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*Urban Workout*  
**Outdoor Recreation  
Is Getting Easier  
In the Heart of the City**

By ANNELENA LOBB  
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Who says you have to leave the big city to experience the great outdoors? For fitness lovers and outdoor enthusiasts, living in an urban environment used to mean giving up on open-air exercise, and joining a gym, practicing Pilates or taking up indoor sports.

But in the last few years, outdoor fitness has become more fashionable in cities around the U.S. Newer offerings, including bike courses, beach-volleyball sand pits, rock-climbing walls and a number of ice rinks, give city dwellers a chance to pursue activities once reserved for daytrips. What's more, much of what's available is moderately priced, or even free.

Fort Lauderdale, Fla., resident Risa Merl, 24 years old, organizes events for [Extreme Miami](#)<sup>1</sup>, a club started about two years ago aimed at getting members "out of the Miami element," she says. The group has held scuba diving and indoor rock-climbing events in Miami, and Ms. Merl plans to organize a camping trip to the [Oleta River State Park](#)<sup>2</sup> on Biscayne Bay in North Miami.

"If you tell most people in Miami you're going camping, they kind of look at you like you're an alien," Ms. Merl says.



T.G. Webster

Baltimore Beach's sand-volleyball complex

The boom in unconventional urban workouts stems partly from growing populations of young, single people in many U.S. cities, says Alan Berube, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., think tank that studies urban demographics. Some new offerings cater to baby boomers, who also make up a significant portion of urban populations. And the recent focus by some public officials on reducing rates of obesity and diabetes has encouraged the development of many public spaces and new fitness programs.

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The upshot is that life in a city can feature recreation often associated with the countryside or the beach. David Wisniewski, 44, a financial adviser in Baltimore, says he plays beach volleyball at a complex called **Baltimore Beach**<sup>3</sup>, takes trapeze classes at **TSNY Baltimore**<sup>4</sup> and mountain bikes at Patapsco Valley State Park, a 10-minute drive from the city's Inner Harbor area. Joining a league at Baltimore Beach costs \$60 for 10 weeks, and each trapeze class costs him \$40 to \$50, though the school also sells package deals.

"In Baltimore, there are a lot of new, gentrified neighborhoods with young professionals looking for different workouts," Mr. Wisniewski says. He thinks that outdoor activities now attract many more city people, but that they still supplement outdoor workouts with gym workouts.

Urban renewal and improvements to infrastructure bring athletes out of doors. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a not-for-profit organization that lobbies for the creation of usable trails from abandoned railway corridors, has helped create miles of space for city cyclists, in-line skaters and joggers. Some 1,390 rail-trails, including Boston's Minuteman Trail and others that run through cities from Seattle to Indianapolis, have been built across the U.S.

Adding new equipment and programs to city parks also changes urban residents' fitness patterns. Chicago's Millennium Park, Detroit's Campus Martius Park and New York's Bryant Park all have ice rinks a few years old. Bryant Park installed the ice rink to make the park usable and more appealing year-round, says Dan Biederman, president of the Bryant Park Corporation. Admission is free; last winter, skate rentals cost \$7.50 apiece. Aside from tourists and families, he says some professionals now skate regularly before work and at lunch. Last year, about 2,000 people took to the ice every day from late October until January. The rink will be open until March in 2007.

Smaller-scale fitness innovations to parks leave their marks as well: New York's Riverside Park installed a set of gymnastics traveling rings for people to swing on, which around 30 to 50 people use regularly, says Dorlene Kaplan, who donated the rings. Seattle's Freeway Park, built over the city's portion of Interstate 5, last year groomed and signed a 0.4 mile loop to encourage laps, after park officials noticed a group of local seniors taking daily walks.



Rails-to-Trails Conservancy/Bryce Hall

Runners on the Burke-Gilman Trail in Seattle



Malcolm Pinckney

A child sleds in New York's Central Park

Ira Gershenhorn, 54, a computer programmer, says the Riverside Park rings have him and his 11-year-old daughter Marisa exercising outdoors more often. "I'm not a fitness freak," he says. "We rollerblade too, but basically we're computer junkies. The rings get us outside."

Seattle's **Camp Long Park**<sup>5</sup> -- built during the Depression-era Works Progress Administration to serve as an urban park where residents could learn the basics of camping -- in 2004 completed a \$90,000 refurbishment of Schurman Rock, a man-made climbing rock. The nonprofit Seattle Parks Foundation raised the funds to repair the rock, which is open year-round and can be used for free, unless a school or scheduled group happens to be there.

"It builds your skills within five minutes of home, yet you feel like you're in a forest," says Karen Daubert, president of the Seattle Parks Foundation and a lifelong Seattle resident. "I once used it

as a Girl Scout."

Even personal trainers are taking workouts outside. Stacy Berman, once a top-ranked trainer with New York Sports Club, left her job there to offer a class in city parks, Stacy's Bootcamp<sup>6</sup>, after years of watching clients go to the gym without attaining the results they sought. Her class requires old-fashioned exercise -- sprints, push-ups and jumping jacks. "It's much healthier," says real-estate broker Adam Schachter, 32, one of Ms. Berman's boot-camp students. "I've since stopped going to the gym -- you don't know who's sick, who's touched the machines." It costs \$250 to take three weeks of thrice-weekly classes.

Some cities now count on outdoor fitness offerings to attract businesses and tourism. In June, Philadelphia's tourism-marketing arm launched Boundless Philadelphia, a marketing campaign to play up outdoor sports and recreation in the city and its surrounding areas. The push came after surveys showed many Philadelphians either weren't aware of the city's outdoor sports features or didn't know how to use them, says Cara Schneider, a spokeswoman for the city's tourism-marketing organization. Boundless Philadelphia's [Web site](#)<sup>7</sup> promotes the city as a top destination for cycling, sailing, rock climbing and other sports, and allows visitors to enter a contest to win free bicycles, donated by bicycle maker Fuji Bikes.

"We may never be Utah, or Colorado, but [one of our slogans] says we want the city to appeal to both the trail-mix me, and the mixed-drinks me," says Ms. Schneider.

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