

Myanmar climbers take latest yoga trend to new heights

First there was beer and paddleboard yoga. Then someone added goats to the mix. Now fitness buffs in Myanmar are taking the latest body-bending trend to whole new heights—pulling off yoga poses on a climbing wall. Khin Myat Thu Zar zips up to the top of a wall at a newly opened climbing centre in Yangon with ease. But her climb isn't finished yet. With the support of a rope partner she flips upside down, her feet gripping two climbing wall holds in an inverted split that would make the couch potatoes of the world wince at just the thought.

"Much more strength is needed to do this kind of yoga and the mind has to be entirely stable," she told AFP after a climb intermixed with an array of elaborate poses. "You need to be courageous," she added. The 32-year-old former lawyer has been teaching yoga in Myanmar professionally for the last five years. She started climbing six months ago as a way to strengthen her muscles and decided to marry the two hobbies together.

"The feeling on the wall is very different from (yoga) on the ground," she beamed, while admitting climbing yoga was not for the faint hearted and carried some risks. "If we do something wrong, it can hurt and it is dangerous." Most of her students hail from Myanmar's rapidly growing middle classes, who have been devouring global trends since the once isolated country abandoned outright military rule six years ago.

Lifestyle options that many in the west might have taken

for granted—from fast fast food joints and hipster cafes to nightclubs—are still seen as novel in Myanmar. Now yoga studios, climbing walls and tight-fitting gym clothes, trends almost unheard of under cloistered military rule, are breaking through. "Things are changing," Khin Myat Thu Zar said, when asked whether the skin-tight gear turned heads in a country that remains deeply conservative and where women are not encouraged to show flesh.

"Sportswear fashion is a new trend now in Myanmar," she explained. At \$12 for an hour long session, her climbing yoga classes are inevitably only affordable for the wealthy in a country where the average annual salary is just \$1,250. But there is no shortage of willing participants. At a recent session, some half a dozen women and two men warmed up before trying their hand at various yoga positions on the wall.

Myint Myat Sandy, a 25-year-old student, said she wanted to use climbing to boost her fitness and improve her yoga skills on the ground. "The way we do climbing yoga, it builds up strength in your hands," she said. Sandar Win, a bodybuilder in her 40s, says it is inner peace she is after. She explained: "I love the feeling I get at the end of a yoga session. My mind is totally at peace." — AFP

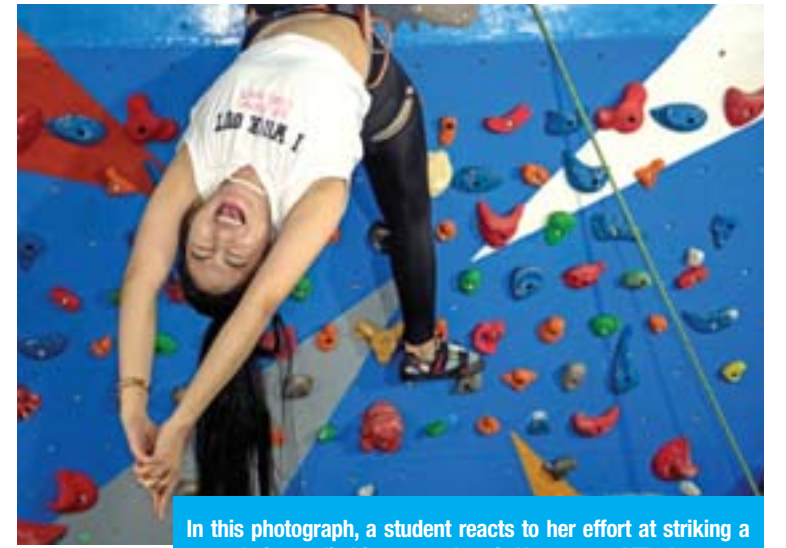
“Feeling on the wall is different from yoga on the ground”



In this photograph, Khin Myat Thu Zar, gives directions to a student trying to perform a yoga pose on a climbing wall.



In this photograph, Khin Myat Thu Zar, center, performs a yoga pose on a climbing wall during a class



In this photograph, a student reacts to her effort at striking a pose during a climbing yoga class in Yangon. — AFP photos

Ivory Coast's museum gets new lease of life

It has been buffeted by the pendulum swing of domestic politics and suffered looting that left it without some of its most precious items. But Ivory Coast's Museum of Civilizations is now back, and determined to recover its place as one of the richest museums of African art in the world—a place of "incomparable wealth," as Senegal's late post-president Leopold Sedar Senghor said in a 1971 visit. Looted four decades later during a political and military showdown, the museum shut its doors for a two-year refurbishment, reopening in July with redecorated rooms, modern lighting and a new conference centre, restaurant and garden.

The first exhibition since the renovation is rightfully called "Renaissance." It places the spotlight on a selection of a hundred of the museum's finest pieces, from the Paleolithic era to contemporary art. "We can consider ourselves lucky to have such a beautiful collection," museum director Sylvie Memel Kassi said. "It's an asset—a collection of 15,000 pieces from across every region."

But she still mourns the pillage that occurred in 2011, during a post-electoral time of anarchy in the Ivorian economic capital, Abidjan, that claimed some 3,000 lives. "That really left us with a bitter taste in the mouth," she said. "The items that were looted were major works: sacred pieces, objects made of wax... Our estimate is that almost four billion CFA francs (six million euros)" were lost, Memel Kassi said.

Phantom collection

In the coming months, the museum plans to put on a "ghost collection" exhibition to keep the memory of the vanished pieces alive and to promote recognition of illicit trafficking in historical objects, which circulate in a market financed by many private collectors who are often not overly troubled by origins. Founded in 1942 when France was the colonial power in much of west Africa, the museum is itself a work of art with 20 columns finely sculpted in wood.

The renovated premises give special place to contemporary artists with a hall set aside for people like Ivorian sculptor Jems Koko Bi, while the garden displays recent work. "We deliberately speak of the museum of civilizations," the director said. "We wanted to show that the artists whose

creations are today regarded as 'ancient works' are the very same as Africans producing contemporary work.

"We're living through a renaissance even at national level with cultural and artistic development... We have the ancient aspect in the museum collections and the contemporary work in the creations of young sculptors." The museum is also planning an exhibition to highlight ties between Picasso and Ivorian sculpture on the heels of a "Primitive Picasso" show at the Quai Branly, the Paris museum dedicated to the indigenous art and cultures of Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas, which opened in 2006.

More than 10,000 people have visited the museum in Abidjan since it reopened, but the curator hopes to raise this figure tenfold over the course of the year, since tourists are returning to the country. Engaging students and schoolchildren in the collection is also a priority. "The museum is also the memory of a people," Memel Kassi observed. "It's important to see it discovered by the Ivorians." —AFP



Busan film festival ready for action despite turmoil

Organizers of the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) say they are confident they can cast off the politics that has overshadowed the influential event as its 22nd edition kicks off on Thursday. The annual festival, which has long championed independent Asian cinema, is determined to "preserve its identity" despite being embroiled in high drama of its own for the past three years, said founder Kim Dong-Ho. Kim, 80, was brought back to help run BIFF in 2015 after previous festival boss Lee Yong-kwan was charged with fraud and removed from his post.

That scandal came after the festival decided in 2014 to stick with the screening of a contentious documentary despite pressure from Busan Mayor Suh Byung-Soo to withdraw it from the program. The film in question, "Diving Bell: The Truth Shall Not Sink With Sewol", was critical of the South Korean government's handling of the Sewol ferry disaster that year which claimed around 300 lives. Government funding cuts followed and then boycotts by leading Korean cinema groups such as the Directors' Guild of Korea, which pointed a finger at political meddling.

"Although this year's festival is still facing unsolved problems, we are determined to encourage up-and-coming Asian directors, support new Asian films and further our role in the film industry," said Kim. Industry insiders had questioned whether BIFF could repair the damage to its reputation—a point raised by festival staff earlier this year when they demanded Kim and festival director Kang Soo-Yeon resign over lack of action on the various troubles. The pair have since acquiesced to those demands and will hand over the reins at the end of this year's edition of the festival, which runs from October 12 to 21.

Young talent

Amid the turmoil, BIFF's programmers have still managed to line up around 300 films and 100 world premieres for this year's festival, which will open against a backdrop of unprecedented growth across Asian film markets. While Hollywood has suffered a summer that saw box office receipts drop by some 16 percent, a series of domestic hits has driven the Chinese market up by 10 percent, while South Korea is on target for a record 2017.

BIFF has this year attracted international guests including two-time Oscar-winning filmmaker Oliver Stone, who will head the jury for the festival's main New Currents award for first- or second-time Asian directors. Fellow Hollywood A-lister Darren Aronofsky will also make an appearance as he tours the festival circuit with his horror "Mother!" and Hong Kong action maestro John Woo will bring his latest thriller "Manhunt" to the Korean port city.

Other notables flying in from across the region include Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda and China's Jia Zhangke. BIFF opens Thursday with the premiere of Korean director Shin Su-Won's revenge thriller "Glass Garden". It will close with the historical drama "Love Education" from

Taiwanese director Sylvia Chang—the first time female directors have book-ended the festival. Other highlights include the world premiere of Jeon Jae-Eun's "Butterfly Sleep" starring Japanese superstar Miho Nakayama, as well as a new award for rising Asian directors in memory of BIFF co-founder Kim Ji-Seok, who passed away while attending the Cannes festival in May.

Rising Korean filmmakers will be showcased in the 27-film Korean Cinema Today section while this year's New Currents features 10 films representing Asian nations, with much interest surrounding the Chinese comedy "One Night on the Wharf" by acclaimed artist-turned-filmmaker Han Dong. There will be politics at play as always in the festival's Wide Angle documentary section with productions in competition including one that looks at the controversial THAAD missile defence deployment in South Korea—the Park Baedil-directed "Soseongri".

"After some hard times we still believe that highlighting and focusing on young Korean and Asian talent, and discovering and supporting them, is what we do best and is the future for BIFF," said festival programmer Kim Young-Woo.—AFP



South Korean animator Han Yeo-ul poses for photos during an interview with AFP at the 18th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) in Busan. — AFP photos



This undated photo released by BIFF in the southeastern port city of Busan shows Bangladeshi director Abu Shahed Emon.