

Bollywood dance classes drawing big crowds

Workouts mix traditional Indian folk dances with hip-hop moves

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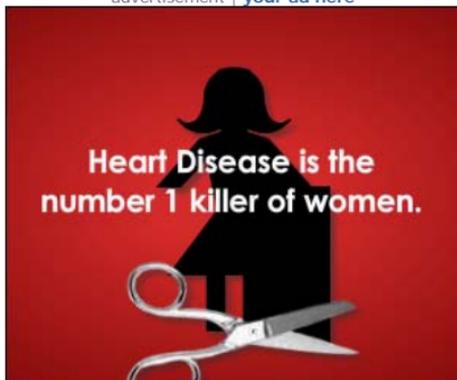
DENVER - Drawn to the lavish dance numbers in films from India, or just bored with their gym [workouts](#), people are flocking to Bollywood-style dance classes that mix traditional Indian folk dances with hip-hop moves. And the U.S. exercise industry is taking notice.

Long enjoyed by young people of Indian descent, and common in big cities on the coasts, Bollywood-style classes are popping up in regions of the country where Indian cinema is new and there aren't as many people of Indian descent.

Fans of Bollywood — an informal term for Hindi-language films, often romantic musicals — want formal instruction in the style marked by foot-stomping dance numbers that put folk moves and hip swings to pop beats.

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"I was looking to try something different," says Tina Striegel, a 45-year-old accountant who tried a Denver class after falling in love with Bollywood-style movies such as "Slumdog Millionaire," the Oscar-nominated film inspired by Indian films that includes a large dance number at the end.

'I love all of it'

Denver's Bollywood West school started in 2006 as the first in Colorado to focus on Bollywood-style dancing. It now packs in crowds four nights a week to two locations and will move to a bigger studio next month.

"I love the movies. I love the culture. I love all of it," Striegel says before stretching for an hour-long session in which more than a dozen women practice a song-and-dance number.

Students swing their hips, raise one hand to their mouths as if calling



David Zalubowski / AP

Instructor Renu Kansal leads students in practicing Bollywood dance steps at a dance school in south Denver.

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out to a lover, and then lift one leg and hop forward in a line. After the number, instructor Renu Kansal reminds the dancers to wave their arms side to side smoothly, so they don't look "too drill-team-ish." As if they were in a Bollywood movie, the dancers are trying to tell a story of romance.

"I taught this in New York, and when we moved out here and I started Bollywood dancing classes, I was skeptical," Kansal said in an interview. "I was like, oh gosh, I don't know if this'll work here. But I had to double my class offerings in under a month. It was a huge surprise to me."

Kansal isn't the only Indian dance instructor caught by surprise. Used to teaching folk dances to the children of Indian immigrants, instructors now field calls from people with no connection to south Asia.

"All of these days it was small-scale, but now it's big-scale," says Bhagya Nagesh, an Indian dance instructor in Naperville, Ill., who will open a studio called Bollywood Rhythms in the Chicago suburb next month.

Get a workout, learn a new culture

In Houston, a Bollywood-style studio that opened in 2003 now has five locations and a waiting list for kids as young as 3. Instructors at Hybrid Rhythms say the classes are too popular for small, private lessons.

"I thought, 'I have to open this studio, because I cannot take any more students,'" Nagesh says. "People are just more familiar with it from the movies."

The [fitness](#) industry has noticed its popularity, calling it part of a trend toward ethnic-style dances where participants get a workout while learning about new cultures.

The American Council on [Exercise](#) says ethnic dancing, such as salsa dancing, belly dancing and now Bollywood dancing, is a major growth area for gyms and dance studios. The classes attract people who don't usually exercise, along with gym members bored by running on treadmills.

"It's really great for those who may not be motivated to go through the motions at the gym. This is better option," says Jessica Matthews, continuing education coordinator for the San Diego-based council.

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For some, learning about Indian culture is as big a draw as the dancing. At Bollywood West, the mostly female students gather on Sunday nights to watch Bollywood films. Students also attend Indian cultural festivals and learn about dances common to Indian weddings and family gatherings.

"I'd tried all of it. Modern dance and salsa and swing. Nothing has hooked me like this. I love the culture and the community and the spice," says Bollywood West student Claire Polsky, 45.

Even non-Indian dance studios are incorporating Bollywood-style dancing into their repertoire. At the Atlanta Belly Dance studio, Bollywood moves have been incorporated into dances set to American pop songs.

"Americans like exotic, but they like dancing to songs they know," says Schadia Hazlett, an owner of three studios of Atlanta Belly Dance, which has several hundred to 1,000 students at times. "It attracts a totally different clientele than salsa or samba."

Fans of Bollywood hope the trend isn't going away. The moves can appear schmaltzy to Western audiences, and at times the movie plots seem designed only to tie together dance numbers.

"Some it is kind of hokey and silly. But if you go back and watch American movies from the 1930s and '40s, the big musicals, they were the same way," Striegel says. "So it's like going back to the old school."

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