

David Minton says health clubs are trying to meet an increasing demand for yoga classes, as more people are embracing the idea of a 'wellness' lifestyle



## Stretching the point

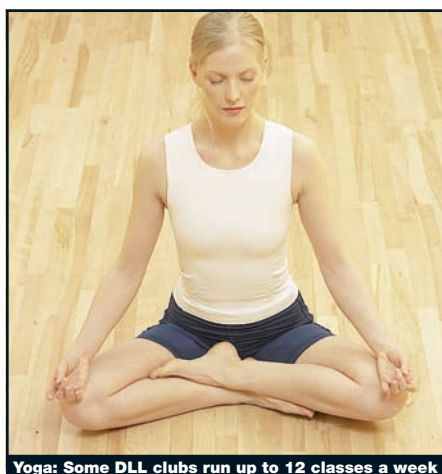
I've just returned from a week's intensive yoga course in Italy - and I survived. I don't want to sound too melodramatic, but I did wonder how I would cope with moving from two and half hours of yoga a good week to twenty five hours in six days. For those of you imagining me in a feet-round-the-back-of-the-neck poses: stop! I am not that flexible. The reason I practise yoga is because I can't do any of the exercises without some difficulty. I'm stiff and inflexible from years of sport, plus asthma in my teenage years, which left my back like a lump of concrete. I'm working on hamstrings shortened from cycling, and can now touch my toes, but the concrete will take time.

So when you read those books that tell you 'yoga relaxes the body and the mind' let me tell you it doesn't do it for me - yet. I think it's more honest to say yoga creates body awareness, not only physical, but also mental. As you age you become more aware of your body and its limitations. After eight years of a personal physical challenge I'm more aware of my body's limitations than ever but it will be years before I achieve a quiet mind. My only regret is not beginning this personal journey sooner, as progress is slow. I seem to make just the tiniest fraction of improvement each week and this keeps me going back for more.

As with any other form of exercise, it's important to feel you're achieving something and in doing so you naturally become aware of others around you. A few weeks ago an enigma came and joined our general yoga class. She was tall, over six feet, willowy in appearance and wore layers of clothes like a model. To say she stood out is a bit of an understatement. In 15 minutes her pre-class warm up routine generated a silent 'Om' from those who just stood and watched. I wondered how on earth she had landed in Maida Vale when she's destined for the stage. It turns out she was classically trained at St Petersburg Conservatoire, but had now retired from dancing and suffered from joints that were too flexible.

Surprisingly, around 10% of the population are too flexible. Beyond a level of flexibility I can only dream of lies hypermobility or hyperlaxity; where joints can move way beyond the normal range of motion. The condition tends to run in families who can have hypermobility in single or multiple joints; in part of, or throughout the whole body. So, in countries like China, if you're born with multiple hyper-mobile joints your career lies in the circus - until your joints wear out.

I'd always thought of these very, very flexible people as being 'double jointed' but it seems this is a misnomer and I find it is wrongly used to describe hypermobility, as no one actually has 'two' joints. Harry Houdini, the famous escapologist, besides being very flexible, also had dislocating joints - not to be confused with hypermobility - and used his dislocating shoulders to great effect, freeing himself



Yoga: Some DLL clubs run up to 12 classes a week

**Yoga's popularity is greater than ever - in the US some 10 million people practice it, with an average age of 38**

from a straight jacket in just over two minutes. Not something to try at home.

You can, however, try some yoga poses not only at home but in the workplace, at the village hall, whilst sitting in a meeting or travelling. Just look at how airlines are now encouraging in-flight workouts, where you tackle signs of tension early, whilst sitting in your seat. All these exercises are based on stretching and yoga-like movements, and are now actively encouraged for long-haul flights.

Yoga, of course, has been around for some time - thousands of years - but its popularity now is greater than ever. In the US some 10 million people practise yoga and the audience is split between 22% men and 78% women, with an average age of 38. I can't understand why more men don't take up yoga in the US, particularly in guru-friendly LA. I'm always outnumbered by women when I go to Andrea Marcum's class. Andrea runs U Studio Yoga on Wilshire Blvd and has quite a following amongst celebrities and fellow teachers. Her atmospheric studio in an art deco building is Chanderlesque, and seems to convey a time, place and ambience of a bygone LA. The studio provides views to die for when the sun begins to set beyond the Hollywood Hills and the yoga is inspirational too.

On a more anecdotal than factual note, in the UK it's estimated that around three million people practise yoga, and that this figure has more than doubled in the past five years. This growth could be down to the post-war baby boomers, refugees from impact classes, current awareness of body

limitations and willingness to try anything to reduce the number of creaking joints. It could be that there are more qualified teachers, who command a premium, across all the specialist styles available.

David Lloyd Leisure, following a customer survey last year, found it didn't have enough yoga on the timetable. To answer demand, particularly from its older membership base, some clubs now have up to twelve different yoga classes each week. It was decided to introduce Bodybalance in all clubs to provide an introductory 'fusion' of yoga, tai chi and pilates then, subject to demand, classes like: Mum and baby yoga (for those still crawling and pre-walking), yoga for kids, plus any number of specialist styles.

JJB Fitness Clubs has gone one stage further and have now built at 24 sites the beautiful Ki Studio, a bespoke space for yoga practice. JJB has discovered that the popularity of yoga is far greater when it can be practised in a purpose-built space away from the noise of the club. The Ki Studio has had the added benefit of attracting yoga teachers who want to teach in a space with good karma.

Location, design, ambience and quality of teaching make for a winning combination. As most yogis are in touch with their surroundings, you can imagine the delight to find one of the first purpose-built yoga studios on my doorstep: the Iyengar Institute in Maida Vale, with its architectural clean lines, flowers on reception, under-floor heating in the winter, plenty of daylight and well equipped studios. They say you should try a number of different styles of yoga before you'll find the right one for you, I have, and for me Iyengar seems to work best. In simple terms, Iyengar accepts that not every body is perfect, so you can use props to help you get into the poses, including ropes (under supervision), blocks, chairs, bolsters, belts and bricks that can add to that extra twist and stretch.

It's hard to appreciate how involved a simple thing like just standing can be; how much concentration and how many subtle movements and adjustments it takes, until you take an Iyengar yoga class. Of course, the point is that you're not just standing. You're doing Tadasana - mountain pose - and in yoga in the style of BKS Iyengar, Tadasana is an active pose. His style of yoga is noted for great attention to detail and the precise alignment of postures. No doubt part of Iyengar's success is due to the quality of teachers, who must complete a rigorous two-five year training programme for certification. Just the slightest touch from my instructor can change a normal pose into the most challenging and sweat-provoking one. Still, I'm like many of her other disciples, in that week by week we go back for more of a challenge; given the opportunity I'd go back to Italy for another week too.

David Minton is director of the Leisure Database Company