

Shaping up like the stars

As Madonna's favourite exercise system becomes available across Britain, POLLY BUCHANAN sits back and tones up

MADONNA loves it, Gwyneth Paltrow is a fan too – and now gyrotonics, the exercise system, is available nationwide.

Dubbed the yoga of the 21st century, the system which originated in the US promises maximum effect with minimum sweat and claims to be a cross between swimming and ballet, with a pinch of Pilates and yoga thrown into the mix.

Gyrotonics says it will strengthen and lengthen muscles, fight fat and transform tubby tums into killer abs. Intrigued, I decide to give this wonder workout a whirl.

My first impressions are daunting. Walking into the studio, the selection of medieval looking machines looks alarmingly like a dominatrix chamber. Each machine seems terrifying. One even appears to have manacles attached.

My instructor Tisha Harrington suggests starting with something simple such as a breathing exercise. As someone whose idea of exercise is manually changing the TV channel, learning how to breathe properly sounds like my idea of a successful session.

Tisha proves me wrong. By teaching me to breathe in time to the various bodily contortions she's putting me through, she demonstrates how to access my abdominals and make them suffer.

I knew I was unfit before I started but hadn't expected that breathing would have me running out of steam. Once I've finished huffing and puffing Tisha sets me up on the first machine, the Tower – a daunting bench-like construction with manacles dangling from its backboard. I lie on my back while Tisha pulls down the (thankfully, Velcro) manacles and threads my hands through them. I'm to use them and the Tower's pulleys to slowly pull myself up into the sit-up position.

The pulleys make the exercise easier than the odd crunch I've attempted in the past but by using them to support my weight, I find the emphasis is on working my abdominals and using my hands or back to haul myself from lying to sitting.

To my surprise, I'm feeling the burn, which bodes well for the waspish waist and washboard stomach I'm dreaming of.

Next on the aerobic agenda is a leg exercise, which involves my feet in the manacles and Tisha urging me to make wide circles



NO SWEAT: Tutor Tisha Harrington, left, introduces Polly to gyrotonics

with my legs, while focusing on my breathing.

I'm soon gasping for breath and it makes a huge difference to have Tisha on hand to regulate my rhythm and encourage me. Ticked by my success on the Tower, I'm bouncing as Tisha leads me to the Jump/Stretch Board and demonstrates a technique she calls the Cat. This involves crouching on all fours, sticking my bum out as high and as far as it will go, then thrusting my chest forward for good measure. I feel like a porn star but the exercise really makes the most of my arm muscles.

Next, Tisha gets me to stand on the machine's central spinning board and shows me how to twist my body one way and my legs the other, a move designed to stretch my hips.

It feels like dancing and I quickly master breathing while spinning like a pro. When Tisha warns that one false move and I could throw a hip joint, I calm down and we move on to the machine I've been dreading – the Ladder, from which I'll be hanging upside down.

I clamber on to the platform, lean forward so my weight is on my upper thighs, shove my legs through the rungs at the back of the contraption and let go, allowing my arms to swing by the sides of my hanging body. It's about five seconds before I'm frantically clutching at the sides

of the Ladder desperate to shift some weight off my thighs. Tisha had warned me that my quad muscles might "kill" me on this manoeuvre. She wasn't joking.

So, with my muscles – not to mention my balance and co-ordination – well and truly stretched, I reflect on gyrotonics: is it something I'd recommend?

ALTHOUGH I haven't broken into a sweat or collapsed on the floor, I feel as if I've had a work-out. My stomach is slightly tighter and, over the next few days I feel an increased awareness of my muscles. It's a complicated workout, which is why the London King's Cross studio I visited won't teach classes of more than five. A newcomer would benefit from an intensive solo session to start with.

But anyone looking for a refreshing muscle exercise regime should give gyrotonics a go. If it's good enough for Gwyneth, it's good enough for me.

● For London classes call 020 7837 7111; Newcastle, 0191 519 3351; Ludlow, 01584 871 061; Carmarthenshire, 01267 267 323; Edinburgh, 0131 221 1131, and Tunbridge Wells, 01892 618 493. Or see gyrotonic.com. One-on-one classes cost from £50.