

Lifestyle | Feature



A woman runs during her lunch break at Djurgarden park in Stockholm. — AFP photos



Employees of Bjoern Borg sportswear brand are pictured during a yoga class.

Mandatory exercise at the office, Sweden's latest craze

Workers spending their lunch break at the gym may be commonplace in most Western countries, but in Sweden some employers are pushing the idea even further, making on-the-job exercise compulsory. Every Friday, employees of fashion and sportswear retailer Bjorn Borg leave their desks at the company's Stockholm headquarters to get their weekly workout at a nearby gym. There is no getting out of it: for more than two years the company founded by the Swedish tennis legend has made on-the-job exercise mandatory at the initiative of chief executive Henrik Bunge, a 44-year-old built like a wrestler.

"If you don't want to exercise or be a part of the company culture, you have to go," says Bunge, without batting an eye. So far no one has quit because of the requirement, he adds. The main aims of the policy—shared by other firms such as city water company Kalmar Vatten and construction consultancy Rotpartner—are to boost productivity and profitability while fostering camaraderie in the work force. In 2014, a University of Stockholm study showed that exercising during the workday was advantageous for both employees—who were healthier and more concentrated—and the employer.

The study found there was a 22 percent decline in work absences, not negligible in a country where the

average person is on sick leave four percent of the time, twice the European average. Rosy-cheeked and smiling, the 60 Bjorn Borg employees taking part in this week's grueling yoga session head to the changing rooms, their endorphins soaring. "Most of us think it's a really good part of the work week," says employee Cecilia Nissborg.

Healthy outdoor lifestyle

Swedes have long been known for their healthy outdoorsy lifestyle. Long walks to pick mushrooms or berries, or just for pleasure, regardless of the weather, are part of their everyday lives. "In Sweden there's this idea that you'll be healthy, strong and happy if you get a lot of exercise, if you spend a lot of time in nature," says Carl Cederstrom, an economics researcher at Stockholm University and the author of "The Wellness Syndrome", a critique of the pervasive ideology of wellness. He notes that it is a common belief in Sweden "that if you exercise and take care of your body, you're a better person".

Swedes get more exercise than anyone else in Europe. A 2014 Eurobarometer poll found that 70 percent of Swedes exercised once a week, and 51 percent two to three times a week. At the bottom of the rankings, only 22 percent of Bulgarians exercised once a week. Swedes also generally see being in shape as a duty to oneself and

"If you don't want to exercise, you have to go"

society, an expectation dating to the 1930s, when a cult of youth, vigour and "social hygiene" flourished, Cederstrom says. But people also see it as a "responsibility you have to your employer", he adds.

'Everyone is equal' at the gym

Since the late 1980s, most Swedish companies subsidize their employees' sporting activities—from golf to water aerobics—contributing up to 500 euros (\$615) per year, which is tax deductible for the employer. And some, like at Bjorn Borg, go so far as to organize exercise classes during work time. Bunge is convinced the workplace

he has created has made employees happier and more productive, noting that all the company's key numbers have gone up since the new regime was introduced.

Mandatory workouts, usually in a group, also have other benefits. They bring together all the departments of a company, allowing employees to put their work responsibilities aside and get to know each other on an equal footing. "When we go into the gym, we're all on the same level. Your place in the company has no importance, everyone is equal," says Ida Lang, who works in Bjorn Borg's accounting department.

For Cederstrom, while the search for wellbeing and performance through physical activity is not unique to the Scandinavian country, "Sweden is really extreme when it comes to companies that make exercise on the job mandatory".

It is a development he finds worrying. "When you start to think that you're a better mother or a better father or a better friend if you exercise, you can get to a point where you think that people who don't live healthily, who are overweight or who smoke, are less good people," he says.—AFP

'GIRL WITH PEARL EARRING' TO UNDERGO PUBLIC EXAMINATION

One of the world's most famous paintings "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is to undergo a two-week scientific examination in front of curious visitors to the Dutch museum where it lives. The luminescent tableau painted by Dutch master Johannes Vermeer around 1665 was last examined in 1994 during a conservation treatment at the Mauritshuis museum in the center of The Hague.

"Although further restoration is not yet required, major advances in non-invasive technical analysis have been made over the last 25 years," the museum said in a statement.

used in a two-week project opening Monday, dubbed "The Girl in the Spotlight." Vermeer's work will be minutely examined "to investigate the canvas, pigments and oil" he used, all from inside a special glass-enclosed structure where visitors can watch a team of international experts at work. "For two weeks, the museum will house one of the most advanced research centers in the world," said Mauritshuis head researcher Abbie Vandivere, after which the painting will be "one of the best documented works of art in the world," the museum added.



This picture shows Johannes Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" painting inside a XRF macro-scanner during a research at Het Mauritshuis in The Hague. — AFP

Researchers have long been fascinated by the painting of a young girl with an enigmatic gaze, as she stares out of the canvas, wearing an eastern blue and yellow turban, her ear adorned with a large pearl. They have "a number of unanswered questions about how Vermeer painted this work of art and which materials he used," the museum said.

So the latest technologies, such as fluorescent X-rays, optical coherence tomography and digital microscopy will be

The much-loved masterpiece inspired a 2003 Hollywood film starring Scarlett Johansson, with Colin Firth in the role of Vermeer. The movie was itself adapted from a best-selling novel by the American-British writer Tracy Chevalier. But it is believed the painting is not a portrait of a real girl, but what is known as a "tronie" or a representation of a character. — AFP



The tide rises at the beach of Marino Ballena National Park in Costa Rica's Pacific Coast. — Reuters photos



A tour operator drives his boat across the beach for a trip into the waters of Marino Ballena National Park on Costa Rica's Pacific Coast.

Ocean warming threatens to drown Costa Rica's whale tourism

In good years, more than a hundred thousand tourists flock to this marine park on Costa Rica's Pacific coast to see humpback whales breaching in the blue waters. But warming temperatures—driven by climate change and strengthening El Nino events—are beginning to threaten the region's tourism economy. "When temperatures rise two or three degrees (Celsius) above the region's average, we have very few whale sightings compared to normal years," said whale specialist Jose David Palacios, who works at the Marino Ballena National Park with the Keto Foundation, a Costa Rican marine conservation organization.

"Typically, there are many sightings a day. When temperatures rise, there are only one or two a week," he said. For Julio Badilla, the operator of Dolphin Tours, that's bad news. Over the three most recent tour seasons, including a strong 2015-2016 El Nino period, whale sightings have been "terrible," he said. Whales are one of the main tourist draws for Marino Ballena National Park, one of Costa Rica's most visited natural areas. As climate change hits the country's parks and biodiversity, it is also threatening local economies highly dependent on tourism, scientists and local people say.

"What's happening with the whales is concerning. In previous years (2015-2016) there was a decrease in the amount of tours precisely because the probability of finding whales was very low," said Rafael Sanchez, a tour operator from the company Adventure Bay. Scientists similarly have noticed a drop in whale sightings in the park, mainly in warmer-than-average years, they said.

Although more study is needed, they believe rising water temperatures may be altering the migration routes of humpback whales moving past Costa Rica from the north.

When the whales descend in search of warmer waters to reproduce, they may now be finding them before reaching the park, scientists believe. The problem is that, as the whales spend time elsewhere, the community of Bahia Ballena could see its income dry up. "Whale sighting tourism really moves this community. Tourism has been the main economic activity in the region for a couple of years now.

Recently, it's been growing in these type of activities," said Sanchez, the tour operator.

A study published in the journal Nature in 2014 estimated that extreme El Nino events, like the recent one in Costa Rica, will become twice as likely due to climate change. That is a growing worry for tour operators in Bahia Ballena. Along with altering whale migration, climate change is causing other problems as well, from coral bleaching to rising sea level, Palacios said. A drop in tourism in the region would mean a big hit for Costa Rica's tourism economy. According to data from the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, the park is the third most visited in the country with over 130,000 tourists per year.



Tree seedlings at the community of Bahia Ballena await planting along the beach at the Marino Ballena National Park on Costa Rica's Pacific Coast.

Less beach, dead coral

While a decrease in whale sightings is the most direct economic threat to the park, other changes—such as a loss of beach area to sea level rise—are causing concern as well. "We're losing beach, which is affecting tourism activity because that space available for recreation and tourism is retreating," explained Catalina Mora, executive president of the Keto Foundation. In the 1980s, a series of stone blocks were installed along the beach, 50 meters

from the water, to protect fragile coastal plants from waves during strong storms, she said.

Today, during high tide, the blocks sit entirely underwater. "The water is reaching some forest paths," said Mora, a scientist. "It's also reaching the first line of palm trees along the coast" and eroding the soil from the roots of the trees, she said.

Marino Ballena's coral reefs also are feeling the heat. Almost all the coral in the park suffered some bleaching in 2015, said Palacios, a marine biologist. By 2016, 94 percent of the park's corals were bleached and today almost 90 percent have died, he said. That is a huge worry for tour operators because snorkeling on the reefs has been another major tourism draw, the scientist said.

Adapting?

With the surrounding community depending on the health of the park for an income, park backers are pushing for adaptation measure to try to limit damage to the reserve. For instance, Mora said her organization is pushing for more sustainable tourism practices, including changing snorkeling and whale watching areas regularly to ensure the same ones are not overstressed. The foundation also is urging that more palm trees be planted along the coast to serve as a defense barrier against erosion and big waves, Palacios said.

However, tour operators say the problem of continuing warming in the reserve can only be solved by global action to limit climate change. Because of this lack of local control over the ongoing damage, they also are searching for ways to diversify their business, just in case. "We are an hour away from Corcovado National Park, for example," Sanchez said. Birdwatching tours in that park have "a lot of potential and are promoted very little", he said. According to the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, the country has about 900 bird species—and the area around Marino Ballena is listed among the top 12 spots in the country to find them. — Reuters