

Reformer Pilates

Billed as a fast, effective way to change your body shape, reformer Pilates has a growing evangelical following. *Healthy's* managing editor Marie went to check it out



Marie shows off her invisible car, and tones up her arms and shoulders

What's the buzz?

This whole-body workout promises to strengthen core muscles, burn fat, tone muscles and boost cardiovascular fitness, in super-quick time. Little wonder reformer Pilates, also known as dynamic Pilates, is catching on fast. 'Using the reformer gets you really strong, really quickly,' says Hollie Grant, head trainer at Pilates HQ in London. 'For every two or three mat classes you do, you'd only need to do one reformer session.' As someone who has practised mat work Pilates for many years, and is zealous about its benefit, I was keen to give this a try.

A bit of background

Unlike mat work, this uses a bit of kit called a reformer. Created by Joseph Pilates during WWII, it was constructed with whatever materials he could get his hands on – from bed springs to rope – and was basically a frame with a sliding platform attached that can be moved back and forth by pushing on a foot bar or pulling ropes. Today's reformers still take their cue from the original, with the spring-loaded sliding bench complete with straps, pulleys, weights and attachments to give you a full-body workout. 'Reformers are so simple, but you can do so much on them,' says Grant. 'I also teach a fat-burn class, which combines high-intensity interval training with a workout on the reformer, so you get your cardio and your Pilates.'

The experience

I go to a beginner's class in a bright, airy studio in north London. Although I've been doing Pilates for years, this is my first time with a reformer. Grant shows me how to change the springs, which are colour coded – red, yellow and blue – to provide variable resistance from light to heavy and reset the position of the foot bar. Beneath the platform are other bits of kit such as free weights, which we'll call on during the class. We start with the warm up. Lying on our backs, feet on the foot bar, we begin with breathing exercises to engage the abdominals, and learn how to set up our bodies in neutral (maintaining the spine's natural curve) and in imprint (backs flat on

the carriage) to protect the lower back, before working through our legs and abs. Warm up done, we move onto the standing section and for me the hardest move all – lunges. With the back foot on the platform, front on the carriage, we push out on the front leg, sliding the carriage forward to adopt a lunge position, knee at 90 degrees, before pulling it back to standing. At first, I felt super-precarious, like I could topple off at any moment, so I hung on to the balance pole provided. But I got used to it surprisingly quickly, and was able to do without it. 'Because the surface is unstable, whenever you do any balance work standing on the machine your core is working really hard to help keep you stable and it tones you up,' says Grant. The session also helped to realign my posture, lengthening my body. Throughout the class there's lots of position changes and spring-tension switches, but these are always clearly called out, so you're never at a loss as to what you should be doing.

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The verdict

In a word: brilliant! By the end of the class, my body felt like it had been challenged – not just physically, but mentally learning to trust in the reformer. And I left feeling loose, limber and energised – walking taller, too. **1** *Pilates HQ (www.pilateshq.co.uk) runs dynamic reformer classes in Angel, London. The first class is free, thereafter £22 per class (off peak) and £25 in peak hours; block booking costs less. To find a class near you, visit www.pilatesunion.com*