

MAN OF THE MOMENT

After a near-death experience, Jimmy Chin—photographer, cinematographer, all-around adventurer—found meaning in the mountains

Text by KEITH GORDON

Photographed by JIMMY CHIN



Standing atop a peak in the Teton mountain range, Jimmy Chin scanned the face of the slope below. The ski down would be intense, but there was little reason for serious concern. The renowned skier, climber, and photographer had the skills to descend the route, and his riding companions, including big mountain snowboarder Jeremy Jones, had already carved down the line with no problems.

But as Chin began to cut back and forth across the route, a very real problem arose when the snow beneath his feet gave way. Chin was swept up in the ensuing avalanche, barely escaping death. In the award-winning documentary *Meru*, in which Chin is both featured and serves as

cinematographer, he recalls: “For a moment, it looked like slow motion, and in the next moment everything went to fast-forward. I got swept, I’m airborne, totally weightless. I just got crushed under an ocean of car-sized blocks, probably going 70 or 80 miles an hour, down 2,000 vertical feet.”

Amid the disaster, Chin experienced a moment of extreme clarity. “In my mind I heard this voice, having this conversation that was like, ‘Wow, I always wondered how I was gonna die, and now—now I know,’ he says today, still very much alive.

Jimmy Chin is the man of the moment, an adventurer and storyteller who, at 43, is thriving in the current age of social media. He has participated in an unsupported crossing of the Chang Tang Plateau in Tibet,



Sonnie Trotter shows his strength by “flagging” on Screams from the Balcony, a famous climbing route in Alberta, Canada. Opposite: Chin’s fellow climbers, Rob DesLauriers, Kit DesLauriers, and Dave Hahn on the South Summit of Everest.



retraced George Mallory's famous route up the north face of Everest, and survived a bout of high-altitude edema on Cho Oyu, an 8,000-meter peak in the Himalayas. Recently, he filmed climber Alex Honnold's record-setting free-solo ascent of El Capitan (see page 32).

But he's also an unlikely star in the world of extreme adventure. Born and raised in Minnesota, Chin had what he describes as a childhood typical of a kid born to Chinese immigrant parents. "I had a very structured life as a kid," he says. "My parents had a pretty narrow set of ideas of the life path set up for me. It's like the classic stereotype...a huge emphasis on academics. I swam competitively, I studied martial arts, I started playing violin when I was three and a half. But my thing was skiing, and I only got to go skiing when I did everything else well."

While Chin participated in a wide range of activities, the one constant was the family's expectations of success. "There was a very strong emphasis on excellence," Chin says. "If you're going to do something, do it well and take what you're doing seriously. This mind-set lives on in the way I think and function."

It was Chin's parents who inadvertently sparked his attraction to climbing and outdoor adventures. "In the summers we used to drive to all

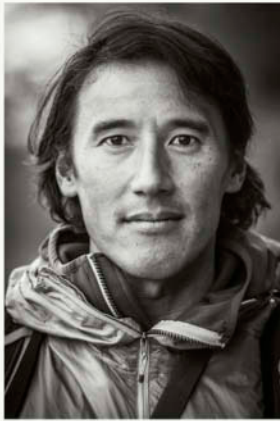
these different national parks, and it just drove me crazy that I had to sit on the sidelines in the car and only look at it. Climbing is a very visceral experience, where you get to actually interact with the landscape, go deep and explore."

Chin found his calling in climbing. After finishing a degree in Asian studies from Carleton College, he bought a beat-up Subaru station wagon and told his parents, "I'm going to climb and ski full-time for a year and just get it out of my system before I pursue my real career." That year of wandering stretched to seven before he was able to turn his outdoor life into a career.

Back then, Chin was largely based in Yosemite, but he also traveled to the biggest walls in the world, located in the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges. It was during this time that corporate sponsors took notice of Chin; North Face picked him up in 2001. "Once that happened, it's like hyperacceleration. All of a sudden, now I have financed expeditions, climbing with some of the best climbers in the world...it was like the dream."

Despite his burgeoning reputation and newfound financial security, Chin's parents still didn't quite approve of his life and career—not until his

Chin has captured iconic aerial images of the world's major cities, including New York



work ended up in the pages of a famous magazine. "Mom just kept saying, 'I've raised a homeless man!' But when I first got published in *National Geographic* and did my first Nat Geo expedition, my mom came out to Washington, D.C. The story had just been published and I was giving a talk at Grosvenor Auditorium and the entire lobby was photos and artifacts from my trip, and I just remember her looking so proud. That was really important to me."

But once his mother fully grasped the danger involved in Chin's career, she had him make a promise. "She said, 'I've accepted what you do. You should

keep doing it. But you need to promise me one thing, and that's just that you won't die before I do,'" Chin recalls. "She looked me in the eye and put me on the spot and forced me to make that promise. And I thought, 'Well, that's fair.'"

That promise stuck until her death in 2007. "It actually affected some of my decisions on the mountains while she was alive. I distinctly remember having moments thinking that the likelihood of something going wrong, and me not surviving this, is probably a little too high for me to keep that promise. I mean, just that you pause to think was the ultimate effect of that promise."

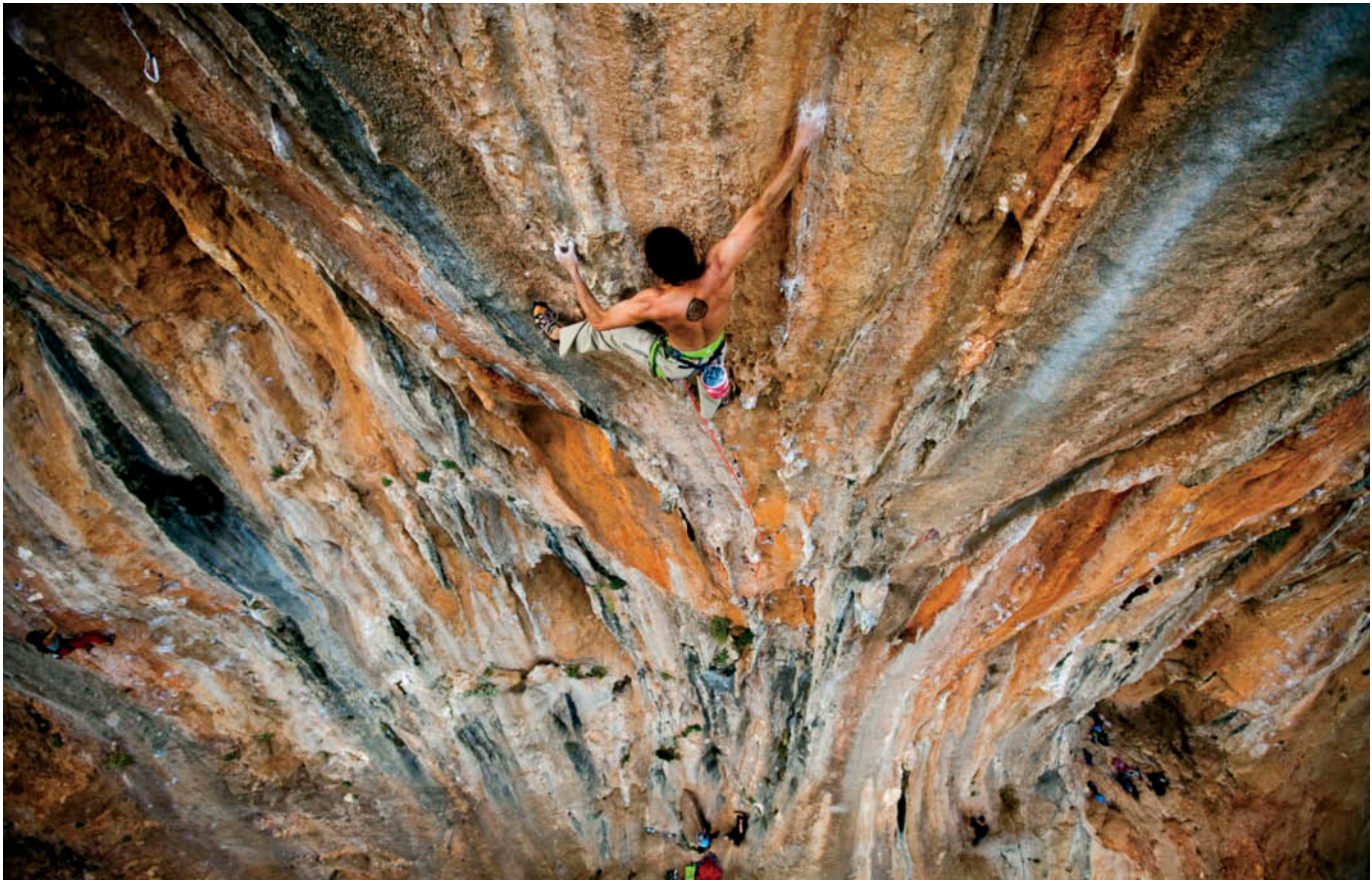
"As I've gotten more experience and gotten older, having lost a lot of friends, having seen the aftermath of such loss, it changes your

perspective," Chin says. "When you're in your early twenties you think you're invincible. As you get older, having seen things go sideways, it changes your risk calculus."

For Chin, the near-death experience in the Tetons put his life in perspective. "After surviving the avalanche, I became deeply reflective on what I was doing and why I was doing it," he says. "Why was I spending my life climbing in the mountains? Is it important? Does it have that much meaning? My initial reaction was that I didn't think it was worth it. It was too dangerous. I didn't want to be in the mountains. I didn't want to be scared all the time, and I really took a negative view of it. I took a few months off, but after some time and quite a bit of reflection, it became pretty clear to me that I was really lucky to have survived, but I was also really lucky to have found this lifestyle and the life in the mountains that really gave meaning to my life."

Chin returned to the mountains, continuing to make world-class adventure films, now with the help of his wife, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, who serves as coproducer, codirector, and cowriter on many of his recent projects. He's continued to push the limits of what's possible as a climber, filmmaker, and photographer. He's climbed and skied down Mt. Everest, conquered the notorious Shark's Fin on Meru, and spent two years filming the buildup to, and execution of, Honnold's free-solo ascent of El Capitan, a feat Chin calls "impossible." (The film is expected to be released in 2018.)

Next, Chin hopes to explore some of the mountains he has yet to conquer, including Trango Tower in Pakistan and Cerro Torre in Patagonia. He has no plans to stop climbing. "That's something I'll always do, that I will always love to do; that is a part of me. I don't see a therapist; I go climbing."



PORTRAIT BY MIKEY SCHAEFER

Looking down at climber Sam Elias ascending a limestone face in Geyikbayiri, Turkey



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*From top: Sherpas carrying loads on the Western Crest of Everest.
Tents illuminated at night during the Meru expedition.*