

Treasure Islands

Swimming round an island offers a unique perspective on history and humanity. **Emma Richards** explores the islands of the river Thames

From rich artistic havens to natural wildlife reserves, the Thames has nearly 200 islands. Enduring throughout history, a surprising number are inhabited by small settlements, creative communities and colourful houseboats. Some are only accessible by boat. Yet each and everyone has a different story to tell.

Curiously changing shape and even changing name, islands offer a sense of unfettered space, free flowing throughout the centuries. Islanders themselves are unshackled from convention, sharing an affinity with the rhythms of a natural world. Yet to swim around an island offers a unique perspective on history and humanity. At a time where our own travel is curtailed, island swimming offers a rare opportunity to seek out special untrodden places, often hidden from view.

Exploring sensory connection, artistic heritage, rich wildlife and even famous personalities, here are five of the best Thames islands to swim around.





Follow Emma's swims on Instagram @swimwriteem. A Mental Health Swims co-host she also runs peer support swims every first Saturday of month, 9am Hampton Ferry. Book via @mhshampton.

Photos credit Broni-Lloyd Edwards, Sue Wilson and James Beard.

Glover's Island

A heavily-wooded, half-acre island provides a centrepiece for dramatic views in both directions of this tidal Thames. Sycamore, ash and willow cover the island, and herons can be seen roosting in the trees. Walk up the towpath from Ham Car Park towards Teddington Lock and get in 30 mins before high tide from one of the shingly beaches opposite Eel Pie Island. Here the wide silky neck of river winds through lush vegetation and tall trees line the banks like kings. Parakeets are part of this brilliant green expansion. Close your eyes and re-imagine you are part of Conrad's coiling Amazon in his novel *The Heart of Darkness*. The river winds seductively, gradually opening up to low-lying meadowlands at Petersham where cattle graze. You will glimpse grandeur from everywhere in the water – on your left is Marble Hill House built by Henrietta Howard, George II's mistress. On your right, Ham House is unveiled through an avenue of cedar trees.

Yet, the natural haven of Glover's Island belies a turbulent history. When Thomas Glover purchased the island for £70 in 1872, he attempted to resell it for the vastly inflated sum of £5,000 – a cynical, 19th-century act of brinkmanship aimed at Richmond Corporation. Glover even toyed with the idea of selling the island to Pears Soap Company in return for an advertising billboard to be erected on its shores. Thank goodness that local benefactor Max Waechter purchased the island and handed it back on the grounds that it never be developed. William Turner's Arcadian view 'The Thames from Richmond Hill' (1815) is immortalised for all time.

For a shorter 1km swim, get in riverside by Orleans Park Steps and exit past Hammerton's Ferry – this may require a bit of scrambling up the bank. The longer route from Eel Pie to Petersham Meadows, where you can exit and walk back is around 1.62km.

Taggs Island

JM Barrie, author of *Peter Pan* and former Taggs resident (1887) famously remarked that one of the charms of a houseboat is that 'it is affords you an utterly new life'. Swimming around Taggs island reminds you of this simple philosophy. Sixty-two boats cluster around a green, teardrop-shaped island, once leased by wealthy music impresario Fred Karno, famed for discovering Charlie Chaplin. This busy stretch of water bristles with keen kayakers, boats and rowers. Get in at Hampton ferry jetty and swim past Fred Karno's iconic houseboat *The Astoria*, once moored on the island. Built in 1911, this perfect marriage of boat, garden and river is exquisitely crafted. Now owned by Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, who converted the dining room into a recording and mixing studio, *Astoria's* interior is high Edwardian ornate splendour, like a vast first-class suite taken from RMS Titanic. Magical features include 700 panes of bevelled glass set in gun metal frames, designed to create dancing lights on the walls just as the sun is setting off the surface of the river. And the covered upper deck is an 150m² dance floor with an incredible vantage point overlooking the cool reaches below. This was once the setting for sumptuous parties, where guests were entertained by The Goldsborough Orchestra performing Handel's water music. One can only imagine the guest list. Laurel and Hardy stayed on board as did Chaplin. *Astoria's* caretaker, surely the luckiest man alive, has been known on occasion to jump from rafters and join you for a quick dip. *If you continue under the Taggs footbridge, you can loop back around the island. Bear in mind you will be returning against the flow, which can be challenging and take around 50 mins. Midsummer beware of teenagers who leap from the bridge without warning.*



Taggs Island and
The Astoria





Eel Pie Island

An oasis of chaos amidst suburban calm, a tidal swim around Eel Pie island transports you to a bygone era, the birthplace of British blues rock where Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton and The Beatles performed on the stage of Eel Pie Island Hotel in 1963. Whilst the hotel has long since burned down the island's bohemian vibe remains. This strange, overgrown hamlet has a ripe community of 26 contemporary painters, potters, sculptors and huge boatyards with rusty hulls. I am struck by the grainy textures, sounds and colours of this island swim. The spitting and screeching coming from big, bottle-green boatyards, the brightly painted ramshackle studios fringed by palm trees and families eating at trestle tables in their gardens. Against the blue gaze of the river, it still feels like an island for dreamers.

A shallow entry point by the White Swan pub allows you to wade gently in at a mudflat beach in front of locals drinking on a waterside terrace. This part of the river feels pliant and forgiving but be prepared to battle a tidal flow as you circumvent the island from the Twickenham end. Midsummer, you will need to navigate kayakers, rowers, motorboats and paddle boarders, as well as currents, so timing is everything. Get this wrong and you could get swept further downstream towards Richmond, so go with an experienced group and tuck in as far as you can as you forge round the island. Once around the tip (700m) the flow is easier and the swim - and views - open out. Replenish at the Barmy Arms after an exhilarating 1.38 km workout.

Opt for the easier 550m swim down the mainstream side of the island, where the river is narrower and you can chat to the locals as you are swimming.



Garrick's Ait

There are narrative moments in time that really bind us to a place. During lockdown, this soulful swim was a deeply natural experience. With just 20 houses and accessible only by boat, Garrick's Ait is an earthly-watery paradise offering an intimate glimpse into the simple pleasures of life. Swim early morning and you will catch locals breakfasting on their decks under green-plaited vines. Named after 18th-century actor David Garrick, who lived in the elegant Garrick's Villa nearby and built a temple to Shakespeare on his lawn, you even have your very own Parthenon as a changing room, overlooking jungle-green reeds and a trailing willow.

Walk back towards the overgrown passageway (just before Garrick's lawn gate) where there's a rocky, but shallow get-in. Swim across the river and loop clockwise around the back of the island towards Hampton Sailing Club, where there's little flow and you will avoid boat traffic. The ferrymaster lives in a huge house at the tip of the island, boasting panoramic views all the way up to the maritime warehouses of Eyotts Platt. Return with the flow and you'll be rewarded with a view reminiscent of Kenneth Graeme's river idyll, *The Wind in the Willows*. Garrick's Temple, flanked by tall dark-green cypress trees, is just achingly beautiful. Witness wildlife in glorious technicolour, including oily-black cormorants, exotic Egyptian Geese, Great Crested Grebes (who carry their young on their back) and even a resident Heron. A word of warning. Sid the swan has notoriety in these waters, so respect his space! *Hampton Ferry runs a daily service from April to October across to Hurst Park, so you can picnic in meadows and return by boat. This is a gentler 20-30 minute non-tidal swim.*

Desborough Island

A manmade island near Shepperton, this natural conservation area provides shady canopy indented with small sandy beaches and discrete inlets. With a perfect choice of wild swimming spots, a footpath encircles the entire island and runs down by the water's edge so you can walk/ swim complete 4.3-mile loop. Totally uninhabited, wildflower meadows are home to four different species of butterfly including the Large White and Small Copper.

Avoid the gruelling straight section known as 'The Desborough Cut' (a navigation channel dug out in 1935). Instead take your time and meander around the curvaceous 'M' of the island, where you will be seduced by gleaming waterside mansions (by Desborough Sailing club) and Mississippi-style houseboats on the Shepperton side. At a leisurely pace, you can swim the 'M' with heads up breaststroke in 1 hour 10 minutes. You may need to swim the island again just to guess exactly which beach Culture Club's 1983 hit 'Kharma Chameleon' was filmed on.

Park up at Cowey Sale Car Park, walk along towpath towards Elmbridge Canoe Club to get in from the jetty. There's a bustling café at the car park, so you can stop for a refresh afterwards.

