

making a splash

Pooling the elements of mat, land, and Reformer Pilates, Poolates, a new wave of aquatic exercise challenges water lovers to build flexibility, aerobic capacity, and core strength.

By Becca Hensley

As Pilates purists, my daughter and I are skeptical when we sign up for our first Poolates class at the Ritz Carlton Key Biscayne. As athletes who regularly work out with a personal trainer on a Reformer, take daily ballet lessons (my daughter), and swim daily laps (me), we aren't convinced that this new form of aquatic exercise will satisfy our yen for flexibility, aerobics, and core-strength building. And, yet, just minutes into the class led by Poolates creator Rebecca "Boo" Cardozo Pfeiffer, a certified Pilates instructor and personal trainer, we find ourselves challenged. My flexible dancer of a daughter, who never struggles with balance, sways—and I seem to bob about the outdoor pool like so much flotsam and jetsam, trying harder than ever before to keep my core stable. We giggle, frown, and concentrate our way through the thoroughly entertaining class. By the end of it, we are converted—we feel that peaceful euphoria that follows a yoga workout and that stretched out, all body lengthening we gain from our weekly Reformer sessions.

Developing core strength through water resistance

"Poolates helps improve posture, builds strength, increases balance and enhances flexibility," Boo says. She points out that Poolates movements are from the inside out, which urges the deep postural muscles to perform.



Poolates at the Ritz Carlton, Key Biscayne, where it debuted

Based on mat, standing, and Reformer exercises, the Poolates technique requires that participants move one leg at a time, an isolation of muscles that tones and builds stabilization. These are Pilates exercises, but in an unstable environment, where buoyancy and water resistance create challenges that go beyond the bands and other equipment we customarily use during our Pilates workouts. In Poolates, the water becomes the instrument. Movements performed effortlessly on land, seem harder in the water. Boo puts it this way, "Even on two legs or sitting in the steps, the water is constantly moving, so you develop stability by trying to stay stable in a moving environment—sort of like trying to stand up on a crowded bus or subway."

continued on page 83

Making a Splash

continued from page 68

A marriage between water exercise and land-based Pilates

How close is Poolates to Pilates, the system of core enhancement exercise that was developed by Joseph H. Pilates in the early 20th century for dancers to improve performance and endurance and prevent injury? "All the Poolates movements are based on the fundamental principles of Pilates, including breath control, concentration, fluidity, length, strength, and depth," explains Boo. Still, Poolates is not merely Pilates in the water. Rather, each movement has been adapted especially for the pool. A marriage between water exercise and strict land-based Pilates, Poolates allows for free muscle movement and weight bearing without the hard surface. This enhances the Pilates goal of uniting the limbs with the core and developing strength in the powerhouse area (the abdomen, back, and hamstrings). The water provides a secure environment for attempting moves that might have seemed too daring on land.

During the class we recognize many Pilates moves we know, but find they take on new meaning in the water. For example, much of mat Pilates happens on our backs, lying on the floor. But much of land-based Pilates (like arabesque, marching, arm work, etc) actually is done standing. This is because Pilates—and Poolates—seeks to use the body more efficiently and to bring the body back to balance. Clearly, it makes sense to develop core strength from a standing position since we spend most of our lives upright. So, Poolates, at the beginning and intermediate levels, is performed either sitting, standing, reclining, or leaning in the water.

Mindful breathing and movement

But Poolates isn't all about the body. "Focus is very important in Poolates," Boo says. "People don't expect that, but once they calm down and think about what they're

doing, they get a rhythm going—and that's why they feel so good afterwards." The idea that participants concentrate on breathing, on the movement in a manner that melds mind, body, and spirit speaks to me. "Those who focus have a much better workout," Boo adds.

Poolates is not your grandmother's water aerobics course. And yet, the class has its share of senior citizens. In our class, there are people of all ages: fit, young athletes, middle-aged exercisers, the elderly, and one woman I suspect to be pregnant. Offering benefits that even Joseph Pilates himself might not have imagined, Poolates appeals to everybody. Some of Boo's private clients are world-class athletes working on flexibility. Others come to tone, shape their bodies, and lose weight.

The Poolates attraction

After the class, Boo tells us more about her trademark fitness regime. We're in the hotel's tropical garden, overlooking a golden, sandy beach, and lounging in chairs between two pools. Boo shoos away a couple of giant iguana. "We get people from all over the world and everybody loves Poolates," she remarks. To meet the demand, Boo has begun training instructors from across the US to teach the course, now only available as part of the Ritz Carlton Key Biscayne's exclusive exercise menu, throughout Miami, and by special appointment with Boo.

As I watch our classmates leave the pool area, I have a revelation: Poolates doesn't intimidate. Anybody can do it and there's a certain camaraderie that develops as participants wriggle and balance together. This mirror free exercise takes place with most of your body submerged in water. Nobody but the instructor can see whether you're doing things right. You don't compete with your fellow students; it's you and the water. Once you focus you become connected and that's just the beginning. ☯

*For more information, visit
www.ritzcarlton.com*