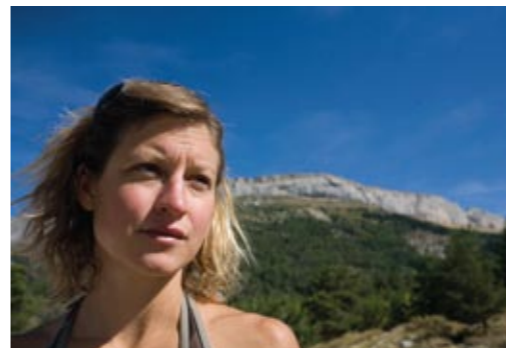




## CLIMBING IS LIFE ...

by MAYAN SMITH-GOBAT



One of the first questions I am regularly asked is, 'So, what do you do in real life?' The only truthful answer I can give is, 'This is my real life'. But this is a question I find very difficult to answer. If this is not my real life, what is?

For nearly ten years now, climbing has been the focal point of my life—climbing is my passion. Everything else revolves around it. As a result, I have become one of the best New Zealand climbers (female or male), and for the last three years I have ranked amongst the top 20 female climbers worldwide. Most recently I achieved a personal goal when I made the first female ascent of *L'arcademicien* at Céüse, one of the most renowned crags in the world. With that ascent I became the first New Zealand woman to climb grade 33.

My love of the mountains and climbing was fostered from birth, having spent the first few years of my life living under Mount Cook, and this love of nature and sports has continued to rule my life, in one way or another, ever since. My first passion was horse riding. I began riding at the age of seven, and I spent every spare minute training a succession of horses and competing to the highest level in every competition in the area. But during my last two years of high school my focus began to change. My love for the mountains was rekindled as a passion for skiing took over my life. For the next few years I chased winters around the world. I was one of the few New Zealand women to do well on the international extreme skiing circuit. But in 2001 I had a major skiing accident, which left me with two broken feet and a fractured jaw and I was forced to take a year off. During this time I started training my upper body to alleviate my frustration at this enforced period of

inaction and in the process, discovered the pleasure of moving over rock. I quickly became addicted to the physical and mental challenge climbing presented, the very tangible cycle of goal setting and achievement, and the feelings of elation during those fleeting moments of success.

My love of the sport combined with an inherent desire to improve. I dedicated myself to climbing and trained hard. Quickly, the results of my efforts became apparent, and within a short space of time I established myself as one of New Zealand's elite climbers. With every success my desire to improve got stronger and I soon realised that in order to maximise my rate of improvement, I needed to broaden my horizons. Therefore, in 2006 I decided to throw myself in the deep end and head to Europe to compete in the World Cup Sport Climbing series. I wanted to see how I measured up against the best in the world. Unsurprisingly, I did not do so well in those competitions. I realised that competing is a different game in Europe, where the players rarely play outdoors.

All the European competitors have grown up training on indoor walls and competing at a much higher standard than is even conceivable in New Zealand. In addition, I realised that to place even within the top 20 would require much more time training—on plastic—than I was willing to invest. My true passion is for climbing on rock, real rock, outside, where every hold is different, so that the cliff dictates your moves, and where you define the rules and set your own challenges. And I love the climbing-bum lifestyle, where the weather rules your life and nature creates the atmosphere.

For the past three years I have spent the majority of my time in Europe living out of my car. I have only rarely entered competitions, choosing rather to dedicate my time to the kind of climbing that I love: improving and diversifying my climbing skills, and attempting to fulfil my craving for new challenges. Europe is the perfect place to live as a climber—being here has opened up many new possibilities for me. The sheer number of crags and their diversity is incredible. No matter where I am in Europe, there will always be superb climbing areas within a couple of hours drive in any direction. In addition, there is a phenomenal number of routes of an extremely high

THIS PAGE *Mayan with the crag line of Céüse in the background.*

FACING PAGE *Mayan on the last hard move (a large crank between tiny crimpers) of L'arcademicien (8c/33), Céüse.*

Both photos: Max Farr



ABOVE *Van life, break-fast in the parking lot.*

FACING PAGE *Mayan on the top crux of Collection Automne Hiver (8b+/32), at St. Leger du Ventoux, France.*

Both photos: Max Farr

level; nearly everyone climbs grade 30 over here and the level is rising at a rapid rate ... it is impossible not to improve!

I have realised that for me the primary focus is to improve; to learn from the rock and climb the most inspiring lines at each area I visit. I spend relatively little time on the road, preferring to become truly acquainted with one area rather than trying to see many places without really getting to know any of them. This year I have been in Europe for five months but I have climbed at only two crags: Saint Léger du Ventoux and Céüse, both in the south of France. (Sometimes I question the wisdom of this decision—there are so many amazing crags in Europe, and I have spent the last few years here, yet still climbed at so few ... ) But generally the lines I find most inspiring are also the most difficult; I love pushing myself to the absolute limits of my ability and beyond. When choosing a new project, I try to select the hardest, most aesthetic, yet potentially achievable routes. As I get to know an area, the scope of what is possible for me widens, so there are always harder, more inspiring projects for me to try. So I tend to stay in one climbing area until the changing seasons make conditions simply unbearable.

I believe that we each have the freedom to choose a life that is real to us. The climbing life feels much

more real to me than subscribing to the values that are deemed 'desirable' by mainstream society. For me, climbing is not just a sport, a recreation or even a passion; it's my life. Climbing takes me off the beaten track, allowing me to explore different aspects of the world, meet interesting people and visit beautiful places others would not generally see.

Climbers are generally obsessive, so their commitment to climbing often becomes more of a 'way of life,' yet most people still seem to treat climbing as an escape from the 'real' world. I guess I have just taken my climbing a step further than most—I have been trying to make it my profession. I rely mainly on support from sponsors, predominantly in the form of equipment, but also occasionally supplemented by much welcomed although relatively small sums of money. I have had to learn how to market myself, publicise my achievements and generally rave about myself. I have learnt to accept this aspect of being a semi-pro climber, but I have never learnt to enjoy it. In addition, sometimes external pressures to produce results influence my desire to perform well on the rock, so that the pure enjoyment I get from climbing is reduced.

At times I think it would be easier to just get a run-of-the-mill job, but this lifestyle does give me freedoms that I am not willing to give up. Some may think that I sacrifice many daily pleasures and comforts in order to sustain this climbing lifestyle, but for me these choices are no sacrifice. I like to live simply—it frees me so I can focus all my energy on climbing, without the distractions and restraints that come with the accessories of a less simple lifestyle.

I have an insatiable desire to climb. It is like an unquenchable thirst; the more I drink, the thirstier I get. The more I climb and improve, the more I want to climb and the more urgent my desire to improve becomes. As soon as I achieve one goal—a particular climb or grade—the next one is set. This cycle is unavoidable, so I have to keep reminding myself that the real reason for climbing is the journey. I try to focus on maximising my learning during the process of getting to the top and to not place too much emphasis on that fleeting moment of elation at attaining a goal. I've learnt that the more energy and time I invest in a route, the more I stand to learn from the process, and the greater my sense of achievement when I finally send.

To read more about Mayan's recent activities, visit [www.mayan-climbs.com](http://www.mayan-climbs.com).

