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Fresh Air Fitness

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT WHEN IT COMES TO CLUBS AND OUTDOOR EXERCISE

CLUBS SEND THEIR MEMBERS OUTSIDE TO ENHANCE EXERCISE BENEFITS

Fitness is GREAT



Riverside rites at Chelsea Piers

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Frog's Fitness hits the beach

OUTDOORS

By Mia Coen

ong before the era of the modern health club, there was a time when fitness was achieved through the activities of daily life. Laborious tasks, such as working outdoors, tending to animals, tilling the farmland, and constructing new homes and buildings, were done out of necessity and, consequently, people were typically leaner, fitter, and healthier. Today, our increasingly sedentary lifestyles don't demand nearly as much physical exertion: as a result, activity levels are decreasing, obesity rates are rising, and stress has become a modern epidemic.

Many specialists, fitness experts, and healthcare professionals are examining the roots of this troubling phenomenon. In the process, they're rediscovering the critical link between exercise and the unparalleled benefits of outdoor exposure.

"The benefits of outdoor exercise—in addition to what you do inside the gym—are invaluable," observes Debbie Mandel, the author of *Addicted to Stress*. "When clubs offer members an opportunity to work out outside, they're providing them not only with an exciting way to exercise, but are also exposing them to the natural environment. Being part of that environment signals the body to be receptive to the sunlight, the air, the sounds, and smells—all of which contribute to vitamin-absorption and lowered levels of anxiety, which, in turn, boost the immune system and normalize the body's rhythms so it returns to homeostasis."

Dr. Kathleen Hall, the founder of The Stress Institute in Atlanta, Georgia, and The Mindful Living Institute, in Oak Haven, Georgia, concurs. "When the five senses are engaged outdoors during exercise, endorphins and adrenalin are produced, which boost circulation, vitamin-absorption, and memory, and normalize the stress hormone, cortisol, in the brain."

Many fitness facilities have already tapped into this opportunity, accommodating their members with invigorating activities and exercise programs to achieve a higher level of wellness... by taking fitness outside—into the great outdoors! >

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Fitness is Great Outdoors

OUTDOOR ATTRACTIONS

"I give my clients the opportunity to exercise outdoors quite often," reports Meghann Koppele, the owner of Premier Pilates and Training in Hoboken, New Jersey. "The sun exposure is great for vitamin D absorption; also, in the direct transfer of heat and energy, endorphins are released, acting as a mood elevator, which regulates the levels of the stress hormones in the body. A club that promotes this has an edge because members enjoy the best of both worlds."

And it's not just rural clubs that are capitalizing on this "edge." A number of facilities in urban settings make impressive use of outdoor space in the city. The Sports Center at Chelsea Piers in New York City, for example, is an enormous facility that grows even larger when it invites members to work out beyond its walls.

As Manhattan's only gym located within a park, Chelsea Piers' outdoor activities take place from March to October on the facility's 28 acres of property, and beyond. "We offer outdoor versions of many of our fitness programs, including The Beast boot camp, triathlon training, Spinning, yoga, and an outdoor running club," explains Greta Wagner, the Sports Center's general manager. "We really cater to the active and outdoor lifestyle. Many of our members frequently combine indoor and outdoor training, utilizing the Hudson River Park bikeway/walkway path as part of their workouts."

The Sports Center's acreage accommodates hundreds of fitness classes and programs, as well as a Driving Range and Golf Academy; the BlueStreak sport-specific training facility; the Sky Rink for ice sports; an 80,000-square-foot Field House; and a public, mile-long, waterfront esplanade. A series of free outdoor yoga classes held last summer attracted over 100 members and nonmembers, between the ages of 18 and 75, week after week. Because of the excellent turnout, the club is currently offering it again this summer.

URBAN INNOVATIONS

Of course, not every urban club has access to the same sort of space that Chelsea Piers commands. But rather than curtailing outdoor offerings, a lack of space often inspires trainers to get creative with the available cityscape.

Sean Hannah, a trainer at the Sports Club/LA in Washington, D.C., has essentially turned the bustling metropolis into a playground with a new class called Parkour. It's modeled after the French military practice that combines a number of disciplines—including plyometrics, power-lifting, running, and gymnastics—to overcome physical obstacles in an urban setting. Members scale, hurdle, and otherwise traverse stairwells, benches, walls, wheelchair ramps, and bike racks as though they were parts of an outdoor obstacle course. Because participants must think through a series of movements to complete the course safely, the fitness experience is intensified.



Club One: outdoor Kranking



Sports Club/LA: parkour practice

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The Houstonian Club: green team

"Taking otherwise mundane objects that are designed to be used in a passive way and turning them into pieces of equipment is something most people have never done," Hannah notes. "The mindset that Parkour encourages is unique in that it has the potential to make an otherwise grueling activity seem fun and imaginative." The class also gives members a chance to connect with the environment, while engaging the sensory modalities to guarantee—as Hannah puts it—"a real mental workout."

The Houstonian Club and Spa, in Houston, Texas, hosts a series of boot-camp-style workouts in a meadow right outside its door. Classes include TRX Suspension Training, X-training, Ropes, and X-treme Burn. "Members and guests have told us that they thoroughly enjoy being out-of-doors among the trees and lush greenery," attests Cher Harris, the club's assistant general manager. "They're surrounded by awe-inspiring oak trees, delicate flowers, and cool flowing streams, which set the scene for rejuvenation and recreation."

Similarly, Club One's San Francisco Bay location offers outdoor classes in a beautiful setting, which keeps members coming back for more. "The smell of fresh air, the sea breezes, and the sunshine on your skin help to energize any workout," says Kari Bedgood, public relations and marketing manager for Club One. "Most of our outdoor groups meet rain or shine, which raises the training to the next level. Luckily, the weather in California is pretty consistent and provides optimal conditions for outdoor fitness training all year long."

WELLNESS CONSIDERATIONS

While these clubs make use of the outdoors for intensive exercise, others tune in to the aesthetic beauty of the natural landscape to engage in moderate, stress-relieving activities.

The Sedona Mago Retreat Center, in Sedona, Arizona, is surrounded by vast juniper and pine forests and cascading cliffs—unique, tranquil surroundings that attract more than 5,000 visitors per year. The center offers a variety of low-impact outdoor classes, including yoga, tai chi, hiking, and horseback riding. Members partake in deep-breathing training, deep-body movement, and various types of mindfulness training. "Here at Sedona Mago Retreat, people enjoy utilizing the connection with nature to enhance the effectiveness of mindful exercise," says Joseph Alexander, the vice president of communications for Dahn Yoga Health Centers, which is affiliated with the retreat.

According to Hall, clubs that offer outdoor options are on a long-term track to providing their members with optimal health and wellness, both physically and emotionally. She cites research from the World Health Organization (WHO), which indicates that depression will soon become the second-leading cause of death in the world. "Health clubs can become a part of a lifelong strategic plan for maintaining a healthy mind, body, and spirit if they incorporate the wellness component," she says. "One way to do that is to expand their program offerings to provide options, such as outdoor exercise, that contribute to optimal health."

Incorporating outdoor fitness into their offerings is just one step clubs can take to move in the direction of total wellness, and to help their members think "outside the box" about exercise! —

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