



FLANDERS TODAY

The heat is on

Bikram yoga is now as hot in Antwerp as it is everywhere else



Ever thought of what it would be like to do your daily routine of yoga in a sauna?

Well, a growing number of fitness-seekers in Flanders are doing just that. They have joined up to a type of yoga that has fast become all the rage in Brussels and Antwerp.

This is yoga, but not the type associated with candles burning in the background, gentle stretching and meditation. In fact – a young practice by yoga standards – it couldn't be much further removed from the

traditional image of yoga.

For a start, Bikram, or "hot yoga", as it's come to be called, is performed for 90 minutes in a room with the temperature set at 36 degrees.

Bikram yoga's 26 postures and two breathing exercises aim to stretch and pull just about every muscle and joint in your body. The first classes in Belgium started in Brussels, where former EU commissioner Peter Mandelson was among the attendees. In fact, Mandelson, now a member of the UK government, recently asked instructor Feroze Khan to go to London to resume classes with him.

Originally from the Indian city of Puna, Khan first came to Belgium after he was invited by the Indian ambassador here to give lessons at the embassy. Mandelson says the secret of Khan's success is his "incredible mixture of discipline and enthusiasm." Khan also gives private lessons to European commission vice-president Margot Wallstrom.

The Brussels Bikram Yoga College of India became so popular (it now has a waiting list) that a similar Bikram yoga studio opened in Antwerp, where Khan lives. "Quite a lot of our clients were travelling from Flanders to attend the Brussels classes and wondered why we didn't have a similar studio closer to where they lived," says Khan, 37, who now runs both the Brussels and Antwerp locations.

Over 2,000 people now regularly attend the Antwerp centre, which, like Brussels has an official certification from the Bikram home-base in Los Angeles. Khan studied the yoga form from living yogi master Bikram Choudhury, who developed the Bikram method in the 1970s. Khan studied under him during a stay in the United States, where Choudhury lives and still teaches in his schools in California.

Bikram yoga is essentially a series of yoga poses – some invented by Choudhury and some not – performed in a specific sequence in a very hot room. The temperature helps increase flexibility. “The heat combined with the sequence of postures is what makes Bikram yoga genuinely unique,” explains Khan. “The class is conducted in such a hot room in order to warm the muscles, which facilitates deeper stretching and helps prevent injuries.”

Antwerp boasts an eclectic mix of clients, including tennis star Kim Clijsters; Geike Arnaert, former lead singer of the rock band Hooverphonic; Noel Colpin, head of Belgian customs administration; and Patsy Sorensen, a former MEP and alderman of Antwerp. This reflects the trendiness of Bikram yoga world-wide, which has pulled in famous people like Madonna and Bill Clinton.

“Bikram yoga is a complete system of wellness, restoration and rejuvenation,” says Khan. “It was designed to systematically stimulate and restore health to every muscle, joint and organ of the body. Bringing Bikram yoga into your life cleanses the body and calms the mind.”

Although it sounds daunting, even for those who have practiced yoga sans heat, all classes at the Bikram Yoga College are open to beginners. “Participants are guided through a series of 26 postures, each increasing in physical challenge,” explains Khan. “Participants of all ages notice an increase in strength, balance, flexibility and mental focus. The body is flushed of toxins, leaving a deep sense of relaxation and well-being.”

Having attended one of his Antwerp classes recently, I can certainly testify to that. At the end, I felt physically drained but also totally refreshed and cleansed.

In September, to mark the second anniversary of the Antwerp studio, Khan will launch a Bikram yoga workshop and teacher-training programme. “I run the Antwerp class with my brother, but it has proven so popular with Flemish people, who travel from all over the region to attend, that we really need to train more people in the art of Bikram yoga so we can run more classes,” he explains. “We are looking, of course, for people who are already fairly physically fit but who are also willing to learn about Bikram yoga and want, like us, to help others enjoy it.”

For anyone interested in giving it a go, a word of warning: be prepared for a hard work-out and to sweat an awful lot.

www.bikramyogabrussels.com

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