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Victor Vescovo has climbed the earth's highest mountains, skied the North and South Poles and travelled to the deepest parts of the world's oceans. He is the first person to have reached the highest and the lowest points on the planet. He's also made a personal fortune in private equity with stints at Bain Consulting, Lehman Brothers and his own firm Insight Equity, which he founded in 2002. But he says his fondest memories stem from when he was pedalling around his hometown of Dallas, Texas, on his pushbike.

"One of the happiest days of my life was when I got my first bicycle and I actually had the ability to go wherever I wanted to go, and to the great horror of my parents, I did that a lot," he says.

As an adult, however, Vescovo didn't just want to go wherever he could, he wanted to go where no one had ever gone before. "I think certain people have a genetic predisposition to being risk-takers or just being incredibly curious, and I definitely fall on one end of that spectrum. And I have expressed that throughout my whole life, not just in technological or physical pursuits, but also in business and everything else. I always want to be looking for something new and interesting to do. I don't think I have ever been bored in my life."

Vescovo spoke to WISH in late January via Zoom from Hawaii as he prepared for his next adventure: climbing Mauna Kea. Technically the tallest mountain in the world, it's 10,210m from the sea floor to the summit (Everest is 8848m above sea level). On February 4, Vescovo announced on Twitter that he had completed the full ascent of Mauna Kea. After the 5016m dive, he and his companion, Dr Cliff Kapono, endured 43km of open ocean canoeing, 59km of uphill biking and a five-hour summit climb. "I am a bit tired and sunburned," he said in a subsequent tweet.

In 2017 Vescovo became the 12th American (and the 38th person) to complete what is known as the Explorers Grand Slam, which requires climbing the highest peaks on all seven continents, including Everest, and skiing at least 100km to the North and South Poles. He then considered space travel as his next challenge, but quickly realised it

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Adventurer and financier Victor Vescovo has had a life filled with highs and lows – literally. He's reached the planet's heights and plumbed its depths, and needed a watch that was up to the challenge

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wasn't really feasible. Besides, there were large parts of this planet that were still uncharted.

The deepest part of the world's oceans is Challenger Deep, a few hundred kilometres off the coast of Guam and about 10,929m deep. That, however, had been dived twice, including by the filmmaker James Cameron in 2012. But the floors of the world's other deeps – the Puerto Rico Trench in the Atlantic, the South Sandwich Trench in the Southern Ocean, the Java Trench in the Indian Ocean and the Molloy Hole in the Arctic – have never been reached by a human being.

Vescovo now had his new quest, but he decided to add a degree of difficulty to the experiment. His plan was to dive to all five of the deepest parts of the world in one year, effectively creating another Grand Slam. Oh, and he wanted to do it in a craft that hadn't been developed yet: a single submersible that could dive each of the deeps, like a Space Shuttle for deep-sea diving (Cameron's vessel, the Deepsea Challenger, got him the world's record for the deepest dive, but it suffered damage at the bottom of the ocean and was no longer operable.)

Vescovo teamed up with a Florida-based submarine manufacturer called Triton to develop his reusable submersible, which he called the Limiting Factor after a spaceship in science fiction author Iain Banks's Culture series of novels. It took a little over three years of development and testing to get the submersible, which looks like a giant stuffed envelope, to the point where it was ready for deep sea diving. Unusually for an enterprise such as this, Vescovo funded it mostly with his own money, reportedly more than \$US50 million.

But as Vescovo was preparing for his first deep-sea dive in the Limiting Factor, he decided he needed a mechanical chronograph wristwatch to take with him as a backup should the electronic systems in the submersible fail. So he walked into an Omega boutique in Dallas and bought himself a diver's watch made from titanium – the same material the Limiting Factor was made from – that was designed to go to just over 600m. "The salesperson asked me if I was planning to do any diving with the watch," he says. "I explained that I was going to take it to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, and I think he thought I was mad."

Vescovo took the watch on his first dive inside the Limiting Factor, and then wrote to tell Omega that it

NEWSLIFE



Vescovo teamed up with a submarine manufacturer to develop his reusable submersible, called the Limiting Factor. Top: One of the Omega watches taken to the ocean depths. Omega's developers made watches from cut-offs from the titanium hull of the Limiting Factor and strapped them to its outside





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survived the journey and that he planned on doing four more deep sea dives with it. Soon afterwards he was in Switzerland meeting with the company's CEO and product development teams.

"I didn't have any commercial partnerships at the time, and I didn't need that," says Vescovo. "But Omega was an interesting potential partner because I liked the brand and what it symbolised in terms of technological achievement and pushing the boundaries."

The Limiting Factor was designed to withstand up to 16,000 pounds of pressure per square inch (psi). By comparison, a nuclear submarine can dive to 1600 feet and sustain about 700 psi; a sperm whale can dive to about 3300 feet and survive 1500 psi. Omega's product developers decided they would test the limits of their diving watches by strapping some specially designed models to the outside of the Limiting Factor – two on the submersible's robotic arm and another on a data-gathering unit known as Lander.

Omega has been making underwater watches since the 1930s and a normal diver's watch is all in a day's work for its product developers, but to create a timepiece suitable to withstand the pressures of the Five Deeps Expeditions required an entirely different level of ingenuity from Omega's engineers. The Planet Ocean Ultra Deep Professional watches that were strapped to the outside of the Limiting Factor were actually made from cut-offs of the forged grade 5 titanium hull of the Limiting Factor. The lugs had to be fully integrated into the case body, and the sapphire crystal glass of the watch needed to be designed in the same way the viewports of the submersible were in order to spread the stress from the water pressure.

"The watch I have now has been down seven times," says Vescovo as he holds it up to his laptop camera to show WISH. "Omega developed a watch that could survive the incredibly hostile environment down there and I was happy to enable their technology as they helped promote what we were doing with the submersible. It's really the only commercial partner I have, and I think it's a really good marriage between their philosophy and their values and my own."

So, what's it like at the very bottom of the deepest parts of the ocean? "Well, it's dark; we bring our own light of course, but I guess the word that immediately comes to mind is that it's very peaceful," says Vescovo. "The feeling



THE FIVE DEEPS EXPEDITION IS MORE THAN JUST BOX-TICKING FOR VESCOVO; HE WANTED HIS RECORD-BREAKING MISSION TO ALSO BE DRIVEN BY SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

that you get is that it's a very quiet, old place. There is exotic life down there – there's not a lot – and in many respects it's the mountain tops or the desert of the oceans. The life that is there is very small because of the extreme environment. But the rocks are incredibly ancient, so you just get a sense that human beings haven't been on this planet very long, while the planet itself is very old and ancient."

The Five Deeps expedition is more than just box-ticking for an adventurer like Vescovo; he wanted his record-breaking mission to also be driven by scientific discovery. He invited Dr Alan Jamieson, a marine biology lecturer from Newcastle University in the UK, to join him in the hope of making fresh discoveries about life at the very depths of the ocean. "Currently we know more about the intricacies of the lunar surface than we do about the depths of our oceans. The discoveries made on this expedition promise a world of new scientific innovation in almost every area of biological, geological and oceanographic study," Jamieson told The Guardian in 2018.

In the Java Trench, one of the Landers that accompanied the Limiting Factor captured a translucent animal with a narrow tail trailing behind it – it was a new species of sea squirt (also known as an ascidian). Sea squirts are normally found anchored to the sea floor, but this one was floating above it. Jamieson later told Live Science that it was an evolutionary change that would allow the creature

to eat food that floated a few metres above the ground. On Jamieson's dive he also observed amphipods, which look like translucent cockroaches, in each of the Five Deeps, something that had never been observed before. And they saw more familiar creatures, such as starfish, sea cucumbers and hadal snailfish – palm-sized, tadpole-like creatures with small black eyes and semi-transparent bodies.

It takes about four hours for the Limiting Factor to reach the very bottom of the ocean – almost 11,000m – which is considered fast for underwater travel. That's thanks in part to the submersible's unique shape, which is designed to go up and down the water column as efficiently and quickly as possible. "The bottom of the ocean is about as deep as the height at which a commercial airliner flies, so if you can think about what it's like looking down on earth from the cruising altitude of a plane, that's how far down we are going," says Vescovo.

"It's a long way, yes, but in the grand scheme of things it's not that far, although the pressure is intense."

So, does Vescovo ever get scared on these dives? "No, not really," he says. "There's always a little bit of anxiety that everything is going to work properly, but I wasn't really that concerned because we had done so much testing, so there's not really a sense of great worry."

Despite venturing into some of the most extreme and dangerous places on earth, Vescovo insists he doesn't take risks that would place him or anyone else in harm's way. "I often tell people there is a very fine line between having a great adventure and being reckless. [Exploration] is not something in me that builds and builds where it gets to the point where I'm doing very dangerous or extreme things. For example, with mountain climbing I had an opportunity to go to K2, but I turned it down because I thought it was beyond my personal abilities and that I had achieved what I wanted to do and I wasn't going to push through to get to a point where I was going to endanger myself or others. There's a great Clint Eastwood line from the movie Magnum Force: a man's got to know his limitations."

When he is not plumbing the depths of the world's oceans, Vescovo, 54, is managing partner (and co-founder) of Insight Equity, which has offices in Texas and New York. He leads the company's investment activities in aerospace (he's been flying planes since he was 19), defence (he's also a retired naval officer) and electronics. It's his work in finance that allows him to explore the highs and lows of the world, but given he says there is so much more he wants to do and see, one wonders how he finds the time.

"It doesn't leave me much spare time to be honest," he says, "but I like what I do, and I work a great deal. I'm also a single guy with no kids and think that frees up a little bit of time perhaps, but I have also learned pretty disciplined time management. I tend to be pretty focused when I work, and I don't waste a lot of time doing things that don't add a lot of value. I think people can do a lot more if they manage their time more aggressively."

Private equity is all about providing investors with profit. So does Vescovo apply the same return on investment principles to the millions of dollars he has poured into exploring the world? "It's really more that I have the means that allows me to do this," he says. "There is a psychic return that you get as an individual, and then there's the return that you're giving back to your community as well. And this is my way of doing both of those things. So, yes, it's a large amount of money, but I'm actually helping to advance technology, and besides, I can't take the money with me when I die, so what am I going to buy? A larger house? Another car? I could do those things but it wouldn't be as interesting or as impactful as what I am doing now." ©