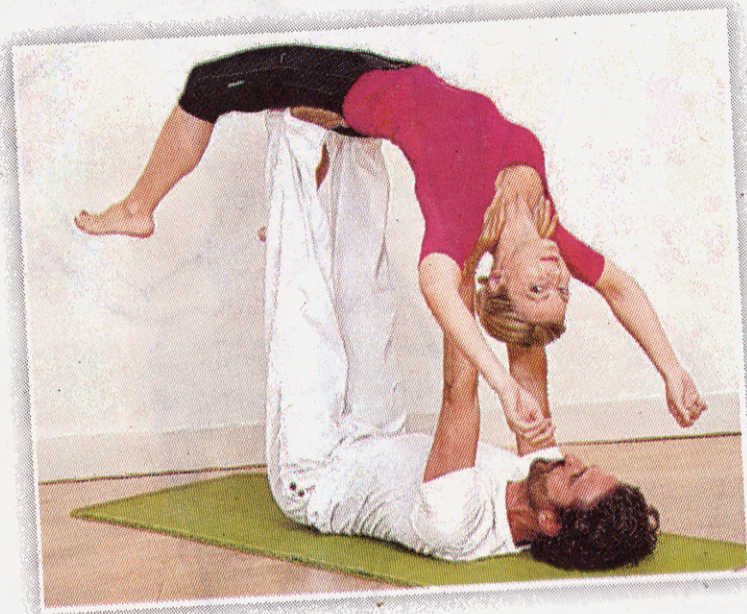


Would you pay £350 for an hour of the world's most intimate yoga?



by Alice Smellie

THE last time I found myself in such close proximity to a handsome continental chap, I was 16, and my parents had packed me off to Brittany for the summer to improve my French. Once there, of course, I immediately began a summer romance with the son of the local boulanger.

While the garcon and I got into some merry old scrapes together, I certainly don't remember Pierre, Gustav, Jerome, or whatever his name was, hanging me upside down, twisting me into yoga positions and dangling me from his feet.

Today, 25 years later, it's a different story. I'm trying out Tulayoga ('Tula' means balance and 'yoga' is union), the hottest treatment currently sweeping Europe.

Devised by Devon-born but Geneva-based Louka Leppard, celebrities and business tycoons across Europe are flocking to pay £350 for one of his incredible healing sessions.

At first glance it all looks slightly bizarre and far too intimate for a happily married woman such as myself: a massage followed by a combination of acrobatics, meditation and yoga moves, this second part practised while balanced on top of Louka's hands and feet as he holds your weight.

I have little truck with websites that insinuate the healing power of the foetal position (it's curling into a ball, for goodness sake), and I am also suspicious of anything claiming to unite mind and body (hard to separate them in the first place without removing your brain, surely?).

Also, Louka has little formal training. He went to art college, where he studied life drawing, and then became a graphic designer before devising this practice 14 years ago.

But once I log on to his website, I start to get it.

Louka is quite devastating looking: dark-haired, with a chiselled jaw and the body of an athlete. Never have I studied a website so closely — for research purposes, you understand. From next month, we are informed, he is seeing clients in London.

Will British women be queuing up for one-to-ones with the 43-year-old,

like their French and Swiss counterparts? I suspect they will.

To the envy of — and not a little teasing from — my friends, I decide to book an appointment.

But on the day we meet at his West London clinic, I'm not feeling open-minded about upside-down yoga as the panacea to all life's tensions.

It's the middle of a hectic week, juggling a back-to-school timetable of extra-curricular activities for my three children and I'm feeling fraught and decidedly grumpy. Complaints that I have bought the 'wrong sort of sugar' for their morning porridge consolidates my irritation.

So I'm in a rotten mood and with very low expectations.

I find it impossible to imagine I will ever be capable of curving gracefully in an airborne crab position (as photos of his clients on Louka's website depict), no matter how good-looking the supporting act.

Thankfully, although Louka is actually even more handsome than his photos, he is extremely matter of fact and reassuring.

'There is no point in having expectations about the treatment,' he says. 'Everybody reacts differently: some people laugh and some cry.'

I lie face down on sheets in a bright white room and Louka begins the hour-and-a-half-long massage around my whole body. While he makes no medical claims, his belly massage is deeply relaxing and

clients say it has helped with digestive, menstrual and fertility problems.

As yet I am not feeling any union of mind and body, just a bit stressed and very exposed, lying on my front in my knickers, covered by a thin sheet. But there is nothing like an amazing massage. My eyes close and I start to feel relaxed.

Occasionally, Louka's voice interrupts my stasis. 'Breathe deeply,' he says. 'Release the tension

through your stomach and into the ground.' When he starts to massage up my back, he says thoughtfully: 'There is a lot of tension here,' as he pushes into my right hip. 'It's as though there is intense irritation that can't be expressed.'

To my astonishment my eyes well up with tears. I think back to that morning, when trying very hard not to shout at my children as they moaned about their breakfast, then feeling bereft when they were cross with me.

'It's natural to feel emotional,' soothes Louka as I brush the tears away, mortified. A few minutes later he smiles. 'I can feel the tension radiating away from your heart.'

This is the sort of comment that would normally have me snorting into my kale juice, but do you know what? Whether it's the release of the stress knots across my whole back



Supporting act: Alice gets an aerial yoga session from Louka Leppard

or the fact that he's truly struck a nerve, I believe him.

I feel lighter, as though a huge weight has been lifted from me.

I can also assure anyone gaping over pictures of Louka, that it is a completely unerotic experience. Truly, it's more like spending time with a really good friend.

When we get to the upside-down acrobatics, I am gently swayed up into the air where I am rocked gently to and fro. I feel no fear, just a strange floating, flying feeling.

Beneath me are the firm and capable hands of Louka, moving my body into the unfeasible-looking stretches I saw on his website.

ALTHOUGH I am upside down, his legs are restricting (not uncomfortably) the blood flow in my legs, so that it doesn't rush to my head. At no point do I get that dizzy feeling you usually have when you hang, head down.

The floating feeling is because my entire weight is being taken by Louka ('I do have a weight limit,' he says. 'More than 80kg is a bit much.')

I feel very safe, and in contrast to my earlier tears, I can't stop grinning — partly at the release of a great deal of pent-up tension.

My body arches and twists so that my back feels wonderfully stretched out. Louka's hands push on release points down my back and shoulders as I relax. He explains that the stretches in Tulayoga elongate and realign the spine.

Finally I am lowered into the foetal position, which signifies the end of our session. Here, you are held in a firm hug and by this point my cynicism has vanished. It feels incredibly protective and comforting, like being held by an old friend.

After leaving, I sleep a full night without waking, and in the morning I still feel happy and light. I don't shout at the children, even when I find myself locked in the daily Battle Of The Lost Games Kit. A week on, and I am still relaxed and calm.

It may sound extraordinary and mad, but Tulayoga is life-changing stuff. I even try telling the children that we ought to hug each other more, but they flinch slightly and I realise I'm pushing it.

■ VISIT tulayoga.com for bookings, from £350.

Gold necklaces

Styling: ISABELLE FOWLER



Save
£15.50
nastygal.com



Spend
£25
phase-eight.com



Splurge
£170
stelladot.co.uk