

Messenger OF THE MOUNTAINS

SILVIA VASQUEZ-LAVADO IS ON A JOURNEY TO HEALING, ONE PEAK AT A TIME. WE CHATTED TO THIS TRAILBLAZING MOUNTAINEER ABOUT FINDING PEACE IN THE THIN AIR.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

IN 2005, with barely any training, Silvia Vasquez-Lavado did her first climb – a hike of more than 60 km to Everest Base Camp. Today, at the age of 42, she is not only the first Peruvian woman to summit Mount Everest, but also the first openly gay woman to complete the Seven Summits, the highest mountains on each of the seven continents. ‘Some people are drawn up the mountain for glory; others are pushed up by pain,’ she says.

She was born and raised in Lima, Peru, during a civil war. The turmoil around her reflected the nightmare she was living in her own home. In her memoir *In the Shadow of the Mountain*, Silvia recounts in brutal detail the sexual assault she suffered as a child at the hands of someone working in her home. Years of abuse resulted in emotional distress and a lack of self-esteem. Silvia eventually told her mother what had happened, and at the suggestion of a therapist she sent Silvia to the US. Denying her trauma and hiding her sexuality from her family caused Silvia to spiral into alcoholism. ‘I was running my life into the ground, and I was in this unrelenting, vicious cycle of self-destruction.’



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The first openly gay woman to complete the Seven Summits, Silvia Vasquez-Lavado has found healing from childhood abuse through climbing.
Opposite: Silvia climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in 2006.

PEAKS & VALLEYS

Eventually, she turned to her mother, who convinced her to return to Peru to go on a powerful Amazonian meditation retreat. On an ayahuasca-fuelled trip, Silvia had a vision of herself as a young girl, around the age of the abuse, and saw herself as an adult embracing the little girl. It was an emotional moment. 'I spent my entire life up until that point trying to forget who I'd been because it brought me so much shame and pain.' Mountains formed between them, and the little girl grabbed her by the hand and led her into them.

Back home in San Francisco, she couldn't shake the thought: 'What is this thing with mountains?' She decided to make the vision a reality. 'I said to myself, "Well, you need to take the biggest pain to the biggest mountain."' She made it to Base Camp in four days – a hike that usually takes about 14 days. 'I was this unstoppable force that wanted to see more.' As she watched the sun come up, she made herself two promises: to come back as a seasoned climber, and to return with a social cause. 'Up there, I felt a sense of belonging and safety that I'd never experienced before.'

In November 2015, Silvia and a group of young women survivors hiked to Base Camp before she continued to the summit of Everest. In her memoir, she writes: 'I wanted for them what I had found in the mountains. To see something bigger than themselves. To understand themselves as I had begun to understand myself – as much more than what had happened to me.'

Even though she comes from a mountainous country, climbing wasn't something she grew up with. 'I was scared of heights, and you

'Up there, I felt a sense of belonging and safety.'

only ever hear of mountain climbers being the toughest of the tough, and men.' She didn't have mountaineering or even Everest on her bucket list. 'I was quite jaded, and didn't believe any of these things could heal me, especially when you have an addiction.'

On the anniversary of her Everest summit, just 10 days shy of her

journey to Denali in Alaska – the highest peak in North America and her final climb to complete the Seven Summits – Sylvia was in a terrible accident. She suffered a brain injury, and, in the ICU, doctors found a brain tumour. Faced with the possibility that she might die, she quit her Silicon Valley job and dedicated herself to working with as many young women as she could in the time she had left.

The tumour turned out to be benign, but she kept that promise. She climbed Denali and got to work



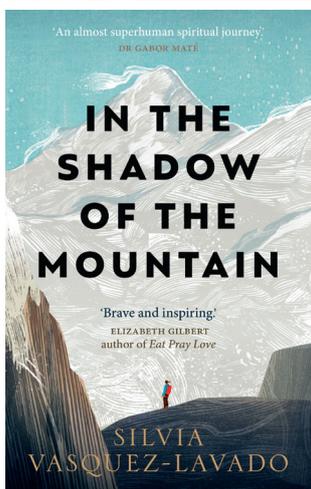
Silvia saw the Northern Lights from Denali in Alaska.



Silvia with two nuns from Deboche, the oldest Buddhist convent in Nepal, in the foothills of Mount Everest



At the summit of Mount Everest, Silvia left photographs of her mother and of herself as a child.



on her sobriety ('I'm now close to four years sober') and her memoir. Writing her story meant revisiting old wounds...

Silvia in front of the Tian Tan Buddha at Po Lin Monastery in Hong Kong; and flying the Courageous Girls flag with the guides who helped her ascend Carstensz Pyramid in Papua, Indonesia.

during the pandemic. 'Writing about the abuse in my childhood and my addiction was the most challenging thing I've had to go through on sea level,' she says. She worked closely with her therapist, and their sessions were pivotal in helping her access parts of her life she had long since closed off.

It paid off.

With praise from Elizabeth Gilbert and Eve Ensler, and a film adaptation starring Selena Gomez in the works ('I like to call it my own gay Cinderella story!'), it's been a surreal experience for Silvia. 'I'll be more than happy if this book is able to touch one person and they can see that they no longer have to suffer alone.' Silvia says this is the book she wishes she could have read in those times of pain, shame

and grief. 'It hides as a book about mountaineering, but if anything, it is a human story about all of us.' She hopes it will invite others to heal and climb their own Everest.

As we chat over Zoom while Silvia is touring the UK, my eye falls on my copy of the Everest disaster novel *Into Thin Air*, and I ask her how she handles the fear. 'Climbing is a healing journey, even though it's a scary one,' she says. 'I've always seen the mountains as healers, and I have an incredible amount of respect for them.'

Nothing goes to plan, so she never takes a day for granted. 'You can have all the equipment in the world and all the food and water, but it's the unexpected changes in the environment that can make it trickier.'

Sylvia sees Everest as a maternal spirit, not something to be defeated. 'I love the ridiculousness of the notion of us conquering a mountain,' she says. 'Whenever I'm asked this, I feel like Everest is looking at me, like, "Do you really want to say you conquered me? Who's been here thousands of years, and who is but a speck of ash? You want to come back, don't you?"'

So, what's next for the adventurer? After the success of her summit of Everest with other survivors of sexual abuse, her organisation Courageous Girls started a trekking leadership academy. In 2020, the pandemic delayed the treks they'd been planning to launch, with survivors leading their own groups up the mountain, but they're ready to pick up where they left off.

The war in Ukraine, which was still ongoing at the time of our interview, put Silvia's trip to the North Pole on hold.

'But right now I just find myself on this beautiful journey. I call myself a messenger of the mountains, and I'm here to convince as many as I can just to join me in nature. So that's a lot of people to cover!' ❖

In the Shadow of the Mountain by Silvia Vasquez-Lavado (Octopus Publishing; distributed in SA by Jonathan Ball Publishers), R355

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