

MyPKLIFE

CORE VALUES

From Stockholm via Sydney, **Joakim Valsinger** is now at home in Perthshire, where his pilates studio is in its 11th year. Ketsuda Phoutinane paid a visit to talk exercise and a sense of place.



"This place is special because of where it is."

The word "elegant" springs to mind as soon as you walk through the doors of Joakim Valsinger's Bälans Pilates Studio and Treatment Rooms.

With its handpicked art, natural wood floors, generous windows and the subtle scent of essential oils in the air, you could be forgiven for mistaking it for a luxury spa. It's awash with sunlight even on a grey, drizzly day.

However, this is no time for relaxation. Bälans (Swedish for "balance") is the passion project of its Swedish-born Australian owner and instructor, who cheerily informs me there's a workout to be done.

Pilates is a method of strengthening core muscles, either on a mat or with the many bits of kit Joakim has curated at Bälans (he loves a nice bit of kit). As he excitedly familiarises me with mat work, the ballet barre, reformer machine, trapeze table and other specialist equipment, Joakim, 46, shares the journey which brought him first to pilates and then to Perthshire.

Like many beginners to exercise, he just wanted to look good. Unlike most newcomers, however, he was a 25-year-old Australian Territorial Army soldier in a commando unit within the special forces.

Yet despite this tough background Joakim admits his first pilates class was an "ego crushing" experience. Our conversation is awash with suggestions like "Let's do some obliques!" and corrections to my form as I attempt hanging pull-ups on a trapeze table, so I can quite understand where he's coming from . . .

"There were little old ladies around me and I was shaking," Joakim says. "It made me understand there's so much more to it than being harder, faster, stronger, which is what I had experienced previously.

"In Pilates less is often more. Just do a little bit less in a slightly different way and suddenly," – he groans – "the core pain hits you, but you're actually doing a much smaller movement."

The military took him across the world from Egypt to Switzerland in the years that followed. He even dabbled in showbiz as an extra on two films, including a three-month stint in Morocco on Captain Corelli's Mandolin with Nicolas Cage.

It was a season lifeguarding in Cornwall that led him to pilates teacher training in 2001. It was only four relatively short years later that he opened Bälans in 2005.

More than 10 years later, Joakim has expanded the studio to its current size with a team of four and lives nearby with his wife Louise, toddler daughter, Mariella, and son, Alben, born last November.

I wonder what's kept him in Perth for so long, given the international aspect of his earlier life?



"I'm a world citizen because I got moved around so much as a kid," he explains. "I think that was a positive for me, but equally, even if I can make myself welcome anywhere in the world, I don't feel that I really have roots anywhere."

He grins. "Perthshire is a nice place to have put down roots."

World citizenship notwithstanding, Joakim says he couldn't replicate Bälans anywhere else. The community spirit of the area, for one, is irreplaceable, he believes.

"This place is special because of where it is," he says.

There are still regulars from his first class on a Wednesday night in 2005. His clients are most often women, although Bälans clientele also includes children, military veterans with missing limbs, athletes and people with mobility problems or those rehabilitating from injury.

Together they form a loyal community. His clients joined in during painting parties before Joakim moved into the present studio just two weeks before his wedding. Armed with pizza and friends, the studio was finished two painting parties later.

On another occasion Joakim shared his frustrations on Facebook about the unglamorous task of replacing floorboards. And, just as before, his community showed up to help.

"People rocked up on Saturday morning to help us, or just with bottles of wine to cheer us on! The number of people that came in and spent time for free on the studio was just . . . I was absolutely amazed by the energy with which people gave their assistance."

Another integral feature is space, both in the studios as well as in Perthshire. The apparatus studio, which Joakim calls the "jewel in the crown" of Bälans, includes four reformer machines and the trapeze table.



Classes take place in calming surroundings.



"One of the things I love most about Perthshire is that the skies are big in the way they are in Australia."

Joakim is training five new instructors to teach all aspects of the equipment this spring.

Moreover, hill walks at six in the morning have become a fixture of his life here.

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The walks themselves are infused with history, a detail Joakim is proud to share. His home is set in the shadow of Dunsinane Hill, a location central to the prophecy in Macbeth.

"That's my closest hill to go walking and it's mentioned in Shakespeare. You're walking in a historical place that's been internationally known for 400 years. An old house in Sydney is 100-years-old!"

Isn't he homesick for Australia after all these years, or at least nostalgic for the weather? It's a topic of conversation often revisited with his father, who is based in rural Victoria – most memorably on a recent walk.

"I was walking up this hill as I was talking

to my dad on the phone, and came up above the clouds. It's called an inverted cloud – the top of the mountain pokes up above it. It's like being on an aeroplane.

"Those sorts of moments, you just go, 'Right, that's why I live here!'"

Most meaningfully, these walks illustrate the best of Perthshire. Joakim recalls sitting on a hill behind his house with his dog one winter when two fighter jets from Leuchars flew by in tandem.

"One was just twisting, twisting, twisting. Clearly some pilot having a jolly. I just thought, how many people are sitting watching this? What a stunning moment.

"You have to appreciate what the place is and see the beauty in the moment."

With his body and mind equally fulfilled by work, environment and loyal friends and clients, it seems Joakim really has found the perfect balance.

www.balanspilates.com



A group of pilates pupils are put through their paces.