

'MY LIFE IN A DAY'

Vanessa O'Brien, adventurer

The 50-year-old mountaineer and explorer reveals how she stays on top of her game

I wake up at 8am and have a bowl of porridge – it's simple and keeps me full for a long time. I quickly read some news online, then head out the door for my first set of exercise – either a cardio or Pilates class at my local gym. To train for climbing at high altitudes, you have to do a lot of cardiovascular exercise. I usually climb stairs or do a cycling class every day.

'I also do some weights alternating between my upper and lower body, as you have to be able to

carry your own bodyweight. 'I've always been quite active – even when I held senior director roles at major banks, I went to the gym. I loved working in a corporate environment, but in 2008, during the recession, I realised it was time for something else.'

'I work out three to four hours a day before I go up a mountain'

NEW CHALLENGES

'In 2009, my husband Jonathan got a job in Hong Kong and this gave me impetus to think about what I wanted. A friend joked that I could climb Everest! At first, I thought "How could I possibly do that?". I had no high-altitude climbing experience. But after lots of research, I decided it was the perfect challenge. No one wants to sponsor a novice, but I worked with a mountaineering company who set up some training for me in Wanaka, New Zealand. It was the most exciting thing I'd ever done. I realised that, apart from the equipment, it's not overly complicated. You just have to be mentally tough, and that's often where women exceed the men.'

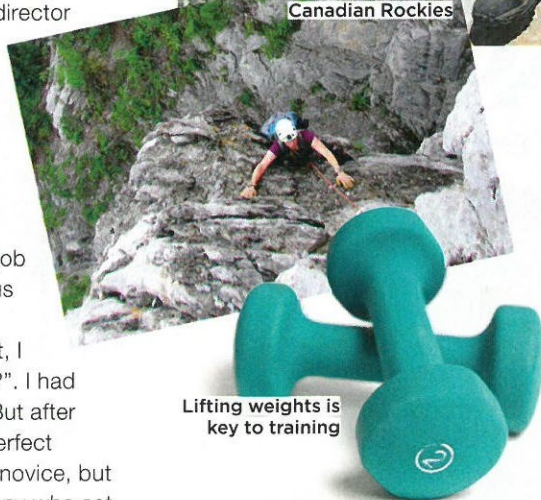
THE FIRST ASCENT

'I'd climbed Kilimanjaro in 2005, but it wasn't until 2011 that I scaled my first major summit. To convince myself I was "Everest ready", I climbed two 8,000m peaks – Shishapangma and Cho Oyu in the Himalayas – back-to-back, eight days apart. And, in May 2012, I climbed Everest. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I lost 20lbs and went through hell – one of my climbing partners lost all the toes on one foot and some of the others ran out of oxygen. 'All of my water bottles froze;



Scaling the Canadian Rockies

O'Brien on an expedition to the K2 area



Lifting weights is key to training

I had no liquid the whole 14-hour climb and became extremely dehydrated. On top of that, my camera battery died, my backup batteries froze and my headlamp fell off. I had such a sense of accomplishment at the end, though. It's so amazing that I get to do this'

THE NEXT STEP UP

'Next summer, I'm preparing to be the first British woman to climb and descend K2, in Pakistan – the world's second-highest peak and one of the most deadly. I work out for three to four hours a day at least

nine months before I go up a mountain. I also work on rock climbing as that's my weakness. In between training sessions, I plan my expeditions, speak at conferences and try to get sponsorship. My next expedition will see me Climbing for Climate Change, collecting samples to test radiogenic isotopes, to help scientists learn more about glaciers.

'Nutrition is vital. Lunch is often chicken or salmon with vegetables, and I have a small dinner in the evenings as I'm winding down. It's a good time to catch up on emails and read; I like girly magazines! Any spare time is spent with Jonathan or friends. I go to bed about 10pm – the earlier, the better! I try to avoid TV as it keeps me awake. Sleep is so important for repairing tissue, muscle and mind.'

RECORD BREAKER

- In 2013, O'Brien became the fastest woman to climb the highest peak on every continent (the '7 Summits' challenge) – in 296 days.
- O'Brien's summited four of the world's highest peaks and has trekked to the North and South Poles.
- She's also the fastest woman to do the Explorer's Grand Slam (climbing the '7 Summits' and walking to the North & South Poles) – in 11 months.

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