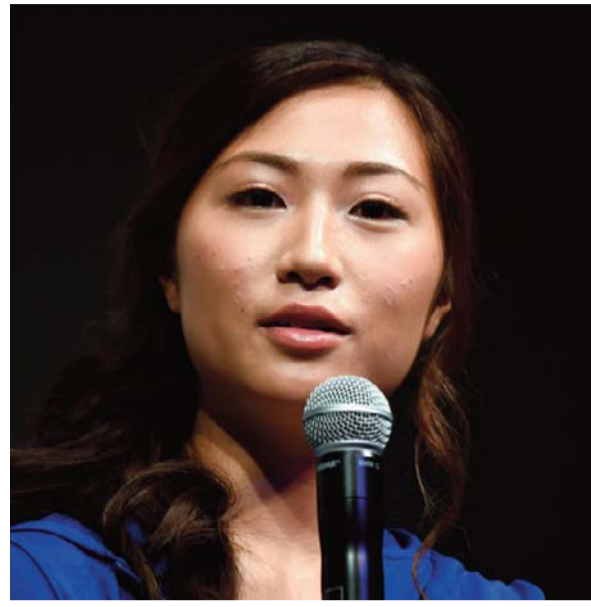


FEATURES



This handout from Marin Minamiya shows Japanese mountaineer Marin Minamiya (right) posing for a self-portrait on the peak of Mount Everest. — AFP photos



Marin Minamiya answering questions during a press conference in Tokyo.



This handout released by Marin Minamiya and taken on December 20, 2015 shows Japanese mountaineer Marin Minamiya posing for a self-portrait at the South Pole.

# Everest-conquering Japan teen eyes explorers' 'Grand Slam'

Japanese teenager Marin Minamiya has already conquered Mount Everest and the highest peaks on six other continents, plus a journey to the South Pole. Now the 19-year-old university student has the North Pole in her sights as she tries to become the youngest person to ascend the seven peaks and venture to opposite ends of the earth. Only 51 people have completed the feat, known as the Explorers Grand Slam, according to a website dedicated to the challenge. Not bad for someone who thinks scaling jaw-dropping mountains is just a "hobby". "I am not a climber so I do not intend to continue climbing high peaks", Minamiya told AFP in a recent interview in Tokyo.

"I enjoy the process of getting there, meeting people." "(It) is all about challenging yourself, you have to go over your own limits, fight your weakness. It's almost like meditation and I really enjoy that." The inspiration for Minamiya—who recently

landed a sponsorship deal with a major Japanese clothing chain—was a school trip in Hong Kong, where her family had moved for work. The then 13-year-old was fully engrossed in the online world, often chatting with friends through social media rather than in person. One day her class ventured onto some of the southern Chinese city's hilly terrain—and Minamiya was hooked. "It was so refreshing. It was new to us," she said. "We were communicating with each other in real life, using analog map and compasses, and we thought, 'My goodness. I did not know there was so much beauty out there.'"

### 'Way too determined'

Then she started scaling mountains in Nepal and Tibet. After turning 17, she took up a challenge to complete the Explorers Grand Slam. Now, she just needs to reach the North Pole—hopefully in April—to finish the circuit. "My family was sur-

prised. They said, 'Out of nowhere, why?'" she said, adding that neither of her parents are climbers. "There were times when several adults came to me and said: 'There is no way you can do it. You are just a young Japanese girl without experience. 'But that did not matter to me. I was just way too determined,' she added.

Minamiya started with the 6,961-metre (22,838-foot) Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America, in early 2015. In December last year she scaled Vinson Massif in Antarctica, where she ventured to the South Pole. She also stood atop Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro, Australia's Mount

Kosciuszko, Russia's Mount Elbrus and in May this year the 8,848 meter Everest. She is the youngest Japanese to reach the top of the world's highest mountain. Her seventh and final summit was North America's Denali, also known as Mount McKinley, in July.

While it is the highest, Everest was not the toughest, she said, shivering at the memory of Mount Elbrus. "It is supposedly one of the easiest mountains of the 'Seven Summits'. However, this was in winter and when I climbed Elbrus it was right before Everest." "I had one week to climb this mountain and the weather was absolutely terrible, the mountain conditions were terrifying, the whole mountain was frozen—it looked like an ice skating rink". And two days later she was scaling Everest in Nepal. "I just don't give up and I feel that every mountain has taught me new lessons and it made me a much stronger person", she said. — AFP



Harvesters, paid in a job-by-job basis, pick saffron flowers at one of Molineta de Minaya saffron company's plots in Minaya. — AFP photos



A basket full of saffron flowers lies on the ground of one of the Molineta de Minaya saffron company's plots in Minaya.



Saffron stigmas are poured over a sieve used to dry them.



A harvester pulls up a saffron flower from its root.



Saffron cleaners work at Molineta de Minaya company's warehouse.

# Saffron, rural Spain's crisis-beating spice

On the arid, wind-swept plateau of central Spain, saffron producers are reaping the benefits of a return to favor of the precious spice introduced by Arabs in the Middle Ages. After a lull in production due to the high cost of growing saffron in Spain, farmers are now back in business as customers have started seeking quality over lower prices. Sitting around three long tables at the Molineta company in Minaya, a 1,600-strong village 200 kilometers (124 miles) southeast of Madrid, elderly ladies extract bright red stigmas from violet saffron crocuses that will subsequently be dried and sold off. Every day during the autumn harvest, Segunda Gascon, 78, blackens her fingers as she works the fragrant petals, a gesture she has practiced again and again since 1964 when she was given a small batch of seedlings for her wedding.

She is part of a group of around 50 people—many of them retired—who are paid to help out at this time of year in the small village of the Castilla-La Mancha region. Nearby Dolores Navarro, 83, sings a folk song as she works: "The saffron rose is a fragrant flower, that grows at sunrise and dies at sunset." She remembers the men who would come to the village in the 1960s to buy the spice "at a high price."

### All by hand

But then came the modernization of agriculture, which led to a drop in many food prices. Saffron though, which relies on intensive manual labor, remained expensive and Spanish producers were unable to keep up. From more than 100 tons a year at the start of the 20th century, Spanish production dropped over the decades to reach just 1.9 tons in 2014, the last official figure. By comparison Iran—where the workforce is cheaper and the selection of stigmas less strict—says 93 percent of worldwide saffron production came from the country in 2015, at 350 tons.

Spain, Morocco and Kashmir shared what was left. "In the 1980s, saffron was ruinous," says Molineta founder Juan Antonio Ortiz, a 66-year-old farmer. Standing by his field, he keeps an eye on the basket-carrying Bulgarian, Senegalese and Malian day laborers, who have been picking still-closed flowers since daybreak and are paid 5.20 euros a kilo. Unlike others, Ortiz decided not to abandon his precious flowers, and it eventually paid off.

His 10 hectares (25 acres) of saffron now earn his family "around 500 euros per kilo," which comes to around 50,000 euros a year. "I held on because I always liked growing this," he said. "I was barely walking and I was already in the saffron plots with my mother picking the flowers."

At the turn of the century, Ortiz and his wife Maria Angeles bet on quality to broaden their production, which now comes complete with a protected designation of origin (PDO) label recognized by the European Union. They sell their saffron to distributors from Spain, the United States, European countries and even the United Arab Emirates.

### 'Threads of gold'

Once Maria Angeles has sorted through the stigmas with tweezers, and dried them on a silk canvas above a small fire,

she puts them in small plastic bags to wait for experts who control their composition to give them their PDO. They will then be able to sell the saffron threads with their distinctive aroma. The price? Four euros per gram. Spanish saffron is "among the best of anywhere," says Pat Heslop-Harrison, professor of agricultural biology at Britain's Leicester University. "Castilla-La Mancha has the perfect conditions," he adds, pointing to "the types of soil, climate, how it is harvested and dried."

That fact has not gone unnoticed among Spain's legion of chefs. "In Spain, we treat it as if it were threads of gold," says Daniel Lasa, chef at Spain's Michelin-starred Mugaritz restaurant. "La Mancha's saffron is much clearer, less bitter" than that of Iran, he adds. He prefers using the spice for soups and gelatines, and to accompany seafood. In the region around Minaya, Spain's devastating economic crisis, which erupted in 2008, pushed many to return to growing what is known as "red gold." There are now 267 producers of saffron with the PDO label alone in Spain. Just 100 kilometers away in Toledo province where unemployment is sky-high, small-scale producers are on the rise, grouping themselves into cooperatives. And in Minaya, the Ortiz family is no longer alone. Antonio Garcia Filoso, a 36-year-old farmer, started planting saffron two years ago, and produced three kilograms last year. — AFP



A harvester, paid in a job-by-job basis, picks saffron flowers.



Molineta de Minaya saffron company owners Mari Angeles Serrano (left) and Jose Antonio Ortiz pose holding a basket full of bloomed saffron bulbs outside their company's warehouse.



A saffron cleaner picks the stigmas of a saffron flower.