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# Couples

"You do realise that the only thing I'm rolling over this weekend is a bottle of wine." More droll than surly, but my husband is definitely showing resistance to the weekend Pilates retreat I've coerced him into. "Anyway, isn't Pilates just a poncey kind of yoga? Not like a proper workout," Tom scoffs, as we start the slow ascent along Clarence Drive, the False Bay waves crashing on the rocks below.

I am no expert on Pilates. What I do know is that I can no longer reach my ankles, so tying shoelaces is becoming





# Retreat

Can a weekend of Pilates be a fun getaway for you and your man? More importantly, can it make you look and feel years younger?


One brave woman packs up her husband and goes to Betty's Bay to find out

*By Pippa de Bruyn*

a bit of a bother, and the promise of a gentle routine that will stretch and strengthen my muscles is appealing. Aside from this, a good friend has had her physique completely transformed by Pilates. But the reason I've signed up for this particular retreat is to honour a sense of serendipity: the Pilates master who will be instructing us is Steve Jordan, son of Abe Jordan, runner-up in the 1968 Mr Universe contest, and again in 1969, when a muscled Austrian called Arnold Schwarzenegger pipped him to the post.

Jordan ran the two best gyms in Joburg in the Seventies, when my mom and I were, for a while, avid members - though, with a prescient sense of the kind of lazy decadence I planned for adulthood, my chief pleasure centred on the sauna rather than the mats and machines where Steve was working out. It's a tenuous link perhaps, but one worth pursuing when the past is fading like a photograph in the sun. >





## Shrugging back the clock

Steve Jordan and his wife Beate are there to meet us at 3 Flavours, the fynbos farm they've booked us into. I wouldn't recognise Steve on the street, but I'd probably glance his way. Lithe and muscular, he stands with his feet slightly apart, planted, explaining how he went from personal trainer to Pilates instructor.

"Pilates was unheard of outside dancing circles [in the early Nineties]. I'd just moved to London when I met a Pilates teacher who was working in one of the UK's biggest dance schools. I was fascinated by the concept, which just made so much sense. Dancers, athletes and bodybuilders tend to overwork their power or "outer" muscles. While the body looks toned and strong, the core muscles are often neglected, which leads to innate posture problems and long-term muscle and even bone or bowel injuries. Pilates specifically targets the deep inner stabilising muscles in the pelvic floor, lower trapezoids, the lats, hamstrings, inner thighs and glutes. These core muscles are what support the back, neck and various joints, and are what give healthy posture."

Steve spent two years in Houston, Texas, training under two Pilates instructors before returning to London, where he spent the next 18 years teaching his unique routine: a combination of Pilates, dance and cardio. Over the years he developed a reputation for his curative workouts.

"I had chronic back pain and was in complete agony," recalls Beate. "I was living on painkillers. Then I went to see Steve and, after three sessions, the pain was gone." Beate was hooked on more than Steve's Pilates: a year later the couple were married. When Beate fell pregnant, they decided to escape Steve's relentless schedule and relocate the studio to Betty's Bay.

That custom-built studio is where we meet at nine the next morning. I ask Steve if posture can also affect how old you look, as is suggested in the information sent to me by Dr Reg Engelbrecht, CEO of the Chiropractic Association of SA.

"Posture is everything," he nods. "If you're hunched, it will make you look years older. You can reduce sag in the chest by 50 percent if you stand tall. Look at your shoulders." I try my hardest to pull them back, but Steve's right: reflected in

the mirrored wall are two sets of rounded shoulders. "This means that your neck and shoulder muscles are working all the time." Steve also identifies Tom's lower back problems: "Can you see how your shoulders are out of alignment? Now turn your head 180 degrees." I manage 90; Tom 100. Things are not looking good, but Steve assures us that after the third and final session, when he revisits the postural analysis, we'll see a marked improvement. His confidence makes me nervous. What will we have to do to get there?

## Crouching chicken, hidden abs

Our first morning session is focused on developing the pelvic floor muscles – the foundation of good posture. "Like building a house, you have to make sure you develop these well if you want straight walls. If your tummy is always out, your shoulders automatically become rounded and your head sticks out like a chicken. See?" I choose not to look.

The first exercise – "plop your belly button out, then pull it in" – is easy, aside from the fact that watching my wobbly stomach makes me feel queasy. Steve tells us to "stop using our six-pack muscles", which makes me want to snort. "Using these compresses the vertebrae in the lower back, leading to pain." What we need to "plop and pull" are those deep abdominal muscles. Which I am struggling to find any connection with whatsoever. "Never mind," he says, "they can atrophy through lack of use, but by the end of the weekend you'll have rediscovered them." Threat or promise? I wonder.

To my relief, the next couple of exercises are also doable, not least because we're still lying on the floor. But the following five sets, with names like "dead bugs" and "the 100", have my eyes watering – a shameful lack of muscle tone mixed with a bit of self-pity. We end with a series of pelvic lifts "working seven different muscle groups". I barely manage, but Steve remains comforting.

Over a quick restorative lunch at the gorgeous Harold Porter National Botanical Gardens, Tom and I discuss how weirdly bonding it is working out side by side, doing the exact same exercise at the same time – a bit like a couple's massage, only sweatier. I manage to quell the urge for a celebratory Sauvignon. >



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## Does Pilates Really Work? We Ask...

### 1 The physiotherapist

"It makes sense that repeated use of a muscle or joint in a poor position can contribute to injury, so in that way good posture or alignment is important. It's difficult to generalise about Pilates as it all depends on the instructor and their background. Assuming the instructor is well qualified, any exercise that recruits the deep stabilisers in functional movements can help address muscle imbalances. Preferably see a physiotherapist or doctor if you have an existing back or neck problem before embarking on Pilates exercises. Or combine the two - many physiotherapists are also qualified Pilates instructors." - *Magda Fourie, consultant, South African Society of Physiotherapy*

### 2 The chiropractor

"Posture ranks right up at the top of the list, along with eating correctly, exercising, getting a good night's sleep and avoiding potentially harmful substances. Good posture allows you to do things with more energy, and less stress and fatigue. Without good posture, you can't really be physically fit. Posture-related problems are increasing because we're more sedentary than ever before. Pilates is an excellent programme recommended by many chiropractors." - *Dr Rieg Engelbrecht, CEO, Chiropractic Association of SA*

### 3 The dance instructor

"Yes, definitely. I wish all my dancers did it! It was developed as a system for ballet dancers in the US because they found that a strong core makes a huge difference to quality of movement and control. It's worth pursuing even if you aren't a dancer - you can have an amazing body if you go regularly and have a good coach." - *Sue de Moyencourt, one of Cape Town's leading ballet instructors*



## Digging the burn

Like the morning, the afternoon session starts off with a few easy exercises before hotting up with *développé*, a ballet movement that works the hamstrings. Steve keeps his trademark auctioneer-like patter going, correcting and gently driving us through the killers that follow – particularly the “glass table”, which has us lying with legs and arms in the air, lifting, turning, sliding and holding. It burns like hell. Steve, oblivious to the Geneva Convention, drives us through three tortuous versions, with 12 reps – on each side. Only Tom looks pleased with himself.

That night we do roll a bottle of wine in a self-congratulatory haze – we’ve spent the whole day exercising, and it was fun. Not bad for a couple who thinks bliss is a day watching an entire season of *Breaking Bad* with a choice of chocolates on the duvet.

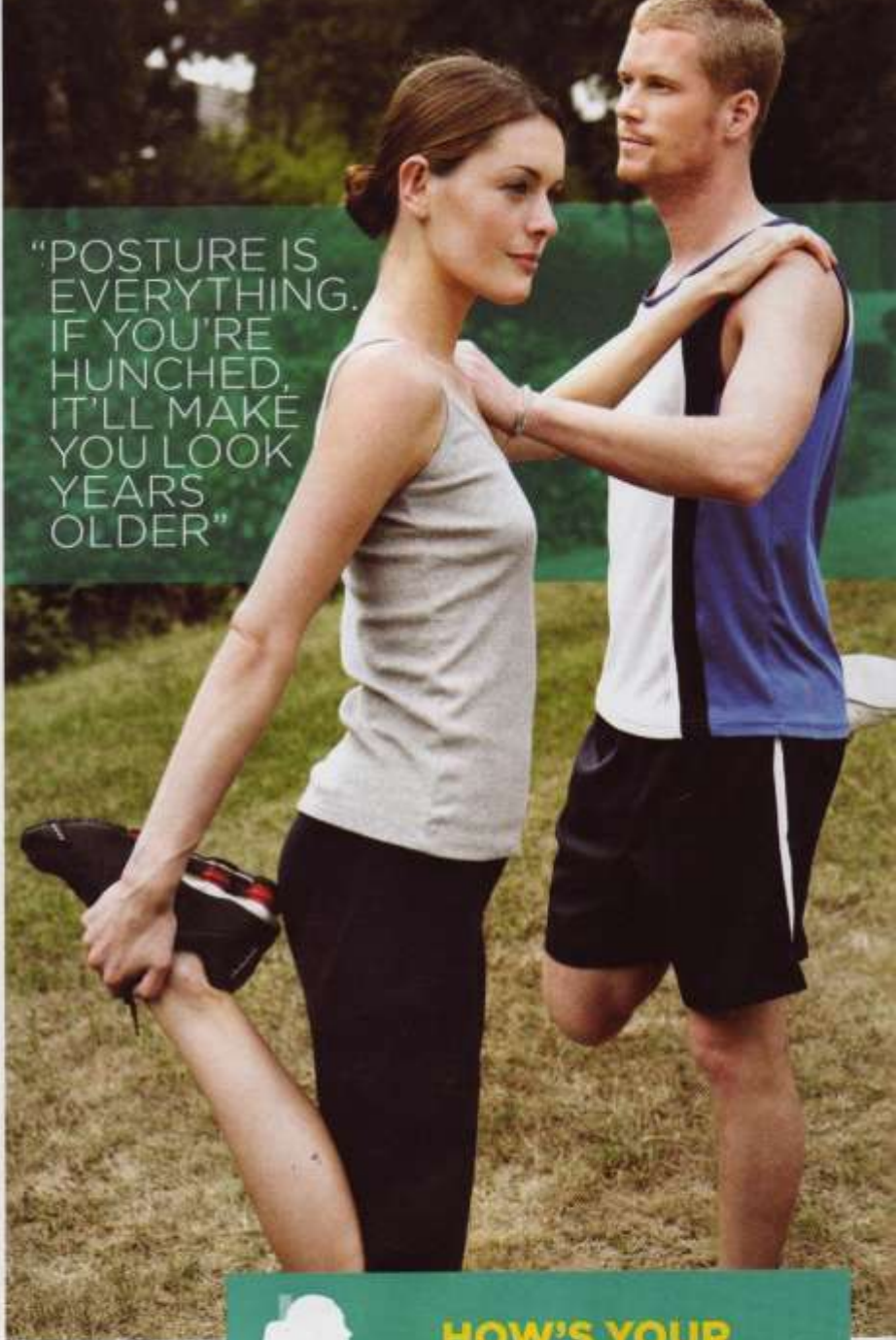
By Sunday morning I have to use my arms to shove myself up and off the bed, sprawling in an undignified heap. Every deep muscle in my abdomen is making its presence felt. Tom, who has fared better, delights in the pain. The final two-hour session will concentrate on the upper body – arms and shoulders – so Steve won’t be pushing our abdominals too hard. As I do appear to have some muscle strength here – all those shopping bags perhaps – and the machine work involved is easier, I feel less like a loser today, though Tom trumps me again, grinning throughout.

When Steve assesses our posture again, there is a noticeable improvement, particularly in shoulder alignment. But clearly there’s still a long way to go. Steve shows us how – using his DVD and a simple rubber band – we can now do all the exercises at home. “Or in a hotel room,” my husband winks at me, knowing that I’m due on a research trip soon. I’d laugh if it wasn’t so darn sore.



The Steve Jordan Pilates weekend retreat ([www.capeactive.com](http://www.capeactive.com)) costs R2 495 per person and includes two nights B&B accommodation at a four-star guesthouse ([www.3flavours.co.za](http://www.3flavours.co.za)). Or order the Steve Jordan Pilates DVD set (R300) online at [www.stevejordanpilates.co.za](http://www.stevejordanpilates.co.za)

“POSTURE IS EVERYTHING. IF YOU’RE HUNCHED, IT’LL MAKE YOU LOOK YEARS OLDER”



## HOW'S YOUR POSTURE?

**THE WALL TEST:** Stand with the back of your head touching the wall and your heels 15cm from the baseboard. With your buttocks touching the wall, check the distance with your hand between your lower back and the wall, and your neck and the wall. If you can get within two to four centimetres at the lower back and five centimetres at the neck, you have excellent posture. If not, your posture may need professional attention to restore the normal curves of your spine.



# FOUR FIXES

Steve Jordan recommends the following moves, designed to strengthen your core and improve your posture – and easily done at home

## 1 THE ROLL DOWN

**PURPOSE:** Lengthens spine; relieves back pain and compression between vertebrae

Stand with your feet hip-width apart. Relax your head, neck and shoulders (A). Take a deep breath in. As you breathe out, drop your chin to your chest and bend forward, imagining that you're peeling your vertebrae off a wall, one at a time. Try to touch the floor with your knees straight and fingers long (B). Breathe in at the bottom. As you breathe out, think of rooting your tailbone to the floor; rotate your pelvis and slowly wallpaper your back up onto the imaginary wall, one vertebra at a time. Repeat six times.



### DO IT RIGHT:

Drop your chin to your chest before you start peeling your vertebrae off the imaginary wall to avoid making your back tighter. Don't worry if you can't touch the floor with your knees straight to start with – as you do more reps, your back will loosen up.

## 2 THE 100

**PURPOSE:** Strengthens core pelvic floor muscles; helps relieve/prevent back or neck pain and poor posture

Lie on your back with your arms straight up at 90 degrees, fingers long and legs in the air. Bend your knees at a right angle, ensuring they don't move past your hips (A). Take a deep breath in. As you breathe out, extend both legs in front of you at 45 degrees and turn them out from your hips as your upper body comes up and your arms return to your sides. Look at your toes and hold this position. Breathe in through your nose and into your back. As you breathe out, pull your tummy in deeper while beating your arms at your sides (B). Hold this position for 10 breaths. Squeeze your bum to help keep your legs up.



### DO IT RIGHT:

If your back hurts, you've either let your tummy out or you're tensing your six-pack muscles. Try to pull your tummy in more. If that doesn't work, you lack strength in your pelvic floor. To compensate, bend your knees while beating your arms, but keep your legs parallel in this position.

## 3 THE GLASS TABLE

**PURPOSE:** Strengthens glutes, helping to keep hip flexors loose, which in turn relieves lower back pain

Lie on your side with your head on your arm, knees at your chest at a right angle to your hips. The other hand should be on the floor near your belly button. Take a deep breath in. As you breathe out, extend your top leg, flex your foot and turn your leg in from your hip, so your toes face the floor. Breathe in. As you breathe out, lengthen and lift your leg 15 to 25cm (A). Breathe in and lower back to hip height. After 12 reps, breathe out as you slide your leg out in front of you across an imaginary glass table at 90 degrees (B). As you breathe in, sweep it back in line with your body. Repeat 12 times. On the last rep, keep your leg out in front of you (C). As you breathe in, lengthen and lift it 15 to 25cm, then breathe out to lower. Repeat 12 times. On the last rep, breathe out and sweep your leg back in line with your body.



### DO IT RIGHT:

Keep a gap under your waist; if you don't lengthen your leg before you lift, it will flatten. Always keep your leg turned in, otherwise you'll feel it working the muscle on the side of your thigh (which can cause knee problems if overworked).

## 4 OPEN FLIES

**PURPOSE:** Relieves neck and upper back tension

Lie on your back on a bench or at the end of your bed (45 degrees to the right angle at the bottom of the bench/bed). Ensure your knees are bent and higher than your body. Place a 15 to 20cm thick ball between your knees. Hold your arms up at 90 degrees, two-kilogram dumbbells in your hands, palms facing each other and elbows slightly bent (A). As you breathe in, lower both arms towards the floor, keeping them in line with your shoulders. Go as low as you can until you feel the stretch (B). Breathe in as you return to start. Repeat 15 times.



### DO IT RIGHT:

Don't straighten your arms as you get lower to the floor; otherwise you'll get the stretch near your elbows instead of across your chest and shoulders. Keep your arms in line with your shoulders. Keep your tummy pulled in five centimetres below your belly button or your back will arch. Don't overstretch – it must feel a little uncomfortable, but not painful.