

ROAR

## Ruling the BIG ONES

**HILAREE NELSON O'NEILL, one of the most sought-after big-mountain expeditionists in the world, talks about how she got her start and what it's like to be on the road five months out of the year, climbing and skiing mountains in every continent.**

When I finished college, I knew I wanted to travel. My parents gave me a one-way ticket to Europe as a graduation present, and I ended up going to Chamonix, France, because of a ski movie, *The Blizzard of Aahhs*. I really thought I'd be there for only one winter, but that ticket was really pivotal in keeping me in Europe. It was less expensive to buy a round-trip ticket when things got tough and I wanted to go home, but I could never let the return portion go unused.

Because of those mountains, I grew up a lot in the five years I was in Chamonix. It's not possible to be just a recreational skier there, so by default I learned about glaciers. I followed and learned from people more experienced than myself. I developed a hunger—always wanting to ski something harder and steeper, to climb farther. That's how I got hooked up with The North Face and had doors open for me. At the time there weren't many women combining skiing and mountaineering skills, and it took two years of expeditions before they officially signed me on. That was in 2001, five years after I'd moved to Chamonix. The career thing didn't exactly happen overnight.

One of my most exciting expeditions was about a year ago—to summit Cho Oyu, which borders Nepal and Tibet and is the sixth-tallest mountain in the world. Our goal was to ski from the summit at 8,200 meters. My personal goal was

to not only ski but also experience life at such high altitude and see if my body could take it. After Cho Oyu I got a little addicted to altitude. I hope to ski at altitude in the future on expeditions. Skiing is a familiar challenge, but altitude is new and crazy and unpredictable. I like that.

More recently, I went on a 21-day expedition to Bolivia. It was a speed climb/ski with several other North Face athletes and friends. The goal was to climb as many peaks as possible in those three weeks. We had great success on the speed ascents, bagging more than 21 ascents, many by new routes. Unfortunately, the skiing was only marginal, so we made only two or three descents. The climbing, however, was fabulous, and we did several mixed routes as well as some snow-only routes.

I am away from home four or five months a year on average, and it is tough. But the whole point of the expeditions for me is to remind me how simple life can be and to appreciate things like my husband, my family and friends, a roof over my head, and even a shower. I miss a lot of weddings and birthdays, and that is a bummer; but the travel and the challenge of expeditions clear my head and make me a better person—and make me more present when I am home. I don't see myself slowing down anytime soon. But perhaps in the future, my adventures will take on some other form.

—As told to Bryn Fox

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Hilaree on the summit of Friendship Peak in outer Mongolia, 2003