

VWEEKEND

Herald Sun

AUGUST 22-23, 2026

HIGHER POWER

River Ahmad and Bianca Adler crossed paths while conquering Mt Everest. Now, the Melbourne women reunite to reveal how they helped each other make history

STEPHEN DRILL



WILL TAYLOR HOW I MADE BEING A SPORTS NUFFY MY JOB **INDY TAHAU** FROM COUCH SURFER TO AFLW STAR

FEATURE

their phones, fearing the worst. The climbing community is small, and sadly, they knew some of the people who perished.

Ten climbers – including one of the world's most famous mountaineers, Nirmal Purja – died in an avalanche.

Purja, or "Nims", became a global identity after he was featured in a 2021 Netflix documentary about his successful scaling of the world's 14 highest peaks in seven months.

His tragic passing was on Broad Peak, the world's 12th-highest mountain near Pakistan's border with China.

Purja had been a Gurkha soldier, an elite Nepalese unit that served in the British Army. He also served in Britain's answer to the Marines, the Special Boat Service.

He had been credited with opening up mountaineering in Pakistan, which is less popular than Nepal.

Adler and Ahmad keep updating their news websites, desperate for answers.

They debate whether the Pakistan mountains are more dangerous than Nepal, or if the lack of rescue infrastructure, including helicopters, makes Everest feel safer.

Both women knew the dangers of climbing at high altitudes.

On the way to Everest's summit, they walked past dead bodies – one almost a skeleton.

He may have been there for decades. Another climber they saw appeared to have perished more recently.

Adler has grown up knowing the risks of Everest.

Her parents both climbed Everest, with her mother successfully summiting in 2006, while her father, Paul, had to turn back 100m from the top because of problems with his oxygen tank.

He was fit, so he survived the torturous journey down the mountain.

He returned the following year, confident that if he could survive the heartache of getting so close, he could make it.

Bianca Adler had two attempts at Everest as well.

Her 2025 climb was hampered by poor



weather, which meant she spent four days in the Death Zone.

"I feel horrible, my throat and my lungs, I'm so out of breath, even though yesterday I was at 8000m," she says in a clip that has been watched 80 million times on TikTok.

This year, she trained harder, determined to reach her goal.

Adler and her father would go on week-long hikes around Australia, which she says was tougher, in some cases, than Everest.

"There was no water so we would have to walk at night to avoid sweating too much," she says.

The training paid off.

When Adler left Base Camp 4, she was moving fast, taking only one breath per step compared to climbers in their 40s who would take as many as 10 breaths per step.

She was passing people as she clipped her safety gear on the fixed ropes that line the route to the summit.

The heartbreak of making the hard decision to turn back last year made reaching the top, even though it was in the dark at about 2.30am, even more special.

Less than 24 hours later, Ahmad would reach the top too.

Everest had been Ahmad's dream since she was a child in Afghanistan.

"I grew up on a mountain – the village I grew up in was 5000m, I knew about Mt Everest when I was 12," she says.

But the chances of doing something as incredible as even attempting to climb Everest seemed remote.

"When I finished my high school, exactly the age Bianca is now, I went to Kabul to study," she says.

"The Taliban stopped our bus on the way to Kabul and they attacked and killed most of the people inside the bus.

"It is incredible that now I am living in Australia and I have been able to climb Everest.

"We are living in a very beautiful country. It is the privilege of living in this country – that's why I made it to the top of the world."

Life could have been different for Ahmad.

Girls in Afghanistan have been banned from attending school since the Taliban took control of Kabul following the withdrawal of United States troops in 2021.



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"It's sad, it's like hell for women living in Afghanistan," Ahmad adds.

But she says she wants her climb to inspire other young girls in Afghanistan.

"I'm getting messages from girls in Afghanistan, they are getting the courage to do things," she says.

Everest has captured the world's imagination since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first summited the 8848m mountain in 1953.

The achievement lifted spirits in post-war Britain, which was still living on rations.

It still captures the imagination, but some now claim the sport is too dangerous, and the death toll too high.

Others say it has become too commercial, with companies competing for clients.

There have been questions about the rubbish left behind, or whether sherpas, the local Nepalese guides, are being adequately paid for risking their lives.

Expeditions can cost more than \$70,000, but reputable companies pay good money to sherpas who give climbers the chance to go on the trip of a lifetime.

Adler has seen some of those criticisms in the comments on her social media.

She has 200,000 followers on TikTok and 103,000 followers on Instagram.

She says she only started sharing details of her travels on social media as a quick way to update her family and friends, and then it exploded.

Ahmad fundraised about \$13,000 towards her trip, raided her savings and borrowed the rest from the Baba Mazari Foundation in Adelaide.

She says she climbed Everest partly to highlight how important it is to look after your mental health.

"I climbed Everest not only to represent women from Afghanistan, but also to raise awareness about mental health here in Australia, something I have personally struggled with," she says.

"The journey was about showing that even during difficult times, it's possible to find strength and a way forward."

Adler and Ahmad were planning to meet up again, at a barbecue with other members of the climbing community, in the week after they caught up for this story.





From far left, River Ahmad on the way to summiting Mt Everest in May; Bianca Adler, 18, celebrating becoming the youngest Australian to conquer the world's highest peak; Ahmad in training; Adler with her dad, Paul, at Island Peak Base Camp, in the Everest region, in April; right, Adler on the famous mountain; and, bottom left, one of Ahmad's social media posts. Pictures: Instagram

"It's a really special moment to be back with River, now that we have both summited and we're both safe again," Adler says.

They are part of a new generation of women climbers, determined to tread their own path.

Adler has spent time with another record-breaking female climber, Norwegian Kristin Harila, who climbed all 14 of the world's highest peaks in 92 days.

Adler and Ahmad have been asked so many times, "What's next after climbing Everest?" that they joke about it when they're together.

Whatever happens, they will both keep climbing.

Adler still has to complete year 12. She has been methodically catching up on her studies as

she comes down from the highs of Everest.

Next year, she's likely to move back to Europe, near where she spent some of her childhood in Annecy, near the French Alps.

"I love climbing and Everest has only strengthened that love for climbing," she says.

Ahmad is completing an arts degree at Victoria University and is planning her next adventure, too. She is in training to climb all 14 of the world's 8000m peaks.

In the meantime, she has become a sought-after speaker, providing her services free, as she talks about mental health, motivation and resilience. "It feels very special to be able to give something back to the community that has supported me," she says. ■



Coastrek is next challenge

Bianca Adler has summited Mt Everest's Death Zone – and now she has another endurance challenge in her sights.

The youngest Australian to ever climb the world's tallest mountain has been named Coastrek's new official ambassador for this year, announcing a brand new route through Sydney's eastern suburbs. She is joining the charity walking challenge to issue a powerful wake-up call to young Australians – particularly young women – to step outside their comfort zone, embrace adventure and discover what they're capable of.

The 18-year-old will walk to raise funds for mental health charity Beyond Blue.

"I've stood on top of Mt Everest, but I've never

walked 50km in a single day," she says.

"That's why I'm so excited to take on my first Coastrek. It's a completely different endurance challenge, and I can't wait to experience it alongside thousands of other Australians."

But the teen's mission goes far beyond physical endurance. She is often seen trekking with her hair in pigtails, brightly painted nails, and a pink tutu, reflecting her belief that women should never feel they have to sacrifice their femininity to succeed in traditionally male-dominated pursuits.

"I've never believed you have to stop being feminine to be taken seriously," she says. "When I climbed Everest, I had pink ice axes, colourful nails and a pink

tutu. You can be fierce, adventurous and unapologetically feminine all at once."

Half of all mental health conditions develop by age 14, and disorders among young people have jumped by nearly 50 per cent in the past 15 years. Young women are experiencing the highest levels of psychological distress. Adler believes the antidote lies in choosing real-world, inconvenient experiences that build genuine resilience.

"We live in a world of constant convenience, but doing hard things makes you a better, stronger person," she says.

"We have to get the younger generation off their screens and into nature. Spending time outdoors and building

healthy habits through walking is one of the most powerful, accessible tools we have for mental wellbeing. Coastrek is the perfect way to start."

Coastrek founder Di Westaway says Adler is an extraordinary role model.

"She's shown incredible courage in some of the world's toughest environments, but what inspires us most is her passion for helping others realise they can achieve more than they ever imagined," she says.

Coastrek's new Sydney trail will offer 20km, 30km and 50km adventure start lines in Mosman, Rushcutters Bay and Vaucluse, finishing in Coogee.

Sydney registrations open October 13 at coastrek.com.au



Bianca Adler is a new Coastrek ambassador.