

Keeping fit in style

By Atle Hetland

There are many people who manage to keep fit and healthy with little physical exercise beyond everyday activities. Yet, there are also many who grow overweight and unhealthy. To many people in the middle and upper classes, work doesn't entail physical strains. It simply means sitting behind a desk in an office or a counter in a shop. Transport means sitting in a motorcar or bus, or on a motorcycle. Even longer travels by trains and airplanes are comfortable. Food habits are often not healthy and people grow overweight at an early age, sometimes even in childhood. Physical education is not given much attention in schools, especially not for girls and young women. Cricket and other sports are popular among many men, but few women are active in sports. Sometimes, traditions restrict women from many outdoor sports and exercise.

But things are changing, and in the larger cities, indeed in the affluent sectors of Islamabad, more and more fitness centres open.

"It has become a fashion and status symbol among middle and upper class men and women to attend fitness centres", says Quratulain Chaudhary, 25, a relations manager in a bank in the city.

"I sit behind my desk the whole day, and I need to go for exercise after work", she says.

"I come every day to the new Vostro Klub in F-6. It helps keep me in shape and physically fit, and it is also a good stress buster. It has now become a habit and a social activity, which I would not be without", she says.

Atif Akram, a trainer at the club explains that the fitness centre has about 50-50 participation of men and women, but most of the trainers are men. "Although most clients work out alone, they can also have personal trainers. After some time, though, the clients know well what to do themselves, and how to use the different training machines and equipment."

"It costs some six or seven thousand per months, but there are also discounts for groups, families and workmates", Atif explains.

"In winter, most of our clients are locals, but in summer, when the swimming pool is open, we have more foreigners."

"The club is open for men and women most of the day, from seven in the morning till eleven at night. But mid-day it is reserved for women only."

"It is the same at our fitness centre" says Sikandar Abbasi at Fitrobics, another new fitness club in the F-7 sector in Islamabad, owned by a father and son who have returned from the UK.

"We are open seven days a week from early morning till late at night. We have separate sections for men and women", Sikander explains.

He adds proudly that one of the club's trainers is 'Mr. Pakistan 2012', Shahzad Shaukat, who also won a prestigious prize in 2013. In early March, he will participate in the South Asia Bodybuilding Championship in Lahore."

"But fitness centres are not mainly for bodybuilding and sportsmen and women. They are not sports clubs, but facilities for working out and exercising, and not overdoing it either", Sikander says.

“I only use fitness centres periodically, mostly when it is very hot in summer and cold in winter. But the rest of the year, I mostly go for walks in the parks”, says Humera Suleman, 36, a housewife and mother of three children.

“Sometimes, I go hiking in the Margalla Hills, following some of the main tracks there, with my husband. That has become popular among locals as well as foreigners”, she says, adding that one of the female ambassadors from a European climbs the mountain in less than an hour. “For the rest of us, it takes more than twice that time”, Huma says.

The two five star hotels in Islamabad, Marriott and Serena, have excellent fitness facilities for hotel guests and members. Their swimming pools are heated and the exercise rooms are either heated or cooled as the season requires. “We have a sauna, too”, says Jan Verduyn, the General Manager in Marriott, showing around at the hotel’s Xavier Health Club, which is open for hotel guests for free, and for paying members from outside.

“I have just joined the health club in Serena”, says a foreign newcomer to Pakistan, who is heading an international organization in the country.

“It is a bit costly”, she adds. “But I also sees it as an investment to find social and professional contacts, and that has already proven true”, walking along with a new-found foreign friend who has been in the country for a year.

“Now, we will take a cup of coffee and discuss topics of common interest”, they say. “And maybe even some sweets. We deserve that now”, they say laughing, look slim and fit both of them.

Photos attached

Photo caption:

Photo **1 & 2** Quratulain Chaudhary doing light workout for the photographer at one of the upscale fitness centres in Islamabad.

Photo **3** Atif Akram and Quratulain Chaudhary at Vestro Klub, one several new upscale fitness centres in Islamabad.

(-Photo by the writer)