

WORK UP A SWEAT

IS HOT YOGA COOLING OFF?

THESE **SUPER-SWEATY CLASSES** MAY BE MORPHING, BUT THEY STILL ENJOY A FERVENT FOLLOWING. EVEN BEGINNERS CAN LEARN HOW TO BRING THE HEAT. BY JANET LEE

If you've started researching different types of yoga classes, you've no doubt come across something called hot yoga (aka Bikram, the OG hot yoga). It involves posing in a hot room—usually heated to 95 degrees or warmer—for 60 to 90 minutes. You may have had a visceral reaction just reading that sentence. Some people can't get enough of it while others would sooner have a root canal.

Hot yoga, a hatha style, started gaining traction among yogis in the U.S. in the '90s, thanks mainly to Bikram Choudhury, who founded the Bikram style of hot yoga. Two decades later, after several alarming lawsuits and a bankruptcy filing, he left the country—and a trail of disappointed devotees and studio owners. While the Bikram name persists at some studios, others are rebranding or just switching to the generic "hot yoga."

Jeff Chen, owner of Pure Yoga Texas (with five yoga studios in Austin and

Bring a large water bottle into class to help you stay hydrated.

YOU CAN BEND MUCH DEEPER IN A HOT YOGA CLASS.

Dallas), trained under Bikram but tries to separate the yoga from the man. He says most studios are drifting away from the word Bikram but he still believes the yoga sequence that Choudhury developed is very powerful. “The yoga is brilliant,” he says. “We’re constantly hearing people proclaim, ‘Bikram saved my life!’ You never hear people say that about vinyasa yoga. It’s not as dramatic a change as with Bikram.”

The “magic” in Bikram, where the rooms are heated to 105 degrees with 40 percent humidity, is the temperature. “In that heat, students’ internal body temperature rises to 101°F or 101.5°F,” says Chen. That is supposed to trigger various biochemical pathways, including a cooling

THE HOT TEMPS IN CLASS MAY LEAD TO A SENSE OF EUPHORIA.

response and the release of serotonin, which floods the brain. The combination leads to a sense of euphoria, he says. (Your internal body heat peaks 50 to 55 minutes into class, which is about when you transition to the floor, so the risk of overheating goes down.)

Besides the temperature, the Bikram style has traditionally been very consistent in terms of the practice. Students know what to expect wherever they practice, and it is easy to gauge the progress. A Bikram class typically begins and ends with a breathing exercise (calming at the beginning; energizing at the end), and includes 26 standing and seated poses, which are always in the same order. You hold the asanas, instead of flowing through them.

While traditional Bikram classes are 90 minutes, many studios have shifted to a 60-minute format, which can be more accessible without sacrificing benefits. There’s also more variety with hot yoga in general. You may be flowing or doing a different set of postures each time. Many studios offer “warm” yoga instead of the full-on hot kind, which might be a good place to start if you’re not sure how you’ll react to the temperature.

“Bikram classes are accessible to everyone,” says Val Sklar, owner of Hot Yoga Pasadena in California and founder of the Original Hot Yoga Association. “There’s no chanting or gong-ringing or philosophy. It’s as Americanized as can be. Still, it’s very transformative.” She says more and more former “Bikram” studios are adding yin yoga and even hot Pilates classes to their schedules to diversify and appeal to a wider audience (something that wouldn’t have been allowed back in the heyday of Choudhury).

7 THINGS NEWBIES SHOULD KNOW

Yoga, no matter the style, is always accessible to beginners. Hot yoga is no different. While there’s nothing to fear, there are a few things to keep in mind to stay safe and enjoy the experience.

1 DRESS LESS A cotton T-shirt and sweatpants are not your friends in this class. Wear lightweight, moisture-wicking pieces that allow you to move freely.

2 HYDRATE Yes, you can drink during class. If the teacher says no, sit down or leave the class, and find another studio. “That was something you’d find back in the old days of Bikram,” says Hot Yoga Pasadena owner Val Sklar.

3 BREATHE The typical ujjayi breath utilized in most yoga classes doesn’t work in hot yoga, says Sklar, so some people who’ve done many other styles of yoga may have trouble adjusting. “Ujjayi breath is meant to build heat, but you’ve got plenty of heat already in hot yoga. Just inhale and exhale normally. The goal is to breathe and move with good form.”

4 POSE ON AN EMPTY STOMACH You don’t want to work up a sweat contorting yourself with a sandwich sitting in your stomach—but neither do you want be running

on fumes. Eat three to four hours before class, suggests Sklar. That’s your sweat “sweet spot.”

5 BRING A TOWEL Whether it’s a yoga towel that you place on top of your mat or just something to wipe your hands on, you’ll appreciate the extra grip it might offer. (The wetter these towels get, the better your traction on your mat/towel.)

6 PACE YOURSELF Take it slow. There’s no race to the finish. If you start to feel dizzy or out of breath, just sit down on your mat and rest until you feel better or leave the room, says Sklar. “I was an athlete but I hated it for the first six months,” says Pure Yoga Texas owner Jeff Chen. “I couldn’t breathe, but my wife taught me to slow down and eventually I learned to love it.”

7 KNOW YOUR LIMITS While the heat helps relax muscles and make certain poses easier, pushing too hard can lead to sprains and strains. Listen to your body and if you feel pain, back off.

THE SWEAT FACTOR

WHY PEOPLE LOVE IT

Athletes and other fitness enthusiasts seem to be drawn to hot yoga because it feels more like a “workout” than some other forms. It’s intense—plus, the heat relaxes the muscles, helping them get into poses they might not ordinarily be able to access. “So many students come in with back pain or knee, ankle or other injuries,” says Pure Yoga Texas owner Jeff Chen. “Downward facing dog and vinyasas may be challenging for them. In Bikram, there aren’t

any sun salutations and there’s no weight bearing on the wrists or arms, which can be better for the shoulders.” The grit required to make it through a session is also a confidence-builder. “When you do a 90-minute class, that last half hour is more of an exercise in willpower,” says Chen, who also uses hot yoga with people suffering with addiction. “It helps you cultivate patience. It just makes you feel so good!” Annie Jacobson,

RYT, a yoga instructor in Ludington, Michigan, used to take Bikram and now teaches a vinyasa-style hot yoga class. However, she acknowledges it’s not for everyone. “I have some students who, when the room gets to about 75 degrees, they’re not happy,” she says. “But the people who like the heat come several times a week. I’m always cold and I don’t sweat easily so creating a space where I do sweat a lot feels good. The heat creates an extra layer of challenge.”

