

Out-of-the-ordinary sports

Germans see sport as exercise for the body. Americans have a different view. Michael Eder, journalist at 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung', took a look over the Pond – and discovered some unusual activities.

Exercise is good for you – that's what doctors tell us. And we say it has to be fun and give us the opportunity to try our hand at something new. Germans enjoy swimming, running and cycling – when they're not playing soccer, that is. And in winter, they head for the slopes, skis in tow. Americans, on the other hand, apply the trial and error principle to their physical activity, and are constantly thinking up new and exciting ways to stay in shape. Some of these inventions have become real hits: surfing, skateboarding, mountain biking, bungee jumping, snowboarding, aerobics, pilates, and a host of others.

The Americans have grasped an important concept: sport isn't just about working up a sweat, it's about feelings. Feelings of triumph and excitement, of tranquility and satisfaction. It's about style and elegance, strength, relaxation, speed, or whatever you want it to be about. Exercise is diverse – and is good for our minds as well as our bodies. Which is why we should cast off our old sneakers from time to time and have a go at something completely different. To misquote Hamlet: there are more sports between heaven and earth, than you could ever imagine. Some of them are crazy, some definitely have a certain allure and all of them are hoping to catch on – even in a country of soccer lovers.

Take Bikram yoga, for instance,

a particularly hot form of the Indian meditative discipline favored by the likes of Madonna and Barbara Streisand and tennis pros Andy Murray and Kim Clijsters. Developed by Bikram Choudhury in Los Angeles, this sport entails performing a series of 26 exercises for 90 minutes in a room that has been heated to 40 degrees Celsius. Participants wear light clothing and are advised to bring as much water with them as if they were attempting to cross Death Valley on foot.

A similarly effectively calorie buster is speed badminton.

Faster, harder and cooler than any other racket sport, it's a mixture of squash, badminton and tennis that is played on beaches, in parks and on tennis courts – whatever the weather. Just make sure you have plenty of space because the specially designed shuttlecocks, Apollo speeders, can travel 30 meters and reach speeds of up to 300 kilometers an hour. If you end up staying at the office late or have another reason for preferring to practice sport after dark, check out black badminton – with its high-speed, glow-in-the-dark shuttlecocks, called UFOs. This sport is played with loud music blasting out of speakers and it's not just the shuttlecocks that light up, the players are also kitted out in luminous gear.





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Or how about blobbing?

These days, airbags are not just for cars, they're popular in sport, too – snowboarding for example. At the winter Olympics in Vancouver, the world's best half-pipe boarders will perform double corks for the first time – extreme jumps with multiple twists and turns five meters above the edge of the pipe, that means 12 meters above the ground. Superstars Shaun White and his buddies practice this death-defying move using five-meter tall, 15 by 15 meter Bagjumps attached to a training pipe. These giant air pillows are worth 25,000 euros. But the huge cushions originally used by stunt artists are not only used to protect budding snowboard champions during training, they are also found elsewhere in the sport world. In blobbing, for example, where an enormous cigar-shaped airbag is placed in a lake or in the sea. Two people then leap from a tower onto the pillow. The air pressure catapults a third person sitting on the edge of the airbag high into the air. This is only for people with guts – and life jackets are a must.

Pen spinning.

If you prefer a little less action, and more skill than adrenalin, you should try pen spinning. This originates in Japan and has been made popular in the USA by Fernando Kuo, a.k.a. Kam. It's basically a fancy way of turning a pen around in your hand. There's a whole host of tricks: thumb around, sonic, finger pass and charge, to name but a few. The pros deftly combine these moves to create a seamless pen-spinning routine. These exercises are good for coordination and motor skills and are great for impressing your work colleagues.

And to conclude:

But if you're not the type to follow new crazes, you have a racing bike and are in good shape, why not take a few days off, travel to France and cycle along the Col du Télégraphe mountain pass from Saint Michel de Maurienne to the summit of Galibier? These are 30 kilometers – away from all the latest fads – that you will certainly never forget.

Our author, 53, is a passionate triathlete and snowboarder. He has been a journalist for the sports section of 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' since 1990. The publication has been named Sports Title of the Year by industry experts Sport intern no less than 11 times.

