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It's own-up time: I'm a hardcore yoga fan
By Christa D'Souza

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Everyone has his own guilty secret. For some, it might be an obsession with chocolate biscuits; for others, an addiction to shopping, their cupboards stuffed with clothes they will never wear. Mine? It's Bikram yoga. Otherwise known as hot yoga, it is a particularly hardcore form of exercise, which involves a 90-minute sequence of 26 Hatha-based poses - all done in temperatures of 44-plus degrees. Because of the sauna-like conditions, bathing suits must be worn, and you are not allowed into class without a litre of water and a towel. Questions are forbidden and so is leaving the room: the miked-up Bikram instructor will tell you to sit down if you feel you are going to faint or be sick -- both extremely likely for the newcomer. As for the smell, well, just imagine a room full of 50 or more people, all pouring with sweat.

This form of yoga, which counts Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow and Shirley Maclaine as followers, is the brainchild of Bikram Choudhury, a former weightlifter from Calcutta, who devised the system after crushing his knees during a competition. When he moved to Los Angeles in the early Seventies, his yoga classes had a tiny following, but now there are 800 Bikram schools around the world (four of them in London). According to the burger-loving, Bentley-driving Choudhury (who once likened himself to Superman), the heat mimics conditions in India - where yoga originated - but also allows the muscles to stretch to their full capacity, in the same way as one heats a horseshoe before it is reshaped. Because Bikram is said to burn around 640 calories a session, it can also make you lose weight. "But fat is the easiest thing in the world to get rid of!" Choudhury says, when I call him at his headquarters in Beverly Hills. "Think of frozen butter. What happens if you put it in heat? It melts away. It disappears!" More important, he says, are Bikram's healing powers. Choudhury claims that, by working all the body's organs, Bikram - if done regularly - can cure everything from infertility to acne, metabolic disorders to depression.

He even says that he has cured countless Aids patients. "Take my friend Billy. He says, 'Bikram, I have two months to live'; I tell him 'bullshit. Do what I tell you', and I give him an extra seven years." Furthermore, he claims that doctors at Nasa are employing his techniques to study the effects of G-Force on bone density. Can any of this really be true? Unsurprisingly, many experts think not - including one doctor from the Beth Israel Medical Centre in New York who, earlier this year, told a British journalist that he saw up to five Bikram-related injuries a week, a result, apparently, of stretching muscles too far beyond their resting lengths. Some members of the yoga community seriously question his motives. After all, what sort of yogi wears sequined Speedos while teaching, fancies himself as a singer (his latest CD, Bikram Love, is on sale via his website), and is said to be worth over seven million dollars? Bikram is used to such criticism. "The world is full of idiots: dumb, ignorant people," he sighs. "But three million people do Bikram, so what can I do? Look at the Pope: he rides in a limo. My guru in India rides a Harley Davidson. I'm just here to educate the world." I know it's crazy. And yet, I've been doing Bikram happily for almost a year. Soon I'll be at my class, in bikini top and shorts, bending over backwards with my nose straining towards my bottom, trying to do the camel. Unlike the truly hardcore Bikram bore, I don't do it every day; my husband would divorce me if I did. www.bikramyoga.com