

DARK-INFESTED WATERS

Pools are for the fainthearted – real swimmers do it outside when the sun goes down. **Helen Croydon** takes the plunge

AS I stand at the end of a pier in autumnal dusk, the water in the harbour glistens with light from riverside restaurants. In the distance I can see the illuminated skyscrapers in Canary Wharf.

If it weren't for my tightly zipped wetsuit hinting at the bracing water below, I could kid myself that this was twilight on a French Riviera marina. But no, this the Thames and the water is 11C – compared with the 28C of a public pool. I'm about to go for a night swim – a trend many perfectly sane people are taking to.

Open-water swimming has seen a surge in popularity in the past decade. The Outdoor Swimming Society has gone from 300 members in 2006 to 23,000 members at the start of 2015. It's mostly seen as a summer venture, and done in daylight. Until now.

For the first time, the National Open Water Coaching Association (NOWCA) is keeping two of its UK lakes open throughout winter and at one of them – the Royal Docks in east London – it's allowing night swimming. The buoys are lit and swimmers issued with glow-in-the-dark floats so guards can see them. And for those worried about how clean it is – open water for swimming has to pass European standards and the docks are in the top category.

'We hosted a trial night-swim and were amazed by how many people came, particularly women,' says Anne-Marie Walker, an organiser at NOWCA.

'People are learning that swimming doesn't have to be boring forwards and



IF you're worried about the cold, try open-water swimming in summer first. And have hope. I shivered for hours after my first dip two years ago but my body has acclimatised

Pitch-black stroke: Helen prepares to take the plunge into the dark dock and (top left) in the Thames
PIC: DANIEL LYNCH



Shiver me fingers: Helen starts to regain the feeling in her hands

back in a swimming pool. Some arrived from office jobs suited and booted. They came out and said they felt empowered and proud.'

I'm a keen triathlete so am used to open waters but haven't dipped a toe in anything below 15C, nor swum in darkness.

Suddenly that 11C is a scary prospect. Instructor Laura gives us first-timers tips on handling the cold.

Get in slowly to acclimatise and put your face in before swimming to minimise the shock.

I dangle my feet in first. They smart with the cold and are numb within two minutes. Not a good start. But with a deep breath and thoughts of hot chocolate, I ease myself in.

I always let water into my wetsuit before swimming. Initially you

THE INFO

Where Royal Docks, east London
When Wed, 4-7pm
Price £12 (wetsuit hire, £10)
londonroyal.docksows.co.uk

Outside of London nightswimming.co.uk lists one-off night swims

flinch but within a minute, the water forms a layer of insulation.

With a deep breath, I push off into the 400m diamond-shaped course. The buoys marking the route are not lit this evening so I keep stopping to make out their shape in the darkness. This adds to the excitement.

Putting my head into the blackness of the water feels eerie at first. What's under there? But it feels and smells clean and soon the dark unknown becomes meditative, its contrast with the kaleidoscope reflection of lights from the buildings magical.

Am I cold? Not a bit. Well, not completely. I haven't felt my hands or feet but that could have been fixed had I invested in some neoprene gloves and booties. I'll do that next time. There *will* be a next time.

nowca.org

THE KIT

- Wetsuit (hire is available). For winter swimming, aim for a thickness of 4 or 5mm.
- Untinted goggles.
- Neoprene gloves and booties (pictured). I didn't have any but I wish I did.
- Swimming cap (wear two for extra warmth).
- A towel for the heated shower afterwards.
- Warm clothes to travel home in.

SHINY TRAINERS

METALLIC trainers are having a sparkly moment. Reebok Classic has partnered with beauty brand Face Stockholm to launch a pair that X Factor contestant Louisa Johnson was seen rocking at judges houses. LA Gear followed suit this month with the Liquid Silver LA Lights. Both sold out but you can get on the trend with one of these pairs, says Vicki-Marie Cossar



Adidas Superstar 80s gold
£79.99, office.co.uk

Metallic lace-ups
£26, next.co.uk

Jimmy Choo London sneakers
£435, mythereasa.com

Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars
£84.99, footlocker.co.uk

Kurt Geiger Glitter Lisbon sneakers
£29, debenhams.com

Dolce And Gabbana
£315, flannels.com

Marc by Marc Jacobs hi-tops
£183.78, farfetch.com

Nike classic Cortez sneakers
£75, stylebop.com