

# HATHA YOGA

for beginners



*Have you always been intrigued by the idea of learning yoga? Maybe you would love to give it a try but are worried that you're not stretchy enough, too unbalanced or just plain unsure what it's all about? Yoga Torquay's beginners' class could be for you. Anita Newcombe gives it a go!*



Give it a Go! Hatha Yoga



I'm meeting James Russell this evening at Yoga Torquay's studio in Park Lane, a haven of tranquillity tucked away in an historic lane, close to Torquay's famous clock tower. James and his partner Alice opened Yoga Torquay in October, having spent a couple of months renovating it.

I've arrived early for tonight's session and while we are waiting for people to arrive, James gives me a bit of background about one of the world's most popular leisure activities. James explains that there are hundreds of different types of yoga in the West but they all derive from Hatha Yoga, which has its root tradition in ancient India. The oldest forms of yoga were based around meditation as described in texts such as the Yoga Sutra. The Sanskrit word, 'yoga' or 'union' is about calming the mind. Well, the only work in (translated) Sanskrit I'm familiar with is the Bhagavad Gita and this slim volume still resides in my library with a very old bookmark inserted between pages 70 & 71. Does this mean I actually read this much – many years ago? I really can't remember but now I am intrigued to learn more.

James tells me that Hatha Yoga developed about 1000 years ago and instead of trying to completely bypass awareness of the the body through the practice of meditation, Hatha's idea was to include the body using special postures (asanas) and breathing techniques (pranayama). Hatha Yoga originally came to Europe in

the 1940s and 50s but only became really popular during the 60s and 70s.

I ask James about the benefits of yoga and he explains that it's good for joint mobility and strength; it helps with flexibility if practised regularly, and is very effective in developing self-discipline, focus and motivation. It is also a very powerful way of de-stressing.

James says, "It gives me clarity. Originally I was doing Tai Chi and Qi Gong but I was introduced to a yoga class and was amazed to find that it completely fixed a nagging pain I was having in my leg. It was literally the first class and I just thought 'wow.' It had a much more direct benefit for me than other disciplines and now I've been teaching yoga for the last 12 years."

James met his partner Alice in India where they were both doing a course and they now have two sons. Yoga Torquay is very much a family business that works for them. James looks after the boys while Alice is taking her yoga classes and vice versa. Alice tends to focus on her pre and post-natal yoga classes. Other classes you can take here include: Yoga Nidra (which is a form of deep relaxation and meditation that is practised lying down – sounds amazing), Holistic Yoga (which includes postures and deep relaxation) and Vinyasa Yoga (a much more dynamic and energising form of yoga).

But now people are arriving and it's time for my

Beginners Yoga class. Everyone is very friendly and we get chatting as we collect our mats, foam blocks and wonderfully soft and colourful blankets. Who knows what we are going to do with all this? Most people are wearing leggings and t-shirts and it's usual to do the class in bare feet.

We start by sitting on the mat using the foam blocks as a low seat; this makes sitting in the cross-legged position much more comfortable. The blankets are left aside for now. The idea of Beginners Yoga is to learn the foundations of yoga progressively within an inclusive and gentle class environment. This means that it is suitable for everyone, regardless of age, fitness or previous experience.

James explains the postures and technique in a very calm and clear way and his voice is very soothing. We try a few of the key postures, breathwork and movement. He gives us different options for each position to ensure we never exceed what is very comfortable. There are some rather exciting names such as the famous Vrikshasana (Tree Pose), Adho Mukho Svanasana (Downward Dog Pose) and Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) and we practise some basic sequences, which are quite easy and good fun.

He reinforces the classic principle that being comfortable and never over-stretching is important – it's really a meditative practice. We learn how to practise Ujjayi breathing – this slows the pace of the breath and is said to promote mental clarity and focus. It must be de-stressing as you really can't focus on anything else while you're doing it. James originally trained in India in a very

traditional way so he believes that breathing is equally important, if not more important than the postures.

The class is 90 minutes long but it passes quite quickly and we finish with 10 minutes of deep relaxation – yes this is where those soft, cosy, colourful blankets come in. We lie on the mats, using a blanket as a pillow and another to cover ourselves from head to toe. James turns the lighting down very low then very quietly and slowly takes us through a process of relaxation helping us to focus on each, individual part of the body in turn. When we are completely relaxed there is a period of complete stillness (Savasana - the corpse pose) before he brings us back to reality with some very pretty sounding Japanese bells.

It's been a super relaxing session and I'd have happily gone to sleep for a few hours in my cosy cocoon but the session is over and we are all going home. James says that many people like to come to a class a couple of times a week and then perhaps practise at home as well.

If you like the sound of yoga why not give it a go? ■

[yogatorquay.co.uk](http://yogatorquay.co.uk)

## Need to Know

Most classes are drop-in with no need to book. Cost is £8 per session or £35 for 5 sessions. There is no parking outside the studio or in Park Lane but there are many carparks and on-street metered parking close by. Wear loose comfortable clothing.