

FOR years I have wanted to go to Sydney for the Mardi Gras because I'm told they are crazy about Patsy over there and during the parade they even have floats dedicated solely to her. But I've always had to put off going because I suffer from a dodgy back and couldn't bear the thought of the long plane journey.

I will always have back problems because I was born with an extra vertebra, which obviously won't go away. I also chipped and cracked two vertebrae in the Seventies when I was doing my own stunts playing Purdey in the New Avengers.

So after years of suffering discomfort, I was delighted when I found the best way to aid recovery and keep things under control was by taking regular Pilates classes, which basically involves a series of exercises to help posture and tone muscles. Now, on the whole, I no longer suffer from back pain.

I started Pilates a little more than a year ago so it's a fairly recent discovery but one for which I am very grateful. It has certainly helped to strengthen my back and correct my body alignment.

Pilates is good for working on your muscle tone, flexibility and co-ordination. I try to do a class every week if I can, for about an hour. These are often done at home with a couple of friends and a teacher.

My early years as a model taught me the importance of good posture and deportment and I always make sure I hold my head up, keep my shoulders back and have a straight back.

In the past, I have never been rigid about exercise. Although I lead a very hectic life and am endlessly running up and down the four flights of stairs at home, I've always

THE shape

This week... JOANNA LUMLEY

Joanna Lumley, 55, is currently filming a new series of Absolutely Fabulous with Jennifer Saunders. But the actress, who lives in London with her husband, the conductor Stephen Barlow, is a lot healthier than her chain-smoking character, Patsy. Here, she explains how the exercise technique Pilates has helped to control her back pain

been a great believer in the power of positive thinking. I've never suffered from the cold in my life. In fact, I never get sick or need to go to the doctor.

I have been a vegetarian for 20 years. I will not eat meat or fish, in fact anything that has a face. I don't do fad diets but fortunately my weight rarely alters. I eat well but very little. Drinking plenty of water is very important and I try to drink at least a litre a day. I must admit I also enjoy a sneaky cigarette every now and then.

Experimenting with various alternative treatments is something I enjoy. I have tried reflexology, aromatherapy and yoga which are all extremely relaxing. Like Pilates,

they all offer a way to keep you fit and healthy without going to the doctor. There was a time when I thought having a massage was dreadfully indulgent. I always thought I didn't deserve it. Then I had my first detoxifying massage and now I'm an addict.

When I told Jennifer Saunders that the Sydney Mardi Gras had invited me to join them, she said: "What, to be a float?" and I told her: "No, darling, to be on a float."

But when the organisers sent me photos of the five floats full of Patsys I thought: "They all look so much better than I do, it will be hard to live up to."

Interview by ROBYN FOYSTER



Picture: Rex Features

WHY PILATES IS GOOD FOR YOUR BACK

PILATES is all the rage, with converts such as Madonna and Leonardo DiCaprio.

It is a simple exercise regime that, through a series of stretches, helps make you more supple, clears your mind and tones your muscles. It realigns the body by working on specific muscle groups and also helps good posture.

German-born circus performer Joseph Pilates first devised this form of exercise and stretching in the early 1900s to assist his dancers with their performance.

Each year, 22million people in the UK suffer from some sort of back pain and 120million working days are lost every year as a result.

Doctors often recommend Pilates to patients with back problems. Chiropractor Ade Sanni, from the Art of Health in London, says: "Pilates is especially good for strengthening the core stabilisers of your trunk and educating muscles to work properly."

POISED FOR ACTION: Pilates means Joanna can manage long-haul flights