

7 Cities Making Their Urban Rivers Swimmable Again

By Alissa Walker

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It's almost time for another steamy, sweaty summer in the city—and nothing looks like it might cool you off more than that sparkling waterway winding through the center of your downtown. But can you really swim in it? In more and more cities, the answer is a refreshing yes.

Your grandparents might remember taking a dip in the local stream back in the day, but thanks to decades of environmental ignorance, gallons of industrial sludge and sewage runoff have been collectively diverted into our rivers. Now cities are getting their acts together and restoring their vital waterways for recreation.

Here are seven urban rivers that once were known as polluted, dangerous places, but are now (or soon will be) places where you can jump right in—the water's fine.

Charles River, Boston

Last summer, the Charles River opened for its first public swim in 50 years, as a section cordoned off by buoys and manned by lifeguards was opened for two hours. Once given a D rating by the Environmental Protection Agency, environmentalists halted the flow of sewage into the Charles, and its rating has improved to a solid B, thanks to groups like the [Charles River Conservancy](#) and the [Charles River Swimming Club](#), which is hosting a one-mile swim in the river this weekend. Even though the river has come a long way, advocates [still have](#)

some work to do: “The bottom of the river remains a toxic mess, but if a swimmer can get in and out of the water without touching the squishy bottom, no tetanus shot is necessary.”

Los Angeles River, Los Angeles

Last week the Army Corps of Engineers recommended a \$1 billion plan to revitalize an 11-mile stretch of the Los Angeles River, transforming it from a cement-lined channel into a vibrant, naturalized actual river. Parts of the L.A. River are already river-like enough for recreation, including two sections opened for kayaking and fishing this summer which definitely feel swimmable (I might have jumped in it few times myself). But this would represent one of the biggest turnarounds in the country for a river that was all but forgotten as a storm sewer only a few years ago: In a few summers, you might be able to swim (safely and legally) in the Los Angeles River.

South Platte River, Denver

On a warm day at Confluence Park, right in the heart of downtown Denver, it's not unlikely to see dozens of families splashing in the South Platte River where it intersects with Cherry Creek. The site was formerly an electrical substation that was redeveloped as a park and in addition to swimming and wading, Denverites can kayak and tube through the rocky rapids (which are conveniently located near an REI). Although recent years have seen some issues with higher-than-comfortable bacterial contamination, the water is generally regarded as safe.

Spree River, Berlin

The Spree River that slices through Berlin would be turned into the world's largest natural swimming pool under this proposal by [realities:united](#). Titled Flussbad, the proposal plans to turn a largely unused channel around the city's Museum Island into a swimmable basin of water which could be accessed from parkland on all sides. Natural filtration from a nearby marsh would clean the water and restore wetlands that were taken away by urban development. The 700-meter pool would be the largest outdoor pool on the planet.

Elizabeth River, Virginia

The [Elizabeth River Project](#) is an ambitious plan to make all reaches of this Chesapeake Bay tributary swimmable by 2020. After removing 36 million pounds of contamination from the river bottom, cancer rates in fish dropped and bacteria rates plummeted. A campaign encouraged homeowners to prevent toxic materials from entering the water, and the organization also installed infrastructure like these oyster habitats (above) that will encourage marine life to revitalize the ecosystem. It's expected that later this summer, the Lafayette River, a branch of the Elizabeth that runs through the city of Norfolk, will meet state criteria for swimming.

The River Thames, London

A plan for London to reduce the flow of sewage into its waterways by 2023 has sparked plenty of proposals from local architects for increasing access to the cleaner water. This idea from [Studio Octopi](#) would create small basins for swimming that would draw attention to the revitalized river and also create a wildlife refuge to attract birds and fish. Although the city does not currently encourage swimming in the Thames, there are some open water swimming events throughout the year.

East River, New York City

Although triathlons and other monitored open water swims regularly allow swimmers into the Hudson and East Rivers surrounding Manhattan, the current is often too strong and bacteria is still too big of a concern to allow public swimming along their banks. But + POOL, a floating pool planned for New York City will allow safe access to the river as well as a cleaner swim by filtering the river water through its membranes. A floating lab stationed on the river this summer will be testing the filtration system, and if all goes well, New Yorkers could be swimming off the Brooklyn shore by 2015.

Got a swimmable urban river by you? Drop the name of the river, the name of the city, an image, and a description below!