Fitness is no longer just about dumbbells and push-ups: there’s a new world of wild and wonderful exercise options. Wellbeing has become a worldwide obsession, shaping our bodies, minds and lifestyles.
A SMALL GROUP OF WOMEN HANG FROM THE CEILING, stretching their bodies angularly into the air. With feet raised vertically and legs outstretched, they curl into a backward bend known as ‘the swing’. They look serene and beautiful, dangling from the rafters.

These women are practicing AntiGravity® Aerial Yoga. It’s a new form of yoga where silk cloth is hung from the ceiling so that asanas (yoga poses) can be performed mid-air, supporting the body against gravity.

Christopher Harrison, the creator of AntiGravity® Aerial Yoga and other suspension fitness and aerial yoga genres, pioneered this unique form of fitness as a gymnast in the 1990s when he started experimenting with the ceiling silks used by acrobatic performers.

“We weren’t acrobats, and we didn’t know which fabric to buy. So we bought the wrong one. We tried climbing it and we were awful!” laughs Harrison. “I thought, what if we just looped the top and made it into a hammock? That was the moment that the silk hammock apparatus was born as the key to an aerial art form.”

Now Harrison is heading a movement. He teaches people to perform not only yoga, but Pilates, restorative yoga and fitness exercises while hanging from the hammock. It’s a development in the area of aerial fitness, tightly tied to the acrobatic arts, that has seen a boom in popularity.

Personal programmes, kangaroo jump shoes, fencing, saucis, trampolines and pole dancing; the ways people try to get fit range from astounding to ridiculous. But if there is one common theme, it’s that people see fitness as crucial to their everyday lives. Blame an image-obsessed culture or a competitive edge – whatever the cause, fitness is here to stay.

AntiGravity® Aerial Yoga is a new form of Yoga.

According to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, the total commercial health club revenue in the US increased by 81 percent to US$157.3 million in 2012. This doesn’t include the huge sums of money the fitness equipment industry generates. “The industry is growing,” says Adam Fox-McGregor, the founder of Regime Fitness, a UAE-based fitness training company. “Awareness about the need to be active to avoid health issues associated with a sedentary lifestyle is growing. About forty percent of our enquiries are for weight loss and about thirty percent from people who just want a healthier, more active lifestyle.”

HOLISTIC WELLNESS, WHICH INVOlVES NOT ONLY MAKING your body stronger and leaner, but your mind, too, is one of the greatest growth points in the fitness industry. “Yoga continues to grow in popularity as people from all sorts
in open space. It releases endorphins, neurotransmitters and happy hormones. It’s very easy to get addicted. We do a lot of laughing and playing in class and you don’t even know how hard you’re working out until you’re really sore the next day!”

AntiGravity® Fitness takes inspiration from yoga and Pilates, and, like these forms of exercise, the intense fitness work sneaks up on you. “People from a fitness background may want to try an AntiGravity® suspension fitness class,” says Harrison. “In those you’re doing push-ups with your feet in the air, you’re doing inverted chin-ups and you’re doing one-legged balances. It’s a hardcore workout. It’s killer. But every class increases mobility in your joints, and gives you cardio strength and flexibility.”

There is no doubt corporate lifestyles have increased the demand for fast, convenient ways to get fit. It’s not unheard of to see someone in an office perched on a brightly coloured ball or they type away. Fitness balls are just one of the ways of actually using muscles while chained to a desk. Some offices have gone so far as to include workout routines as part of the daily schedule.

The UAE is particularly vulnerable to work-induced unfitness. The busy corporate environment combined with extreme temperatures outside means many struggle to find ways to work out. “People work really long hours and travel a lot, so we have to be really flexible and work around their schedules,” Fox-McGregor says. “We do a lot on the corporate wellness side. Companies and organisations are recognising the need to continue bringing fitness and wellness resources to the workplace so that employees have the ability to maintain productivity and a healthy lifestyle.”

Fitness trends these days tend to cross the world, with global take-up occurring at a fast pace. “Some places have really embraced AntiGravity® Fitness,” Harrison says. “Asia has: we built a huge training centre in Chang Mai, Thailand, just to keep up with demand. We’re very successful in Europe. We’ve launched our site in the UAE and other regions are looking to copy us. We’re building a network of these centres around the world.”

One of the most extraordinary developments in fitness is that many programmes aren’t restricted by location. Online fitness allows people to get fit anytime, anywhere. My Yoga Online was one of the pioneers in this field. This online yoga platform based in Vancouver, Canada focuses on yoga, but also includes Pilates, dance and supportive programmes. The demand for online fitness is exploding, offering over 1,000 different classes. “We launched our site before YouTube even existed,” explains Michelle Trantina, one of its co-founders. “It took people time before they understood why we were doing it – some thought we were completely crazy. But now almost everyone seems to be interested. Our growth has been substantial, especially in the past few years.”

Convenience is the obvious benefit of online fitness instruction. “You get access to great teachers when and where you want them,” Trantina says. “It can be hard to fit in the time to exercise, and an on-demand platform with classes of different lengths and levels makes it so much easier to get it done. By making the programmes available at the user’s schedule, rather than the schedule of the studio or gym, we can ensure consistency in our practice. It’s all about making heating, strengthening practices available on demand, and taking the barriers away from creating a strong, consistent practice that will give benefits for both body and mind.”

There are a few inherent limitations to the online medium, such as the ability to receive immediate feedback. Over the years My Yoga Online has built up a reliable stable of instructors, crucial to ensuring the online formula works.

“Online fitness will continue to become more popular in the future,” Trantina says. “Everything is moving online right now.”

Still, online fitness might not be for everyone. “For some people online programmes work very well,” says Fox-McGregor. “However, you need to be disciplined in order for them to work, and confident that you are performing the exercises in the correct form.”

Whether it’s dumbbells or silk swings, fitness balls or online yoga, there are a multitude of alternatives for staying healthy in both mind and body. Sign up to the gym, or pick up the Wii, you can also be much more particular with your instructor roster as we have the whole world to draw from. Some online videos are presented from one camera angle for away from the teacher, making it hard to see things like alignment, mudras (hand or limb gestures), or pranayama (breathing). We invest time and money in multiple camera angles and close-ups to ensure users know what is happening and where they need to be.

Yoga is not the only form of fitness suited to the online vehicle, but it is one of the most popular. Other forms of technology-based fitness, such as the Nintendo Wii Fit, demonstrate how people are looking for customisable ways to get fit. “Online fitness will continue to become more popular in the future,” Trantina says. “Everything is moving online right now.”

AWARENESS ABOUT THE NEED TO BE ACTIVE TO AVOID HEALTH ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH A SEDENTARY LIFESTYLE IS GROWING.