

The
Interview

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Liv Sansoz

She made her name on the sport climbing competition circuit, but Liv Sansoz is now stretching her horizons to bigger and bolder objectives...

Liv Sansoz is best known as one of France's most successful competition climbers. A two-time World Champion and three-time overall World Cup winner, she was also the second woman to climb an 8c/c+ route (5.14b/c), but in recent times the Mountain Hardware athlete has moved into alpine climbing and big mountain adventures. Her most recent trip, in the summer of 2013, was to the remote Tien Shan Mountains near the border of China and Kyrgyzstan and this was captured on video for two short films called 'Border Lands' produced as part of Mountain Hardware's 'Days You Remember' series. The team travelled through desert landscapes, a maze of sandstone towers, high plains and deep valleys in search of interesting and challenging multi-pitch routes. Unlike most expeditions, the China trip was very different – the team, consisting of Liv, Mike Libecki, Ethan Pringle and filmmaker Keith Ladzinski, had no idea of where they would climb, the names of mountains or their altitudes, and just an old Russian map for guidance. But old maps were the least of their problems, as we found out when we spoke to Liv in her home town of Chamonix...

Competition sport climbing is your background – do you miss that experience?

I travelled the world for competitions and trained hard, I won my first championship when I was 19, then my second when I was 21. I won three World Cups and stood on 50 podiums in total. I had a really



Setting up ABC on the glacier of the Western Kokshal Tau mountains



Advanced base camp on the Great Trango Tower, with a stunning view of the steep Uli Biaho peaks

Credit: Liv Sansoz Collection

“I learned a lot in Patagonia; that you have to be a good climber, a good alpinist and a good camper as well, as the wind is so strong and you have to set up your tent really quick...”

good career and it was lots of fun. Competing is a lot about the head; I was not the strongest physically – if I had to do pull-ups with the French team I was not the best for sure – but on the world climbing circuit I had good technique and I learnt to reproduce it in competitions and could win over and over again. I was 16 at my first World Cup with all the stars there, and you have nothing to prove at all – you are just super excited and you just want to give your best and you have no pressure, so you go for it and everything is new. I learned really fast. But then you get into a final and stand on your first podium, then your second podium. This is the hard part, as you know you can win but you also know you can still make a mistake – you're never *too* confident. I think, 'okay I can fall, I can do badly in the semi-final and not get into the final,' so you have to be really focused and determined.

When you go for the hold, you go for it 120 per cent. Sometimes you're completely wasted but I had this capacity for pushing myself even when my hands were in pain. The last three years of competing were really fun; I had nothing to prove, I knew I could win, that I would be in the super final and send all the final routes, so I just wanted to have fun. It was really nice as I was completely free of pressure and I climbed really well.

What is your training programme now and where do you climb for 'fun'?

In winter, in Chamonix at the EMHM gym (Ecole Militaire de Haute Montagne) or the gym in Les Houches. I moved to Chamonix three years ago, but before that I lived in my home town of Bourg-Saint-Maurice where I had a climbing wall at my parents' house. This was very handy for training, especially as I was still in high school or at university and I could always train and not lose time travelling – so it was very efficient for me.

How did you train?

I learned from other people; really good climbers like François Legrand and Robyn Erbesfield; some of the best climbers around when I started. For me quality was the main thing. I would never do too much in volume but I would always try a really hard route or circuit on my training wall, and treat it as if it was a super final route. My goal was the quality. This was more important to me than the

volume because in a competition all you have to climb is one or two routes a day – that's it. But you have to be able to push yourself to your max for those one or two routes, and that's what I was doing at home. I had some really hard routes at home; sometimes I just did four circuits and a little bit of bouldering – but I did the four at more than my max. And of course you have to have variety; do bouldering, resistance and stamina work and you always have to change and train your muscles to be used to any kind of effort and to be used to climbing at any time of day. Sometimes I trained in the morning, sometimes in the evening or middle of the day and then on the rock. It was good to go outdoors and keep some of your climbing on the rock for the technique and for the feeling of the freedom. When you go to the Gorge du Tarn or Verdon and you have this landscape, it's like 'wow, I'm doing something amazing'. I love climbing; it keeps you psyched because training has never been hard for me. It was never like 'I *have* to train'. If I woke up one morning and was like; 'oh I *have* to train,' I would just skip the training day as for me it's important to be at 120 per cent or do nothing. I'm like black and white or yes or no, not something average.

You've moved into mountaineering and big walls – is that also tied in with the move to Chamonix?

No, I was born in Bourg-Saint-Maurice so I grew up in the mountains. I was doing lots of skiing, I climbed Mont Blanc when I was 14 and climbed some of the peaks near my place when I was 10, 11 and 12 so I really loved being in the mountains. Then I was involved in the World

Cups and I loved what I was doing, so I was fully dedicated to that and to my studies. But then I had an accident in the States on an 8c+ route. The person belaying me made a mistake and she dropped me on the floor and I hurt my back and I couldn't really climb for 8/9 months. I missed all the World Cups and everything and I had a really hard time. I think I was a little bit in shock mentally so I decided to just do my studies and when I had the desire to climb again – *if* it came back – I would go for it, but if it didn't come again then it was fine. I'm already happy with all I achieved, so for a few years I didn't climb that much. I went with friends on 6a/6b routes, multi-pitch in the mountains, but nothing like pushing hard or training hard, yet then I realised I wanted to climb again, but do something completely different and travel more – so that's what I did. I went with my boyfriend at that time – who was not a climber – to Yosemite. I had no big wall experience, nor crack climbing experience. Our friend Chris McNamara, who is a master of aid climbing, gave us like a two-hour course to explain to us how to haul the bags, how to aid climb fast and gave us lots of great tips. We read books and went training, and when we felt ready we climbed the Nose together. So we really started from zero, with no knowledge of placing gear and it was really nice. And of course then I decided *this* was what I wanted to do, so I got more involved in alpine climbing.

What have you been doing since then?

Since then I've been on expeditions to Patagonia with Janet and Freddie Wilkinson, two American climbers who are also Mountain Hardwear athletes, and it was really good but we had really tough conditions. We knew there was never going to be a day of really nice weather, and you need at least two days (*to complete any routes*). We were walking, hiking, climbing in the bad weather to be ready for a nice weather window, but it never came. We made the worst approach I've ever done with heavy bags in a storm, hoping the third day would be nice, but every morning the wind was really bad and we had to go back. I learned a lot in Patagonia; that you have to be a good climber, a good alpinist and a good camper as well because the wind is so strong and you have to set up your tent really quick and make it as sturdy as you can, or you will lose everything.

As a Mountain Hardwear athlete, are you involved in the development of their products?

I give feedback to the team involved in the development of the products, like Ueli Steck and Tim Emmett. We work on climbing products and for us it's really good to be able to give feedback, such as 'this pocket should be 3cm lower as it doesn't work with the harness', or 'this fabric is great, but too fragile'. So every time we go on an expedition we have a prototype to test and we give our feedback; but I never work from scratch and make a product – I just give suggestions to improve gear like clothes, backpacks and sleeping bags. During our China expedition in July 2013 we tested the spring 2014 products; new backpacks and a new cooling technology for clothes called Cool Q ZERO. It's an innovation that refreshes as you sweat, so if you're carrying a heavy pack for example, the chemical refreshes you.

How did the China expedition come about?

It was really interesting because we went there with Mike Libeck; he's an amazing guy and was nominated as 'Explorer Of The Year' by National Geographic; sometimes he spends 20 days on a wall in Antarctica or Baffin Island alone. He has a really big heart and he's always really nice with you and a very, very explorative guy. When he first sent me an email he said, "okay, we are going to China and Kyrgyzstan, I don't know what we are going to climb, we have no map, no name, no altitude, so take everything; it may be rock, ice, snow – take everything and we will be ready". And that was really the spirit we went in. You know nothing; not like on most of the other expeditions where you know the altitude, you maybe have a topo of the routes, you have paths and porters. In China, once we reached the meadow where we set up what we called our base camp, there was nothing. No paths, no porters and an unknown glaciated valley ahead. We were helped by the local people (more Kyrgyz than Chinese) and had camels and

Paragliding above Chamonix
– some of Liv's favourite terrain



Climbing in Taghia, Morocco – a
stunning climbing destination with
incredible walls and perfect rock



Learning crack climbing
in Indian Creek, Utah



“In China, once we reached the meadow where we set up what we called our base camp, there was nothing. No paths, no porters and an unknown glaciated valley ahead.”

donkeys to reach the base camp meadow. But after we could not ask them to keep going, the terrain was sketchy and we did not want the camels or the people to get injured. We were still in China, but all the people we met were from Kyrgyzstan. I think there were Kyrgyzstan people there a long time ago and then the Chinese came and they couldn't pass through the mountain again; so they still live there today as they did hundreds of years ago, except they have solar panels now for electricity. They still wear the costumes and make the butter from the yak; in fact, everything is from their yaks – their clothes, their food.

What did you end up climbing?

When we got there we realised that the mountains were really far away and we didn't have too many days left, so we started to shuttle our gear to set up an advanced base camp. At first it took us eight hours to find our way, because sometimes there was a glacial river we could not cross and we had to go back. It was a really long approach but we gained very little distance and we were completely exhausted. For me it was another challenge because I broke my heel bouldering about two months before leaving and I thought; 'oh that's not great, my heel is really painful.' I spoke a lot to Mike and he knew it was going to be really hard terrain with lots of boulders and I had to make a decision. Because of the visa/permit I had to say 'yes' or 'no', and I went to the physio in Chamonix who was really positive about my heel, so I felt okay and decided to go. I was given a training programme to do in the pool; running with a buoyancy aid so your foot doesn't touch the ground and the water gives resistance, so it's really good for your lungs and heart and muscles. So every day I went to the pool in Chamonix and did laps of running which was really hard, but when you have a goal you train really hard. I didn't want to be the weak member of the team because if one person is weak it can put the rest of the team in danger. So I did everything I could do without using my foot; I used weights on a step with the heel not touching anything... it was interesting! So when I arrived in China I was fine, but it was not easy on moving terrain like boulders, so I had to deal with that. All the boys were very understanding but I still had to carry heavy bags like them, they couldn't carry anymore – it was really interesting for the spirit.

What other challenges did you come across?

We reached a certain point and realised we should go back as we'd have no more time for climbing, so we shuttled out gear for four days before we came back down. Our photographer Keith had stayed at the base camp because he was a little sick. When we arrived back he told us that policemen had come and we were told to be in the town in seven days because our permit was not working. We were shocked because we had a permit for two more weeks and it would just leave us one week to climb. But you don't 'play' with the police in China as we had already learned. We'd had a problem before when we came to the last big city and wanted to buy petrol for the stove. It is forbidden to fill a container with petrol; you can only fill your car, but we didn't know this so we came to this place, filled two containers of petrol, put them in the mini-van, then went to another place to buy dry fruits, figs and things like that. Suddenly the police arrived and were shouting at us and then they pointed at the tank, so we had to go to the police office and they took our guide and they shouted at him like crazy man. We thought they were going to put him in jail, and for three hours we were in front of the building; we couldn't get in, we had no idea what was going on and we were worried we'd lose our guide and would have nothing to climb in this county. After three hours the guide came and said we had to leave some money, so we gave them money and we got our guide back – but we never saw our money again. They said when we came back we could get it, but we never saw it again – they just said it was gone. So the politics in China is really, really tough. We had 4/5

checkpoints – it's not like in Pakistan where you give a paper and passport and you're done. In China, sometimes you spend two hours in the office. It's an interesting country and it shows you that we live in countries of freedom and we can do what we want. In these countries everything is so different.

How did you resolve the visa problem?

So when we came back to base camp and Keith told us we had to be back in town at a certain place on this day, and that they had guns, we knew we had to be there. We had just five days of climbing left so we went back and found a nice granite route – it was not a huge route but we could climb it for maybe ten days. We decided to check a line so we got ready and set up advance base camp, but then I had another accident. Because we were on ice, every time you sleep you heat the ice so it melts underneath you. You have to prepare it before you put your tent on it, so you put some rocks underneath and try to find some dirt. I took a big rock and it was really sharp and I cut my finger, really deep. The others thought I should go to hospital but I thought I'd be okay, so I just put some sterilised strips on it for two days. I didn't go with Ethan and Mike as they started to open the route; I went on the last day but still I had a big tape on my finger – I couldn't really do anything. It was good to see everything and to try it, and it also shows that sometimes you go on an expedition and it's not successful – but that's just part of the job. You go for one month and climb for only three or four days; it's not much, but it's the whole thing that's really interesting because you have to be strong for all the team and in good spirits and to not be selfish, but be ready to help. I was the only French person, the only woman, so on the human side it's really, really interesting and then you learn a lot about how far you can go, why you did this and why you chose that.

Does the footage of the expedition capture all these trials and tribulations?

The video shows the places we went and the difficulties we met. I think our trip was interesting in the spirit of exploration, and you don't know if it will work or not, if you will be successful, but it's about a different approach. We had to discuss what to do, to go for something big, more rock, ice, we also had huge rock falls on our path and we were thinking maybe we shouldn't have come here. You always have to be flexible and be smart; sometimes we woke up and I was with Keith in our tent and Mike and Ethan were in the other tent and there was a massive blast of rock that went off and we really thought it was falling upon us. It was two in the morning and we got out of our sleeping bags, put on our headlamps and we were all surrounded by dust. The noise had stopped but it was really scary!

So what's next for you?

I want to go back for a longer period – not just for four weeks – because the mountains have not been explored very much and you don't have porters like in Nepal or Pakistan, so you have to do it all yourself which takes a long time. But it's more wild, and the peaks are really nice for sure. I like that it was us who were the first to cut our step here – it's an amazing feeling. The people there have never seen people like us before, in a place with big mountains everywhere and no-one has been before. There are so many new ascents out there still, when you think everything has been done; but no, there is still a lot to explore for sure. ■ T&M

Liv Sansoz is sponsored by Mountain Hardwear - you can watch the videos of last year's China trip at: <http://blog.mountainhardwear.com/>