhausted and prop ourselves up on our sleeping bags using bags of kit as pillows just to 'chill'. I hand her an invisible remote control as we look out the tent towards the Lhotse Face and joke that we are watching Mountain TV. She takes the remote and says how boring Mountain TV is. Nothing ever changes! It's like that Fireplace DVD. Then a few seconds later we are frozen and motionless in our tents as the view starts to change right before our eyes.

One of our male climbing partners comes out to the vestibule in his tent directly in front of us. On his knees he pulls down his pants, yanks his penis towards the pee bottles and starts to pee. Our mouths drop to the floor. We are unable to change Mountain TV out of shock with this full frontal. He reverses his actions and as he gets back in his tent we start laughing our arses off. It was a combination of fatigue, the joke of Mountain TV never changes THEN massively changing into say Pay Per View, and the conclusion that if we had to watch it again if only it could be X instead of Y.

CBK: Favorite Mountain and why?

That's a tough one. I would have to say Everest because it took the most out of all of us – our whole team – me included. Out of a team of 10, only six made it. Of the six that made it, one lost all his toes on his right foot. Of the four that didn't make the summit, three turned back at Camp 3 and one turned back on Summit Day. Out of all the people I've climbed with I've kept in contact the most with that team because we went through the most together over that seven week period.

CBK: Do you have the same feeling when summiting each mountain? How has each experience been unique?

No – the feelings and experiences are very different depending on how hard the expedition is and even who you are with. 85% of deaths happen upon descent on high altitude mountains so somewhere like Everest – there isn't the same elation or 'high-fives' at the top. It is the realization that you are only half way and success is getting down (alive). But somewhere like Carstensz Pyramid in Papua, New Guinea – somewhere so remote and the only rock climbing of the seven summits – you do feel like doing 'high fives' because it is amazing to achieve that in such a remote area, same with the South Pole. However, the North Pole is constantly moving (you are on water now or at least ice), so it is more annoying to catch a moving target!

CBK: It took you a few attempts to make it to the top of Mount Everest. What was different in your approach the time you made it?

Actually I made it to the top of Everest the first time I tried in 2012 and Everest was initially my only goal. What you might be referring to is when I went to Everest in 2010 after my first Mountaineering Course in New Zealand. I had just learned alpine climbing and was wondering where to apply these new skills and thought – why not Everest? Not the summit, of course, but maybe just a little higher than Base Camp so I can get a feel for the place but also put my mountaineering skills to work. What I didn't appreciate is that beyond Base Camp is the Khumbu Icefall which is really no place for a beginner to practice on ice.

So I developed pulmonary edema on the way to Everest Base Camp because I was racing up not pacing myself, not covering my mouth or lungs from the dust or yaks, and probably picked something up in one of the teahouses. To make matters worse when I went halfway through the Khumbu Icefall, I became hypoxic (meaning my oxygen stats fell to 50%) with blue lips and fingernails and just to top things off (as if they weren't looking bad enough) an avalanche ripped through the Khumbu Icefall while we were in it (although it missed us) putting me in a state of shock.

I was sent home on medical grounds and told I couldn't climb higher. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. While the giant piece of humble pie I ate was horrible, I went home so full of knowledge about things I had to change to be successful for my ultimate summit. Things like training, high altitude medication and by now I had found the climbing company I would climb with in the future.

Styling mindy saad www.mindysaad.com

Styling assistant- miquel sanchez

CBK: How has your husband been affected by all this?

Well Jonathan is British – stiff upper lip and all. He knows all the early expeditions (ironically mostly were British) and all the accompanying history and can rattle them off with some level of detail. He claims never to have been truly concerned although he admits to having had some relief with a post summit phone call.

CBK: You climb with a team or partner. Competitive or convivial?

A bit of both. Today, for the larger expeditions, you tend to go with a reputable guiding company and a guide that you know and trust. I've climbed the majority of mountains with International Mountain Guides and Mike Hamill, author of *Climbing the Seven Summits*, for example. However, other climbing individuals are needed make the economics work. So effectively, this collective 'team' really comes together by pooling resources in order to afford something that would be price prohibitive individually.

So let's say I have a Sherpa or a Guide and that I am on Everest. Chances are there is also another climber that tends to be right in front or right behind me. And this is true for everyone. All 10 of us on Everest formed a queue depending on our pace and rhythm. Myself and a Finnish guy tended to trade first or second place so I liked that. It's a little bit 'co-opetition' maybe like a dive buddy. You don't necessary want to be the only one up there and it is nice to set your pace to someone else who can keep you 'at your pace' if that makes sense, if you're having a slightly off day. Likewise, you help each other out if you need to get something out of a pack or take a picture, etc.

I guess the point is that it is not a zero sum game. My summiting does preclude someone else summiting. We should all be able to summit so 'pure competition' doesn't exist. The only person you might compete with is yourself and your drive to push yourself beyond the limit when you feel you cannot go any further.

CBK: You are also a licensed Esthetician and a Dive Master. Any other non-climbing careers you like to give a try?

Well the esthetician is important for treating my skin in harsh environments so that's a utility. Dive Master is just the opposite of climbing I suppose. I did pass an open water boating exam in Hong Kong which was no small challenge – in Two Parts – Nautical & Engineering in Chinglish with double negative questioning and multiple choice answers ("you will not not – is that a will?") but I did let my Notary Public expire. Oh well. I wouldn't mind having a real estate license and maybe a stockbroker's license but now I am just collecting, aren't I?

CBK: Fresh off the mountain food cravings?

Well, I'm still waiting for one of my Everest mates to write the book! Having been 'trapped' above Camp 2 for the Summit Bid and down again we couldn't face it anymore. It was what we coined "The Four Quadrants of Crap". I'll have to consult with one of the them on exactly what this was but basically you are now too high for the cooks to cook anything nice or nutritious so it is either expired MRE's (Military Meals Ready to Eat) – really they never expire! – or four quadrants like rice, beans, tuna, pasta (all from a box). The smarter one's amongst us would say they would have what the Sherpa were having, luxurious Dal Bhat (rice & lentils) meals.

CBK: You are among only 50 women who have completed the seven summits challenge. What level of sexism exists in the sport?

Well the number is rising it is still small – women only make up 15% to 20% of most expeditions. And it is interesting because I think they could do really well. Women compete well with men in swimming and running – and mountaineering takes after both of these cardiovascular and leg strength. There is some sexism but mostly amongst the older climbers of the same nationalities that have sexism at home. I don't see any of it in younger climbers or in any of the guiding companies.

CBK: Describe your recovery process.

Usually I plan to go somewhere after a summit attempt to hopefully celebrate but in the worst case commiserate. If it's around Asia then that would be Hong Kong where my mates are. If it is anywhere near London, probably there for the same reason. Occasionally the spouse and I will book a retreat or spa and 'chill' that way. Generally I take two weeks off before I start to feel bad about doing no training at all. Even when I'm not on an expedition I like to work out a couple times a week... the only thing that slips is cardiovascular which I have to really psyche myself up for!

CBK: After setting world records for climbing the 7 summits and the grand slam, what are your future expedition goals?

Well if I can get 'clearance' for my sinuses I would love to go back to the Himalayas. I would love to try K2 (the second highest mountain in the world) but realistically I'll need a starter mountain for that because it is quite technical and politically sits on the Pakistan border so probably not a great time to go.

My choices for spring 2014 would be Makalu or Dhaulagiri and I already have a German female climbing partner that was on Everest with me ready to go.

Makalu is the fifth highest mountain in the world at 27,895 feet. It is 19 km southeast of Everest, on the border between Nepal and China. Dhaulagiri is at the opposite end of the Himalaya range and is the Seventh highest mountain at 26,794 feet.

I still can't help but think climbing one of these would be easier than doing the Boston Marathon.

5 Responses to “Vanessa O’Brien: Mountain Maverick”



Fred Simmons says:

December 9, 2013 at 3:41 pm

Being one of the climbers on Everest in the Spring of 2012 to which Vanessa refers several times in this article, I can say that the statements made and majority of the content in this article are quite true for many of us as well, and they are formulated with the color and insight for which Vanessa is known!! She is a most extraordinary person, not simply a world class climber. And although she uses guides and companies, make no mistake: she could guide and lead others herself. Very insightful article—thanks!! Fred Simmons
[Reply](#)



Jim Pruitt says:

December 9, 2013 at 7:31 pm

Vanessa, this is one of the best articles yet about your achievements! You are my hero, and I would hike with you anytime, anywhere!!
[Reply](#)



Cristiane says:

December 10, 2013 at 8:11 am

I loved watching the beginning from when you decided you were going to climb the Everest and I thought it was...well... you being eccentric 😊 But following all your amazing conquests my friend is truly inspiring. WELL DONE! Very humbling too!
[Reply](#)



Lucy says:

December 10, 2013 at 12:43 pm

You don't speak of the role or value of guides in your ascents. Your successes are triumphant. I am just wondering what degree of importance, if any, guides are in your safety and well-being on the trips?
[Reply](#)



Vanessa says:

December 10, 2013 at 9:40 pm

Hi Lucy – under Q: You climb with a team or partner. Competitive or convivial?

I mention finding a reputable guiding company and a guide that you know and trust. I've climbed the majority of mountains with International Mountain Guides and a guide named Mike Hamill. I would say the guides play a HUGE role in safety and well-being – the higher the mountain & the more remote the location, the more important this becomes – for oxygen say on Everest or even being held Ransom on Carstensz Pyramid. Finding a guide you respect, has good leadership skills, is technically proficient, resourceful, and a decent cook can make all the difference between a mediocre expedition and an amazing one!



Courtesy of Vanessa O'Brien



Courtesy of Vanessa O'Brien



Courtesy of Vanessa O'Brien



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