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Flying Free

Aerial yoga can take your practice higher than ever

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The practice of yoga is an ancient tradition steeped in religious and philosophical history, but many of today's studios have taken the practice to new heights. While the health and fitness benefits of traditional yoga range from increased flexibility to muscle strengthening to stress relief, some Bergen County studios are offering an exciting new twist on the ancient practice: aerial yoga.

Aerial yoga incorporates a high-density (but super soft) nylon fabric hammock that's suspended from the ceiling to assist in both traditional yoga poses as well as aerial adaptations of traditional poses.

"Aerial yoga is a lighthearted, whimsical, joyful experience...it's fun and freeing for people of all ages," Toni Chianetta, director of the aerial program at Tribe Body in Ramsey, says. "At times, the practice of yoga can feel a little serious...but it's really hard to feel that way when your feet aren't on the floor."

But along with all the fun, aerial yoga also comes with some serious health and fitness benefits. Chianetta explains that students can use gravity to their advantage when assisting their bodies through a series of stretching and strengthening poses. Your core muscles have to be engaged in order to promote balance and stability while suspended, and the hammocks can facilitate a deeper stretch than what you might be able to achieve on a yoga mat.

"You can definitely expect increased flexibility, your core and upper body will be fully engaged, and it improves blood flow and circulation throughout the body," she says.

Christine O'Donnell, owner of Sukha Arts Center in Harrington Park, agrees that having to consistently stabilize your body on the hammock means engaging your core and arms in a whole new way – but that you don't

necessarily need to be particularly flexible or strong as a beginner.

"What makes aerial yoga perfect for people of all ages and levels of physical fitness is that you don't need to be experienced at yoga and you don't have to be especially strong right from the beginning because you'll always have the support of the hammock," she says.

The hammocks also play a big role in what is possibly one of the best parts of a yoga class: the savasana (or "corpse") pose at the end, where students are encouraged to lie completely still, close their eyes, and enter into a state of complete relaxation – which can be difficult to do when lying on the floor next to strangers.

"The hammocks help increase your body awareness, so if you struggle with the final relaxation at the end of class, you might have more success in the hammock...it feels almost like a cocoon that blocks out light and sound and allows you to truly relax in your own personal space," Chianetta says.

Though some first-time aerial yoga students may initially be nervous about suspending themselves from the ceiling, O'Donnell notes that the hammock apparatus is completely safe.

"The material is graded to hold up to 2,000 pounds, so you're definitely not going to break it or fall from the ceiling," she says. In fact, in some ways, aerial yoga is considered even safer than traditional yoga because the suspension can be easier on the body. Sukna Arts Center offers beginner classes targeted solely to helping people become comfortable with the hammock.

"You have this giant prop that's super versatile, and that allows for inversions without the compression of your joints, spine, or neck," O'Donnell says. "It can be scary or intimidating to see other people upside down, but once you get into it, aerial yoga is playful...you're having fun, laughing, and losing your inhibitions before you know it." ■