

# Maya Gabeira surfs gigantic waves. She's helping rid them of plastic too.

As a big-wave surfer, the Brazilian adrenaline junkie set records at the highest surf break on Earth. She's still committed to the ocean—now, though, she's dedicating herself to helping keep it clean for future generations.



Maya Gabeira photographed by Matthieu Paley in Nazaré, Portugal

By Molly Langmuir  
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This story is part of the [National Geographic 33](#).

For much of the year, the ocean at Nazaré, a fishing village on Portugal's coast, is placid. But in the winter, certain storms funnel swells through an underwater canyon, transforming the waves into moving mountains of water so colossal they have been described as the Everest of the ocean.

Big-wave surfers have made pilgrimages to the town since 2011, when a video of Garrett McNamara [barreling down a 78-foot wave](#) established it as having one of the planet's biggest breaks. Over much of the past decade, one of the select few women in the lineup has been Maya Gabeira, a Brazilian with a contagious laugh who harbored what some regarded as an outlandish dream: She too wanted to surf the biggest wave in the world.

Growing up in Rio de Janeiro, Gabeira had a taste for adrenaline, terrible asthma, and an intense fear of “dying out of breath,” as she puts it, leading to severe anxiety. This would have pushed many people to avoid open water. For Gabeira, it did the opposite. “She’s spent probably half her life in the ocean,” says Stephanie Johnes, director of the 2022 documentary [Maya and the Wave](#). “She’s lived through really hard things, but she has a unique ability to transcend that and get to the other side.”

Gabeira's early attempts to surf at Nazaré ended in disaster. In 2013, flying down the face of one of the largest waves she'd ever tried, she catapulted into the water and, once she was finally dragged onto the beach, had to be revived with CPR. The near-death experience proved both profound and painful. “When you go to the other side, it’s dark and full of wisdom,” she says. She was left with a broken leg, a severely damaged spine, and even more intense anxiety.



Photograph by Ana Catarina Teles

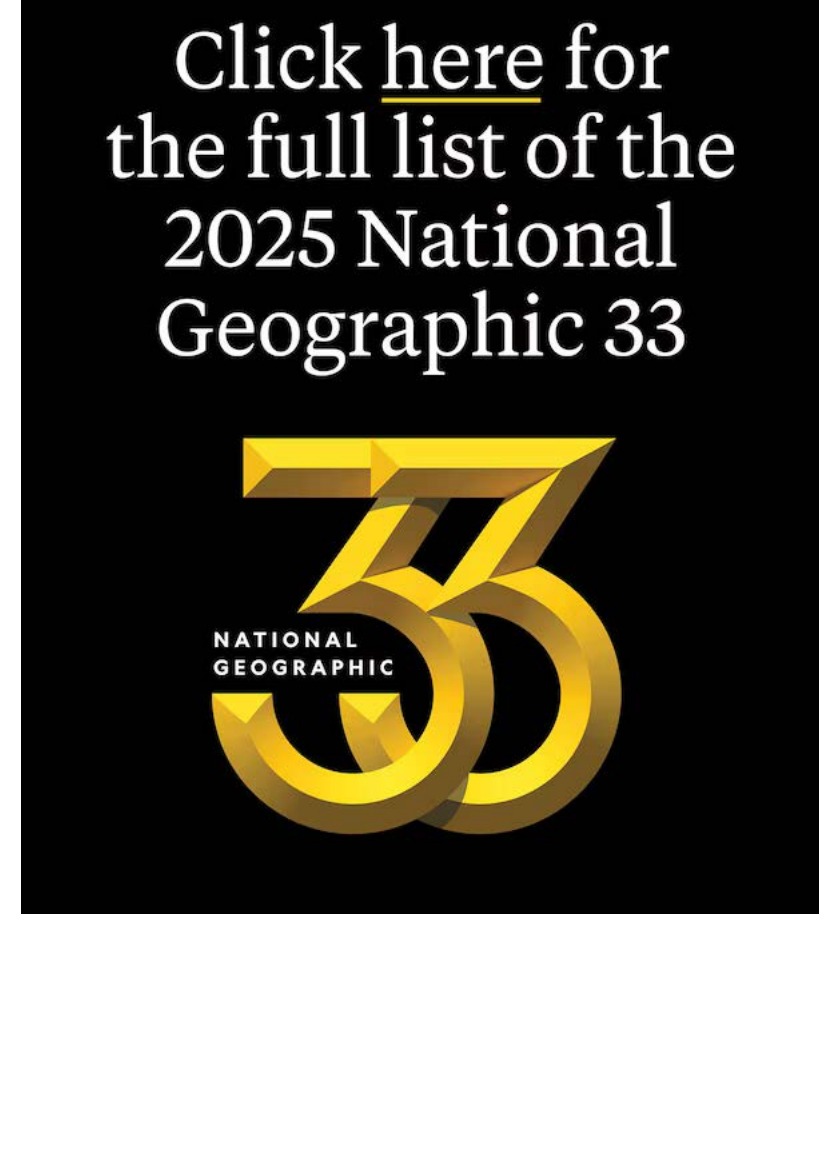
Three spine surgeries and four years of recovery later, something inside her began to shift. “I got up again,” she says, and she felt stronger for it. In January 2018 Gabeira [dropped in on a 68-foot monster at Nazaré](#), the biggest any woman had ever surfed. Two years later she broke her own record, [surfing a 73.5-foot wave](#) there that was the largest surfed by any man or woman that season.

Of course, her time in the [ocean](#) has left her acutely aware of the problems faced by marine ecosystems, including the [prevalence of garbage and plastic](#). “More often than not, it is a sea of trash,” she says. “That’s just the reality.”

As a child, she had learned about conservation issues and the value of pushing for change from her father, a founding member of Brazil's Green Party. “As I drifted into the ocean, it was a transition of knowing the green parts through my dad,” she says, “then diving into the blue.” Now she's leveraging her reputation as one of the world's most prominent big-wave surfers to advocate for solutions. Gabeira has served as a board member at the nonprofit [Oceana](#) since 2021, and during the pandemic she was a driving force in the group's campaign to encourage Brazil's largest food delivery service, iFood, to use less plastic packaging.

Her communication skills played an instrumental role in the campaign's success. “She has a practical sense of how to reach the public,” says Jim Simon, Oceana's CEO. “And she's sensitive to people's aspirations for a spiritual connection with the ocean.”

In 2022 she became [UNESCO's Champion for the Ocean and Youth](#), a role in which she works to connect with young people about conservation issues. “As a surfer, you're always trying to become intimate with the ocean,” she says. “And when you love something, you care. I feel so fortunate to have built this connection with the ocean and to be able to save myself out there. It would be unfair not to try and communicate the things I learned spending time in the seas.”



Last year Gabeira decided to retire, though she continues to live in Nazaré with her two dogs. “I can't pretend I did it because it was fun,” she says of big-wave surfing. “You're chasing something. And to me particularly, I was so troubled in my mind that I was chasing moments to be present or aware.” Whatever she had been seeking out there all those years, she seems to have found it in the concentrated, formidable power of the ocean.

A version of this story appears in the [April 2025 issue](#) of *National Geographic* magazine.

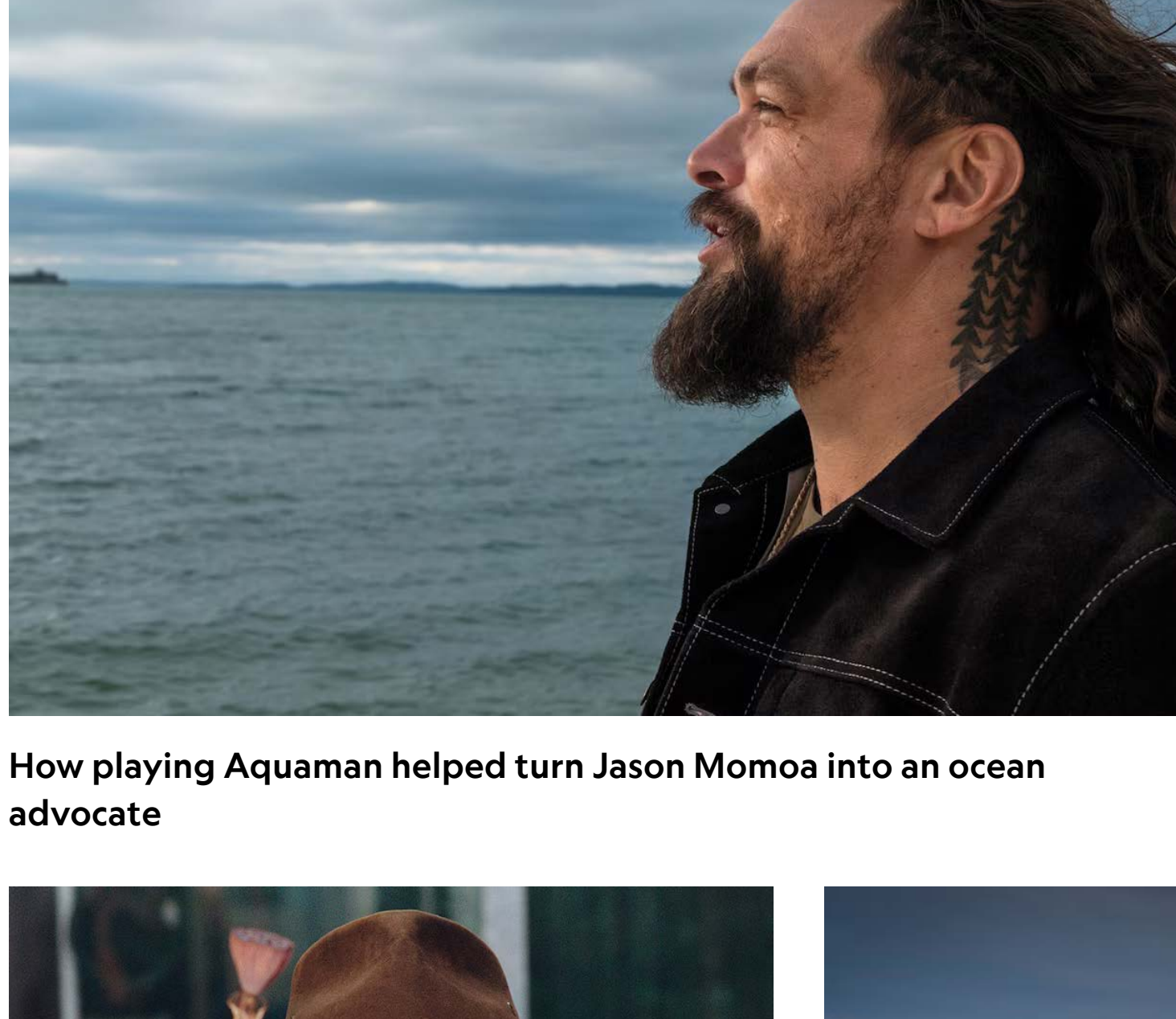
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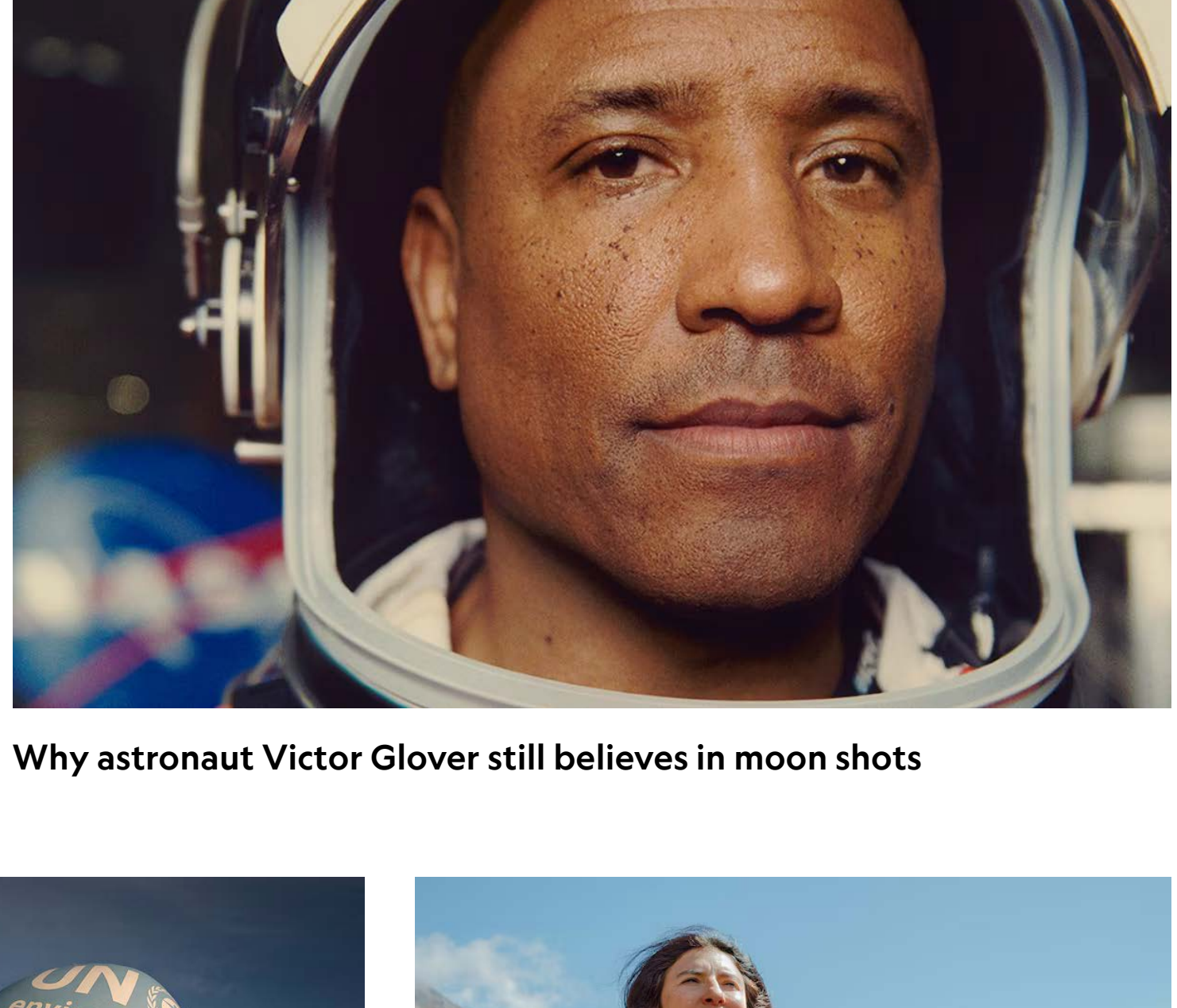
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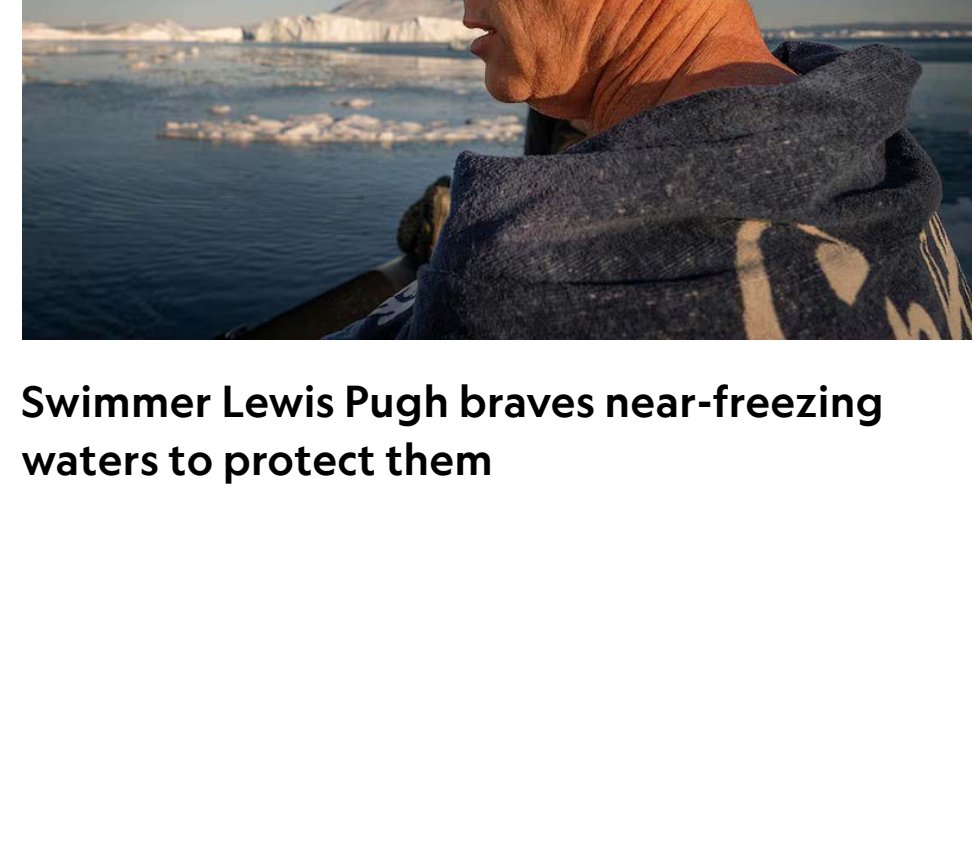
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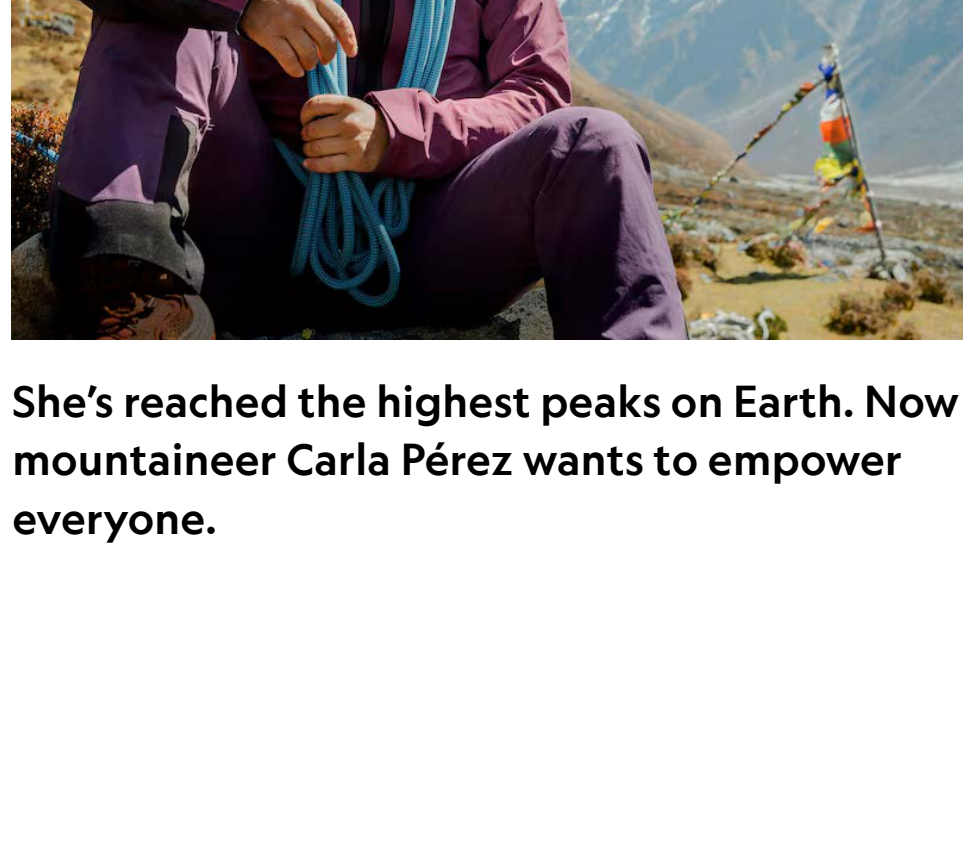
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