

London's liquid assets

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IN the 1920s and 30s, many open-air pools were built in Britain, and in London alone there were 64 lidos.

These large, mostly art-deco pools with their spacious surrounds for sunbathing and socialising were hugely popular. Then in the 1960s indoor pools started to be built, and people began going on overseas holidays and became used to swimming in warmer water.

The lidos no longer made economic sense and many were closed. Today there are just 11 left in London. On sunny summer days these pools are packed with people of all ages, but the rest of the year it's only the eccentric cold-water swimmers, exhilarated by a cool dip, who keep these pools open.

Brockwell Lido: It's early May and a few people are swimming up and down the turquoise-coloured 50m pool. Surrounded by the low red-bricked grade II listed art-deco building, this is a hidden haven in the middle of London.

The serenity is momentarily upset by the involuntary scream I emit when I get into the water, which is only 15C. But what consoles me, as I bash down the pool as fast as I can, is the thought of the hot cup of coffee and eggs florentine I'm going to order from the Lido Cafe afterwards. This poolside eatery has excellent food and reasonable prices.

Known as Brixton Beach, Brockwell Lido is open from April to October. I'm told by a man who is also swimming here for the first time today, but is considerably more stoic than me, that it was once the haunt of two well-known British cabinet secretaries, one of whom had just left and the other recently come into office, and they used to swim up and down discussing how to rein in the prime minister. Brockwell Lido, Brockwell Park, Dulwich Road, London. More: + 44 20 7274 3088; [fusion-lifestyle.com/centres/Brockwell Lido](http://fusion-lifestyle.com/centres/Brockwell_Lido) ([http://fusion-lifestyle.com/centres/Brockwell Lido](http://fusion-lifestyle.com/centres/Brockwell_Lido)).

Tooting Bec Lido: This is the largest open-air pool in England, 90m long and 30m wide. It opened on July 28, 1906, when lifeguard Alfred French took the first dive. Despite the presence of dignitaries and ladies, hundreds of small boys stripped naked and followed him into the water. Apart from routine maintenance, the pool has remained open every day since, even during wartime.

The South London Swimming Club was also founded in 1906. This organisation manages the lido during the winter months, when it's not open to the public. My school friend Katy English is a member but admits she isn't really considered an all-year-round swimmer as during the past two winters there have been periods when she was unable to drive there because of the thick snow.



At Serpentine Lido, the Serpentine Swimming Club's annual Christmas race is a 100-yard (91.5m) dash in water temperatures of 4C or less Source: Supplied

My introduction to Tooting Bec Lido was in early June last year. I'd arrived on the long-haul flight from Sydney early that morning and Katy suggested a swim could help my jetlag. Rather worryingly, I noticed she was wearing the same thick pink cardigan that she had when she came camping with my partner and me at Barrington Tops and it snowed.

With a nip in the air it wasn't a day most people in London would consider swimming, but after the initial shock of the water temperature I was enchanted by this vast expanse of water and its magnificent surrounds.

Janet Smith, the author of *Liquid Assets*, about Britain's lidos, is a regular swimmer here and claims it is the only place in London she knows where everyone smiles. It's impossible not to when you see this huge pool presided over by four lifeguards, dressed in red and yellow, sitting on high chairs. Then there's the two rows of changing cubicles with brightly painted doors that are so evocative of the English seaside. Tooting Bec Lido, Tooting Bec Road, London. More: + 44 20 8871 7198.

Serpentine Lido, Hyde Park: But even Tooting Bec's million gallons of H₂O can't entice people who don't like swimming in chlorinated water and for them the Serpentine Lido in Hyde Park is the answer. This is best known for its annual Christmas Day race in which members of the Serpentine Swimming Club do a 100-yard (91.5m) dash in water temperatures of 4C or less. (It makes May's 15C seem balmy.)

The Serpentine Lake was created in 1730 when the Westbourne River, a tributary of the Thames, was dammed. The lido is a cornered-off area of the freshwater lake. It's also London's longest stretch of water for swimming, which makes it an ideal venue for serious swimming training, including preparation for next year's Olympic Games.

For me it's surreal to be swimming here with the ducks or moorhens and, nearby, on the main part of the lake, people floating past in paddleboats.

The Serpentine Lido is another secluded spot in the heart of London. There are loungers for sunbathing and a children's playground as well as a paddling pool. Then there is the lure of the Lido Cafe Bar immediately next door, which offers everything from coffee and cakes to seriously delicious meals. The Serpentine Lido, Hyde Park, London. More: + 44 20 7706 3422.

Hampstead Heath Ponds: These are long-standing swimming holes for Londoners. Nestled in the heath's 324ha expanse of grass and woodlands, a series of ponds were built in the late 17th and early 18th centuries originally as reservoirs. Three of these are used for swimming -- Hampstead Mixed Bathing Pond, Highgate Men's Bathing Pond and Kenwood Ladies Bathing Pond.

At the entrance to Kenwood Ladies Pond a sign on the gate says Women Only. A narrow path leads down to the bathing pond hidden in the trees. A young female lifeguard stands on the concrete platform and an old timber dinghy floats in the water beside her. This pond is for competent swimmers only. Children under eight are not allowed and under-16s need to pass a swimming test and must be accompanied by an adult.

Now acclimatised to cold water, it's hard to believe I'm in London as I happily float along, surveying the bulrushes, reeds and a moorhen's nest perched on top of one of the white buoyancy rings. I can't help but smile at the joy of being in yet another oasis in the heart of one of the world's busiest cities. Kenwood Ladies Bathing Pond, Hampstead Heath off Millfield Lane. More: + 44 20 7332 3773.

Checklist

Other London lidos include Parliament Hill Lido on the edge of Hampstead Heath; Oasis Sports Centre, a 27.5m outdoor heated pool near Covent Garden; and London Fields Lido in the East End, open year round, with a 50m heated outdoor pool.