NYC’S EXERCISE CULTS

Keeping fit is a religion at the city’s six hottest workouts. Try one — if you can get in.

BY BETH LANDMAN

I'TS THE THURSDAY before the long Fourth of July weekend, and people all over the city are slogging to finish work and prepare for the holiday. But at the Grand Central branch of Equinox, a group of particularly fit men and women cram up against a wall, waiting for the boot-camp-style Tabata 300 class to begin. After a mad dash for prime spots in the room, they settle in shoulder-to-shoulder, a handsome young Latino with a tattoo, next to a cute blonde with super-toned legs.

“Crown work, work in the beating rhythm and the 155 ing” uty instructor Angel Alicea as he bounds around the room, setting on people as they do push-ups and squatting like a frog as he cheers them on. After 45 minutes of intense movement, the group cools down. “We can grab a cocktail later; now let’s stretch,” whispers Angel. “I love you.”

“We are Angel groupies,” says Ami Larescome, a 27-year-old British expat who’s been taking the class since it started in February. “He pushes us to another level. You literally want to throw up in class.”

“I schedule my lunch hour around Angel and will go wherever he is,” says 49-year-old Carrie Karp. “I go to class every day. It makes me more competitive.”

All around the city, from 70 people waiting to enter a yoga class at a Midtown studio to a class of 50 at Upper East Side studio PureCycle, New York workout enthusiasts are so passionately devoted to a new crop of exercise classes that they’ll schedule their lunch hour around them or wait on hour-long lines to get in, as if they were the hottest nightlife in town.

“I’m psyching up almost every day,” says Saraphine Turner, a 28-year-old freelance photographer, who splits her workouts between Physique 57, a controlled-class emphasizing core strength, and Flywheel, a spinning studio started by Soul Cycle co-founder Ruth Zukerman and NFL star Tiki Barber. “A little while ago, I had a work injury, and when I was told I couldn’t work out for two months, I had to literally pray in church that I could find the same kind of peace of mind.” Of course, stress relief has always been a key factor in the addiction to exercise. “I feel like my head is a closed drain, and the class is Drano,” she adds.

In New York, where it’s easy to feel like an outsider, fitness studios also establish a sense of community and identity. “It’s the ‘ehem,’ says Dechen Thurman, the 35-year-old brother of UMA, whose classes at Ilyamala draw crowds. “People like to walk into a place and be known.”

His class has a decidedly different identity from Angel’s, but the participants are just as bonded in their mindfulness.

After class, friends often gather in the studio’s café. “I’d be frustrated and depressed if I couldn’t come to yoga,” says 39-year-old Karin Muller-Elliott. “I’m dealing with people all day, but I can disconnect here.”

The community is a bit more testosterone-laden at Flywheel, where 48-year-old Wayne Edelman spins with Mike Merritt every day, sometimes twice a day.

“We used to go to Soul Cycle,” says Edelman, “but it was so packed that I had to change the street. I remember one day a woman was going up to the front desk, where they have candles burning for atmosphere. It was so crowded that her hair caught fire. It was also costing about $1,800 per month for us to spin there.”

The privilege of being in a place where people hang out for high tariffs for membership, and the thrill of racing to secure a coveted spot in a class, is part of the appeal of Soul Cycle and Physique 57. “It’s like the club you can’t get into that you want to get into,” observes Zukerman.

“My friends and I sign up months ahead so that we can get the classes we want,” notes Lili Silverman, who goes to Physique 57 daily. Members even have the option of paying nearly double for guaranteed seats.

Over at Alvin Alley, where the community is thick and students take Samuel Salazar’s Zumba, camaraderie is so much of a draw as the workout. “It’s the friendships that keep me coming back,” says 29-year-old Wendy W., a yoga teacher who found her true affinity in the salsa-style classes. “It’s my priority. Everything in my life is worked around Zumba.”

Megan Junt, 25, who lost 90 pounds taking Zumba, agrees. “I get very emotional when I talk about my class. It’s a special community.”

Crunch instructor Mario Lozano, who teaches a class called Boogie with Karao, where students wear boots that resemble roller blades with a large spring instead of wheels, also has dedicated students.

“I bought my own boots, because if you don’t have your own and you don’t get to class really early, you get shut out,” says Max Schneid, 29. “I’ll miss class, I’m angry and disappointed.”

Another aspect of a class’s appeal to New Yorkers is the ability to give up control. “A lot of my students are bosses,” says Tabata’s Angel.

“In my class, I’m the boss. All they have to worry about is doing what I ask. This town can run you up, and my class makes them strong. I don’t mean just physically. Our mind is the most powerful muscle in the body.”

NYC’s most exclusive classes

FOR TRENDSETTERS

Hiking With Kangaroo, at Crunch, 174 Fourth Ave., Thursday at 8 p.m. In Marion Green’s fun class, students bounce around on skates (above) using leg strength and balance to execute the steps.

FOR STRENGTH BUILDERS

HI Physique 57, 262 W. 57th St., suite 6 and 6th St. Ave., schedule varies. This workout taught by Tanya Becker uses dumbbells, the ballet barre and your own body weight to tone and strengthen.

FOR SPINNERS

HI Flywheel Spinning Class, at Flywheel Sports, 9th and St. Ave., schedule varies. The spinning bikes are so sophisticated in Ruth Zukerman’s class that they will make you feel as if you are on a motorbike, and everyone’s score is flashed on a screen so you can see how you stack up.

FOR BODY CAMPERs

Tabata 300, at Equinox, 20 Lexington Ave., Thursday at 6 p.m. Instructor Angel Alicea incorporates lunges, jumps and squats performed in four-minute cardio and strength intervals, with 10 seconds of intense movement and 20 seconds of rest — repeated eight times.

FOR DANCERS

HI Zumba, at Alvin Alley, 45 W. 50th St., schedule varies. Samuel Salazar teaches Latin moves along with a dose of hip-hop that’s accessible to people with a wide range of ability.

FOR VOICE

HI Karmaluidi Yoga, 8th Broadway, schedule varies. Dechen Thurman, wise in the open-level flow class focuses on deep breathing and chanting. Plus, he’s UMA’s brother!

Tabata 2010 instructor Angel Alicea shows tough love to his devoted students.

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