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Laugh at the Cold

Bikram kicked my butt (and other tales)

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By

By Cullen Curtiss

I consider myself rather hearty—I've run five marathons, including Boston on a dare, completed a 6,000-foot-elevation international distance triathlon, climbed two 14ers, biked a couple centuries, completed five-pitch climbs in Yosemite and slept in an igloo for three weeks in Wyoming's version of February. And then I met Bikram Yoga.

Also called hot yoga, Bikram Yoga demands your respect instantly. Its creator, Bikram Choudhury, born in 1946 in Calcutta, injured his knee when he was 17 during a weight-lifting accident. He was told he'd never walk again. After six months of yoga, he was healed. Bikram is now headquartered in Los Angeles, but has a healthy franchise of studios worldwide with a copyrighted asana sequence of 26 hatha poses, accompanied by copyrighted dialogue.

Open the studio door at Bikram's Yoga College of India in Santa Fe (which reads, "No Shoes, No Whining") and it's hot (to 105 degrees) and humid (around 40 percent) and fantastically smelly (essence of wet dog). And that's just the beginning—you've yet to contort your limbs into ancient poses and abide the instructor's relentless commands for

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90 minutes straight.

I started my introductory \$20 unlimited week pass with a 7 am class. It's cold then, but once I crossed the studio threshold, it felt like noon in Texas' version of July. I placed my mat, bath towel and water bottle on the carpet in an area described as the coolest part of the generously mirrored room.

While breathing hard is not a challenge here, sweating can be, especially when the thermometer reads zero. With Bikram Yoga, you laugh at the cold. According to the [official Web site](#), the heat is designed to protect the muscles for deeper stretching, detox the body, reorganize the lipids in the muscular structure and more.

Some advice? Wear next to nothing, but avoid white unless you have wet T-shirt aspirations. And by all means, bring a change of clothes if you plan to run an errand after class.

The opening pose is called Standing Deep Breathing; it will challenge your notion of what breathing means and expand your lung capacity to new dimensions. For me, it beats meditation and chanting.

Then begin the 12 standing poses. In Standing Hand to Knee, I was scolded for straightening my leg before locking my standing knee. If done correctly, the pose, among other things, improves the flexibility of the sciatic nerve and strengthens reproductive organs. My aberration afforded me zero medical benefits, but locking my knee sounded wrong. (If it does to you, too, suck it up—you'll hear "Lock the knee!" 100 times in a single class.) If I used my quadriceps, in time I could stabilize my knee.

A few poses later is Triangle. I love the aerodynamic stretch in my sides and hamstrings, but Bikram's Triangle is one to loathe. You straddle that sticky mat, with your feet on the slippery carpet. And there's no supporting yourself with your hand. Just hold the pose with the strength of your body... forever (OK, 60 to 90 seconds). As I did, you'll come anticipate your release by listening to the cadence of the instructor's voice.

After my first Bikram class, the instructor gave me a high five, so I just had to go back. I was better prepared the next time—a beach towel, a dark tank top, a washcloth and my hair piled high. I set up in front of the humidity-making machine, where the instructor stands, commands, rarely roams and does not correct using touch. There, I listened more deeply, received more personal instruction, and the poses got even harder as I did them more right than wrong.

Regardless of where you are in the studio, the Bikram-trained instructors list with gusto the respective health benefits of each pose. How nice you get to perform each twice! At [bikramyoga.com](#), the question, "How does Bikram Yoga work?" is answered this way: "By the tourniquet effect: stretching, balancing (using gravity), and creating pressure all at the same time. The blood supply in arteries and veins is being cut off, creating pressure. When released, a lock gate effect is created, causing blood to rush through veins and arteries, flushing them out."

Halfway through the class, you drink water and lay down for a two-minute Dead Body. This is welcome, however, now the carpet, scented with yogi sweat and feet, is closer to your nose. I asked Adelma Hnasko, mom of two young boys and a student of more than three years, how she deals. "I imagine myself in India, with much less space than in the Bikram's studio, with a lot more heat and with a lot more smell. So I use it to be grateful, if you can believe it. I use it as reminder of how privileged I am, and I try to move beyond my

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issues with it.”

Adelma made me realize that the intensity of the smell, the heat, the instructors and the poses would never change. I had to embrace Bikram Yoga’s uniqueness for our relationship to evolve: I hate mirrors, but the studios are not for preening—they are for improving alignment. And Bikram’s choreographed program is not intended to bore; it’s intended to deepen your focus. And the emphatic instruction, borrowed from the personal-trainer ethos, seems necessary to get students to hold the poses, push hard and then repeat. In other words, embrace the pain for the gain.

The floor series is next, with several back-bending, spine-strengthening poses. Between each, you turn around and lay in Dead Body. Getting there elegantly is not important (no vinyasas here). The intention is that your body rests and your circulation returns to normal. It’s also a nice way to experience the rejuvenating effects of Cobra, Bow or Camel. The instructors will remind you that most of our lives are spent bent forward or moving forward to underscore why back-bending is simultaneously fantastically hard and great.

So, am I a convert? Am I saved? Well, I attended my first class with a head cold and, by the end of the second class, it had vanished. My husband stayed sick and stuffy for another week and a half.

And I think my ankle, from which I’d chipped bone three months earlier, is healed. At first, I couldn’t balance in Toe Stand or any other poses very well. And I chose not to bend my left leg in Fixed Firm, a kneeling pose in which you put the tops of your feet, your butt and eventually your entire backside, on the floor. It didn’t seem right to stretch my ankle that much. But the instructor pushed. The pose was designed to heal the ankles, she said. So I did it to the amount I could bear and, folks, my ankle is confident again.

Will I be one of those people this winter taking two classes a day (your second one is free!) to beat the cold, stay limber and challenge myself? Possibly. Adelma says, “Bikram provides a great complement to other exercise, such as telemark skiing and running that can be quite compounding.” So there’s that. And I’ve found that since that week, my mind and body have missed the rigor of Bikram Yoga, not to mention the dewy skin. I daresay: high-five to the sweaty struggle.

Bikram’s Yoga College of India in Santa Fe

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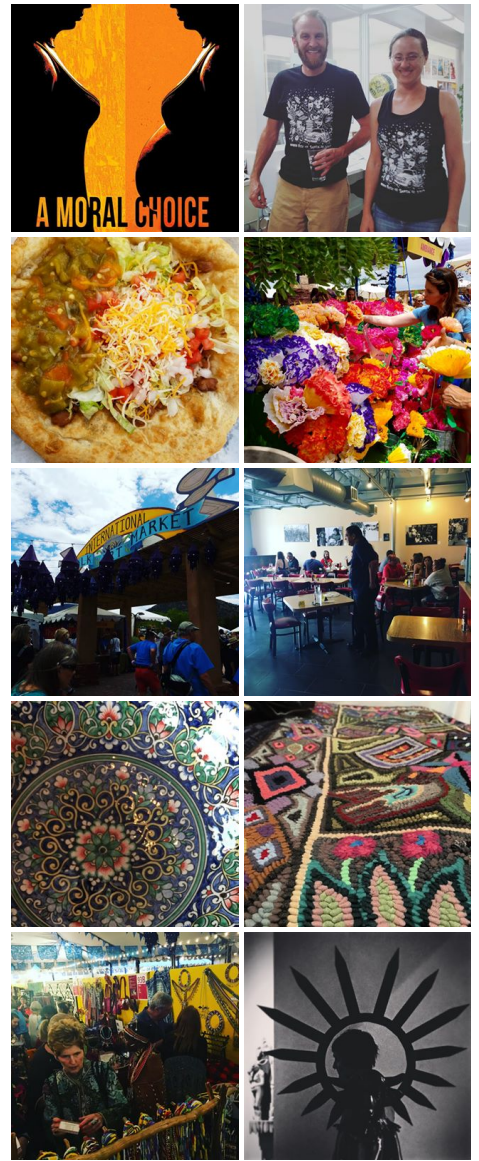
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