

Prevention^{AUSTRALIA}
inspiring
WOMEN

Life Changing Challenges
**I conquered
the wild**

If you want to boost your fitness, mood and passion for life, step out of your comfort zone and into the great outdoors to embark on a physical challenge.

BY STEPHANIE OSFIELD

“The first step is to stop asking yourself ‘What if I can’t do it?’ and start asking ‘What if I can?’”

When was the last time you engaged in an activity that maxed your fitness levels, lifted your spirits, tested your skills and pushed you out of your comfort zone? Can’t remember? Not sure you would even be up for it? Why not change tack, and your thinking, because that’s what a growing number of women are doing – like the three women featured here, they are seeking out adventures and finding fulfillment through physical activities that leave them feeling more vital, invigorated and resilient.

DISCOVERING NEW STRENGTHS

Engaging in physical feats and adventures can help you discover new abilities within yourself that you’d never realised you had, as well as passions that fuel a renewed sense of purpose in life.

There’s a definite payoff for your mind as well as your body, with a growing body of research showing people who embark on physical adventures enjoy a better quality of life, feelings of joy and liberation and more positive life experiences. Participants may also feel emotionally stronger due to overcoming their fears and pushing their limits. The whole experience can lead to a transformation in both physical and mental aspects of your life.

But you don’t have to be a hardcore adventurer, who lives off the adrenaline of each achievement – there’s a groundswell of women discovering active pursuits in their 40s, 50s and beyond, who have conquered many a mountain and changed their lives.

“At midlife lots of women have ticked off many of their life goals, such as having a family and succeeding in their career. Also, they have often spent years putting their own wellbeing and needs on the backburner,” says psychologist Professor Anthony Grant, from the Faculty of Science at the University of Sydney. “So women may then start to crave new invigorating and life-affirming experiences that break the routine, offer challenges and increase their feelings of self worth, autonomy and competence.”

FITTER THAN EVER BEFORE

“I am seeing a growing number of women who are fitter in their midlife than ever and have better flexibility, stamina, speed and muscle strength than they did in their 20s,” says exercise scientist, Martha Lourey-Bird. When we are younger we take our fitness for granted, but many of us discover that fitness is an asset with perks far beyond a slim silhouette. ►

HITTING THE HEIGHTS

Di Westaway, 58, did the world’s highest handstand in the Himalayas

“At almost 40, I was a worn-out mother of three children when a friend’s personal trainer invited me to join a climb of Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, the highest mountain in the southern hemisphere. I hoped it would just make me fitter but it transformed my entire life. I realised that wild adventures made me feel vital, purposeful and more alive.

Several years later I founded Wild Women on Top, to inspire women to undertake physical challenges. And along with them, I have kept on challenging myself, taking on difficult hikes, treks and mountain climbs.

My biggest challenge was doing the world’s highest handstand at 6,982 metres on the summit of Mount Ama Dablam in the Everest region of Nepal. The challenge took five weeks, which included trekking, making acclimatisation climbs and sleeping on the side of Himalayan mountains in tiny tents – sometimes in blizzards.

Mount Ama Dablam is a very steep, rocky ice peak so lots of rock climbing was involved, which I found exhilarating. But the night before we headed out for the summit I was exhausted, and perched dangerously on the mountainside I texted my buddy Danae back in Australia saying I wanted to quit. She said “Control your mind, Di.” And I did. I felt like I was doing it for the girls.

After struggling to the summit, it took all my strength to hold a handstand while wearing 10kg of gear. But it felt great to be there. The descent was also challenging because I couldn’t see the icy ground.

Once I got back to base camp I felt absolutely elated. When you challenge yourself against nature, you develop an empowering mental tenacity. Every physical feat makes me stronger, more confident and more resilient.”



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DI'S TOP: HER OWN LEGGINGS COURTESY OF LULULEMON



I felt such freedom being on the water. It is incredibly meditative and silent. It made me calm but fully alive.

THE SPIRIT OF THE WILD

Jacqui Holth, 46, undertook a week-long kayaking trip in Alaska

"For years I had wanted to see a whale up close in a wild setting so in 2016, I committed to getting fit enough to take a week-long kayaking trip in Alaska. Although I'm generally fit, for six months I stepped up my training. I went for 5km runs, kayaked on Sydney Harbour and strengthened my upper body with workouts involving push-ups, tricep dips and sit-ups.

My trip involved kayaking over seven days and camping on beaches at night. I felt such freedom being on the water. It is incredibly meditative and silent. It made me calm but fully alive. Sitting for long periods was challenging and paddling into the wind and swell and against the flow of the current from the glacial face was tough, but so worth it. My biggest highlight occurred on the first day - when a humpback whale appeared about 30 metres away. It went under the water then came up about 10 metres from me and I could clearly see its barnacles and eyes. I was so moved by its magnificence I had tears streaming down my cheeks.

This challenge reminded me that face-to-face experiences with wildlife in remote locations fill my soul and allow me to really connect with myself. It created a space to reflect and tap into my true desires and helped me find myself spiritually. At the end of the week I felt enormous gratitude and an overwhelming sense of being at one with nature. I already run a wellbeing company but this trip inspired me to start another one called Adventurous Spirit, to encourage and support people to adventure more often, regardless of age. The first step is to stop asking 'What if I can't do it?' and start asking 'What if I can?'"

"Women are increasingly recognising that exercise can also help plump up their skin, strengthen bones, boost mood and even keep their brains healthier, to protect against ageing issues such as dementia," says Lourey-Bird. But a weekly gym class may not be enough to sustain our interest, or challenge us physically.

Fitness adventures are ideal because there's an end goal; a challenge you need to train for, to build your strength and stamina to achieve - and then, the reward of accomplishment at the end. Travel companies report an upswing in adventure holidays - cycling, canoeing, trekking - enabling people to take an interest or a skill into a more challenging environment.

Adventure goals actually encourage a broader, more complete level of fitness than you'll achieve in a gym class. "When you repeat the same type of exercise over and over, you may go into cruise control and not push yourself as hard," says Lourey-Bird. "Your body may also adapt so that you reach a plateau, where you may be getting a little less benefit." But training for physical adventures requires mixing up your workouts, testing your limits.

The payoffs are many, even when you weren't an athlete at 20, and we're not just talking about stronger legs or a healthier heart. Setting yourself a physical challenge that gets you out of the gym and into nature can improve your confidence as well as boost your body image. "A natural environment can provide people with cognitive quiet, which fosters self-compassion as well as appreciation and respect for your body as part of a wider ecosystem requiring protection and care," says Professor Viren Swami, co-author of a study by the University College of London. ►

TAKING IT OUT OF THE GYM AND INTO THE WILD

People who combine physical challenges with natural settings have been shown to enjoy a spike in wellbeing that spills over from their training, trekking and traversing into everyday life. US research shows that being in nature makes people feel more vital and alive and satisfied with life, while hiking for four days can boost creativity.

But making the move from the gym to the wild does take some preparation. When setting physical challenges in the wild, exercise physiologist Nardine Presland suggests that you: "Make sure you start small and build your fitness to minimise risk of injury." To help you stay on track she suggests you set goals and challenges that are SMART:

- Specific:** Be clear about the end goal -for example, don't just aim to 'get fit', aim to walk 5km without stopping in the next 3 months
- Measurable:** How many weeks or months of training will you need?
- Attainable:** Make sure you will have the skills plus the fitness levels. This may mean you seek guidance or training tips from an expert.
- Relevant:** Raising money for charity or travel can add extra incentive
- Timely:** Setting a clear timeframe helps you stay motivated to train.

AIM FOR YOUR PERSONAL BEST

You don't need to go white-water rafting or climb Everest to enjoy an inspiring fitness-boosting outdoor adventure. "You might decide to start training for a hike or half marathon then work up to other challenges, such as a cycling tour or climbing a hill in your local area," says Lourey-Bird. "Your challenge should also push you to boost your fitness using different training activities such as weights, power walking and yoga."

Setting personal rather than competitive goals can also help spur you on. "If you are planning to boost your fitness by entering a long charity swim for example, aiming to reach the finish line will be more beneficial than trying to come in the top 10," Grant points out. "Then the next time you swim that distance again, aim to do it a little faster. Setting these kinds of goals based on achieving your personal best can help make you more likely to succeed in your challenge and leave you feeling satisfied that you ticked off that goal."

But while you are setting a challenge for yourself, don't underestimate the power of the group and how support can help you achieve your goal. Finding a like-minded bunch of people to share in the joy (and pain) will help you get where you want to go (see the box below).

The secret is to find your own personal mountain – a physical feat with the right level of challenge to encourage you to strive harder and reach higher. En route you will enjoy quality time in nature and stretch your abilities and staying power as you raise the bar and achieve new personal bests. Engaging in targeted training then enjoying the triumph of completing the physical feat itself will help you grow in mind, body and spirit. It will draw on your inner reserves and strengths to remind you just how incredibly tenacious and capable you are. **12**

FINDING ACTIVE ADVENTURES

Keen to embark on a fitness challenge in the wild? "Joining a group can help to make the experience more fun and social," suggests Di Westaway from Wild Women On Top, as well as giving you a cheer squad to help you get over any tough training bits. You can start with friends and family joining you on your weekend treks but if you want to take it that next step, the following organisations offer guidance and support as well as outdoor challenges that cater to a variety of fitness levels, activity interests and appetites for adventure:

Wild Women On Top wildwomenontop.com

Adventurous Life Project adventurouslifeproject.life

Intrepid Travel intrepidtravel.com/au

Australian Walking Holidays australianwalkingholidays.com.au

Women's Own Adventure womensownadventure.com.au

STANDING STRONG

Leila Fourie, 49, climbed the highest mountain in Antarctica

Eight years ago I took up mountaineering to counter the stress of my job as the CEO of a financial company. The travel and solitude involved in conquering a mountain was just what I needed to re-energise and re-boot. In recent years I have climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Mount Elbrus in Russia and mountains in South America, the Himalayas, Peru and New Zealand.

In January this year I went to Antarctica, the coldest and windiest continent in the world, to climb Mount Vinson, 4,892 metres above sea level.

To build endurance and fitness, I cross-trained 15 hours a week for six months. This involved doing long treks lasting 6-10 hours with a heavy backpack across hilly terrain, strength training, cycling, running and yoga.

I trained in a high altitude gym to simulate the low oxygen levels I would be experiencing. I also did a mountaineering course to learn how to use a rope and hitch-knot to help climb out of a crevasse after a fall.

The trip took two weeks but despite pain from freezing temperatures and getting a terrible cold and cough, I only thought about giving up once. It was after an exhausting day carrying a 25kg pack up an ice ascent of 1,200m at a 45 degree angle. But I pushed on to the next break and as we set up camp some climbers gave us a cup of hot chocolate to share between myself and my four fellow climbers. It tasted incredible and spurred me on to keep going.

The final climb took 12 hours at -37°C. When I reached the summit, I felt elated, relieved, exhausted and overwhelming joy. Mountaineering has taught me to dig deep, persevere and believe in myself. It reminds me that I am strong and can do anything I set my mind to."

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