

Beauty

The roundabout way to work out

Offering 30-minute circuit training for women of all ages, sizes and fitness levels, Curves opens a branch somewhere in the world every 4 hours. One of the more recent launches was in western Athens

By Cordelia Madden

TO SAY that the Curves for Women fitness chain is big is something of an understatement. It is listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the largest fitness franchise in the world, with an estimated 4 million members around the world. Every four hours, a Curves branch or franchise opens somewhere in the world. There are branches throughout North, South and Central America and Europe. For every two Macdonald's fast-food joints in the States, there is one Curves gym. While Macdonald's took 25 years to open 6,000 franchises, Curves reached the same number in just seven years.

The secret behind the success of this women-only gym chain seems to lie in its simple, undemanding approach to exercise. Offering an easy-to-follow 30 minute per day workout that can be tackled by anyone, whatever her age or size, Curves is getting women up off the sofa and into its warm, welcoming one-room gyms where the machines are set up in a sociable circle to facilitate chat. Conventional fitness fanatics may be frothing at the mouth over the chain's growth, arguing that this one-workout-suits-all formula cannot possibly benefit any woman regardless of her requirements, health and fitness level, but the fact remains that Curves is managing to persuade women who had never set foot inside a gym before to don their trainers and work up a sweat.

The news, therefore, that Curves has opened two franchises in Athens and is planning for a further ten by next year can only be good for Greek women, who recently received the dubious honour of being crowned the world's fattest - surpassing in girth even the supersized American gals. While the prevalent unisex gyms where Lycra-clad model-types are eyed up by beefy musclemen can understandably intimidate many women, particularly those who feel less than confident about their saggy bits, the friendly, uncompetitive atmosphere at Curves may offer a haven in which plumper girls or older women can follow an uncomplicated daily workout, enjoy a gossip if they wish and, or so the gym literature promises, watch the extra pounds melt away.

"You don't need any level of fitness to start, and the workout suits everyone, whether they are 15 or 80 years old," says Toni Hadzis who, with her partner Muriel Papageorgiou, opened Curves in Patissia on September 5. (The first Athens branch opened in the eastern Attica suburb of Koropi at Easter 2005.) "It's a very simple workout," she continues. "I've worked out all my life, and I've always had to think about what I should do next, whether I should be lifting more weight or changing my routine. There's no thinking involved with the Curves workout." But that's



Not just for Lycra-clad gym bunnies, the Curves workout suits young and old, slim and voluptuous alike



not to say, she is quick to add, that it isn't tough. "These should be the most difficult 30 minutes of your life," she says.

Ten to twelve machines are arranged in order in a large, open circle, interspersed with rubber mats. The machines are for resistance training; the mats for aerobic workout. Members spend 30 seconds on each machine, pushing or pulling the levers to create hydraulic resistance - the faster one moves the levers, the more resistance is created and the harder the move becomes. In between the machines, the women skip, jog on the spot or star-jump on the mats to keep up the heart rate. The entire programme (two rounds of the circle, followed by stretching) is supervised by an instructor, who motivates the women on each apparatus and, every 8 minutes, gets them to check their pulses to make sure that they are training at the appropriate level.

The reason why Curves is for women only, says Hadzis, is not only because many women feel uncomfortable exercising with men but because it can make them focus more on what they're wearing and how they look rather than on how they are doing the exercise. Eliminating men also means that the circular workout zone can turn into a gossip or even therapy circle. "It's great fun when you get 16 women on the circuit and they're all talking away," Hadzis says. Many's the time, she says, when she herself has done extra rounds of the circuit simply because she was enjoying a chat with a friend on the neighbouring machine.

At a time when many gyms in Greece are going belly-up, with the huge Universal chain recently being declared bankrupt, Hadzis says she's not concerned that Curves may similarly flop. "I'm not worried, because we are so different," she says. "We're not trying to compete with regular gyms." Even the opening hours are different, she points out, with Curves closing at 7pm during the week, at 1pm on Saturdays and remaining shut all Sunday; "regular" gyms tend to be busiest between 7 and 9pm weekdays and also attract plenty of weekend workout junkies.

Gary Heavin and wife Diane opened the first Curves for Women fitness centre in Harlington, Texas in 1992. The new concept of a 30-minute fitness and strength training session accompanied by weight-loss guidance, in a comfortable environment designed for women, was immediately successful. The first franchise opened in 1995, and within 36 months Curves boasted 1,000 branches. The chain has consistently been ranked in *Entrepreneur* magazine as one of the best new franchises in their annual survey, and in 2004 Heavin won the Ernst & Young entrepreneur of the year.

✓ Depending on the programme you choose, Curves offers membership at between 30 and 45 euros per month, with special incentives for joining on the first day you visit and for bringing in other members. Curves is at 10 Nektariou St, Patissia (Attiki metro station), tel 210-866-0909