

Staying Fit in the City

Posted on

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Beep-beep, beep-beep...my implacable alarm clock gently but firmly penetrates the fog that envelopes my brain at 5.30am until I can ignore it no longer. Do I really have to get up at this early hour?, I semi-consciously ask myself. Yes. Okay, then let's get on with it!. ... and 15 minutes later I'm suited up and on the road to join an assortment of other people with the same purpose in mind: to start off the day with a sense of well-being. No longer is it an unusual sight in the pre-dawn hours to find a variety of physical-fitness conscious people plying the roads, whether they are speed-walkers tooling along with flaying arms, panting joggers pounding past, elderly couples strolling at a more leisurely pace or colourfully attired bicyclists zooming by in packs for their early morning training session.

There was a time when the Galle Face Green was the centre of most of this outdoor physical-fitness activity; and, although it is still a very popular venue for fitness enthusiasts, now it is also common to encounter on so many of the main roads and smaller byways numerous people who believe in beginning their day with an aerobic wake-up before the hustle and bustle of the city gets into gear and the streets become congested with commuter traffic.

But if hitting the pavement at dawn doesn't appeal to you as part of your regular exercise regimen, there are several other options available for keeping fit the most sophisticated being found in the health clubs/sports complexes located in the various five-star hotels.

The most common outdoor facilities at all these establishments are well-maintained swimming pools, usually complete with kiddies pool and poolside refreshment service, and floodlit tennis courts having different surfaces ranging from clay to synthetic turf. Most provide individual coaching and regular classes in these sports.

Indoor facilities offered differ from place to place, especially in their ambience (for instance, some clubs have separate facilities for men and women; others have shared facilities), and you need to shop around to find the health club which suits your particular exercise requirements. One club may emphasize individual exercise programmes tailored especially for you, beginning with an initial physical fitness evaluation, and your programme is then carefully monitored and updated by qualified instructors; whereas at another club the gym equipment will be demonstrated for you if required and then you are on your own. The types of indoor facilities available are quite comprehensive and include air-conditioned squash courts, table tennis, free and fixed weighttraining equipment, jogging treadmills, stationary bicycles, rowing machines, sauna, whirlpool, steam rooms and massage. The more progressive clubs also have innovative programmes of classes in aerobics, karate, callisthenics, body sculpturing, and jazz ballet.

But the cost of using these facilities is not inconsiderable and varies as much from one hotel to another as the facilities themselves. For example, one establishment's annual membership fee for a single person will run you Rs 5,500 and Rs 7,500 for a couple. Another has a more categorized rate structure with an initial non-refundable initiation fee of Rs. 6,000 per person with additional monthly or annual fees of Rs 900 or Rs 8,400 respectively. For a family membership the initiation fee rises to Rs. 10,000 and the additional monthly or annual fees being, Rs 1,500 or Rs 14,400. A special monthly membership fee for short-term residents in Colombo will cost you Rs 1,200. And in assessing which club to join and for what price you will also need to find out just what these membership fees cover; extra charges may also be levied for the use of certain facilities.

However, you don't have to be a five-star hotel guest or a member if you want to avail yourself of these facilities from time to time. Usually, the club will charge you a fixed daily fee plus whatever separate fees are applicable to the facilities you make use of.

Additionally, many sports clubs and associations in Colombo accept foreign visitors on a temporary membership basis. (Please see the "About Town" section for details.) Smaller health clubs and fitness centres are also situated throughout the city. Although some of these have exercise equipment and hydro-therapy such as steam rooms, the most widely found facility is for massage.

The Jade Green Health Centre, located on the 1st Floor of the Hotel Lanka Orchard (opposite the Savoy Theatre) at 3 Galle Road, is a particularly popular place for this form of relaxation and rejuvenation. They specialize in Swedish massage performed by masseurs and masseuses who have been trained and who have on-going training by an English expert in this field. The eight comfortably appointed, private rooms are all air-conditioned, with wall-to-wall carpeting, piped-in music and attached shower. An hour spent here will cost you Rs 150/-, and it is an excellent way to shed the tensions of the work-a-day world. The health centre is usually quite busy so an appointment is advisable at any time daily (except Poya Days) from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

In quite a different setting—in fact, down a quiet, tree-lined lane away from the busyness and noise of the city, at 13 Adam's Avenue, Colombo 4—is a large house that has been converted into the Ratne Health Centre. The Centre, which has an impeccable reputation, specializes in manual, scientific massage and acupuncture to alleviate your aches and pains and to soothe your tired muscles. The proprietor, Mr. Navaratne, who both gives these revitalizing massages himself as well as personally trains his adept staff to give them, has some 35 years of experience in physio-therapy. He has a large repeat clientele, many of whom claim that his massages work miracles, especially those using herbal, ayurvedic oils. The session lasts for about an hour for the modest fee of Rs 100/-. Open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., appointments are recommended to avoid waiting as the services of Mr. Navaratne and his staff are much in demand. The Ratne Health Centre also has branches in tourist hotels in Bentota. It's always a challenge when living in a city, or having to travel from city to city on business or vacation, to maintain fitness and a healthy lifestyle. But here in Colombo there are numerous ways available for shaping up or staying in shape, be it on your own via the jogging trail or in a modernly equipped health club following a regular workout routine. The choice is yours for the asking.

