

What
Janey
did next...

Moving on up

Our intrepid reporter Janey Lee Grace roams the land trying her hand at the trends taking the mind, body and spirit world by storm - this month, she samples Nia, the hottest spiritual dance craze

For years and years I was totally exercise-phobic. I simply didn't enjoy it and couldn't understand the euphoria people got from 'going for the burn'. But as I became more aware of my own health and wellbeing, and, yes, as I got older, I realised that exercise is not an option - it's a necessity.

When I bumped into another parent at the school gates one morning, she got chatting to me about Nia classes. I looked at her blankly. *What classes?*

'It's like a form of sensory movement', she explained. 'It uses a mix of styles, like jazz dance, yoga and martial arts moves, and you do it barefoot to inspiring music. You'll love it.'

She told me Nia was created 28 years ago by the California-based then-husband-and-wife team Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas. Debbie, who was a fitness instructor, was fascinated by how martial arts helped people to feel empowered. Together with Carlos, she found a way of blending aspects of tai chi, aikido and tae kwon do with the expressive qualities of dance - including jazz, freestyle and Awareness Through Movement (ATM), which is all about becoming conscious of your body's patterns of movement.

Debbie discovered that when



Nia is composed of 52 moves

those qualities were added to the healing arts like yoga and Pilates, they produced deeply revelatory results. And so Nia - a word that means 'purpose' in Swahili - was born. Nia can be a transformative experience, giving you a heightened sense of self-awareness and a deeper connection to what your body and soul are really feeling.

Somehow my friend managed

I started whirling, twirling and what felt like floating, caught up in a moment of joy

to persuade me to go along to a class she was holding in the school hall the following week. I was petrified I'd look ridiculous, pretending to be leaves on a tree or that I'd be galumphing around like an elephant when everyone else was grace personified. But when I walked into the hall, I sighed with relief to see that those attending the class were all shapes, sizes and ages.

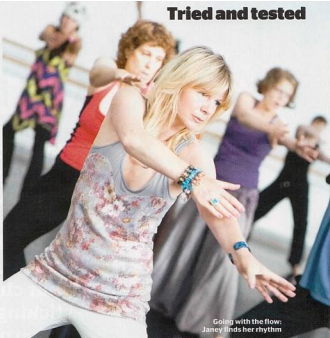
It's tricky to describe a Nia class because no two are ever exactly the same. There's always a focus or an intention for each class, which the teacher sets at

the beginning of the session. It could be an intention about your body or your emotions, and in the case of my first class it was about 'increasing energy'.

Five minutes into the class and we were all moving around in a slow warm-up accompanied by Nia music - an eclectic mix of styles from around the world, which have all been sourced and commissioned for a Nia compilation CD that goes with the routines.

To get ourselves going, we were encouraged to dance around and do our own thing. The second track was a bit more energetic than the first, and the one after that was even more lively. I kicked off my shoes and started whirling and twirling, swaying, shimmying, sashaying cha-cha-ing, twisting and what felt like floating, totally caught up in a moment of joy.

Nia is based around 52 moves, and you'd be amazed how many combinations there are. Yes, we were doing choreographed routines, but even with these you could put your own individual twist on any tricky steps. When an exotic Eastern beat started belting out, I shut my eyes and felt like I was in a kasbah down a winding alley in mysterious Marrakech. And when we reached the martial arts element of the class - on



Going with the flow: Janey finds her rhythm

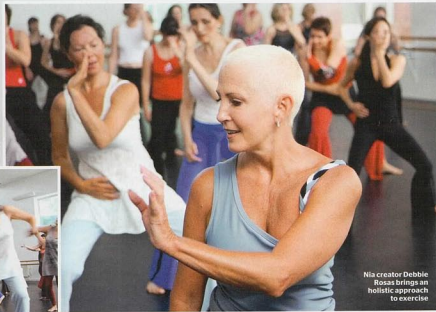
this occasion tae kwon do - I kicked and punched my way through the powerful rock beat and shouted 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' just like Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally!*

Towards the end of the class we incorporated more yoga and Pilates moves to cool us down, which left me chilled out and serene. I felt like I'd had

a workout, but at the same time I was euphoric and energised. It helped me really measure and value the importance of pleasurable sensation and freed me up to feel creative. In short it was transformational. None of my other fitness or dance classes have ever made me feel this good.

After just one class I was a big Nia fan. After several classes, I was addicted and have since gone on to train as a teacher, which means I'm a 'White Belt'. Through Nia we can experience healing, improved posture, cardio fitness, strength and flexibility as well as a toned body and, of course, a feeling of wellbeing and joy.

Nia is unique in that you can be as energetic as you like, so an athlete and a less agile pensioner can both enjoy the same class. Indeed, I taught a Nia class at a festival recently and a woman with Parkinson's disease found she was able to follow most of the moves. It's given me so much confidence and I appreciate my body so much more these days - not just because it's a lot less flabby but because I'm now infinitely more aware of how I move every limb. **SPIRIT+DESTINY**



Nia creator Debbie Ross brings an holistic approach to exercise

• There are around 100 Nia teachers licensed in the UK - to find one near you or for more details, go to www.nianow.com or www.nialondon.com