

Bathing beauties

The French capital reveals a distinctive aquatic culture

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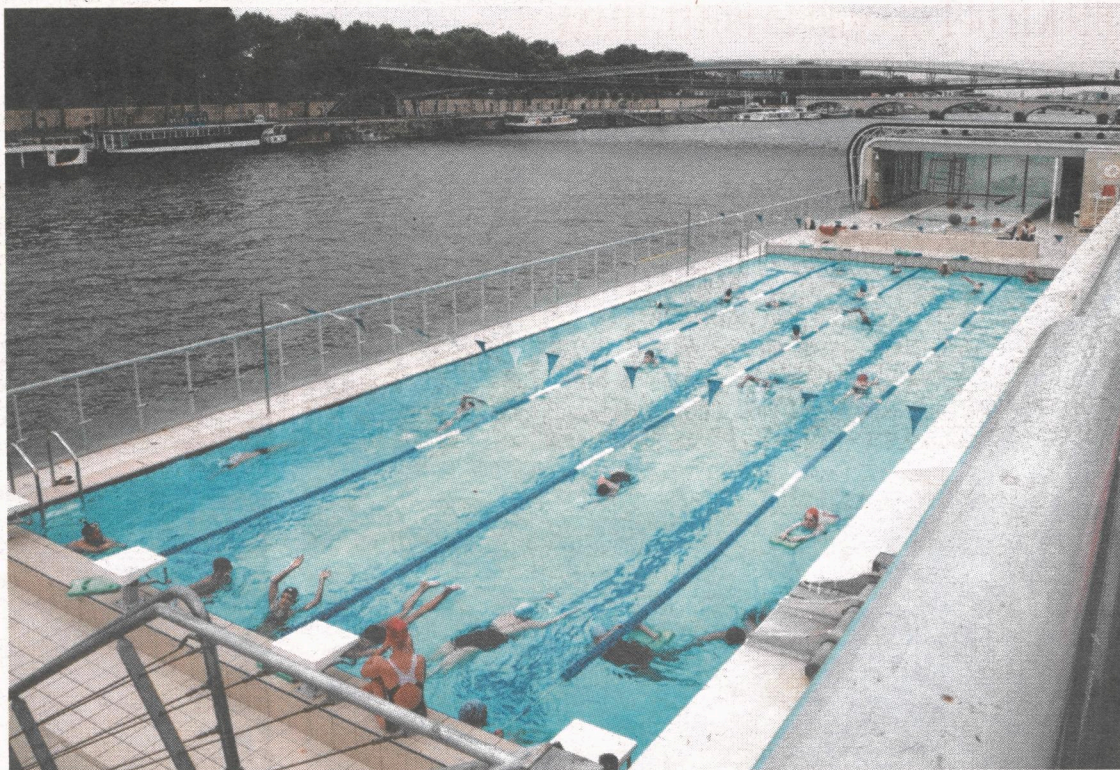
BY the time I visit my sixth pool in Paris I am starting to get the knack of the "circuit of the bather", the strict process I must follow before diving in. Hygiene is a big focus at the French capital's public pools, where removing shoes before entering change rooms, feet washing and pre-swim showering are obligatory.

Caps or *bonnets du bain* are also compulsory even at the Roger Le Gall Pool in the 12th arrondissement where the Nudist Association of Paris offers nude swimming two nights a week. Other rules include no board shorts or trunks for men, with only Speedo-style swimmers allowed and, like the roads, lap swimmers need to stick to the right-hand side of the lane. With a choice of 38 piscines as pools are known in French, I dip into three on the Left Bank and three on the Right.

I am channelling French actor Juliet Binoche in the 1993 movie *Three Colours Blue* when I dive into the Pontoise Pool in the Latin Quarter. It is my second attempt to swim at this heritage-listed venue just off the Boulevard St Germain between the Seine and the Sorbonne. On my first visit around 3pm it is closed. As I find out, pools in Paris have irregular opening hours so it's important to check the daily schedule on the City of Paris website before heading out for a swim. They can also get very crowded, so the Paris Piscines app is useful for real-time updates on the number of people at each place.

When I finally get to swim at the Pontoise Pool, I switch to backstroke so I can gaze at the turquoise change cubicles and decorative mosaics on two galleries high above the 33m, six-lane pool. Since it opened in 1934, the centre's art deco design has been a popular backdrop for fashion shoots, books and films, including Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours Blue*, in which Binoche seeks relief from her grief in the pool. In 1936, Jacques Cousteau tested his first deep-sea diving suit here, and more recently it was the setting for a graphic novel, *A Taste of Chlorine*, in which a young man falls in love with a fellow swimmer. At 19 Rue de Pontoise, the Lucien Pollet-designed centre is open until midnight at least one night during the summer, and is a short walk from Maubert-Mutualite Metro.

Another historic Left Bank pool is the 90-year-old De



Clockwise from top: The Josephine Baker Pool on a barge by the Seine; Andrew "Boy" Charlton won gold at the Georges Vallery Pool; the Suzanne Berlioux Pool is located under the Forum des Halles

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la Butte aux Cailles in the 13th arrondissement, scheduled to reopen on July 1 after renovations. In the area between Place d'Italie and the Chinatown district, it was the first centre designed so that bathers had to pass through showers and a foot-bath before entering the water. The complex's 33m indoor pool and two smaller outdoor options, added in the 1970s, used to be filled with artesian water discovered in the area in 1886. On the Saturday afternoon we visit, the indoor pool is busy with swimmers attempting all manner of strokes. While my husband launches into the 28C water to test out his newly acquired cap, I admire architect Louis Bonnier's striking art nouveau design. In between seven concrete arches that curve above us are splashes of crimson and yellow, with newer tiled areas in geometric shapes in orange, yellow and white. The pool is at 5 Place Paul Verlaine, a 10-minute walk from Metro Corvisart or Place d'Italie.

Also in the 13th arrondissement is the newer Josephine Baker Pool, moored on a barge at the Quai Francois Mauriac near the Francois Mitterrand Library and across the river from Bercy Park. On the afternoon I visit young women in bikinis parade around the water's edge in the spirit of the pool's namesake, famous for her sensual performances in Paris in the 1920s and 30s. I join the serious swimmers attempting to lap up and down the four busy 25m lanes, filled with treated water from the river.

The modular-shaped, clear roof is open and I realise I'm as close as I'll get to swimming in the Seine. After my dip I recline on the spacious timber sundeck above the pool and watch the barges go by near the Simone de Beauvoir footbridge. The centre also has a smaller children's pool and from July 20 to August 17 is the centrepiece of the Port de la Gare section of Paris Plages, the annual man-made beach project along the Seine. The closest Metro is the Quai de la Gare.

On the Right Bank in the 20th arrondissement is the Georges Vallery Pool, the venue for the 1924 Olympic Games where champion Australian swimmer Andrew "Boy" Charlton won gold in the 1500m freestyle and Johnny Weissmuller (aka Tarzan) broke a world record in the 100m. Near the multicultural Belleville area where Edith Piaf was born, the 90-year-old stadium was renovated in 1989 and 2004, and continues to host top-level swimming meets. One of only six 50m pools in Paris, the complex includes a smaller children's pool, seating for 1500 spectators and a retractable roof that is peeled back in summer to create open-air swimming. As I lap up and down, I wonder whether Christine Lagarde, French head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and junior water ballet champion, has tested the pool's 3m deep synchronised swimming pit. Named after France's 1948 Olympic bronze medal-winning backstroke, the pool is at 148 Avenue Gambetta, a short walk from the art deco Porte des Lilas Metro.

In the 10th arrondissement between Gare de l'Est, one of the city's main railway stations, and the Canal St Martin, is Chateau-Landon, the oldest pool in Paris.

In 1936, Jacques Cousteau tested his first deep-sea diving suit here

Commissioned by the French Society of Water Gymnastics, it opened in 1882 and was originally fed with water heated by industry mills in nearby de la Villette. The renovated complex includes a 25m, four-lane pool and a 10m x 6m version. When I immerse myself in the intimate space I feel as if I'm on an ocean liner with two levels of curved balconies like promenade decks above the largely white-coloured aquatic space. Other features include a floor-to-ceiling window, skylights, individual change cubicles with doors painted in pink, deep blue and yellow, and the original foundation stone which is on display in the foyer area. At 31 Rue du Chateau-Landon, the closest Metro is Louis Blanc.

In the bowels of the Forum des Halles not far from the Louvre and the Pompidou Centre is the Suzanne Berlioux Pool. Despite its underground location, this centre has a tropical look with an artificial beach, deck chairs and palm tree on one side of the 50m pool, and large windows and a rainforest-like garden on the other side. Named after the French coach who produced gold-medal-winning backstrokers from the 1940s to the 60s, when I visit at midday the deck chairs are empty, with patrons focussed on exercising. Five lanes are allocated to different levels of swimming, there's a "fun and splash" section and an area for an aqua-biking class. Despite more than eight to each lane, the swimmers are considerate, especially when I absentmindedly launch off on the left side of the lane. At 10 Place de la Rotonde on level three of the shopping centre, the most convenient Metro is Les Halles.

Watch out for the rebuilt Molitor Pool featured in the 2013 film, *The Life of Pi*, which is due to reopen mid-year. Famous as the venue for the 1946 launch of the first bikini, the new centre will include a 46m outdoor pool and a 33m indoor pool, a spa and hotel. In the 16th arrondissement near the Bois de Boulogne and the Roland Garros Tennis Centre, it is at 4 Rue Nungesser et Coli, close to Metro Porte d'Auteuil.

Checklist

The pools section of the City of Paris website and the Paris Piscines app have details of all 38 venues, including location, opening hours, entrance fees, disability access, change rooms, water temperature and temporary closures. More: paris.fr; piscine.equipement.paris.fr.

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