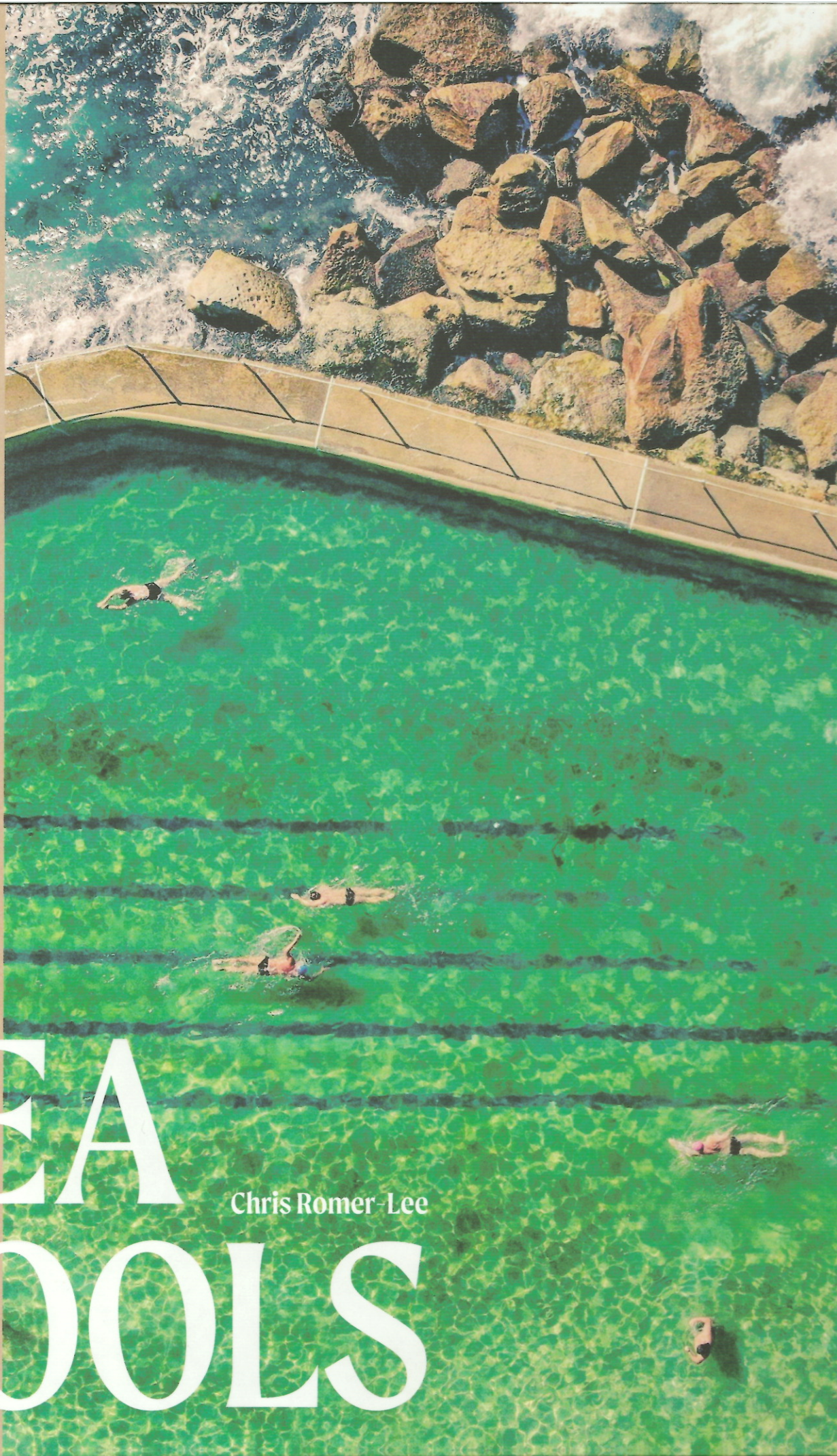


66 saltwater
sanctuaries
from around
the world



SEA POOLS

Chris Romer-Lee

Saltwater sanctuaries

Therese
Spruhan

I lean over the blue and yellow chequerboard deck that stands high above Wylie's Baths, watching waves crash on to the edge and pour white water into the pool. It's almost high tide, and as the sets keep coming the pool overflows, spilling water over the adjoining sandstone like delicate threads of lace. Then there's a break between sets and the water is still for a minute or two. Swimmers in red, blue and yellow caps settle into a rhythm as they lap up and down the pool. Others in snorkels and masks move in circles, their eyes on something they've spotted underneath – sea stars, blackfish or perhaps an octopus hiding in one of the rocky crevices on the natural bottom of the pool.

When the sets start rolling in again, I try to imagine my water-loving mother and her sister at their swimming lessons at the pool 30 years after Henry Wylie excavated it out of the rock platform in 1907. I picture the two freckle-faced girls, enthusiastically following instructions from their teacher, Olympic silver medallist and daughter of Henry, Mina Wylie, strands of their dark-pigtailed hair hanging out of their old-fashioned caps.

My relationship with this sea pool became close in the long winter of 2021. As Covid numbers rose and more and more people became sick, I was grateful to find relief plunging into the saltwater in this magnificent pool at Coogee on the edge of the Sydney coast. I also got a taste for swimming in the colder months and after half an hour of watching silver bream swim across my path and gazing at mother-of-pearl shells, I'd emerge feeling euphoric, like I'd shed a skin and could begin anew again. When I dried off on the concrete beneath the timber deck I'd say: 'Wasn't that sensational?' In between sighs, I'd say it repeatedly to my niece, Mary, who often swam with me, or to my friend Michelle Wheeler, who also discovered Wylie's and winter swimming in lockdown.

'It's magical swimming in a sea pool like Wylie's,' says Michelle, 'but I think you have to go with

someone as it's really nice to share how wonderful you feel when you get out.' Michelle likens swimming at Wylie's to an out-of-body experience. 'It sounds a bit crazy, but you don't think about anything except the context that you are in – the beautiful fish you are seeing or that wave that's pounding in and pushing you off course.'

Since that winter, I've returned often to Wylie's, on my own or with Mary or Michelle, and each time I've visited I've noticed something new; something that makes up the character of this pool: the golden banksias that line the steps leading to the striped façade; the sculpture of Mina Wylie, perched above the pool like a sea goddess; Boots, the caretaker's black and white cat, lying in a sunny spot below Mina's feet; and Matthew Martin, the pool's unofficial resident artist, sketching the textures in the sandstone, a bolt in a wooden post, a swimmer mid-stroke.

On the deck after a winter dip, I've rejoiced in the warmth of the sun, and heard stories about the days when Wylie's had a diving tower and slide. I've experienced the calm of low tide and the thrill of standing on the south-west corner when a big swell smashes into the edge, rises and tumbles over me like a waterfall. I've also noticed the small details in and around the pool – the black and white periwinkles and orange seaweed that cling to the edge, and how lovely it is to dive into the water as it ripples out in circles like a kaleidoscope of emerald and blue.

'When you swim in a chlorine pool it's pretty much the same each day,' says Michelle. 'But at Wylie's it's different each time you go because the ocean changes every day. You feel transformed when you get out and I always want to say: "Wow, that was fab!"'

Transformed is a big word, a big concept – making a marked change in form, nature or appearance. But that's exactly what Lai Nguyen says happened to her at McIver's Ladies Baths, a women-only pool just north of Wylie's, built beneath a sandstone cliff in 1876.

'The spirit of McIver's transformed me from a quiet woman of colour to a sociable woman,' says Lai.

She first encountered the pool 10 years ago when a colleague suggested it would help her post-cancer recovery. At that first meeting she couldn't believe the joy she felt standing in the seawater and looking out at the glorious ocean view. The only problem was she couldn't swim. She signed up for lessons at a local aquatic centre but didn't make much progress until she switched to classes at McIver's. With that extra bit of care and individual attention, Lai's technique improved and one day she realized she was swimming.

'At 56 I could finally swim,' she says. 'What a wonderful feeling. The water was holding me up and I was enjoying it; the water was my friend, not my enemy. I was truly transformed in the beautiful seawater of the women's pool.'

Since then, she's become a regular at McIver's. Her transformation has continued, with fellow swimmers helping her with her English pronunciation, something she had struggled with since coming to Australia in 1985 as a refugee from Vietnam.

'These women who are busy volunteering at the pool made time for me, correcting my pronunciation and grammar, and explaining new vocabularies that were easy for me to remember,' says Lai. 'They treated me like one of their dear friends and I was inspired by their kindness. To me they are like the spirit of McIver's Ladies Baths.'

Lynne Spender says the kindness and friendship are not just one-way. 'Lai has become a friend to many and when Covid happened, she made us all masks. She's a wonderful cook, too, and often shares her delicious rice paper rolls with us.'

Friendship is something many people find when they go to sea pools at a similar time each day or through one of the numerous summer and winter swimming clubs – the Maroubra Seals, the Merewether Mackerels, the Bondi Icebergs, to name a few. The community element is what Margi

Gormly loves about swimming at Woonona Rock Pool, a 50m beauty opened in 1929 just south of Sydney on the New South Wales Illawarra coast.

'When you are surrounded by the ocean everyone is happy to have a conversation. All ages come to the pool and people look out for each other,' says Margi, who has been a regular for the past 22 years. She especially remembers the kindness of many of the women who kept watch on her son when he was a baby.

'One woman started it and then others did it too,' says Margi. 'They used to say, "We know what it's like to have a baby. It's no problem; go and do your laps." I'll always remember their kindness and arriving at the pool not feeling great and then diving in and being immediately lifted up.'

'And then there are those special days when we spot dolphins swimming with the surfers in the waves, and one time we watched a whale breach in the sea just outside the pool. Everyone got so excited,' Margi says. 'After we wondered if it really happened. Did we really experience something so wonderful?'

That powerful connection with nature keeps drawing me back to sea pools. I vividly remember the chance encounter I had with an eastern blue groper, the chunky ultramarine fish that starts life as a female and turns into a male. I had been about to get out of the water at Giles Baths, an almost natural rock pool at the northern end of Coogee Beach, when all of sudden one appeared in front of me. I spent the next 20 minutes swimming around the pool with him as if I was just another fish. When I got out, I couldn't take the smile off my face.

Artist Lizzie Buckmaster Dove says swimming at her local Coledale sea pool, a presence on the NSW Illawarra coast since 1921, is an essential part of how she maintains connection and balance.

'It's a space, literally for breathing and for finding my breath,' she says. 'And every time I walk across the beach, the rock platform and reach the pool, I'm wowed by its existence, its elemental nature, its

liminal qualities, in between the land and the sea.'

I have similar feelings of excitement when I meet a sea pool for the first time. A vivid memory is spotting the Art Deco pavilion of Newcastle's ocean baths, dating from around 1922, as I walked along the seafront. I'd read that the early designers had envisaged the pool being artistic and substantial and that's exactly what I found. The façade of the cream-coloured pavilion was decorated with diamond shapes and lines of colour in pink, purple, yellow and turquoise. When I walked through the entrance, I found an enormous pool separated into two by a timber walkway, and a huge concrete wall on the northern side with levelled seating where bodies lay in the sun.

The Newcastle Ocean Baths have been a favourite subject for artist James Willebrant; he started painting them in the early 1970s in his distinctive surrealist mixed with pop-art style. He says he's drawn to the beauty and faded glory of the Art Deco style and the structures in and around the pool.

'I love the sweeping perspectives, the angles, the whitewashed concrete starting blocks, and the wonderful stepped turquoise wall that's so distinctive to the baths, with its curve at one end,' says James. 'The pool is very nostalgic for me, and I have a real affection for it because I've known it for such a long time. I've used it physically to swim in and imaginatively in my paintings. I think it will always be with me in my work.'

Sea pools affect us, and they have the capacity to give us what we need: inspiration, a break from the world, a dose of saltwater, beauty – even love.

That's what Colleen Kelly found when she waggled school aged 12 and wandered into McIver's Ladies Baths, the same pool where Lai Nguyen's life was transformed. Inside she met a woman she calls Mrs C, who made space for her on the bench, gave her cake, wrapped her in a towel and rubbed her back.

'It was the first time I'd experienced love,' says Colleen, who grew up in children's homes. After that day, she went back each week until one night she was moved to another home far away from Coogee.

But she never forgot Mrs C and the pool. When she retired, she reconnected by becoming a volunteer and a regular swimmer there. She says Mrs C saved her life and that memory of her helped her many times during difficult periods. And now when she swims in the pool, she says it always gives her a hug.

'It holds me, and I feel that lovely, gentle rocking motion and it takes me back to my original meeting with Mrs C and our beloved women's pool.'

On 21 June, I return to Wylie's just before sunrise for the winter solstice. Above the pool where my mother and aunty swam, the sky is resplendent in pink, purple and navy blue. Then it becomes a mix of apricot, watermelon and finally a brilliant orange and yellow. When I dive in, the colours of the sunrise reflect in the water, and I feel like I've been transported to paradise. Groups of friends hold hands and leap in, others drift around the water and float. 'Beautiful,' I say over and over again as gentle waves wash in pouring champagne bubbles over my head.



There is a Sydney swimmer, writer and author. In 2019, her first book, The Memory Pool: Australian Stories of Summer, Sun and Swimming was published by NewSouth, and in 2021, her writing was featured in The Women's Pool. She writes about pools on her blog, Swimming Pool Stories and posts photos on Instagram @swimmingpoolstories.