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Yoga fever

Instructor Tereza Bonnet-Šenková says Bikram classes are heating up
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Photos by **WALTER NOVAK**/The Prague Post

Students at Bikram Yoga Prague practice one of the 26 poses of Bikram yoga, which is done in a room heated to 105 F (40.5 C).

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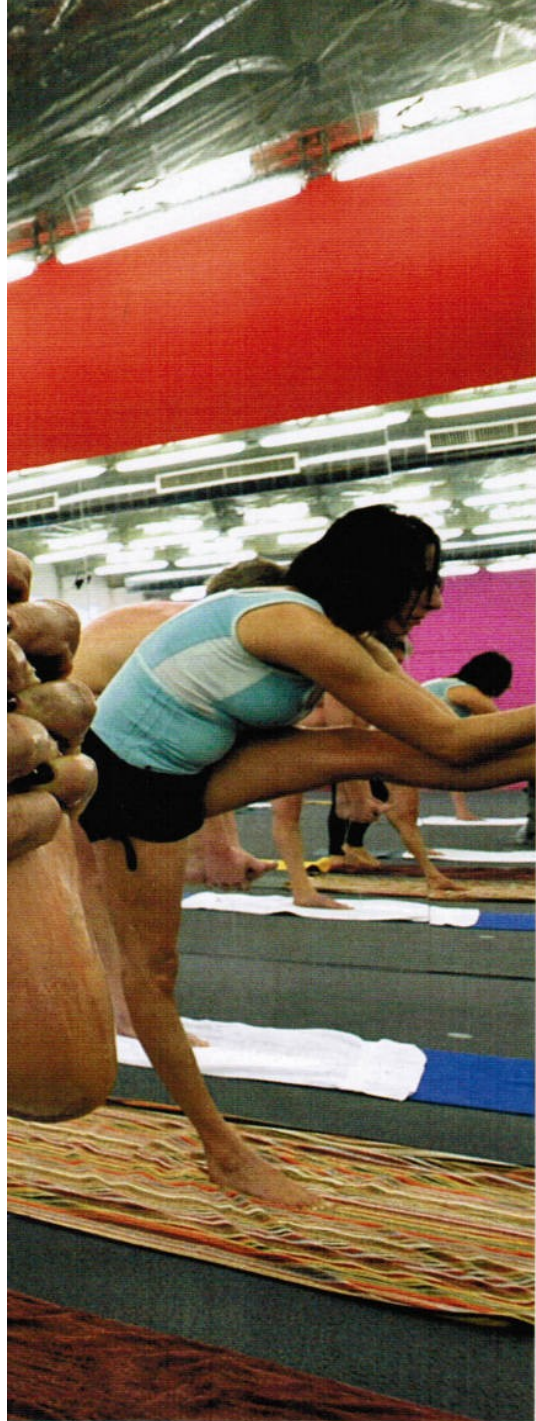
Bikram yoga turns up the heat on ancient Indian art

BY **LUCY SHACKLETON**
FOR THE POST

Keeping fit, it seems, has become a competitive sport. From hip-hop street dance to rock-climbing, a spandex-clad portion of society is always on the lookout for new, and ever more off-the-wall, ways of sculpting and toning their bods.

Bikram yoga, a branch of yoga practiced in a studio heated to 105 F (40.5C), is currently at the height of keep-fit fashion. Devised and trademarked by Indian-born yoga champion-turned-LA-yoga-mogul Bikram Choudhury, Bikram yoga is a branch of Hatha, or physical yoga. It is designed to exercise your body from the inside out, from the bones to the skin. Beginners and experts practice together, performing a series of 26 postures and two breathing exercises (to be repeated twice) in sweltering conditions intended to recreate the Indian climate.

Former professional dancer and owner of



The heat allows for a deeper, safer stretch while also detoxifying the skin.

her body forever, so much so that she was inspired to open her own Bikram studio. In 2006, after completing the grueling nine-week training program with creator Bikram Choudhury necessary to become an instructor, she established Bikram Yoga Prague, the first Bikram studio in the Czech Republic. Since then, it has gained extraordinary popularity, attracting about 120 clients a day.

Classes are offered up to five times daily, in English and in Czech, and, for those who book in advance, there is even a babysitting service available on weekday mornings.

The majority of people who frequent Bikram Yoga are not expats but Czechs, who Bonnet-Šenková says have incredible self-discipline. Czech men, however, remain reticent. "Men here still have the stereotype that yoga is for girls, but then they come and they crawl on their knees out of the studio," Bonnet-Šenková explains with a smile.

With celebrities and sports personalities such as Daniel Craig and Andy Murray espousing the benefits of yoga, the stereotype that it is all patchouli oil, hippy beads and feminine introspection may not last for long. Indeed, Bikram Choudhury and his wife, Rajashree Choudhury, envision one day making yoga an Olympic sport. To this end, they have established the International Yoga Asana championships, which take place yearly in Los Angeles. Participating countries organize national championships and then send their best on to compete internationally.

Healthy competition

This year, Bikram Yoga Prague sent four of its most flexible to represent the Czech Republic. Ondřej Hartma and Pavel Hakl secured fourth and eighth position, respectively, in the men's final, and Sandra Žigie and Sandra Bártová came in ninth and 13th in the women's.

For Yoga purists, however, the commercialization and competition coming to dominate the yoga scene represents a break from the practice's spiritual roots. For this reason, Bikram Choudhury has become a contentious figure, seen to have created a branded branch of yoga that prioritizes body image over introspection and greed over meditation.

Bonnet-Šenková dismisses such accusations, asserting students must perfect their bodies before they can hope to move on to their minds. "People here believe it is possible for them to practice spiritual yoga, but we here in the West are not ready. Our minds are upside down; we can't sit still. It is difficult to pretend we are spiritual when we cannot focus."

Wherever you stand on the spirituality debate, if you're a Bikram virgin, Bikram Yoga Prague is well worth a visit. You might not be guaranteed an epiphany, but you will certainly leave focused, energized and drenched in sweat.

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Everyone can benefit from Bikram yoga.

Bikram Yoga Prague Tereza Bonnet-Šenková explains that the heat helps create a deeper stretch, detoxifies the skin and protects muscles from sprain and strain. Despite the intensity of the 90-minute sessions, Bonnet-Šenková says anyone can benefit from classes, regardless of their level of fitness. She adds that Bikram can counteract many of today's most common health problems, from insomnia to obesity. In particular, it helps with post-surgery rehabilitation, something Bonnet-Šenková learned firsthand.

"I was first introduced to Bikram yoga in Paris by my American choreographer," Bonnet-Šenková explains. "I had recently found out I had broken cartilage in my leg, which would require an operation and threatened my career as a dancer. I began practicing Bikram two months before my operation and started again three weeks after. I was back onstage three months later."

Bikram yoga, Bonnet-Šenková says, changed her attitude toward dance and