



Just It Do



OLA PRZYBYSZ STYLES
RED DRAGON (5.13C), A
CLASSIC LINE AT MOON
HILL, YANGSHUO, CHINA.

The life and climbs of Ola Przybysz, the expat Pole pushing the first-ascent envelope in China

BY MICHAEL LEVY

In August 2016, a picture of an obscure unclimbed peak popped up in a Yangshuo climbers group in WeChat—the WhatsApp of China. It showed a 12,500-foot limestone tower floating above the Tibetan village of Zhagana. The more ambitious climbers in the group immediately responded.

One of the climbers was Aleksandra “Ola” Przybysz, 35, a 5.14 climber and ex-pat Pole living in China since 2007 who’s a fixture in the national comp scene. Przybysz competes on plastic mainly to supplement her income from Green Step Adventures, the outdoor education and guiding company she founded in 2013 and runs from Shanghai. On the rock, her focus is on establishing new routes, making her an anomaly in this traditionally male-dominated arena. “Placing first in a World Cup or winning comps doesn’t feel that special to me,” she says. “But developing routes; getting to the top first; exploring places that are still untouched—it feels way more important.”

Blonde, blue-eyed, and with high cheekbones, Przybysz could just as soon pass for Swedish as Polish. She’s equally capable on thuggy, overhanging sport climbs—she has sent 5.14c at Yangshuo, China—as on granite splitters. To date, she has equipped and climbed dozens of routes from 5.9 to 5.13, and made the first ascent of at least as many previously bolted lines in places near Beijing and Shanghai; Yangshuo, Guangxi Province; Xi’an, Shaanxi Province; and Keketuohai National Park, Xinjiang Province.

When she saw the picture of Zhagana, she started planning, researching the peak.

In 2007, Przybysz moved with a boyfriend to Beijing to study at North China Electric Power University. She

spoke no Chinese and no English—just Russian and Polish. One day, when Przybysz boarded the wrong bus trying to reach a climbing gym, she ended up in an unfamiliar town in the countryside at midnight.

Every time she approached someone and tried to string the syllables of her university's name together, a garbled mess came out. "They'd ignore me and leave," Przybysz remembers. "I just sat down and cried." Not easily discouraged, Przybysz set to work building a life in China: She worked on her English and Chinese, got a job at a Beijing climbing gym, and started thinking of ways to get on real rock.

As Przybysz began planning her expedition to Zhagana, the challenge wasn't a matter of language—she had become fluent in Chinese. Nor was it a matter of navigation—she'd crisscrossed the country innumerable times. Nor was it a matter of climbing ability—she had redpointed four 5.14s and onsighted over a dozen 5.13s. It was simply a matter of harnessing the same tenacity responsible for her transformation over the past decade from a scared, lonely foreigner to one of the foremost pioneers of China's uncharted vertical.

Przybysz grew up in the town of Zgorzelec in southwest Poland, 80 miles from the sandstone towers of Adršpach, Czech Republic. Her father, Marek, raised bees, and her mother, Gabriela, taught behaviorally challenged kids, eventually adopting an older boy to join Ola and her brother and two sisters. Przybysz helped her father with the bees, horses, and sheep on the family farm.

At age 10, two things convinced her she wanted to be a climber: She went rappelling with her scout troop and she saw a picture of a friend climbing a two-spired summit at Sokoliki, a granite area in Poland. "My hands started sweating when I saw that picture," she says. "I remember thinking, 'I want to do that.'" She had a natural build for climbing—the sinewy look of a Dave Graham or an Adam Ondra, a physique so naturally thin her grandmother once said that she'd pay Przybysz to gain weight. ("I was super excited and ate a ton," recalls Przybysz. "But I just couldn't do it.")

For her thirteenth birthday, Przybysz's parents gave her a harness and a figure 8. But partners were scarce—most climbers were older—and Przybysz's other extracurriculars—the scouts, cross-country running (she was "pretty good" at the 5K), theater, helping on the farm—left little time. It would be almost 10 years before she used the gear.

Przybysz's parents constantly worried about her health. At 16, they took her to a doctor, concerned she wasn't eating enough. An ultrasonograph revealed that one of her kidneys was three times larger than normal. Further tests revealed a nonaggressive cancer causing the organ to swell. "Basically, it was a bag full of toxic

water, and if it popped I'd be done," Przybysz explains. Doctors told her if she didn't have an operation to remove the kidney, she only had two weeks to live.

The surgery was successful. "I have a big scar on my stomach but haven't had problems since," she says.

The doctors recommended she avoid high-energy athletics for the rest of her life, as well as anything that might stress her body: excessive drinking, partying, sleeping on the ground, even swimming in cold water. "Part of me thought, 'Maybe my life is fucked-up now,'" Przybysz says. "But then I realized that for all the time I had been sick, I was still running, going on scout trips, doing theater, horseback riding—and I was fine. And now I was healthy. So why shouldn't I do all that other stuff?"

In 2000, Przybysz enrolled in Wrocław University of Technology. For three years, she tried to take a climbing course, but failed to get into the perennially overenrolled class. At 21, exasperated, she tried out for the school's climbing team. The day before her tryout, however, a fire broke out in the school's climbing gym, closing it for a year. "It felt like the world was trying to stop me from climbing," Przybysz says.

Finally, in 2004, during her fourth year at the university, she was accepted into the course. Przybysz's innate ability impressed the instructor so much that he asked her to join the climbing team. A few weeks later, she visited Sperlonga, Italy, and sent a 7a (5.11d). That preternatural ability set her apart. Katariina Rahikainen, a Finnish climber who would later become one of Przybysz's partners in China, says that Przybysz always knows the perfect "combination of natural movement and strength" and never looks like she's "struggling or powering through." Przybysz went on to compete in events across Poland, including Polish Nationals, where her focus became lead climbing.

When she graduated in 2006 with a masters in

"Winning comps doesn't feel that special," Przybysz says. "But developing routes, exploring places that are still untouched—it feels way more important."

PRZYBYSZ ON THE NIPPLE ROUTE (5.10A), KEKETUOHAI NATIONAL PARK.



PHOTOS BY GARRETT BRADLEY (2)

PRZYBYSZ FOLLOWS
P3 (5.11A) ON THE FA OF
KEKETUOHAI NATIONAL
PARK'S FISHY FLIP-FLOPS.





PRZYBYSZ LEADS P4 (5.10) OF GATE TO ASGARD (5.12A; 9 PITCHES), ZHAWADUO, ZHAGANA, TIBET.

physics, Przybysz says she “wasn’t sure what to do,” and so decided to follow her then-boyfriend to Beijing. She accepted a one-year scholarship to study Chinese language and culture, eager for a new adventure.

Back in 2007, Przybysz did eventually find the gym she sought—a gym-cum-bar called Extreme Experience on Beijing’s outskirts. As she plugged into the climbing community, Przybysz wanted to explore Baihe, a granite area outside the city. Hard up for climbing partners, she took matters into her own hands: In May 2008, she hopped on the bus to Miyun, the town closest to Baihe. From there, she walked the 10.5 miles to the area’s pink granite domes.

She walked up to the Lao Guai (“Demon”) crag and recognized climbers from Extreme Experience. They let her join, and Przybysz toproped a 5.12c in the dwindling daylight. She started climbing and became a route-setter at another Beijing climbing gym, O’le Sports Centre, where she eventually became manager.

In the next several months, she connected with a crew of outdoor climbers, notably a coworker at O’le, Rahikainen. They laughed it up with cringeworthy humor (“Kata would joke, ‘I’m *Finnished*,’ at the top of a climb, and I would say, ‘The rock is so *Polish-ed*”). They also motivated each other to train and climb harder. At Baihe, Przybysz sent her first 5.13b (*Demon*) and began onsighting 5.12c. After ticking the 300-ish existing climbs, Przybysz set her sights on the “forgotten routes”—the already bolted, unredpointed lines.

One was an overhanging line of crimps on a free-

standing boulder. While one hand crimped, the other bumped up an arête. Przybysz began working the line with Rahikainen. When Rahikainen felt she was getting close, she would take her burns sans shirt—“Kata would always do her first ascents topless,” Przybysz says. Rahikainen came close, but Przybysz put the project down first, dubbing it *Big Sparrow*, a 5.13c.

Przybysz also got her first taste of development. “The Beijing climbing association has a lot of money for bolting, and they’ll give you the bolts and resources,” she says. As one of her first bolted routes, she equipped and climbed an overhanging Baihe 5.13b called *Egyptian*. Says Przybysz, “At first, I bolted things because I had run out of routes, but in the back of my mind it was always the next step: not just doing what other people have done.”

In 2011, she joined the Petzl RocTrip to the Getu He Valley and bolted a 5.12d with the Australian Duncan Brown. It was her first time bolting ground-up, which proved a much more unwieldy process. Says Przybysz, “It took me three days. I had a really heavy drill that I could only get up to the rock by swinging it. I had to drill wherever it stopped on the rock.” The experience left her depressed. Later in the trip, the French climber Arnaud Petit invited her to equip a route with him. Recalls Petit, “I like to share my climbing knowledge, and for someone who lives in China and has so much potential, it seemed even more obvious my little teaching would be used very well.”

The next morning, Przybysz and Petit hiked to Getu’s Great Arch. They started bolting a route ground-up—what would become *Ceramic House* (5.10c). “At a cer-

Over three weeks, Przybysz and crew established about 90 new pitches in Keketuohai, split between single-pitch crags and multi-pitch outings. She also wrote the area’s first major guidebook.

PHOTO BY GARRETT BRADLEY

tain point, Arnaud said I should just go to the top and bolt it top-down,” Przybysz remembers. “So I soloed the rest [to put in an anchor] because you don’t say no to Arnaud Petit!” Back on the ground, Petit said, “You know, you’re a little bit crazy, Ola.”

While living in Beijing, Przybysz began traveling. In Thailand in 2011, she sent her first 5.13d, *Jai Dum*, a bouldery route up limestone edges and flakes. She also began applying for grants from the Polish Mountaineering Association to develop climbs further afield. They sent her to Morocco’s Taghia Gorge in 2010, where she repeated a 5.13a big wall. In 2011, she received funding to go Madagascar’s Tsaranoro Massif, where she and her partner Kuba Jaworski made the first almost-free ascent (redpointing all but one pitch), at 5.12c, of *L’Escalier Magique*, a 2,500-foot line equipped by Gerhard Thomas and Mark Gacio.

In September 2012, she spearheaded a trip to Keketuohai National Park, China—a place that had only been visited by two prior expeditions, in 2010. When she and five other climbers arrived, they saw 108 granite peaks, myriad faces thousands of feet high, and only a dozen existing routes. “Everyone was pointing out walls and calling dibs, yelling, ‘That’s my line, that’s my line!’” Przybysz says.

Przybysz partnered with Garrett Bradley, an American photographer then based in Beijing, to open *Turtle Power*, a four-pitch 5.12 up slabs and cracks. After he led a runout 5.9 slab, Przybysz entered the hard terrain. “There was a several-move boulder problem that Ola had to pull to get established in the crack,” Bradley says. “She was really bold. The gear wasn’t very good; the anchor I had built was only a couple pieces.” After a couple of falls—in which the gear popped and sent her back to the belay—she fired the pitch, a 5.12.

Over three weeks, Przybysz and the group established about 90 new pitches in Keketuohai, split between single-pitch crags and multi-pitch outings. She went on to write the area’s first major guidebook, *Keketuohai Climbing Routebook*, published in 2012.

Back in Baihe, one unsent line still called to her: a 70-foot finger crack known as *Steve and John*, after would-be first ascentist Steve McClure and fellow UK legend John Dunne. In April 2001, McClure tried to send the poorly protected, slightly overhanging crack on gear, but never finished it. (Dunne didn’t try the route, as it was “out of his league at the time of the visit,” recalled McClure in a Facebook message.)

After receiving McClure’s permission, Chinese climbers retro-bolted it, but the FA remained up for grabs. Przybysz started working the route alone on a top-rope self-belay. The crux came at the third bolt—a razor-thin layback on minuscule holds, in which Przybysz hiked her feet up to her hands. In June 2012, after two seasons, she freed the crack at 8b+ (5.14a).



PRZYBYSZ SHOWS CHILDREN IN ZHAGANA THE PICTURES SHE’S TAKEN OF THEM.



PRZYBYSZ DOES A LITTLE LIGHT GARDENING ON GATE TO ASGARD, ZHAGANA.

“The second I sent it, I told my employer I was quitting and leaving Beijing,” says Przybysz. “I went to Shanghai”—where her then-boyfriend (the same one she had moved to Beijing with) was again moving for a new job—“and I haven’t climbed at Baihe since.”

After moving to Shanghai in 2013, Przybysz founded an outdoor education and guiding company with a Shanghai-based Brazilian alpinist, Marcos Costa, and a Chinese friend, Maoniu (“Yak” in Tibetan), who owned Hengyi Climbing Gym. They named the outfit Vertical Horizon. Costa bowed out to pursue his professional climbing career not long after, so Przybysz and Maoniu rebranded the company as Green Step Adventures.

Over the next three years, they grew the business and expanded their slate of trips. In addition to Lin’an, a climbing area near Shanghai, they started running longer trips to Getu and Beijing. Today, they have 10 to 15 trips per year. Between that, climbing, and running

her company, her life was fully booked.

One extracurricular she fit in was the Chinese edition of *Ninja Warrior* in mid-2015. She reached out to the competition on behalf of a fanboy friend who wanted to land a spot on the show, but then the organizers asked Przybysz herself to join. In a one-hour training session before filming, she realized that she could do all the obstacles easily—except for the Warped Wall, a quarter pipe you must run up.

In a YouTube video, Przybysz summarily dispatches the early obstacles. Then, at the Warped Wall, she fails on her first two attempts. “You’re only allowed three tries,” she says. Before her final try, the camera zooms in, showing determination in her eyes. She charges forward, barely sticking the lip. She then mantels onto the finishing platform and throws her hands in the air, smiling. To date, she remains the only woman to have finished the Chinese *Ninja Warrior* course.

In 2016, though Shanghai was still her home base, Przybysz started spending more time in Yangshuo where she’d agreed to manage two apartment complexes for a friend. Nestled in the limestone karst mountains in Guangxi Province, Yangshuo is the birthplace of sport climbing in China, with its highest concentration of difficult climbs.

There, she started projecting again. Over a three-day period that winter, she tried *China Climb*, a 70-foot 5.14b. She’d departed from her notorious “no training, just climb anything and everything” regimen, adding running. When she returned in the spring, she sent the route on her first day in just three attempts.

Looking to test her “newfound power,” Przybysz turned to *Spicy Noodle*. Established by Chris Sharma in 2009, the 120-foot line follows a tufa feature at the White Mountain Crag, and weighs in at 5.14c. On her flash attempt, she climbed halfway through the crux, and eyed the hold at the end that marked the easier, 5.12c climbing. She eventually fell, but it got her “super psyched.”

After six or seven more days—another 12 to 15 attempts—*Spicy Noodle* went down, bumping Przybysz into the exclusive club of women who’ve climbed 8c+ or harder. “I’d love to try 9a [5.14d] now,” she says. “I think I can do it.”

Bradley sees a connection between Przybysz’s adventurousness and her discipline in projecting hard sport climbs: “She’s always motivated to climb,” he says. “Some sport climbers are more complacent, maybe waking up late or only climbing if the weather’s good. But Ola is always gung ho.” That mindset, says Bradley, has spurred her to organize big expeditions like Madagascar in 2011, Keketuohai in 2012, and both Zhagana and Xi’an in 2017. “She’s always ready to be the first one, whether it’s at the crag or a whole new

area,” he says. “Ola has a competitive spirit that drives her for continuous improvement.”

“I like going places that no one has been,” Przybysz says. “I’m not usually putting up these climbs for others. Whatever I leave, I want it to be clean, nice, and pretty, and I hope people come climb it. But I mainly want to go to the places that nobody has been, to be part of the landscape, and to get into the communities.”

Women have long been a minority in exploratory climbing, if not the whole sport. In a phone interview, former California Stone Master Lynn Hill recalled that she and a couple other female friends, like Mari Gingery, “were the only women really pulling down with the Stone Masters back in the day.” While Hill never felt she had something extra to prove by being a woman, she was keenly aware of challenging gender norms: “When a woman outdoes [men] in this sport that has a lot of machismo and often requires a lot of upper-body strength, a lot of men just aren’t mature enough to accept that on a conscious or even subconscious level.”

Przybysz has observed this dynamic as well, citing mansplaining at the crags and adding, “I get super-annoyed sometimes because no one will listen to me, just because I’m a girl.” Moreover, female first ascentionists and developers are a rarity, a fact Przybysz is quite conscious of. “I’m the only girl I know of in China really doing it,” she says.

Hill commiserates: “I understand what Ola probably experiences, particularly in an even more traditional and patriarchal society and culture [like China].”

In summer 2016, when the photo of Zhagana popped up on WeChat, Przybysz reached out to He Chuan, a legendary Beijing-based climber and one of the few Chinese climbers doing big walls. “He does lots of sketchy ascents in the mountains,” Przybysz says, “and he’s also a very good ice climber.” In 2015, in Shaanxi Province, he did an eight-day, roped-solo first ascent on Hua Shan, a 2,000-foot granite wall that had only seen a handful of climbs prior (several by He Chuan himself). In 2016 alone, He Chuan established 30 new ice climbs. He Chuan insisted they recruit a third member for the Zhagana trip; Ola asked Bradley to join them.

In May 2017, the trio came face-to-face with Zhagana’s stacked, undeveloped limestone valleys. Situated in the Tibetan enclave of Gansu Province, Zhagana village (elevation 9,900 feet) “is perched on a steep hillside where each level is only wide enough to contain one street and one row of houses,” Bradley says. The peaks, with their 1,000-plus-foot walls, form a natural fortress, and the hills are covered in conifer forests. Fluttering, multicolored prayer flags and purple alpine flowers spot the terraced fields of wheat and



PHOTO BY GARRETT BRADLEY

Prybysz has already done more in her 14 years of climbing than most will do in a lifetime.

barley below the peak at the center of the massif, Zhawaduo, some of its walls towering up to 2,000 feet.

During their first two days, the three climbers scouted the cliffs. “We’d pass frozen waterfalls in the forest,” Prybysz says. “It’s amazingly beautiful.” Finally, the team found their line: a scraggly, intermittent crack system that split the 1,000-foot southwest face of Zhawaduo. He Chuan took the first lead, gardening his way up the dirty crack. “He placed one loose cam in the first 70 feet of 5.10 climbing,” Prybysz says. “I made him place a bolt after that because it was too sketchy.” Above the bolt, He Chuan climbed 80 feet to the first belay, placing only three cams, before a snow squall forced the climbers to retreat.

The next day, they juggled back up. Prybysz started up the loose second pitch with “crappy, suspect gear,” according to Bradley, placing a bolt halfway. She was

happy to have it: the next moves were some of the “sportiest and hardest” of the route, Prybysz says.

She will never forget the pitch’s final 70 feet. “There was no solid gear,” she says. “I was slinging clumps of vegetation mostly. When I got to the end, I was trying to balance on this sloping, grassy ledge and drill a bolt. It was the scariest bolt I’ve drilled in my life.”

At the end of the second day, they fixed their ropes and returned to town. They repeated this routine the third day, pushing their ropes higher. On the fourth day, after climbing seven pitches, they topped out Zhawaduo at sunset. Prybysz, He Chuan, and Bradley had swung leads; including belays, they placed 16 bolts, all on lead. They christened their new 1,000-foot route *Welcome to Zhagana* (5.10+ A1).

In their remaining time, they rap-bolted a second route 100 feet east. The nine-pitch *Gate to Asgard*



PRZYBYSZ STRETCHES THROUGH THE FINAL CRUX ON *BROKEN* (5.13B/C) AT BEGINNER CRAG, BAIHE VALLEY, WHERE SHE CUT HER TEETH WITH FIRST ASCENTS.



PRZYBYSZ ON HER HARDEST REDPOINT TO DATE, SPICY NOODLE (5.14C), WHITE MOUNTAIN CLIFF, YANGSHUO.



DRILLING AN ANCHOR
ON THE FA OF WELCOME
TO ZHAGANA.

(5.12a) is much cleaner and less stressful, with two pitches in the middle ascending iron-composite xenoliths. Despite being one of only three individuals to have climbed in Zhagana, Przybysz is already formulating plans to return: “There’s so much potential there. It’s endless. Amazing rock quality. I want to bolt a route up a 600-meter wall,” she says.

Przybysz has already done more in her 14 years of climbing than most will do in a lifetime. Perhaps it’s her restless “Just do it” nature, instilled in her by her hard-working parents. Part of her thinks it might be time to move on from China. She exhausted the lines in Baihe before relocating, and while there is limitless potential in other provinces, she has done much of what she hoped to. If she leaves, it will likely be for South Africa.

Regardless of where she ends up, she’ll keep seeking new experiences. Consider an expedition she took to the Shuangqiao Valley, Sichuan, in 2014, at a point in her career when she had no real alpine experience.

She and her partner, the New Zealander David Hood, were kicked out of the park by local rangers for no apparent reason. “We had to sneak back in through a side valley in the middle of the night,” she says. After a four-day approach, they battled ice-filled vertical cracks and postholed across ledges with waist-deep snow drifts, completing a single-day first ascent of the unclimbed 5,300-meter Xuanwu via the peak’s southwest ridge. They had only brought rock gear, expecting mellow conditions. Hood got frostbite from standing around belaying in his rock shoes.

“It was adventure climbing for sure,” Przybysz says. “But I loved it.”

MICHAEL LEVY IS A COLORADO-BASED WRITER WHO HAS BEEN FALLING OFF CLIMBS FOR 10 YEARS.

“There was no solid gear,” she says of her lead on the southwest face of Zhawaduo. “I was just slinging clumps of vegetation.”