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Meditation, focus and no ego: Everest climber and serial adventurer Vanessa O'Brien on what it takes to reach the summits

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By BHAKTI MATHUR | SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST



Vanessa O'Brien climbs to Camp 2 on K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. O'Brien has climbed the highest peak on every continent, skied to both poles, and reached the oceans' lowest depths.

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Fatigued, her adrenaline spent, her body trembling and her mind numb, Vanessa O'Brien tried hard to savour the moment. After a gruelling expedition of more than 50 days and a severe test of her mountaineering skills, physical stamina and mental strength, O'Brien had realised her dream.

She stood on top of the world, 8,849 metres (29,032 feet) above sea level on the summit of Mount Everest – a place she remembers as being a little bit wider and longer than a king-size mattress.

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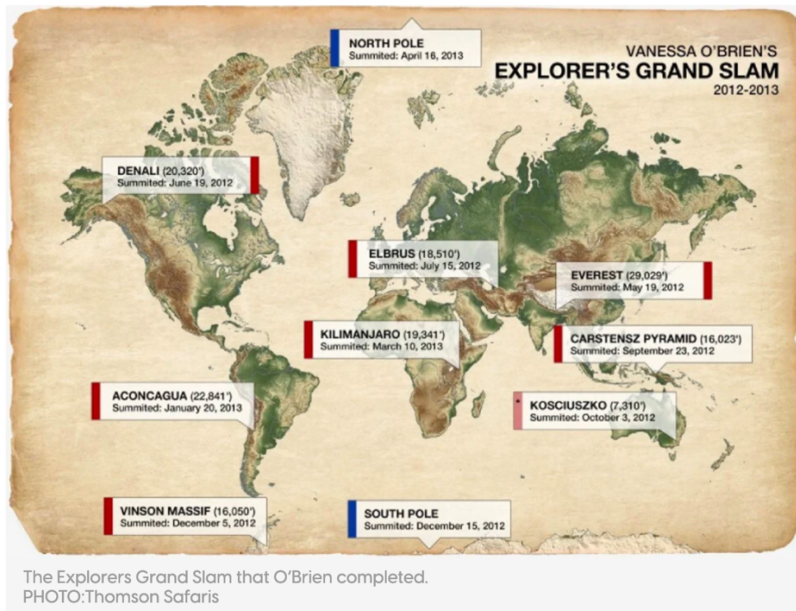


O'Brien on her descent of Mount Everest after reaching the summit.
PHOTO: Phinjo Dorjee Sherpa

For most people, such an arduous experience would be enough to last a lifetime. Not for O'Brien, who was just getting started.

Since that day on May 19, 2012, she has climbed the highest peak on every continent, the Seven Summits Challenge, completing it in 295 days – a Guinness World Record for the fastest time achieved by a woman.

To add to this feat she skied the last 60 nautical miles (111.1km) to the South Pole and North Pole to complete what's known as the Explorers Grand Slam.



She is the first American woman to summit K2 (the second-highest mountain in the world, at 8,611 metres, on the China-Pakistan border), and set another Guinness World Record by becoming the first woman to reach Earth's highest and lowest points – she reached Challenger's Deep, 10,925 metres below the Western Pacific Ocean at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, in a submersible on June 12, 2020.



O'Brien skiing to the geographic North Pole.
PHOTO: Doug Stoup/Ice Axe



O'Brien emerges from a submersible after reaching Challenger's Deep, the deepest known point on Earth.
PHOTO: Enrique Alvarez

O'Brien, 56, has chronicled her adventures in a book, *To The Greatest Heights – Facing Danger, Finding Humility and Climbing a Mountain of Truth* (published March, 2021, Simon & Schuster).

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Armed with an MBA from the prestigious NYU Stern School of Business, O'Brien was primed to reach the top of the corporate ladder rather than the roof of the world.

But after a successful 20-year career in finance, O'Brien, who was working in Hong Kong at the time, lost her job in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008.

"I was looking for an audacious new goal and over a few drinks on a girls' night out, a friend suggested climbing Everest.

The idea ricocheted in my mind and stuck," says O'Brien whose only mountaineering experience before that was climbing Mount Kilimanjaro (5,895 metres) in Tanzania, East Africa, in 2005.

With her eyes set on her new goal, O'Brien started training with zeal.

"I worked with a performance coach, Ross Eathorne, to train for the challenges of high-altitude mountaineering," says O'Brien.



Performance coach Ross Eathorne, who helped O'Brien train to climb Mount Everest.
PHOTO: Ross Eathorne

Eathorne, who is based in Hong Kong, pushed O'Brien to ensure she was ready for the challenge.

"We used a wide range of free weights, including a heavy sandbag attached to a rope that Vanessa dragged up and down the hall to simulate rope climbing.

To help build high-altitude cardiovascular stamina needed for mountaineering we designed high-intensity circuits to be completed while carrying climbing equipment and camping gear," Eathorne, 52, says.

O'Brien first attempted to climb up to Camp Two on Everest, at an altitude of 6,400 metres, in 2010 but was unable to make it.

"I struggled at the Khumbu Icefall, the first challenge you encounter after base camp. It is dangerous, as you have to navigate around large crevasses that suddenly open up in the moving glacier.

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I realised that my mountaineering skills, my understanding of how high altitude impacts the body and my stamina needed to improve substantially.

"I got pulmonary oedema (fluid accumulation in the tissue and air space of the lungs which could lead to respiratory failure) and had to turn back," says O'Brien.

She returned to Hong Kong, where Eathorne developed a game plan that focused on aerobic and anaerobic conditioning.

"Our new training strategy was about staying strong without overdoing the weights.

We added Pilates and yoga for core strength and continued with the high-intensity interval training," says Eathorne.

O'Brien joined a local hiking group and started exploring the Hong Kong trails.

"My favourite was the MacLehose Trail (stages three and four). In many ways training for the expedition is harder than the expedition itself. It requires patience and hard work," she says.

In preparation for her attempt to summit Everest, O'Brien climbed Mount Washington (1,917 metres) in New Hampshire, Mount Rainier (4,392 metres) in Washington state, Cho Oyu (8,188 metres) in Nepal and Shishapangma (8,013 metres) in Tibet, China.

"I had to go lower, before I could climb higher. On these climbs, I could see the benefits of my new exercise regime, the increased lung capacity and agility," she says.

After conquering Everest and completing the Seven Summits, O'Brien turned her sights to K2, a mountain she had attempted to climb twice, in 2015 and in 2016.



O'Brien on a Mount Everest acclimatisation hike.
PHOTO: Bob Berger

K2's tricky technical climbs, often dire weather, and the constant threat of avalanches and falling rocks has earned it the nickname "Savage Mountain". One out of every four climbers who attempts to summit K2 does not make it down alive.

O'Brien summited K2 on her third attempt in 2017, at 52 years of age, after having surgery to mend three torn tendons in her rotator cuff.

What kept O'Brien going despite facing multiple setbacks? "I think it is my love of data points – each of these 'missed opportunities' gave me information, and with more information came hope and confidence that I could do it.

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"It wasn't easy – every year is another year of training, hard work, intensity, and focus. And more money (an expedition to the Everest costs anywhere between US\$50,000 (\$66,470) to US\$85,000)," says O'Brien.

How does O'Brien stay strong mentally in life-threatening situations?

"Mountaineering is more mental than physical; you go well and beyond what your body is capable of. I have a focused mantra to stay sharp, which I repeat – 'Today is the day, look all the way'.



O'Brien on the summit of K2 with a UN Women's flag. PHOTO: Dawa Gyalje Sherpa

I use a form of meditation where if I get a negative thought and become anxious, I visualise putting it on a raft and the thought sailing away," says O'Brien.

"The mountains have taught me a lot. The first and the hardest lesson is to give up control and to focus on only those things that you can control. They taught me patience and made me a nicer person.

"To summit the mountains I have climbed, I had to shed the ego I arrived with, which was far too heavy to haul. I am sure it is in a crevasse somewhere to this day."

O'Brien's advice for people who want to climb Everest and K2 is to get to know what high altitude feels like, to summit an 8,000-metre high peak beforehand and to make sure you are familiar with high-altitude medicine.

"You'll enjoy yourself more once you understand the dynamics of high-altitude mountaineering," she says.

She is happy with the feedback she has received about her book.

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"I get emails from people who have lost jobs, want to change careers, are having a midlife crisis or people looking for an adventure after Covid-19, saying how the book is inspiring them to take the next big step in their lives," she says.

O'Brien subscribes to English mountaineer George Mallory's classic reason for wanting to climb Mount Everest.

"Because it's there," he told a reporter in 1923.

Mallory went on to say: "The answer is instinctive, a part, I suppose, of man's desire to conquer the

universe."

So what is next for O'Brien? "A mission to the moon, perhaps?" she replies.