



INNER YOU



SOULCYCLE

New York's **hot** fitness **craze** is half spin, half spiritual **awakening**. And it's coming here

Words **Emily Cronin**

It's Wednesday night and a swathe of the most attractive people in New York couldn't care less about the hottest bar du jour. Instead, all the excitement of the city has collected in a dark room packed with stationary bikes. 'We're gonna sweat tonight. Is that OK?' asks trainer Charlee Atkins, a star of the indoor cycling world who also works as a model.

'Wooo!' her acolytes respond.
'Are you ready to dance?'
'WOOOO!'

And with a toss of Atkins's model mane, 60 Lycra-clad booties pop up into the air, ready to ride to the remixed Rihanna beat.

But this is no usual spin class. This is SoulCycle, an indoor cycling workout that,

at \$34 a go, is possibly the most expensive exercise class in the history of exercise classes. It's become almost cult-like in its following. Why? Because it's not just keep fit. It's a serious cardio workout complete with motivational mantras, charismatic instructors and powerful playlists.

Think **cycling** with a group of 60 people cheering and whooping to cries of 'You ride the bike like you live your life!' and 'We're riding in the dark so we can have sex with the lights on!' Yes, really.

As a result, this special mix has made SoulCycle New York's favourite elite exercise craze. By the end of each day, 4,000 people will have ridden like their toned thighs depended on it (most likely, they do) in 14 Soul studios around New York and Los Angeles. The next city in SoulCycle's sights? London, opening in early 2014. Are you ready to ride with the pack?

'There are two things that every woman has to try before she turns 30 - Botox and SoulCycle,' says Anna Davies, a New Yorker and writer. No exaggeration, the question I've been asked most often since moving to New York last September, right after 'Where are you living?' and 'What do you do?', may just be 'Have you tried SoulCycle yet?'

Demand stays high, no matter the cost. Class registration for the following week opens online at midday every Monday, an hour that has assumed a special juju among riders. 'I always make sure my schedule is clear at noon,' one devotee tells me. 'I also have a recurring calendar alert on my BlackBerry, and I've left meetings and

sprinted back to my office to be there. Then it's a case of clicking and praying.'

Believe it: this is more than just a spin class. Riders relish the exercise, sure, but that's something they could get at any of a number of gyms in the city for far lower fees. What draws people to SC is something less earthly than the need to work up a sweat.

'It's not just a workout. The workout is the cherry on top,' says Janet Fitzgerald, SoulCycle master trainer. 'While we're here, elevating souls to their highest potential, inspiring their lives, inspiring their dreams, there's a by-product of it, and that is you burn calories and get into incredible shape.'

Instructors administer that soul elevation by way of mantras. To wit: 'If you truly believe that you deserve to live the life that you want, in every way, turn that resistance up.' (That's one of Fitzgerald's. 'I've been teaching for 20 years, and I don't think about what I'm going to say - it just comes from me,' she says.) 'Your body will forgive you. But will you forgive your body?' 'You cannot fail; you can only get better.' 'Put a little extra love on the wheel.' And then, of course, the sex-with-the-lights-on line. 'I usually say that in my night classes,' trainer Rique Uresti says. 'It's a totally different feel.'

No huddling into the handlebars here - active participation is encouraged, even required, by instructors who elicit whoops and hollers, shouts and responses from their ecstatic crews. 'I am a shouter,' admits Teddi Ginsberg, a 28-year-old marketeer who blogs about her Soul devotion at jgiwc.com. 'I think it makes it more fun and it holds me accountable. I hear myself "Woo!" and it's a reminder to keep going.'

Veteran riders like Ginsberg swear by the inspirational, motivational power of the trainers. 'I found my inner light in the dark,' she offers, adding that she's considering retraining as an instructor. 'Being in there

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is when I feel the best about myself. I don't get that experience anywhere else.'

An investment in yourself? Inner light? Mantras? Cheering? Doesn't that all sound very... well... American? SoulCycle thrives in New York because it is of New York. The city pulses with an ethos of aggressive self-improvement, bested only by that of image-conscious LA.

Can the Soul formula translate to the UK when it comes here next year? Just think of the dominant personality descriptors associated with Britons. Understated. Self-deprecating. Reserved, maybe even to the point of repressed. Now try to envision a studio full of Gemmas, Penelopes and Issys unleashing their inner banshees, flinging sweat and positive vibes at fellow riders. Wince-worthy, isn't it?

But Elizabeth Cutler and Julie Rice are betting that we'll be seduced, just like NYC and LA. The two founded SoulCycle in 2006 with a third partner who has since established rival brand Flywheel. The very first Soul hove was a one-time funeral parlour on the Upper West Side. With no signage, no showers and no external funding, success wasn't assured there either.

But now celebrity fans include Lena Dunham (SoulCycle fêted the second season of *Girls* with a week of free rides), Victoria's Secret Angel Hilary Rhoda ('It's really good music and you just get into it') and Lady Gaga, who celebrated her 26th birthday with a private party at SoulCycle West Hollywood. You probably caught her tweet last year about smashing 'a double' - the Soulie term for two intense back-to-back classes. But did you know she's rumoured to tour with two custom-made SC bikes on her bus?

'I think it'll take a hot minute,' Fitzgerald predicts of the UK reaction to SC. 'We'll train them to be wild and free and vocal and enthusiastic - they're going to love it.'

Only one way to find out: I register for a class. (The confirmation email sets the tone: 'Congrats! Your SOUL is confirmed,' it reads. 'Get ready to FIND YOUR SOUL...'

Inspiration. Transformation. Celebration. DONE.) I may be American by birth but, anaemic and a bookworm, I think it's fair to say I'm more British by nature. No offence.

At the SpinCycle studio, a sea of Soul-branded gear greets me. One woman wears a coveted 'Rooster' T-shirt, indicating her membership of the hardcore coterie of pre-dawn riders. Almost everyone else wears Spanx-tight leggings and Keratin-straightened hair. Inside, the instructor's bike occupies an elevated platform, illuminated by the flicker of several Jonathan Adler grapefruit candles.

There is something rather ridiculous about being in a room whose riders are wearing a combined cargo of 200 carats of diamonds and hearing statements like, 'You are a better person because you showed up to this class.' Seriously?

But somewhere, going with the flow, keeping to the beat, turning the resistance wheel when I'm told, a gear shifts from scepticism to engrossed participation. Four songs in, we tackle a 'hill', with push-ups on the handlebars. The music and the trainer's encouragement and the energy of the crowd (and a dash of my own competitive streak) are enough to keep me pushing and when we finish, when we come out on top, I can't help but take part in the euphoric yawp that rolls over the room. This is fun - the kind of fun that keeps you smiling and singing along when your legs feel like they're churning through wet cement.

After the class, admirers flock to Atkins. 'I just wanted you to know that this was my first class at SoulCycle and it was crazy incredible,' one rider tells her in a red-faced rush. 'I can't believe my friend has been doing this for so long and hasn't brought me until now. It's one of those things where you think you're in shape and then you do this...'

Atkins nods, smiles at her newest convert. 'And believe me,' she says, 'you're only going to get stronger.'

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HEAR IT
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