

52 Ways to Cool Off, And All of Them Free

By COREY KILGANNON – The New York Times July 27, 2007



Sabrina Layetano, left, Joanna Baskett and Kareen Haskins at the Astoria Pool in Queens, the largest of the city's 52 public pools.

WITH her fluffy white bath towel, Brenda Gruskin — taut copper skin, black designer swimsuit, awash in gold jewelry — claimed a parcel of sun-warmed concrete on the deck of the John Jay Pool on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

“When I tell people I use city pools, they can’t believe it,” she said, surveying the rectangular gulch of wobbling azure water one recent morning, beyond it the East River running swiftly south. “They think the pools are dirty or rowdy. I tell them, ‘The public pools are the best-kept secret in the city.’”

That secret is getting out. Last year 1.5 million people visited city pools, and though the pools have long served less-privileged New Yorkers, they are now used by a more diverse population than ever: ethnically, socio-economically; backstrokers, breast-strokers.

The pools are luring families, the very young, the very old and also people who can afford more exclusive settings. The reasons: They are safer, and many have undergone renovations recently, including the installation of shade structures, ornamental plantings and spray showers in kiddie pools. Many now offer special lap-swim sessions in the early morning and evening, as well as swimming lessons. And they

are free. The city has 1,080 lifeguards this summer, its highest number ever, said Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner, who noted that city pools get just as crowded as they did pre-air-conditioning.

“City pools still serve a primary purpose as an escape for the working class who cannot afford to leave the city in the summer,” he said. “But they get a much broader user group and demographic today.”

The city’s 52 outdoor pools are open daily through Labor Day, generally from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. During heat waves they are often kept open until 8. Almost all city pools are about 3 to 4 feet deep throughout.

In a steamy city these urban oases offer a measure of cool, chlorinated bliss. They are great for people watching and a good way to introduce yourself to a new neighborhood. They are often hubs of neighborhood activity, attracting food vendors, street musicians, family barbecues and general commotion.

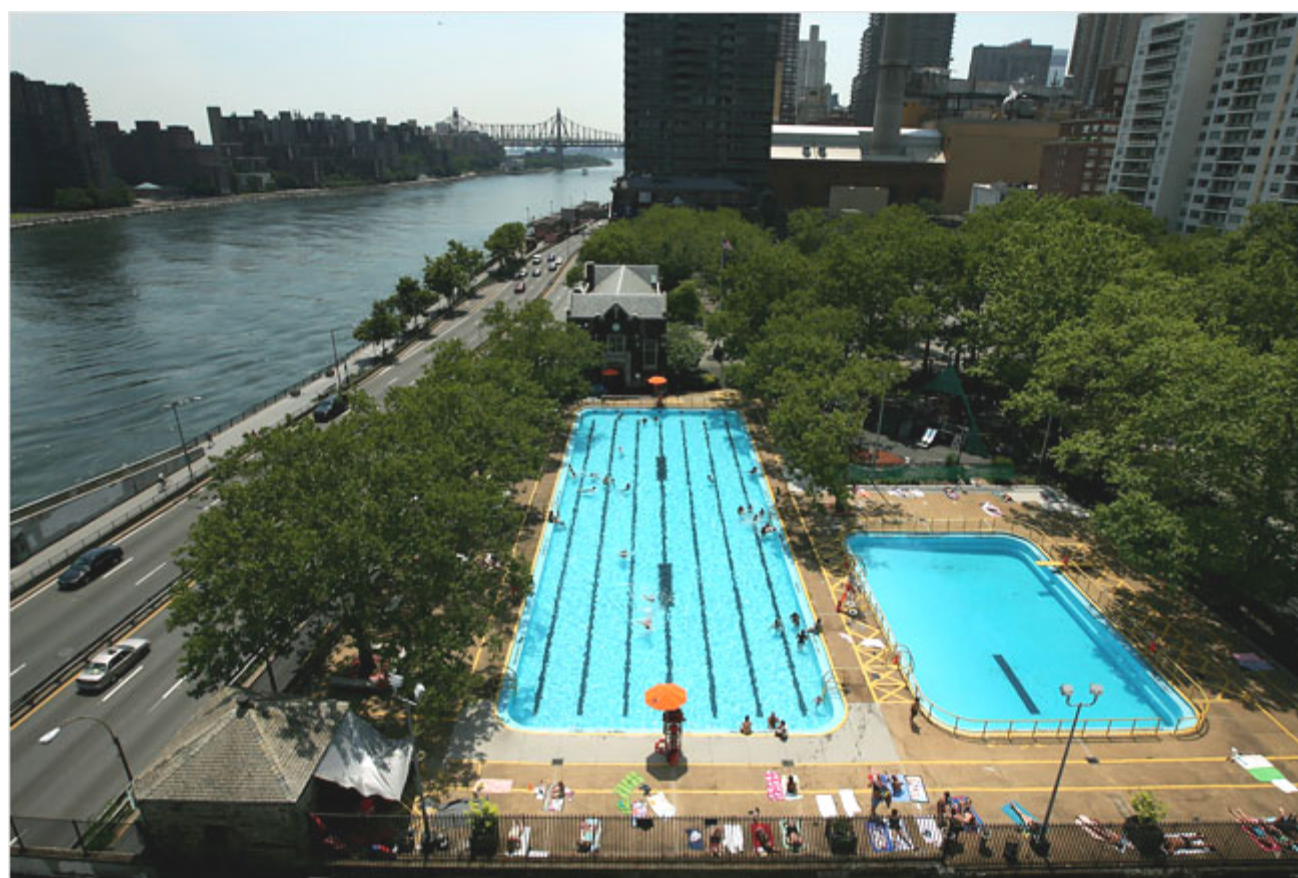
You can walk dripping wet out of Highbridge Pool, in Washington Heights, and within a single block browse a smorgasbord of Dominican food. There is a fruit stand selling containers of sliced mangos for \$2; and if you’re thirsty, a man with a machete will chop open a coconut and stick a straw in it. Nearby, a woman sells johnnycakes, fried, flat dough snacks, for \$1 apiece from her shopping cart, along with the popular Dominican fruit shake known as morir soñando (“to die dreaming”), made from oranges, milk, sugar and chopped ice. Outside the bathhouse trucks parked at the curb sell chimichurri (meat sandwiches) and steaming plates of chicken, pork or beef with rice and beans.

Oh, right — the swimming. Well, the entrance is at Amsterdam Avenue and West 173rd Street, and on hot days there are longish lines — women to the left, men to the right — cordoned with police barricades.

One recent sultry afternoon a parks enforcement officer with a megaphone barked at the teenagers in line to behave. The pool — 220 feet by 162 feet — was packed, and a dozen lifeguards and parks enforcement officers stood along the side, incessantly whistling young men out of the water for infractions. Outside, young men sized up female bathers for chats between the chain-links.

The city pools got a black eye some years back when there were headlines about incidents of unruly teenage boys surrounding girls and harassing and groping them. The city has since stepped up security, assigning police officers and parks enforcement officers to pool decks, as well as installing security cameras. The lifeguards are armed with whistles, the parks officers with summons books and nightsticks, and the police with 9-millimeter pistols.

A tour of a half-dozen pools over the last two weeks found clean water and pool decks, although the locker rooms and waiting areas can be less so and are often in disrepair. To enter a pool you must show an attendant that you have a conventional bathing suit — park officials say they don’t want the suit’s colors running — and that you have a padlock to secure your belongings in a locker. Only white T-shirts, towels, hats, sunglasses, sunblock, flip-flops and a book or magazine are allowed on the pool deck. Basically all else is banned, including electronics, food and newspapers.



Certain things seem senseless, like seeing half the pool closed to swimming with a huge line of eager bathers waiting outside, and the policy of closing the pool for an hour at 3 p.m., usually the hottest part of the day, necessitating a whole new lengthy entry process. (Parks officials say the hour closing is for cleaning the pool.)

A major reason the early pools were built is that hundreds of children were drowning each summer swimming in the city's waterways, Mr. Benepe said.



"These great outdoor pools would never be built today because it's no longer wise to invest in outdoor pools that are used two months of the year," he said. "The ones we have were built to a palatial scale. The message is that working people can feel like royalty by passing through the portals of these edifices built like temples and Roman castles and French fortresses. You feel superhuman."

Crotona Pool in the Bronx stretches between East 172nd and East 174th Streets on Fulton Avenue on the edge of Crotona Park. Its bathhouse is an Art Deco interpretation of a French castle, and the interior is a city landmark.

Last Saturday you could smell the barbecues set up in the park, mingling with sunblock and chlorine and hot asphalt and car exhaust. A loud radio beyond the fence blasted salsa music, and down the block a car alarm sounded for hours on end. The pool, 330 feet by 120 feet, has a shallow section for small children. It is secured by a tall, spiked iron fence topped with coils of razor wire. The pool edge is lined with blue, wooden police barricades to curtail running and jumping into the pool. But several barricades had been moved, and a dozen teenage boys were engaged in a testosterone-fueled romp, racing around the pool deck, wrestling and throwing one another, and any girls close to their age, into the water. As the pool emptied at closing time, four police cars had pulled up, and the officers sternly watched the crowd exit and slowly disperse.

Hamilton Fish Pool, on the Lower East Side at Houston and Pitt Streets, draws downtown hipsters, Chinatown residents and the largely Hispanic population living in the nearby housing projects. The pool, which is 165 by 98 feet, sits in the center of Hamilton Fish Park and is flanked by Beaux-Arts-style structures.

David Sanchez, 30, a construction worker, sat on the side of the pool one recent weekday, dangling his legs in the water.

"Most of these kids you see here are from the projects," said Mr. Sanchez, who lives in a project on Avenue D and enjoys the multicultural girl-watching at the pool. "You think these kids ever seen a real beach? Myself, I've only been to Coney Island and Orchard Beach. It's just easier to come here."

Astoria Pool in Queens is in Astoria Park overlooking the East River between the Hell Gate and Triborough Bridges. It is the largest of the city pools and one of the largest in the country. The main pool is 330 by 165 feet and was designed to accommodate 3,000 swimmers.

Its diving pool, with a 32-foot-high elevated platform, was closed in 1981 because of trespassing, and the mucky bottom now resembles a bog. (Mr. Benepe said he hoped to reopen at least one diving pool in each borough eventually.) Outside the Art Deco bathing pavilion there is a stand that sells bathing suits, caps, goggles and swimming diapers. A short block away on Ditmars Boulevard are several cafes with outdoor seating and good food.

One recent sweltering weekday more than 500 people waited to re-enter the pool at 4 p.m., forming a line that stretched up and out of the park. Along the outside of the bathhouse a thin pipe sprayed a cool mist onto the line. Those farther down the line drank from a temporary water fountain rigged to a sidewalk fire hydrant.

Brian Azcona, 16, and four friends waited. They had taken the train from Bushwick, Brooklyn.

"It's cleaner than the beach, that's for sure," Brian said.

Astoria, Crotona and Highbridge are among the 11 Olympic-size pools the city opened in the summer of 1936. Built by Robert Moses, the city's first parks commissioner, with financing from the federal Works Progress Administration, the pools were heralded as some of the most remarkable public recreational facilities ever built in the United States.

Then there are the smaller pools, like the Sheltering Arms Pool in Harlem, at Amsterdam Avenue and West 126th Street. There is a bus depot across the avenue, and pedestrians and bus riders are well within splashing range of bathers.

Back at John Jay Pool, Ms. Gruskin casually greeted friends milling about the end of the pool deck near East 78th Street at Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive. The pool, in John Jay Park, overlooks the East River and abuts the drive so closely that you could splash the passing cars. The London plane trees that rise from the deck offer a generous canopy of shade.

The pool, which has one of the city's two remaining diving boards, is favored by neighborhood families and a group of adults who all seemed to know one another. By early afternoon they give way to the crowds of excited adolescents.

"They take the train here from East Harlem or the Lower East Side, where I grew up," Ms. Gruskin said. "City pools are for the people who can't afford to go out to a nice beach."