

A person in a black swimsuit and blue swim cap stands in a calm lake at sunset. The water reflects the golden light of the setting sun. The scene is framed by tall reeds in the foreground. The sky is a mix of blue and orange.

SWIMMING WILD IN SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

OVER 100 OF THE BEST OUTDOOR SWIMMING
SPOTS IN LONDON, THE HOME COUNTIES
AND THE ISLE OF WIGHT

NATASHA SONES

SWIMMING WILD IN SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

OVER 100 OF THE BEST OUTDOOR SWIMMING
SPOTS IN LONDON, THE HOME COUNTIES
AND THE ISLE OF WIGHT

NATASHA SONES



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com

Key

- 1 **London**
- 2 **Buckinghamshire**
- 3 **Oxfordshire**
- 4 **Berkshire**
- 5 **Hampshire**
- 6 **Isle of Wight**
- 7 **West Sussex**
- 8 **East Sussex**
- 9 **Kent**
- 10 **Surrey**



E n g l i s h C h a n n e l



Introduction	ix
Access rights and wild swimming in England	x
How to get started	xi
Equipment	xv
Safety – river swimming	xix
Safety – swimming in lakes	xx
Safety – sea swimming	xx
Being environmentally thoughtful	xxiv

1 London 1

2 Buckinghamshire 27

3 Oxfordshire 45

4 Berkshire 59

5 Hampshire 73

6 Isle of Wight 91

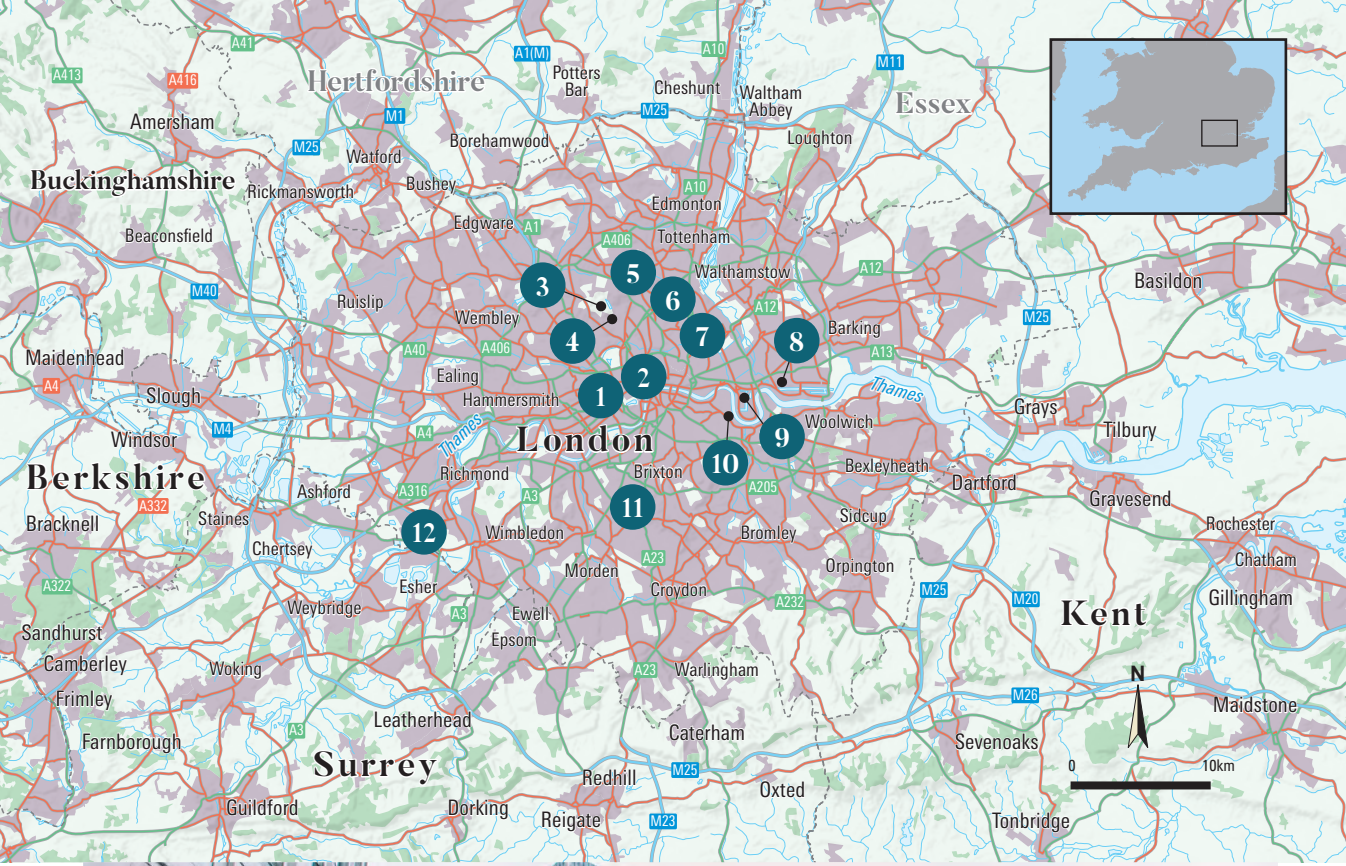
7 West Sussex 117

8 East Sussex 133

9 Kent 149

10 Surrey 173

Appendix	198
Acknowledgements	199
The swim spots: Natasha's top fives	200
Index	202



- 1 Serpentine Lido
- 2 Oasis Sports Centre
- 3 Hampstead Heath Ponds
- 4 Parliament Hill Lido
- 5 Park Road Lido
- 6 West Reservoir
- 7 London Fields Lido
- 8 London Royal Docks
- 9 Canary Wharf
- 10 Greenland Dock
- 11 Tooting Bec Lido
- 12 Hampton Pool

LONDON

Opposite Canary Wharf, London © VIMA Photography
Overleaf Highgate Men's Pond, Hampstead Heath © The City of London Corporation







Serpentine Lido

The Serpentine Lido is an iconic venue for open water swimming right in the middle of London. In the heart of the urban city is the beautiful green space of Hyde Park, an area of around 350 acres. In the centre of this thriving park is the Serpentine, a 850-by-160-metre purpose-built lake – the Serpentine Lido is a marked 100-by-30-metre section of this lake. The rest of the lake is reserved for boating and the local wildlife.

One of the oldest swimming clubs in Britain, the famous Serpentine Swimming Club was formed in 1864, with its members enjoying the water in Hyde Park. The Serpentine Lido has been a popular choice since the general public started swimming here in 1930. Today, the club's swimmers can swim in the Serpentine every morning, before public swimming opens. They also host a well-known race on Christmas Day. The lido hosts Swim Serpentine – a swimming event that over 6,000 people take part in annually. You can also hire boats on the lake throughout the year.

THE SWIM

The water is not chlorinated, so it is lovely, fresh and cool. There is plenty of space for a dip, despite the amount of people who can be there. There are deeper and shallower waters so swimmers can choose a depth that suits them best. The lake has sloping sides, so no diving is permitted. The lido is open at weekends from mid-May, and every day between June and mid-September. Either pay when you get there or book online at www.royalparksof.org.uk/visit/parks/hyde-park/serpentine-lido

There is a terraced area at the lido which is accessible at no cost for everyone to enjoy throughout the summer months. There is play equipment in-situ at the terrace garden plus free paddling facilities at the nearby Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain. Loungers are available to hire at the lido beachhead.

Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain. Loungers are available to hire at the lido beachhead.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION lake **MAXIMUM DEPTH 2m**
LENGTH (JUST LIDO) 100m **WIDTH (JUST LIDO) 30m** **ELEVATION 15m** **ACCESS public transport and parking nearby** **ENTRY jetty and steps**
GOOD FOR a swim in the middle of a Royal Park
LOCAL GROUPS Serpentine Swimming Club; London Bluetits **LOCATION 51.5047, -0.1696**
AVOID swimming beyond the buoy boundary



Getting there

Hyde Park is in Westminster, Central London. The closest mainline/overground train station is London Paddington; the closest Tube station is Knightsbridge. There are also many options for getting to the park by bus. There are two public car parks at Hyde Park, both accessed from West Carriage Drive. www.royalparksof.org.uk

There are lots of marked cycleways in and around the park, with several cycle hire points around the park. Take advantage of one of the Boris Bikes (Santander Cycles) conveniently stationed nearby.

Access

Hyde Park itself has flat, surfaced paths with undulating grassy ground off the paths. Entry to the lido is only permitted from the manned entrance gate adjacent to the pavilion. There's a jetty then steps to get into the water.

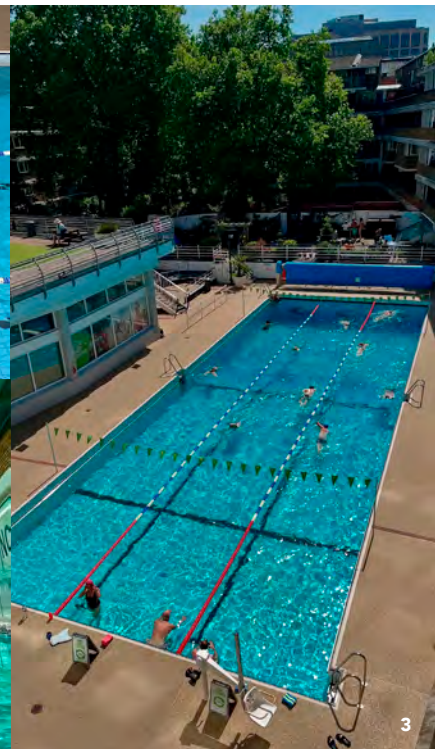
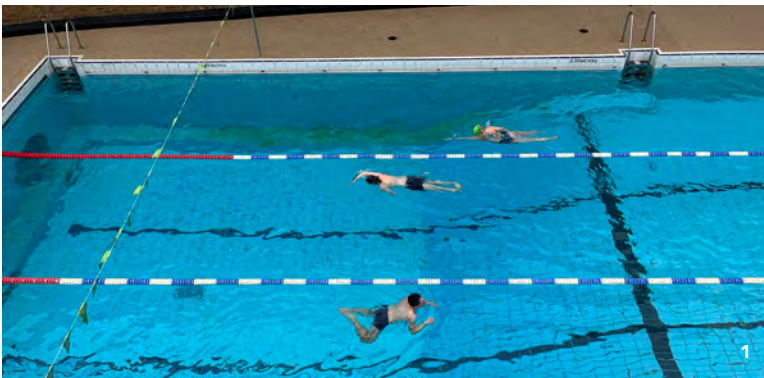
Refreshments

- » The **Serpentine Lido Cafe** is licensed, has waterside tables and is the ideal place to enjoy a snack, meal or a glass of wine.
- » **Serpentine Bar & Kitchen** is also licensed; it is situated next to the lake and has a good variety of food, including vegan options, to enjoy.
- » **The Lodge Cafe** at Hyde Park Corner offers freshly prepared food, from baguettes and salads to lasagna and quiches.
- » There are multiple ice cream vans in the park.

Oasis Sports Centre

One of Central London's best-kept secrets, at Oasis Sports Centre you can swim all year round in an outdoor heated swimming pool. This hidden oasis, located in the heart of the West End, has a small sauna overlooking it, as well as patio areas, a sunbathing deck to relax on, an indoor pool and gym.

The water is heated to a warm 25.5 °C, and it is the perfect place to escape for a dip amongst the bustle of the city. The outdoor pool has recently had a major upgrade, including a full redecoration of the poolside and surroundings. Lifeguards keep the swim safe and there are tables inside for a chat with friends afterwards.



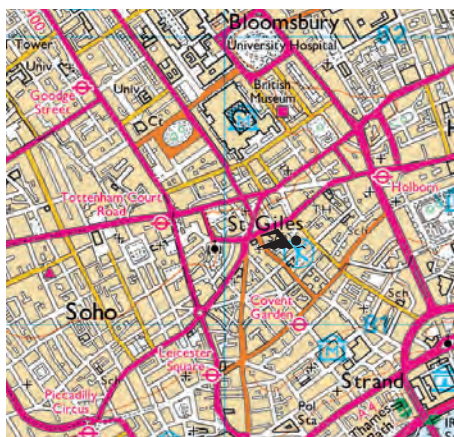
THE SWIM

Swim in one of the three lanes, following the clockwise or anti clockwise paths indicated. There are separate male and female changing areas indoors, plus a small outdoor change area that has showers and changing cubicles.

Walk-in sessions may be available on the day but it's best to book your session in advance. www.better.org.uk

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION **heated lido** MAXIMUM DEPTH **3.5m**
 LENGTH **27.5m** WIDTH **10m** ACCESS **public**
 transport nearby ENTRY **ladder** GOOD FOR
 swimming in a heated pool in buzzing Theatreland
 LOCAL GROUP **London Bluetits** LOCATION
51.5158, -0.1258



Getting there

Oasis Sports Centre is in Holborn, Central London. Arriving by public transport is your best bet – the nearest Tube stations are Tottenham Court Road and Covent Garden.

Access

There are some cycle racks at the lido. There are metal ladders to get into the pool.

Refreshments

- » There are some good food options very close to the lido including the hamburger restaurant **Byron** and **Ben's Traditional Fish & Chips**.
- » **The Craft Beer Co. Covent Garden** is right next door if you need a refreshing drink.

Hampstead Heath Ponds

Hampstead Heath is home to some of the best outdoor swimming spots in a unique setting in London, including three natural bathing ponds and one 60-metre lido (see page 12). A dip in the ponds is a wonderful experience which thousands of Londoners and visitors alike enjoy each year. On sunny days, hundreds of dippers visit to escape the heat, and even in the depths of winter people can be found swimming amongst the ice.

The ponds were regulated for swimming in the late 19th century. Men swam in what is now the Hampstead Mixed Pond and women were allowed to bathe there just one day a week. The Kenwood Ladies' Pond opened in the 1920s. To get a feeling of the community here, watch *The Ponds*, a feature-length documentary which follows the swimming and swimmers in all three ponds.

Children aged eight to 15 years can swim in all the ponds, as long as they are accompanied by an adult (one adult can supervise a maximum of two children). Note that all the ponds are for strong swimmers only and children will be asked to complete a swim competency test on their first visit. There are tethered life rings for swimmers to rest on while swimming in the ponds.

All the ponds are lifeguarded. There are changing rooms, showers and toilets at all the ponds. There are no lockers at the bathing ponds – valuables are left at your own risk.

The Highgate Men's Pond and Kenwood Ladies' Pond are open all year; Hampstead Mixed Pond is open from April until October. Information and bookings at: cityoflondon.gov.uk/hampsteadheathswimming

Don't swim in the heath's non-swimming ponds. There are underwater hazards in them and no lifeguards.

HIGHGATE MEN'S POND

Highgate Men's Pond, or the Men's Pond as it is known, is a former reservoir on the eastern side of Hampstead Heath. The largest of the three swimming ponds, it is also the only one which boasts a diving board.

It is popular with men from all over, as well as nearby residents. There is a set of regular visitors here who have created a sub-group called – rather tongue-in-cheek given their gender – the East German Ladies' Swimming Team, named after the most successful (and most controversial) Olympic swimming team. They meet regularly for a swim.

The pond is the location for the famous Christmas Day swim, when women are also allowed to swim.

The Men's Pond is perfect for feeling totally in harmony with nature, surrounded by wilderness. Guys typically describe it as one of the best wild swims they have ever had – more of an experience than just a swim, especially swimming with other like-minded men. One of the aspects that many pond swimmers feel proud about is the diversity – of ages, background, sexuality and religion.

KENWOOD LADIES' POND

Kenwood Ladies' Pond is the only female-only wild swimming spot in the UK – it is surrounded by trees that enclose swimmers in green light and shield them from public view. This spring-fed pond became available for women after over 20 years of calls for a women-only pond on the heath. The lifeguards are also all female – the pond truly is a secluded place where women can just bathe in peace with other women. It feels amazing to swim underneath the towering tree canopies, surrounded by nature. The pond even has its own enclosed meadow, the Upper Meadow.

Formed in the mid 1980s, the Kenwood Ladies' Pond Association is a thousand-strong



1



2

3 Kenwood Ladies' Pond

voluntary organisation of women 'who care about the pond'. The group likes to wax poetic about the pond on their Facebook page, inspiring others to take a dip and embrace the water, whatever the weather.

On a freezing morning in January, I made my way to Hampstead Heath in the dark before sunrise. Watching dawn break over an icy pond was beautiful. Spotting some other hardy ladies wearing changing robes, I followed them to the entrance. After getting changed I eagerly and nervously went to the cold, deep pond. It was -5 °C outside, and the water temperature was just 2.5 °C. Gingerly lowering myself into the cold water via the metal steps, it was bracing and I swam briskly. I kept that swim short as it was very chilly, but it was so beautiful seeing bubbles on the surface of the water, surrounded by frosty trees and ice at the edges.

Being in the company of solely other women and no photography being allowed makes it feel like a real break from reality, a haven in the middle of the capital. The freezing temperatures in winter certainly don't put women off and there is a tangible sense of community here, making it the perfect place

to swim in friendly, female company, in natural water with vegetation and wildlife.

HAMPSTEAD MIXED POND

Hampstead Mixed Pond is for everyone – if you're a family looking to go swimming, then this is the best pond for you. It is the only swimming pond on the western (Hampstead) side of the heath, on the opposite side to the other two. Like the other ponds, it is suitable for competent swimmers only as it has deep water. There is a swimmers' group for the Mixed Pond that enables members to swim in the pond without a lifeguard in the winter months.

I first swam here in torrential rain on a Saturday in summer, expecting to be the only swimmer. To my surprise there were many people there at the same time.

In fact, swimming in the pond in the rain was magical – there were bubbles on the surface, and the raindrops looked like stars bouncing off the water. Diving off the jetty into the refreshing water felt amazing.





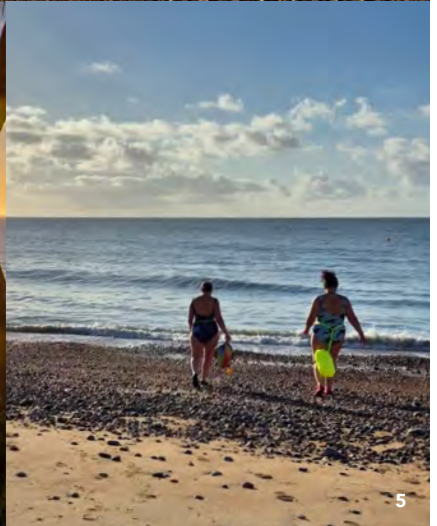
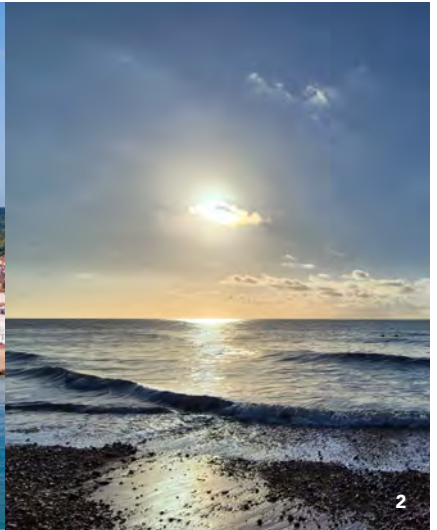
- 1 Brighton
- 2 Cuckmere Meanders
- 3 Birling Gap
- 4 Eastbourne
- 5 Pevensey Bay
- 6 Camber Sands

EAST SUSSEX

Opposite Coastguard cottages overlooking Cuckmere Haven, Cuckmere Meanders © Visit Eastbourne www.visiteastbourne.com
Overleaf Camber Sands © john_1/Shutterstock.com







Eastbourne's award-winning seafront boasts over five kilometres of shingle beaches. This charming seaside town has pretty beach huts that can be booked during the summer, and it boasts a grand pier which is 300 metres long. Opened in 1870, it has an impressive pavilion and beautiful extensive seafront gardens next to it.

There is an array of beaches here which are ideal for swimming and other water sports, from windsurfing to surfing and sailing. Eastbourne's main resort beach runs from the pier to the Martello Tower (the Wish Tower) and is the busiest section – this part of the beach is lifeguarded in the summer season (swim between the red and yellow flags) and is backed by the promenade which is lined with grand Victorian hotels.

South of the Wish Tower is a more secluded section of beach, the best place for a quiet swim, with shrub-covered slopes and the cliffs of Beachy Head providing the backdrop. North-east of the pier, meanwhile, is a long flat section of coast that is less scenic but has its own charms, particularly on a hot summer day.

I had a beautiful dip here with my friend Sarah, swimming early one morning in August. The water is a stunning blue-green and very refreshing. There is quite a brisk current flowing parallel to the shore, so be careful if swimming beyond the end of the groynes. Make sure to check tide times, sewage alerts and weather conditions. At low tide you will have to walk out quite a way before it is deep enough to swim.

DESCRIPTION **beach** ORIENTATION **south-east**
TIDES **best around high tide** ACCESS **public**
transport and car parking **nearby** ENTRY
moderately shelving, shingle beach GOOD FOR
sea swims near a pier LOCAL GROUPS **Eastbourne**
Sea Swimmers; Eastbourne Open Water Swimmers
DEFRA BATHING WATERS **water quality tested**
May–September LOCATION **main beach**
50.7636, 0.2888; southern section 50.7565,
0.2781; northern section 50.7703, 0.2972
AVOID **banging into the underwater part of the**
groynes at high tide



Getting there

Eastbourne is at the eastern end of the South Downs. The town has a train station which is a short walk from the beach; it also has good bus links with surrounding towns and villages.

Access

Eastbourne has chargeable on-street parking and several pay and display car parks.

There are steps down to the beach. The shingle beach gives way to a mix of sand and rock underwater, with the sea floor gently sloping away from shore.

Refreshments

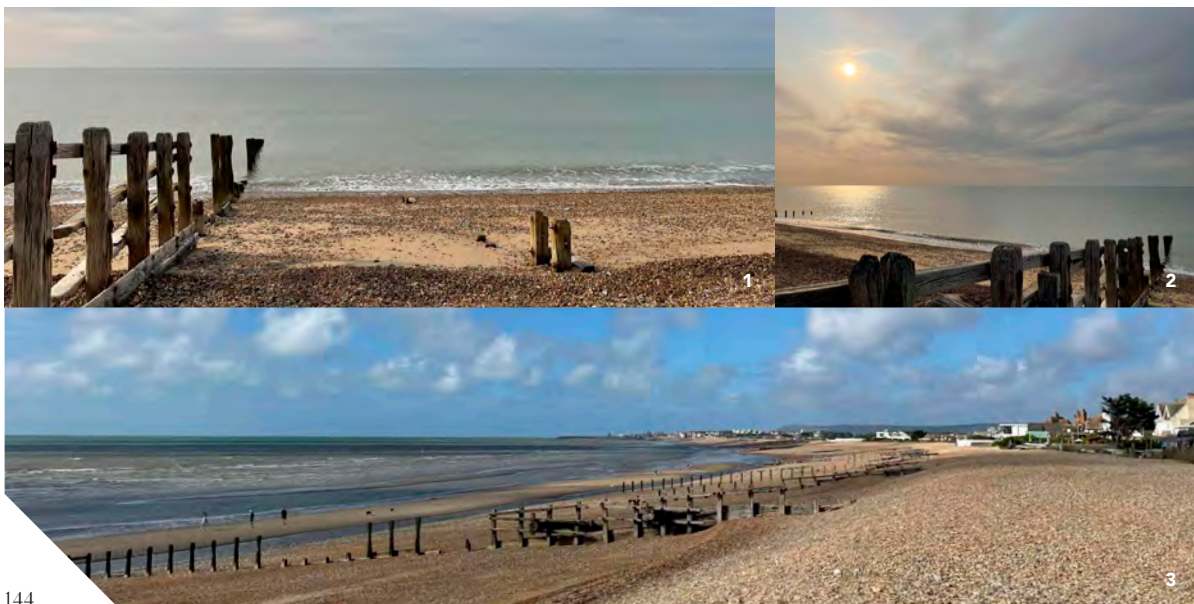
- » There are loads of options for food and drink around the area. Near the pier you can find nice seafront cafes and bars on the promenade.
- » At the Beachy Head end of the promenade, you'll find the **Holywell Tea Chalet** which has indoor and outdoor seating.
- » Get some fish and chips at **Qualisea** on Terminus Road.

Pevensey Bay

The old fishing village of Pevensey Bay is a real hidden gem on the South Coast. The area is famous for being the place where William the Conqueror landed in 1066 before the Battle of Hastings, although the landscape would have looked quite different then as there used to be a lagoon (which was used as a harbour) on what is now marshland, behind the shingle beach.

This pretty shingle beach is known for being quieter than other beaches on this coast – it is a great spot for those seeking a more peaceful seaside experience away from the crowded tourist hotspots, and it's great for enjoying views over the English Channel.

It's a perfect place for a stroll or simply to sit and watch the waves. The water is generally calm, and, on a clear day, the views are spectacular. A short walk away is the village of Pevensey, with its striking castle and Roman fort.



1-3 Pevensey Bay © Vicki Harris 4 Boats on the beach at Pevensey Bay © Ian Woolcock/Shutterstock.com

THE SWIM

The beach is mainly pebbly with patches of sand, especially when the tide goes out – low tide is a nice time to bring children to the beach. At high tide in the winter, the sea sometimes breaks through the sea defences.

It is best to come two hours either side of high tide to swim; low tide means you have a really long walk to the sea. It is best to stay land-side of the yellow buoys to avoid fishing boats, motor crafts and jet skis. Tow floats are recommended. The Pevensey Plungers swim every morning at 9 a.m., whatever the weather, meeting at Sea Road car park.

During the winter months the yellow buoys are taken in; instead look out for a swim buoy – named 'Buoy George' – placed by the Pevensey Plungers which can be seen from the beach. In winter the Environment Agency is often on the beach with diggers, restoring the sea defences. It's worth keeping your eyes peeled for them, but they are all super friendly and work around swimmers.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION beach **ORIENTATION** south-east
TIDES best at high tide **ACCESS** car park by the beach; public transport nearby **ENTRY** undulating stones and shingle **GOOD FOR** calm sea swims **LOCAL GROUPS** Pevensey Plungers; Hastings & St Leonards Sea Swimming Group; Bexhill Mermaids; Trunks and Hunks **DEFRA BATHING WATERS** water quality tested May–September **LOCATION** 50.8115, 0.3530 **AVOID** watch out for groynes as they can be hidden at low tide



Getting there

Pevensy Bay is to the east of Eastbourne; the A259 runs through the village. There is a train station in Pevensy Bay but there are only a few services per day at peak times and none at weekends. More services stop at Pevensy and Westham train station – Stagecoach bus 8 links this station with Pevensy Bay. Stagecoach bus 99 links Hastings, Bexhill, Pevensy Bay and Eastbourne.

Access

Sea Road car park is next to the beach – it is pay and display from March to September and free for the rest of the year. On a hot day it can be difficult to park.

The beach is shingle, which can be tricky to walk on – bring your aqua shoes. During the winter, when diggers are on the beach building the sea defences, the entry can be steep.

Refreshments

- » The **Ocean View** bakery and restaurant is next to Sea Road car park – they serve hot and cold food to eat in and take away.
- » **The Aqua Bar** is on the beach at Pevensy Bay – it is family friendly with a great, varied menu.

Camber Sands

For a stunning beach with miles and miles of golden sand, Camber Sands is the place to go. This popular location is situated close to the Kent border to the east and ends at the estuary of the River Rother to the west.

Camber Sands is ideal for a paddle or a swim in the sea in the summer months when the weather's calm. It is a fab place for beachcombing and looking for buried treasure such as shells, seaweed, driftwood and sea glass washed up on the shore.

Home to the only sand dune system in East Sussex, the dunes provide a valuable natural habitat to over 250 different species of plant and wildlife. Walk down paths lined with sea buckthorn covered in golden berries, with the sea and sands shimmering in the sun.

Camber village at the eastern end of the beach is a popular destination where you can find shops, restaurants and holiday parks. Broomhill Sands, further to the east, is an area which has been zoned for sports such as windsurfing and kitesurfing. The western end of Camber has become stylishly chic, largely due to The Gallivant hotel, which is just minutes from the beach.

THE SWIM

There is lots of sand during high tide and at low tide there is even more damp sand which is perfect for building sandcastles. Keep an eye on the shoreline once you are in the water, as the tide is quite fast with undercurrents and sandbanks affecting the direction it may take you. Up to around two hours either side of high tide is best for a swim, so you don't have to walk too far to get to the sea.

Camber Sands experiences a very wide range of tides, with the tide going out a long way. The beach is lifeguarded in summer; ensure you only swim within the marked area – between the red and yellow flags.



TECHNICAL INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION beach **ORIENTATION** south **TIDES** best around high tide, ideally just before but 2 hours either side is okay **ACCESS** parking and public transport nearby **ENTRY** sandy; be careful as the beach is known for strong tides and shifting sandbanks **GOOD FOR** beach days and swims **LOCAL GROUPS** Camber Sands Bluebirds; Hastings & St Leonards Sea Swimming Group **DEFRA BATHING WATERS** water quality tested May–September **LOCATION** 50.9327, 0.7957 **AVOID** the harbour entrance as there are very strong currents and boats in the area



Getting there

Camber Sands is the nearest bit of coastline to Rye. Follow the A259 then Camber Road to reach the beach.

Stagecoach bus 100, which connects Hastings, Rye (where there is a train station) and New Romney, stops at Camber Sands.

Access

There are three chargeable car parks at Camber Sands – on hot sunny days and during school holidays, many people visit and car parks can be full by 9 a.m. Rother District Council may close the roads into Camber and turn cars away if the car parks reach capacity.

Camber Sands is a lovely flat, sandy beach with some sandbanks as the tide goes out. Beware of sandbanks – don't get cut off by the tide. Look out for soft sand and mud exposed at low tide. At low tide the beach is beautifully wide with pools of warm water on the flats.

Refreshments

- » The **Kit Kat Cafe** is right next to the beach – they serve great coffee and bacon sandwiches.
- » **The Gallivant** is a boutique hotel at the western end of the beach with beautifully presented dishes.
- » **The Standard** is an atmospheric 15th-century pub in nearby Rye.