

Be fitter, braver and boulder



Fearless: Helen gets to grips with the bouldering wall
PICTURE: GRETTEL ENSIGNIA

Gym addicts are gripped by bouldering, a new form of climbing. **Helen Croydon** went to see what all the fuss is about

PERCHED six feet up in the air, I'm balancing my left foot on what looks like a pink plastic liquorice allsort, while my right hand is gripping tightly to an orange plastic splodge. My other two limbs are dangling precariously. 'Bring your right foot to the red handhold just above you,' suggests Carlos, my dashing instructor.

This might sound like an advanced game of Twister but I'm actually having my first bouldering lesson. The sport, once the preserve of daring outdoor adventurers, is now so popular it has replaced the gym

for many fitness fans. The Association of British Climbing Walls estimates that there are 20 new centres opening in the UK every year and there's even a campaign to get it included as an Olympic sport.

Bouldering is like climbing, only without ropes to keep you 'safe' if

If you've ever played Candy Crush, imagine the game board as a vertical wall in 3D

you let go. Although it started as an outdoor sport on real boulders, fans of the activity are increasingly urbanites using special bouldering gyms for a full-body workout – and sometimes even as a meditative exercise due to the levels of concentration required.

If you've ever played Candy Crush, imagine the game board as a vertical wall in 3D. There you have your bouldering wall. Using multicoloured handholds (bright plastic blobs) to grip or step on, you hoist yourself up and across walls. Crash mats make up the flooring, eliminating the need for safety ropes.

London's Mile End Climbing Wall, where I have my first lesson, has eight areas, which vary in difficulty and emphasis. The Teaching Room, where I start, has flat walls and its handholds are easy to grip.

As I get more confident, I move into other rooms with sloping walls, corners and protruding elements. The Monkey House, for example, has walls sloping inwards at 45 degrees

while The Wave is curved and overhanging. The Secret Garden is a covered

outdoor space made to look as much like a real rock face as possible. Admittedly, when I attempt to climb all the way over the top of this, my heart performs a few flutters.

While the walls may look like a modern art exhibit, they are in fact laid out strategically with colour-coded courses, graded on difficulty. If you're on the red course, for example, you must try to only use the red handholds. Most bouldering gyms rebuild their walls every two months so users don't tire of tackling the same courses.

It's easy to see why bouldering is addictive. It isn't an aerobic workout but it certainly challenges the whole body. It requires complete concentration and I realise after my hour-long session that I haven't given my daily worries a thought. It's also obvious why some people are ditching the repetitiveness of the gym. Bouldering has much more variety, training your muscles and honing



Rock and roll: A handful of chalk for grip, a sure foothold, and Helen is up and away



WHERE TO GO BOULDERING

Manchester

Rock Over Climbing

With walls ranging in height from three to 11 metres and even a professional competition wall, there's a whole centre dedicated to bouldering for you to explore.

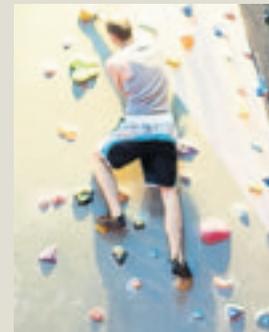
One session, £7.50 members, £9 non-members.
rockoverclimbing.co.uk

Brighton

Boulder Brighton

This indoor bouldering centre (below) gives a number and letter to indicate how hard the climb is and means you can track your progress.

One-off entry £8, monthly membership £44.
boulderbrighton.com



Swansea

Dynamic Rock

This old Victorian public hall boasts indoor and outdoor bouldering walls for all abilities. Walls are reset every three months.

Individual sessions from £6.
dynamicrock.co.uk

Edinburgh

Alien Rock

Scotland's first dedicated indoor climbing centre when it opened 20 years ago, the bouldering room has more than 30sq m of angled walls, from slabs through to an 8m-long roof.

Individual session from £8.20, monthly membership £52.
alienrock.co.uk

flexibility, plus it also gives you that mental challenge.

Unlike outdoor climbing, you don't need any kit, just shorts, T-shirt and £3 to hire the shoes (you can't go barefoot). And, of course, you won't be at the mercy of the Great British weather.

Single entry to Mile End Climbing Wall costs from £7.50 or £40 per month. Private lessons from £60. abcwalls.co.uk



Get a leg-up: Helen takes climbing advice from her instructor, Carlos