

A woman with blonde braids, wearing a bright red hooded jacket, blue mirrored sunglasses, and a colorful patterned headband, is smiling broadly. She is holding a yellow and black ice axe in her right hand. She is wearing a blue harness with a 'tagonia' logo. The background shows a vast, snowy mountain landscape under a cloudy sky. A white flag with some text is visible behind her.

REMEMBERING
Life

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LOCATION: CORDILLERA BLANCA, PERU

The thundering crash of the falling serac woke me from sleep. The earth shook as a huge chunk of the mountain crumbled. Or was it an earthquake? My mind jumped to worst-case scenarios. Since the Nepal earthquake that spring, and my reading about the 1970 Ancash, Peru earthquake, when an avalanche flattened an entire city, I now had another natural disaster to worry about.

We were in the Cordillera Blanca in Peru, the world's highest tropical mountain range, and it was cold and humid. My skin stuck to my sleeping bag, like a cold sweat. Or a nightmare. I thought about my friend Liz Daley and how, ever since she died in the mountains, loud noises scare me. They didn't used to. It had been eight months since her death and I didn't know if this trip was going to help or just rub salt in the still-raw wound. The moment I heard about Liz, something changed and I began questioning my desire to get into the mountains.

When she went on that fateful trip to Patagonia, I was envious – I'd spent a lot of time researching the same trip. It's not easy coming up with good ideas for new, exciting, exotic, challenging places to go where few have skied or snowboarded before. When Liz went on that trip, I watched it on social media with a strange unease.

Liz had expressed concern with my decision-making in Chamonix last year. She thought I was too cavalier about the risks of the mountains there. The few lines I rode with her in Cham, she rode conservatively. But right afterward, we went to Alaska on a sponsored filming trip and when the camera was on her she looked like a different rider. She said she had to outrun her slough – that's how you were supposed to ride Alaska lines. I knew the lines in Patagonia's Fitz Roy massif were big-consequence lines, even more technical and difficult than Chamonix.

A small, isolated wind-slab avalanche swept her over a cliff. That little patch of wind slab fooled them all, a group of pros and a guide with a lot of cumulative experience. I once heard Andrew McLean say something like ski mountaineering would be a great sport if it weren't for the avalanches. Was I willing to take those same risks?

Unfortunately, careful analysis of risk and decision-making doesn't always pay a sponsored athlete's bills. I knew I wanted to continue pursuing my personal and professional goals as a skier, at least in some capacity. So I planned easier trips with what I deemed less objective hazard. Then, in mid-January, I got the news that another great ski mountaineer that I looked up to, Dave Rosenbarger, had died in an avalanche. It was jarring. In less than a year, my heroes were dead.

I couldn't help but think about how many of their deaths were on video. The first one I remembered was Billy Poole in 2008. It sickened me. Did his parents watch it? I can't blame the videographers or the YouTube audience that loves to watch crash reels; it ultimately comes down to the pressure we put upon ourselves. But sometimes it felt like I was in the Hunger Games – our deaths were all being filmed and there was always a new round of horrors around the corner.

When I was a little girl, growing up in the frozen flatlands of Minnesota, my family would go west a few times a year, and it was on those trips that I fell in love with the mountains. I loved being in the alpine, those high places above the trees where you could see for miles. The adrenaline, the huge doses of Vitamin D, the endorphins – it was intoxicating and the place I felt most free. From a young age, I knew I wanted to become a professional skier. I knew I could be the strong, aggressive, powerful girl I wanted to be.

As an adult, I decided to pursue my dream, taking a disciplined approach to building my career. I structured my ski mountaineering and alpine climbing goals as a series of trips and objectives that got progressively more difficult. First, I added various degrees of steepness and technical difficulty, then altitude, then some glaciated terrain. I carefully built





the skills I needed. It began in my backyard, the Wasatch; then the three highest peaks in Ecuador, my first exposure to serious altitude and heavily glaciated terrain. Afterwards came Chamonix and Alaska, and a summer spent alpine climbing. Then a trip to ski Orizaba, the highest volcano in North America, in a weekend.

The next trip that called to me was Peru, because Peru is the best training for the Himalayas. But was I ready for the Andes, the mountain range that took my best friend? All winter long I debated. I knew that if I went to Peru, I wanted to go with just one other partner – someone I could trust to make conservative decisions. I knew I wanted to pay for the trip out of my own pocket, so I had no feelings of obligation or expectations from sponsors.

I asked a trusted guide friend if he thought I was ready and he said my background and training were perfect, so I asked my boyfriend, Rob Lea, a former Ironman triathlete with successful summits on Denali and Aconcagua, to be my partner. He had the expedition experience and the fitness base; I had the technical training. We were going to Peru.

Before the trip, we refreshed our white-out navigation and crevasse-rescue skills. We spent a great deal of time working with an English-speaking local logistical coordinator on our proposed itinerary, and we researched the heck out of the objectives. I visualised every step of the journey and I felt prepared and excited. I wanted to get to the base of those mountains, look up at them and confront my fears. If only it were so easy.

After flying to Lima, we took an all-day bus ride to the frenetic city of Huaraz, at the base of the Cordillera Blanca. I arrived at our hostel fatigued from two days of travel, but I found it difficult to rest amidst the chaos of this city of 100,000. Horns honked, roosters crowed, children drummed, police marched in riot gear, there were protests, parades – walking around town was an overload of stimuli. Some climbers describe Huaraz as the Chamonix of the Andes, but I didn't see it. It may be at the base of the mountains, but instead of a quick tram ride to the snowline, it's a long drive and days of walking. After a few days of acclimatising at Huaraz's 3,052 metres, we packed up and headed to our first base camp in the Ishinca Valley.

May is normally the beginning of climbing season and hosts stable and predictable weather. We picked mid-May to early June for our trip in hopes of the best snow. But this was a strong El Niño year in the Cordillera Blanca and the climbing season was off to a slow start. The monsoonal season dragged on, and other climbers had trouble getting to the higher peaks due to heavy rain. Mountain condition reports

were hard to come by and we heard rumours of a rescue on Toclaraju, one of the peaks we hoped to climb and ski.

After a day of organising gear, followed by a few hours' drive, we arrived at the trailhead, but I wasn't sure we were there because it was a big field with sheep, cows, horses and donkeys. We packed up and, with the help of a few burros, walked the half-day to base camp. As soon as we arrived the rain started and didn't stop for most of the week. We could hardly see the mountains through the dense clouds. But we were eager to get on snow, so we woke in our tent at midnight to eat breakfast and go for our first objective, Ishinca.

On paper, Ishinca looks like a walk. But with the thin air and the extra weight of skis, boots, layers, crevasse-rescue gear, rope, food and water, it didn't feel easy. It took us hours of walking before we even saw the mountain. For the first few hours of our approach, we saw stars in the night sky, a reassuring sight for climbers. But then, as we got closer to Ishinca, the stars disappeared, and a thick layer of clouds replaced them.

The route presented little objective hazard, so we decided to continue. The sun rose and the sky turned a beautiful pink hue for just a moment, only to be obscured behind cloud cover. At least it kept the snow cool. The snow was punchy with a scary unsupportable layer underneath, just deep enough to feel stable, like a monster under the bed. We continued cautiously, roped up for crevasses, until we reached the final pitch, a brief section of steeper, exposed climbing.

The sun came out at the summit and almost instantly the mountains around us came alive as wet slides started peeling down, and seracs and ice started breaking loose. We stripped off our jackets – it was the hottest I've ever been at 5,530m. Because of the rapid warming, we chose to down-climb the top section instead of skiing it. I tried to hammer in a picket but it sunk right through to the rotten layer. After a steep, sweaty pitch of down-climbing, we put our skis on and started flying down the mountain, finally cooling in the breeze we generated.

On the climb, we'd been able to scout Ranrapalca and Toclaraju, two other potential objectives. But the routes looked bad – broken glaciers, thin rock sections, huge crevasses and icefalls. Ranrapalca had a bit of technical mixed climbing near the summit at around 6,000m, and the approach to Toclaraju looked broken and convoluted. I didn't feel so brave any more, especially with the delirious effects of altitude. It takes a lot of skill and acclimatisation to be able to handle technical ropework and climbing manoeuvres at 6,000m.



The tropical glaciers are melting faster than anywhere else due to climate change. I felt like we were there 10 years too late. The routes looked thin and boney. Human excrement was everywhere, especially at snowline. It was like a graveyard of buried faeces and toilet paper that climbers thought would never be exposed. You could feel the mountains in transition. Big seracs hung over many routes, and I just didn't want to expose myself – not now, not with this weather, and not on this trip. I kept thinking about Liz, about the lessons she taught me on our trips together and the inspiration she gave me. She was my soul sister. I've never laughed so hard with anyone else. I missed her. I wanted her there with me.

As we got off the glacier and started walking across the long, rocky moraine, the rain picked up again and didn't stop. We returned to base camp tired, dirty, wet and hungry. I'd underestimated Ishinca and felt like a huge failure and disappointment. Now I felt my broader goals for the trip had to be reevaluated. We had some hard discussions at base camp.

Sometimes the mountains welcome you with good weather. Other times, the conditions are more challenging. In these mountains I didn't feel brave

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or bold – I felt the need to make conservative decisions. Ultimately, trusting your intuition and being conservative is what keeps you alive. You can always go back and try another time when you are better prepared or when you have better weather. Unless you're dead.

After a day of rest we skied Urus Este, a simpler but enjoyable outing, again accomplished in questionable weather. Afterward, we left base camp and went back to Huaraz to regroup.

There we decided that instead of trying to ski a technical line on a 6,000m peak in marginal conditions, we would focus on a more achievable route. We decided to go for Pisco.

At the beginning of the trip, while discussing mountain conditions and potential objectives, a local hostel owner told me about the trip where Arne Backstrom died. It was on Pisco. I didn't know Arne, but I know Ingrid, his sister, and having lost my own half-brother to an avalanche, I know the pain of losing a sibling. It turns out that when he died, Arne was with Dave Rosenbarger and Kipp Garre. Now all three were dead.

As I lay in my dark tent on Pisco, woken by the boom of the serac collapsing, I couldn't shake the thought of the porters dragging Arne's lifeless body away. I couldn't stop thinking about Liz's lifeless body in Patagonia, about her partners performing CPR on her for 45 minutes.

We set off before dawn. As we made the long, painful carry of skis, boots, ropes, and other gear to snowline, I started asking questions. Why was I doing this? My mind drifted to the comforts of home. Maybe I'd be happy as a stay-at-home wife? Maybe this wasn't the path for me.

Once we reached snowline and started our way up the long summit ridge, we were hit by powerful, howling winds that penetrated my softshell. I could feel myself slipping into a near-hypothermic state, angry and clumsy, unable to drink or eat. I put on my sunglasses in the dark to protect my eyes because it felt like the wind was going in through my eyeballs and freezing my brain. I cried a little to myself and slogged on, one foot in front of the other. Then, just before the summit, the sun burst upon us. That moment, of finally greeting the sunlight atop that majestic 5,752m peak, with views for miles around, made the entire journey worthwhile.

It's hard for me to explain why, after losing so many friends, I want to continue doing this. There's no easy answer. People have different motivations to climb and ski big mountains. Sometimes we go to escape reality, to forget the pain of a break-up or because we feel we have something to prove. But on this trip, I came for different reasons. I came not to forget or escape, but to remember. The challenge of pushing myself, of enduring the elements, of continuing despite the cold and thin air, despite everything, to see the sunrise and feel its soul-warming rays on a mountaintop – that's why I love the mountains. It's why my friend Liz loved the mountains. And it's why I'll keep coming back.

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