



BY CHRISTINA MARIA PASCHYN

DROPPING THE DOHA DOZEN



"I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO WEIGH THIS MUCH,"

I WHIMPERED TO MYSELF AS I STARED AT THE SCALE BENEATH MY FEET. THE NUMBER DISPLAYED TAUNTED ME, A DEFLATING SIGN THAT I HAD JUST OFFICIALLY WIPE AWAY NEARLY A YEAR'S WORTH OF HARD-SHED SWEAT.

Last February

I embarked on an intense fitness and nutrition regime that helped me to drop about 15 pounds in seven weeks, all so I could look slim on my wedding day. Losing it wasn't the hard part; it was the struggle to maintain that weight loss in the months leading up to my big day that truly tested my resolve to deny my naturally large appetite.

But maintain it I did, until the day after my wedding, when I then embarked on an equally intensive week of celebratory binge eating. Stupidly, I was surprised to see that I shot up five pounds in those fleeting seven days, but I brushed off any concerns. In a few days time I would be travelling to Doha to start a new career. "Five pounds is nothing! I'll just re-lose them in Qatar, how hard can it be?" I convinced myself. Thirty days later, the answer proved a resounding "very." Not only did I not lose those five pounds, I also gained 13 more. That's three more than I started with eight months ago!

The reason for my weight gain is probably obvious to many expatriates living in Qatar: temptation lurks around every corner here. From fast food delivery to those many work lunches catered oh-so-deliciously by high-end hotels, it's amazing anyone can avoid gorging on fatty and sugary foods every day. And let's not forget the city's ridiculously high-priced gym memberships and lack of pedestrian-friendly streets.

Is it any wonder that studies show Qatar is one of the tubbiest nations in the world? A recent report from the International Association

for the Study of Obesity found that roughly 35% of adult men and 45% of adult women in Qatar were obese in 2003; experts predict the rate will climb to 69% of men and 73% of women by 2015. The survey focused on the native population; but cultural, economic or genetic variances aside, I wouldn't be surprised if a study showed that Qatar's foreign residents are facing a similar health crisis. Qataris and expats eat a lot here, and a public embrace of proper portion size and moderate daily exercise has yet to be seen.

Getting Fit

So how does one go about shedding the notorious Doha dozen, as many expatriates who have packed on the pounds since moving here like to call it? It's not easy. As I wrote, it's nearly impossible to walk anywhere in the city without careening into construction and oncoming traffic, or realising that the sidewalk has suddenly disappeared under your feet. And for those of us living on modest wages, spending hundreds of dollars a month for a hotel gym membership is simply not an option. Even the somewhat more moderately-priced Fitness First in City Center mall seems extortionary when you know that fitness chains charge just \$25 (less than a hundred riyals) a month back in the States.

Despite these obstacles, it is indeed possible to develop an effective fitness regime in Doha. Many of us are lucky enough to live in housing complexes that provide a pool and gym. But if you can't bring yourself to hit the elliptical machine every morning – and I most certainty can't – you should try your hand at the many group fitness classes offered around the city. Group

classes were my salvation when I was struggling to lose weight back in America. Forget solitary workout videos, I found success in a room full of equally out-of-shape peers. The camaraderie one develops with similarly motivated individuals is addictive, and besides, no one wants to risk the disapproval of strangers by giving up during the middle of a workout. Needless to say, I am relieved that I have discovered several group classes in Doha that won't do a number on my bank balance.

The options

My favourite is Step A02; it is by far one of the best workouts I have ever experienced. In this high-energy aerobic class, you get to semi-dance your way on and around a compact platform. Don't worry if you're not the most coordinated; it doesn't matter how you look or if you are following the routine step-by-step. After a while, you'll become so engrossed by the fist-pumping music that you won't even care. More importantly, you'll finish feeling like you've melted away pounds of fat. My face has never been so red after a workout, and I loved it; it's a high that keeps me coming back for more.

But the best part: Step class at the InterContinental Hotel in Doha only costs QR 40 for non-members. And since you aren't locked into a costly year-long membership, you won't feel like you're wasting your money if you need to miss a class. The Intercon also offers other classes worthy of your effort, including the dance-tastic Body Groove, Circuit Training, which probably gives you the most calorie burn for your buck, and Kickfit, a martial arts body workout.



Another class I worship nearly as much as Step is Body Pump, offered at the Ritz-Carlton Doha. This one is pricier – QR75 per session for non-members. But it really is a Godsend; it's the only way I can lift weights without begrudging the tedious repetitions. Body Pump is both cardio and strength training, so you're not only burning fat but also chiselling your physique and toning muscle. The latter shouldn't alarm women; it won't bulk you up, but it will help you to define your arms, legs and abs. At the very least, Body Pump will rev up your metabolism since strength training keeps your muscles active long after you have finished your workout, helping you to burn extra calories throughout the course of your day without even trying! Cardio, for the most part, limits you to the calories you burn during a particular session, so you always need to include both in your fitness regime.

Perhaps the thought of driving to some distant hotel through Doha traffic is putting you off from lacing up your gym shoes. I get it. I live five minutes away from the Intercon and Ritz, and I still can't be bothered to start my car's engine. So don't. You probably are wasting gas and time when there's a good chance your own housing complex offers a few fitness classes of its own, albeit unofficially perhaps. Living at the Pearl-Qatar, I was blessed to find a group of like-minded women also desperate for easy-to-access fitness classes, and now they've started their own. I don't have to leave the Pearl's marina to find a Step, Kickfit or Yoga class. There's even a boot camp that I attend twice a week. So start asking around, you never know who might eager to share their skills.

Bite-sized changes

So that's the fitness side of the game, but what about nutrition? It's been the hardest thing to master for me. I love food – I mean I really love food, especially chocolate, ice cream and any kind of dessert you can imagine. And I never want to stop at just one bite. There are life coaches and nutrition experts available in Doha to help you learn how to eat healthily, such as the Art of Abundant Living. But in my case, I've gone back to my pre-wedding diet: no more than 1200 calories a day. After I achieve my goal,

I will boost that figure to 1500 or so. I am determined to drop 15 pounds and keep it off, and I am fully aware that means watching what I eat, because all the exercise in the world won't help me unless I cut my food intake as well.

Will I stumble? Yes. Will I cave to temptation? Of course. I no longer have a big event to truly motivate me to get fit. But maybe that means my weight loss will stick this time. There is no 'end' in sight; I am at the beginning of a lifestyle change. Yes, that may be difficult to achieve in Doha, with the array of luxury treats always on display at hotel brunches and malls. But one thing I have come to realise is that no food is ever worth the extra pounds; and that is particularly true in Doha where, for me, no dessert has ever truly lived up to expectation. That may not be enough to keep me from tasting, but it is enough to keep me from binging. Eating properly takes discipline, a behavioural change that is ongoing in my life.

I have made progress. I am halfway to achieving my weight loss goal, and I hope my story proves inspirational. If losing weight is one of your New Year's resolutions, don't fret that you're embarking on this challenging task as an expat in Qatar. Yes, you will encounter snags and pitfalls, but the country also has a burgeoning community of fitness buffs to help get you back on track. Anyone can drop the Doha dozen, but it takes patience, determination, and occasionally busting a move in front of people you barely know.

(Christina will be writing about her Doha fitness pursuit in GLAM over the next few months)