

Take a break from café culture for some perspiration inspiration. Liz Krieger tests out some of the best places to get physical.

While the popular image of Parisian life usually conjures up smoke-filled cafes, copious amounts of wine and cheese, and no more in the way of exercise than a quick sprint to catch the next Métro, there's actually a lively fitness scene in Paris. Granted, the 80s days of legwarmer, leotard and headbands seem to be oddly alive and well, and the offerings still pale in comparison to the extensive menu that New York or Los Angeles transplants are used to. (The latest tai-bo or zen spinning combo

classes haven't really made it here yet, although step classes are big.) That said, there are still plenty of places to work up a sweat in style.

Not far from the bustle of Les Halles is **Espace Vit'Halles**, a well-liked, sunken-level health club where you'd be hard-pressed to see anyone over 35 or with excessive, visible body fat – begging the question: which came first, the gym or the gym-body? Whatever the answer, this is a seriously fit crowd, and you can tell by their hardcore Lycra outfits. If you're not intimidated by thumping music, a handful of preening male models and super-exuberant, wannabe-popstar instructors, you'll like it here. As well as clean, if quite small, locker rooms and good weight-training equipment, it's got some of the best classes in Paris, and knows it – Step and RPM classes (stationary bicycling) are very popular, very sweaty. Try Cécile's RPM class – it can get pretty raucous. Unlike many other clubs in the city, Espace Vit'Halles has a very flexible pricing policy and is open seven days a week. You can avoid the commitment of a membership by purchasing a ten-entry passbook for 149, or a single visit for 20.

Just off the boulevard St-Germain in the 5th lies the venerable **Club Quartier Latin**, home to the Piscine Pontoise, where it seems that every child under the age of five spends at least an hour frolicking with *maman* on the weekend. Two floors above the water you'll find the fitness facility, but you can usually find your way there by the unique scent – redolent of fresh sweat and stale chlorine. The gym is one of the cheapest to join and it certainly isn't wasting your dues on cleaning products or air-fresheners. That said, the people are mellow and eclectic; the classes are popular and the instructors funny and kind. (Jean-Marie's pump classes are always packed, as is the Tuesday night high-impact aerobics with Sébastien.) It's more of a no-frills place though: no lockers, older weight machines and even a few die-hard smokers sacreligiously puffing away at the small bar downstairs. Students and families alike dig the place for the prices, for the multi-lane pool, for the location and the camaraderie.

The biggest heavy weight on the health club scene is **Club Med Gym** (ex-Gymnase Club). The first two words in the name should tip you off to a few things about this place: young, active and just a bit scene-y. Wrapped in juicy-fruity colours just like the logo, the chain has the advantage of around a dozen locations in Paris alone. No excuses: you're never very far from a Stairmaster with your name on it, and if you're lucky you'll snag one by a giant window so you can watch the world go by. Habitues of Club Med Gym quickly find a branch that suits their schedule and style – many even have pools. Rumour has it that the salsa-style dance classes on Friday nights at the branch in République can get downright frisky – perfect as warm-up for a fun night out. Overall, the gyms are clean, well-lit and have good equipment, as well as prime locations. The biggest drag is the hard-sell membership team, which will regularly try to give you the standard 'If you join today, I'll cut you a deal,' though note that one-day membership is available.

La Compagnie Bleue has two super-clean, convenient locations in Paris; while they offer the whole spectrum of cardio-classes-weights, they really excel in yoga, relaxation and stretching classes. It's a mixed gym, but you'll likely see many more women than men, in a chilled out atmosphere.



If you go to **La Gym Suédoise** with visions of blonde, buxom Scandinavians you're going to be disappointed. It's much more plebian. That said, it offers its own unique gym method, fresh from Sweden, mixing simple exercises with music.

If you find the private clubs too intimidating or too expensive, the city is also dotted with municipal *gymnases*. The best resource for all the municipal facilities is the annual *Parisports – Le Guide du Sport à Paris* available for free at any Mairie. Facilities aren't usually up to those of the private clubs, but prices are generally much lower and some offer a good range of classes. Get into shape at the **Gymnase Sablonnière** with 'abs and butt' classes on Mon and Wed evenings, strength training on Tue and Fri, or **Gymnase Amyot** for aerobics sessions every weekday morning. **Gymnase Huyghens** has a 'body fitness' room with treadmills, bikes, and other cardio machines. **Tour-d'Auvergne Salle de Sport** has a weight-lifting room, which will do wonders for your biceps.

GYMS ADDRESSES

- **Club Med Gym**
numerous branches
(www.clubmedgym.fr).
Rates one visit €30;
one year €726-€826;
€546 students.
- **Club Quartier Latin**
19 rue de Pontoise, 5th
(01.55.42.77.88).
Rates one visit €15;
€12 students; €3.35
students; six months
€388; €307 students.
- **La Compagnie Bleue**
12 rue de l'Eglise, 15th
(01.40.59.49.10). 100
rue du Cherche-Midi,
6th (01.45.44.47.48).
Rates one month €122;
18 months €1,080.
- **Espace Vit'Halles**
48 rue Rambuteau, 3rd
(01.42.77.21.71/
www.vit-halles.com).
Rates one visit €20;
- ten visits €149; six
months approx €500;
€400 students.
- **La Gym Suédoise** 34
bd de Reims, 17th; 11
rue Pierre-Villers, 7th
(01.45.00.18.22/www.
lagymsuedoise.asso.fr).
Rates €75 per term,
€10 individual session.
- **Gymnase Amyot**
3 rue Amyot, 5th
(01.43.36.28.99).
- **Gymnase Huyghens**
10 rue Huyghens, 14th
(01.43.20.67.64).
- **Gymnase Sablonnière**
62 rue Cambronne, 15th
(01.45.67.43.45).
- **Tour d'Auvergne
Salle de Sport** 15bis
rue la Tour d'Auvergne,
9th (01.45.26.98.21).