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The dangers of K2, from those who know it best

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Photography by Alex Buisse

In the coming weeks, Back Bay resident Vanessa O'Brien hopes to become the first American woman to reach the summit of K2, a 28,251-foot mountain accessible from Pakistan. One of the world's most dangerous climbs, the mountain boasts a staggering summit-to-death ratio of roughly 4-to-1. Here is what O'Brien will be up against, in the words of those who've climbed, studied, or documented the so-called Savage Mountain.

"This really is a sport where you have to be very good at suffering. Too often, climbers have gotten stuck high on K2 and didn't know how to hunker down and suffer through the pain. And many of those climbers ended up simply falling off."

Jennifer Jordan, author of "Savage Summit: The Life and Death of the First Women of K2" "It's the type of a mountain where literally one mistake will cost you your life."

Alan Arnette, climber who last year became the oldest American to reach the summit of K2 at 58 "In a single day on Everest, you could have as many on the summit as have ever summited K2."

Chris Warner, American climber and guide who reached the K2 summit in 2007 and has led more than 200 international expeditions "I think you go into [K2] sort of accepting that you have the possibility that you could die climbing. That's the fact of the matter."

Stewart Green, climbing author and expert for about.com "You have the potential for what we would call 'acts of God' — things that are just happening beyond your control."

"Once you do summit K2, it's not for boasting — it's a time for expressing gratitude. If you can summit and come home safe, then it's a gift." *Alan Arnette*

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