

Belly Dance - Eastern Promise

Any woman built on more generous lines than a catwalk model owes a debt of gratitude to those long-ago Middle Eastern women who entertained each other, on boring evenings in the harem, with a spot of belly dancing. Thanks to Hollywood, we've all seen how dynamic our natural curves can be when backed with some Arabian Nights music and a chiffon veil.

Belly dancing is such a fun form of exercise that you can now find classes in many towns, with costume-making and performances if you really get into it. Belly dancing includes something most of us never get - flexibility work. Our modern way of life limits us to a tiny range of movement leading inevitably to stiffness, lower back pain and aching joints.

In fact belly dance, or Raqs Sharqi, probably started as a symbolic enactment of giving birth and kept women in good shape for the real event. Its swaying movements ease aching muscles and, when the rhythm speeds up, it's an energizing aerobic workout.

Here are some basic moves, so treat yourself to a tape of Middle Eastern music and get shimmying. Navel-rubies optional!

Dancing from the centre

Practise each movement several times, then start linking them to create a smooth continuous dance.

Pelvic tilts

Stand with feet slightly apart, back straight, knees slightly bent. Arms should be by your side, slightly bent with palms facing forwards. Arch your back, tipping your

pelvis down. Then contract your buttock muscles and flatten out your lower back, thrusting forward with the pelvis.

Hip swinging

Standing with feet slightly apart, swing your hips from side to side in a straight line, trying to keep your shoulders still.

Pelvic circles

Now link the movements - arch your back, push your right hip out sideways, flatten your back, push the left hip out - so you've made a circle. Continue in a smooth circling movement. Vary the sizes of the circle, some small, some as large as you can without moving your shoulders.

Travelling tilts

As your pelvis thrusts forwards in a tilt, take a short step forward with the right foot. Tilt back, then do two quick thrusts. On the second one step forward on the left foot. Do two more thrusts and then step forward on the right foot.

