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Flying through hoops

When we were young, it was always my sister's dream to run away and join the circus. As a kid gymnast, she was flipping and

cartwheeling wherever we went, hanging upside down from everything with a bar or a branch.

I was a ballet dancer, so any bars I came into contact with were for balance only – upright, thank you very much. I always felt that my head was put on top of my shoulders for a reason and should stay that way.

As a grownup, it's a feeling that's hard to shake. Conquering my fear of being upside down is an ongoing process of attempting headstands only with the support of a nice, solid wall.

In a continuing effort to overcome her fear of being upside down, **Zoe Paskett** tries out an aerial class - and loves it

So it came as a surprise even to me that I signed up for an aerial hoop class at Flying Fantastic. I've been trying out a variety of alternative fitness classes recently, but this sounded particularly exciting – who hasn't dreamed about flying?

Chris and Edel Wigan discovered aerial in 2008 and founded Flying Fantastic three years later. Chris was a graphic designer and Edel a civil servant and primary school teacher before they discovered their love of

being airborne.

With Chris as ringmaster and Edel the director of Young Flyers (aerial for kids), they've built a school that prides itself on helping Londoners discover muscles they never knew they had.

And that, I can certainly vouch for. It's now been 24 hours since I was hauling myself up into a hoop and everything hurts. Everything. But, to use a common line, it's a good pain.

It all starts at Gymbox in Old Street, where I and two other nervous women wait as the previous class finishes off.

"I've just seen them," says one of the women as I turn up, "and it looks terrifying."

The studio has five hoops suspended from the ceiling with some very welcoming crash mats under each. As soon as we're in the room, no time is wasted as we're instructed to jog, gallop and sprint to warm up. Knowing beforehand that this was an "all levels welcome" class, I'm a little apprehensive, but the class splits evenly into total beginners and very-much-not beginners.

I and the two women from outside are taken under the wing of Ruby Gaskell, a soon to be graduate of the National Centre for Circus Arts who has been studying circus since the age of 10.

In a fit of madness that has nothing to do with getting it out of the way, I volunteer to go first. We start with what should be the easiest part – mounting

the hoop, which takes a lot of core strength and hardy hands to accomplish with any sort of grace. Some residual flexibility I've retained from ballet helps a bit, but right now it's rock solid abs I need (and don't have).

With a supporting hand from Ruby, I master the side mount and hoist myself into a sitting position, where she then tells me to hold on with my legs and let go with my hands. My expert skills of deduction suggest that this means I'll be upside down. Luckily none of these people know how I feel about it, so I can pretend that I am a fearless gymnast, and let go.

How relaxing it is to be suspended from a gently swinging hoop. That is until Ruby instructs me to start doing sit ups.

For the next hour, she demonstrates and helps us through a number of "basic" positions, including the man in the moon, which has me sitting sideways with no hands holding on, feet and back pressing to keep me from falling out and a bum cheek either side of the hoop. It's not the most comfortable sport. From there, we go further so there's no hands and only one foot, or my legs at a vertical right angle, and finally, no hands, no feet and no bum - yes, it's possible.

Aerial arts defy the laws of physics. It makes you work against gravity with every move and, for us beginners, that's painfully obvious. But for Ruby it looks like second nature, and she inspires you to really try as hard as you can until it feels just that bit better.

Enough to go back? Definitely, but I might get a few more muscles first.

Flying Fantastic runs aerial hoop classes at Gymbox on Old Street, Sundays at 2pm.

To book: flyingfantastic.co.uk
Ruby Gaskell: rubygaskell.com



■ I achieved none of these positions in my first class. I have high hopes for class two (inset) Ruby Gaskell
Picture: BERTILL NILSON