

A GYM GUIDE FOR WOMEN

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When age takes its toll on a woman's figure, there are options. You can rethink your wardrobe and make peace with elastic waistbands, drop sugar from your diet, take up a vigorous new hobby, drastically reduce your food intake and ponder gastric-bypass surgery.

Or you can join a gym.

If you find a facility that fits you, and actually enjoy your visits enough to make them regular, a gym membership can mean the difference between feeling disgruntled about your middle-aged self and enjoying a physically vital midlife. With new evidence indicating that strength training is an excellent way to increase bone density, the gym rats begin to look pretty smart.

Finding the gym that suits you is the trick. A 55-year-old woman walks into a fitness facility with a vastly different set of criteria than a 30-year-old woman, let alone a 25-year-old man.

A year and a half ago, my search for a new trainer led me to Florida Sun Waterfront Fitness on Clematis, a boutique gym in downtown West Palm with a purposely small membership. In two hours a week, Chris Sell helps me feel fitter than I have in years. But trainers aren't for everyone, just as large gyms don't appeal to some, and gyms with sweating weightlifters don't appeal to others.

Because I've been hearing a lot about local gyms that target the Boomer population, I decided to venture out of my happy rut at Florida Sun for a look around. I was curious to see what else is out there for midlife women.

I embarked on my gym survey armed with a secret weapon: fitness expert Joy Prouty, who's seen, done and taught it all in her 40-year fitness career. Together, we made four field trips in August, stopping in unannounced at a Planet Fitness, Curves, LA Fitness, Lady of America and others that aren't part of chains.

We couldn't be comprehensive, so we strove for geographic diversity. And we weren't scientific; instead, we relied on our middle-aged female sensibilities to hone in on the features at each gym that appeal to us - and the ones that leave us cold.

Tag along, and we'll share our observations: the good, the bad and the smelly.

LOGGERHEAD FITNESS, Juno Beach

Loggerhead Fitness was tricky to locate, but once we found it, we were impressed. Open for 15 years, the 7,200-square-foot Juno Beach club caters to Baby Boomers who live by the water. New owner Rick Opton targeted his audience by trading the child-care room for the county's first GRAVITY® training space (a new strength-training method), and now midlife women make up the bulk of the cardio, aerobic and yoga classes, according to general manager Corinn Raffel. Pointing out a member who was fetching something from behind the counter, Corinn said people feel like they're family at Loggerhead. Employee stability plays a part in that; many of the teachers have been there for more than a decade. A flood in January necessitated new carpeting and paint, so the gym is clean and fresh. Upon joining, members are screened for medical problems, and safety is taken seriously, Corinn said. Small-group personal training is offered, along with classes that range from kick-boxing to mat Pilates. Cost is around \$48 a month.

Joy's thumbs up: User-friendly. Lots of equipment.

Joy's thumbs down: Hmmm. A bit hard to locate is the worst thing I can say.

LADY OF AMERICA, Palm Beach Gardens

The Lady of America on Northlake was our first stop on Day 2. Joy and I were met at the door by super-friendly manager Amy Perdue and got a warm welcome from this all-women's facility. Plenty of classes crowd the schedule, but there's only one shower here, so we have to conclude this is a neighborhood favorite, where women drop in for kick-boxing, yoga or cardio and then head straight home. There's a child-care area, small sauna and tanning bed, plus six personal trainers affiliated with the gym. Amy said some members are friends and go to lunch together after workouts. Belly dancing, cardio striptease and power sculpt are other popular classes, but there are also low-impact offerings where you could sit in a chair and participate. "If someone requires special attention, that's what we're here for," said Amy. "Fitness should be attainable for everyone."

Instructors actually know the members, and might greet you with "You're the new girl!" or "I haven't seen you in a while." Fees are about \$30 a month, and though we loved the feel of this place, it seemed more geared to young moms than the 50+ demographic - not that there's anything wrong with that!

Joy's thumbs up: Friendly staff and a nice variety of classes and opportunities for women to meet friends and workout together.

Joy's thumbs down: The staff is young and less experienced than some other places we visited. And while the floor in the class area is rubber and has good cushioning, the surface can be tricky, especially in an aerobic movement/dance-type class.

50 PLUS FITNESS CENTER, Boynton Beach

The 50 Plus Fitness Center was our next stop, where Chris Mazzola has converted a tiny space into a circuit-training center for seniors. A personal trainer affiliated with several national fitness organizations, Chris manages about 300 sessions a month for his clientele, mostly locals in their 60s and 70s. Overwhelmed by the lack of mobility in seniors, Chris opened his no-frills space two years ago and said he finds joy in small

rewards, such as seeing clients climb out of their car more quickly and easily. For \$59 a month, clients come in as often as they like for a 30-minute round of exercises, six designed for balance and movement, six for strength. Chris is always on hand to supervise and told us the folks who come into his facility find it a comfort to be surrounded by their peers. The day we dropped in, a handful of older clients were determinedly making their rounds, shifting machines each time a "horn" sounded.

Joy's thumb up: Chris has identified his niche and seems to connect well with his clients. He's smart to accentuate strength, balance and agility, since they're key in aging.

Joy's thumbs down: Too little attention given to cardiovascular work.

LA FITNESS, Palm Beach Gardens

The **LA Fitness** on Northlake, just down the street, was our next stop, but it was a short one.

The coldly forbidding woman at the front desk refused to let us walk into the workout area unaccompanied. She said "corporate" would have to be contacted before anyone could give the press an official comment and that we could wait to see the manager if we liked, but he was "with someone."

We walked over to gaze longingly through the window to the large indoor pool (nice!), listening as the woman at the front desk alienated a man who'd walked in shortly after us.

"Too many questions," we heard him say. "I just want to talk about joining."

Good luck, buddy. We took off.

CURVES, West Palm Beach

A **Curves** location on South Dixie drew our attention next. We'd heard both good and bad reports about these independently owned franchises (which sprang up like mushrooms a couple years back), but in our opinion, Jane Ward and Rich Glennon have fashioned a winning studio. Joy said it's as if they took the original intention of Curves (to encourage women who haven't been exercising to get started), and brought it to a higher level.

Open since 2003, this Curves has the advantage of owners who are fitness professionals: Rich and Jane run R&J Fitness out of the same space, providing clients an opportunity to "step up" beyond circuit training when they're ready.

Jane, who's affiliated with International Fitness Professionals Association, also conducts advanced circuit classes once a month and keeps a sign-up sheet for private classes to offer variety. Most of her clients are between the ages of 45 and 65, so we felt right at home. For \$39 a month, you have unlimited access to the 24 stations.

Jane explained that circuit training is appealing because you come in and don't have to think; you can just zone out and switch machines when the CD instructs you to do so.

Joy's thumbs up: This innovative location proves that not all Curves are created equal! Nice atmosphere with a certified fitness owner and trainer doing a good job.

Joy's thumbs down: It's small, and people probably don't know about it. If it grew too much, space could be an issue.

PLANET FITNESS, Palm Beach Gardens

We headed next to **Planet Fitness** on Alternate A1A, where we were greeted by friendly guide, Junya Beau-brun. He answered our questions about the gym, which doesn't offer classes, only machines, circuit training and trainers. But for \$19 a month, Joy and I thought it was a super deal. The BodyMasters equipment is excellent, the circuit training area is efficient, the treadmills and bikes are numerous, and the music is fun. The mid-afternoon crowd was a non-intimidating mix of about 20 men and women, mostly middle-aged. "I think it'd be fun to work out here," said Joy on our way out.

Joy's thumbs up: Has a large selection of equipment, with a smaller circuit area that is very user- friendly. And so affordable!

Joy's thumbs down: No classes.

ULTIMA FITNESS, Wellington

Ultima Fitness was our first stop on Field Trip No. 3, and we were a bit surprised to learn it's no longer affiliated with the Ultima on Clematis Street in West Palm Beach. The two split amicably nine years ago, with Jill and John Merrell becoming sole owners of the Wellington gym. Jill checked her membership roster for us and counted 1,436 over-40 women currently signed up.

The 30,000-square-foot facility certainly offers it all: 18 personal trainers for individual or small-group training; entertainment systems on the ellipticals, steppers, bicycles and treadmills; small-group specialty classes such as Pilates; a separate ladies-only area; suspended wood floor in the class area; free kids' play area; separate Xtreme Tae Kwon Do school; and classes that range from Ab Lab to Fun & Fit over 50 to Zumba.

With an annual membership, it's \$32 a month, and there's the security of knowing the gym has been at the same location 11 years, and 18 years in Wellington.

Joy's thumbs up: This family-owned facility asks its members for suggestions on growing their business - and listens to them! The small, private weight room for women is a nice touch.

Joy's thumbs down: This is a huge facility, which means it can be intimidating to walk into the first few times.

YMCA of the Treasure Coast, Stuart

I made a solo trip to **YMCA of the Treasure Coast** on Day 4, discovering the busiest gym I'd yet seen, with about 35 people (many in my age group and older) exercising at 10 in the morning.

A separate Pilates room was dark the day I visited, so I ducked into the old-fashioned, cement-block dressing room, which felt comfortably familiar.

The lap pool out back is an amenity few other gyms offer, and the yoga classroom that morning was filled with 20 women.

The atmosphere was very inclusive, and while families may be the focus, midlife women clearly felt at home here. Free coffee was another seldom-seen perk.

The workout area is filled with high-quality Cybex equipment, but the downside is that, during season, the gym is so popular you have to wait for equipment, which one member told me gets frustrating. Still, at \$46 a month (plus a one-time joining fee of \$79), this giant, all-inclusive facility, complete with lap pool, is a fitness bargain.

STAYIN' ALIVE FITNESS CENTER,

Lake Worth

The **Stayin' Alive Fitness Center** in Lake Worth is the longest-established facility we found in our travels. Joy remembered when Bonnie and Donna Hubscher started up back in 1980 as Two Sisters Exercise Studio, along with their niece, Julie Lowder. The Stayin' Alive name arrived in 1984, and the gym moved to its current location in Lantana Square seven years ago - but it's still a family affair.

There's a large weight room, a child-care room, small-group training and a long list of classes, including Pilates, yoga, Zumba, Silver Sneakers and step. The friendly staff told us we were welcome to observe a CorePole class about to start, inviting us to wait in a cozy common area adjacent to the smoothie/juice bar. We found Bonnie's class fascinating and liked its "we're all in this together" feel.

At 50, Bonnie can identify with her midlife clients. She's still fitness-committed all these years later and says her gyms strive to appeal to all ages, "even those over 30 and 40, since we're Boomers, too. It just makes sense." At Stayin' Alive, \$29 a month covers the average package.

Joy's thumbs up: Great job adapting to the ever-changing trends in the fitness business. Excellent variety of classes, some very innovative.

Joy's thumbs down: Noise from the large weight room upstairs is audible in the first-floor classroom.

AVENUE PILATES, Delray Beach

Our final stop on Day 3 took us to **Avenue Pilates**, a spa-like facility in Delray Beach on Federal Highway. It was soothing just to step inside, and the spotless, carefully-lit rooms held the latest equipment, including three Wunda Chairs.

Carla Dunlap-Kaan, Miss Olympia of 1983, now 52, is the Pilates master, and both Joy and I can attest to her still-formidable physique. Seven Pilates instructors and five

personal trainers work at the studio, which has free weights and weight machines for individual work.

Owner Jean Magrella, 45, also runs Avenue Fitness next door, which boasts a Pergo floating floor for Zumba, exotic dance, stretch and belly-dance classes. About 300 clients, mostly women, visit regularly, paying from \$11 to \$16 per class, depending on the size of their purchase package. "We pride ourselves on hospitality," Jean said. "People arriving a half an hour early for class kick off their shoes, grab a magazine and sit on the sofa."

Joy's thumbs up: Love the atmosphere and attention to detail; well-trained staff and an innovative slate of classes.

Joy's thumbs down: Soothing, luxe atmosphere costs a bit more.

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