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How I defied the Death Zone

Exercising without much oxygen might have huge benefits, but Bryony Gordon didn't like the sound of it one bit...

What do you do when your boss tells you that, for your next assignment, you are going to run on a treadmill while simultaneously being deprived of oxygen? Cry? Resign? Feel offended because you thought that she liked you, but now it seems she wants you dead?

Thankfully, it turns out that exercising in low oxygen levels, or hypoxic training, is good for you. The lack of O₂ heightens the exercise process. Climbers have long trained at altitude to prepare for ascents and now advances in technology have enabled scientists to create hypoxic chambers - rooms in which low oxygen levels mimic those found at high altitude and which are fitted with standard gym equipment. This means that anyone can have a go.

Indeed, marathon man Gordon Ramsay has taken to running in one with a rucksack full of weights strapped to his back.

And so it is that I find myself in Third Space, a gym in central London that houses the only commercial altitude-training centre in Britain, quaking with fear and mumbling the word hypoxic over and over to myself. Hypoxic, hypoxic - masaging to have a deficiency of oxygen in the blood. It doesn't sound good. Passengers who are in planes that suddenly lose pressure become hypoxic. People who climb Everest become hypoxic. I feel as if I am about to enter the Death Zone.

The man who is taking me there is Richard Pullan, an altitude-training specialist, who is currently preparing the intrepid explorer Bear Grylls for his latest wheeze: para-motoring over Mount Everest. I ask Pullan, 33, how depriving yourself of oxygen while exercising could possibly be any good for you. He explains that it forces the body into acclimatisation mode, producing extra red blood cells that actually



Flying low: top-class sportsmen and adventurers are using hypoxic training, but Bryony was more thrilled to learn of its effect on cellulite

I realise that I am not gasping for air and my lips are not turning blue

increase your ability to carry oxygen around the body.

"If you run in the chamber for 20 minutes two to three times a week, you are going to see enormous benefits," says Pullan, who adds that studies have shown that people who live in areas of high altitude live longer and have lower rates of heart disease. "It improves circulation and the blood supply to the brain. And when you have improved oxygen efficiency, you also rev up your metabolism. It's akin to fine tuning a car engine." It is particularly helpful

for people who suffer from asthma because of the positive effects it has on lung function. Pullan believes that people who suffer from moderate asthma can be cured with "relatively few sessions" in the chamber.

It is also believed to speed up the recovery of injuries (Wayne Rooney is said to have slept in a hypoxic tent when he broke his metatarsal last year), and of course sportsmen and women believe it enhances their performance. Cyclist Lance Armstrong uses a hypoxic tent before races, and the US speed-slating team used altitude training to prepare for last year's Winter Olympics, flying home with seven medals. Little wonder, then, that Chelsea FC is installing a hypoxic chamber in its training ground.

But that's not what I'm interested in. Best of all, Pullan tells me, is that 15 sessions of hypoxic training can improve the appearance of cellulite because it causes new blood capillaries to grow and improves circulation, which, he says, causes body fat "to even out".

The hypoxic conditions are controlled by huge industrial air compressors that whirr and swoosh and have scary pressure dials. "The compressors decrease the levels of oxygen from 20-9 per cent - normal at sea level - to 14-5, which is what you get when you go to about 9,770 feet," says Pullan.

I expected the chamber to resemble a Nazi-esque torture chamber but it is like an ordinary gym. I find this disappointing - until I see the sign on the door. "Due to the refined air content, the simulated altitude environment can be more demanding than you are used to. We recommend that you consult your physician before you enter the chamber." Good grief. It comes with a health warning. Stepping inside, I am struck by how cold it is. The air is - alpine. Pullan tells me that oxygen levels are so low that you couldn't light a cigarette in there. He also explains



the alpine conditions: the air-conditioning is on high.

First, Pullan talks me through a portable altitude acclimatisation machine and mask that lowers oxygen levels and which I could use on my treadmill at home. Then, once the "sell" is out of the way, he attaches a "pulse oximeter" to my wrist and index finger, which will measure my heart rate and oxygen levels - the pulse will rise, the oxygen levels will plummet, and this little meter will enable me to watch my demise. Nervously, I start the treadmill. My heart is pounding. Up, up, up goes my pulse. Down, down, down go my oxygen levels, from 98 per cent blood saturation to 90. I feel panic. My pulse continues to rise. My oxygen levels continue to drop.

Pullan tells me to relax. I try, and realise I am not gasping for air and my lips are not turning blue. Yes, it is slightly harder than being on a normal treadmill, but not too much harder. And the air feels so clean that I quite enjoy watching my O₂ levels drop to 82 per cent.

I stop after 15 minutes, feeling a bit woozy. I ache more than normally after a treadmill session, but that just makes me feel like I have done more of a workout, and considering the short amount of time I spent in the chamber, that's quite impressive. Would I go again? If I could afford to, definitely. It may not be conquering Everest, but it's a start.

For further information on hypoxic training sessions with Richard Pullan at Third Space, call 0870 9504479 or see www.altitudecentre.com. Prices from £80 per session.

