

You can't tell from my expressions, but I'm having a ball of a time with this workout!



power up your body

Pilates makes a fitness convert of **CINDY WEE**, whose take on exercise is “no pain, no pain”.

The last time I exerted myself was more than a month ago, and all I did was go for a short walk at a nearby park. As you can see, I don't like to exercise – no aching muscles, no panting, no pain, thank you very much.

But I feel no trepidation as I head for my first Pilates Fundamentals class at PowerMoves, a boutique Pilates studio in Bishan Park. How hard could it be? Though I don't know much about this fitness technique, I've heard that it involves stretching and muscle control, which I think I'm perfectly capable of handling.

Besides, the studio sits adjacent to Aramsa – The Garden Spa, and resembles a cosy beach bungalow with resort-like wood decor and lush green landscaping. Seems more like a walk in the park than a workout.

Before the class, I had a short chat with PowerMoves

director Claudel Kuek, a lithe and graceful 43-year-old who is also one of the studio's three Pilates instructors. She explained the benefits of Pilates, which is a series of continuous exercises based on the six principles of breathing, concentration, control, centering, precision and flow.

Besides improving coordination and flexibility, Pilates also tones and tightens typical problem areas like the abdominals, arms and thighs. Due to its emphasis on the quality of its movements rather than the number of repetitions, you are supposed to leave feeling invigorated rather than exhausted.

A trained ballerina, Claudel tells me it was only after she became a mother in her 30s that she discovered Pilates and was won over by its elegant and fluid dance-like

movements, which made her so much fitter and stronger.

Ah, I am feeling more confident already. That is, until I step into the studio and spot a series of complicated-looking bench-like machines called Reformers. Sensing my apprehension, Claudel assures me that beginners start off on floor mats and, if they choose to, can then progress to the Reformers after a few sessions.

For this evening's hour-long session, there is just me and another woman, led by our American instructor Iduma, who boasts a lean, mean machine of a body. Classes here are kept small, with a maximum of six students to an instructor, so students are closely supervised to minimise the risk of injury.

We start off with basic stretches to loosen up. As each step is introduced, we perform a few repetitions before moving on to the next. Our individual body movements are then combined to form a flowing sequence resembling a choreographed dance.

So far, so good. I get plenty of attention from Iduma, who hovers over us to ensure each position is executed correctly. I also like that the poses can be adjusted to a person's comfort zone or to accommodate those recovering from an injury.

It's been a long day at work, but right now, I feel as if I'm exercising in my very own private villa in a secluded resort, thanks to the personalised attention, soothing ambient music, and the view of a lush tropical garden outside the floor-to-ceiling glass wall. Soon, I'm perspiring in the cool air-conditioned comfort – I'm breathing harder and my heart is pumping faster too. Deep in restful concentration, I lose count of the number of poses we are put through.

As the class progresses, the movements become more

challenging and ache-inducing – from bending over to touch our toes, we are made to lift our shoulders and legs from a lying position.

Some of the moves employ the Magic Circle, a steering wheel-like exercise aid that measures 35cm in diameter, and which provides added resistance to strengthen and tone specific parts of the body, depending on whether it's pressed between the palms, the ankles or the thighs.

Squeeze, release, squeeze, release... Using the wheel, I find, also helps to regulate my breathing, which I tend to neglect.

As someone who has always deemed exercise a necessary pain, I am pleasantly surprised at the fun I am having while getting a good workout, although I must admit that bending and stretching my stiff body wasn't as easy as I thought. My abdominal and calf muscles are starting to protest, and my joints are creaking a little.

But it sure feels good. I catch my reflection in the studio mirror – I look much calmer; nothing like a harried journalist with a backlog of deadlines.

As I swing out of the studio doors after the session, my steps feel lighter and my posture is more upright, just like a dancer's. The feel-good effects lasted for the next few days – and there was no trace of muscle pain or exhaustion.

Am I game for a few more sessions? Why not? No pain, no pain, right? **SH**

Basic packages start from \$240 for five sessions of Pilates Fundamentals. PowerMoves also offers dance sessions for adults and children, incorporating jazz ballet and hip-hop. Special classes tailored to golfers, athletes and dancers are also available. For more information, call 6455-2221 or log on to www.powermoves.com.sg.

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