

Time well spent

For those who are able to access the outdoors, it's a tonic for body and mind. Before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, **Jane Yettram** spoke to some who have found their own spaces to unwind. It's a timely reminder of everything that so many of us have been missing out on during the ongoing crisis



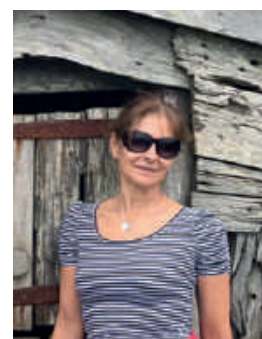
When major surgery on both legs left Sara Barnes unable to walk, it was swimming in the spectacular landscape of the Lake District that saved her. 'Osteoarthritis had eaten away the cartilage in both knee joints, leaving bone rubbing on bone, which was excruciating,' she explains. 'So I had surgery to break my tibias and put in a bone graft, realigning my legs.'

The 58-year-old spent eight weeks in a wheelchair and had to learn to walk all over again. 'Outdoor swimming really helped my recovery,' she says. 'The water supported me so that weight wasn't pressing down on

broken bone, plus the cold temperature numbed any pain.'

But the benefits of wild swimming were more than physical: 'In nature – in the fresh air and sunlight – you feel stronger physically and emotionally; you feel hope that things will improve,' Sara says. 'I was always really outdoorsy, running round the fells and cycling over the passes. Now, as I can no longer cycle or run, outdoor swimming is my way of getting into the countryside; of being able to look at the fells and still enjoy them from the water.'

She has also found friendship in the outdoor-swimming community. 'You start to feel part of something again, which helps with that sense of isolation.'



Jane Yettram, pictured on the north Cornish coast she loves, is a freelance journalist who has written on subjects from health to community and conservation.



PETE KELLY/SWIM THE LAKES

Sara belongs to Lake District Open Water Swimmers (LDOWS), a group set up by Pete Kelly from Ambleside. LDOWS has members of all abilities, as Pete – who began outdoor swimming when he moved to the Lake District over 20 years ago, and went on to set up a guided-swimming business called Swim the Lakes – explains. ‘We have amputees and people who have problems walking, then we have athletes and extreme ice-swimmers. Plus we have everyone in between.’

This, Pete feels, is the great thing about swimming. ‘It’s open to everyone. Although the range of fitness levels is vast, everyone helps each other and everyone is made to feel welcome. We all get in the water, go off and do our thing. But after a swim we meet up for a cup of tea or to go to the pub. It fosters friendship and community feeling.’

Pete is passionate about the benefits that swimming in the natural environment brings. ‘It ticks so many boxes for your health and wellbeing. Being outside is what we call green and blue therapy – being under the blue sky and among the green leaves.’

He believes outdoor swimming is a particularly powerful de-stressor: ‘It is totally immersive. Everything melts away when you get in the water and you come out feeling bloody great! Part of that’s the cold



Sara Barnes on a January swim in Crummock Water

temperature, which gives an increased exercise high. As a swimming guide, I get regular emails from folk saying that the swim they did changed their lives.’

Jakki Moore is another LDOWS member whose outdoor swimming gives her time and space to unwind. ‘It provides an escape from the world,’ she says. ‘I run a theatre, and all day and evening I am talking, acting, planning. But when I get into Coniston Lake, I can relax, think positive thoughts, and listen to nature. It is the total opposite to my busy lifestyle full of stress. I really am alive in the water.’

The power of planting

The dedicated volunteers of Brighton Permaculture Trust have been reaping similar rewards from a rather different activity: tending a plot of land in Stanmer Park in East Sussex.

Permaculture is all about sustainable living, working with nature rather than against it in all we do – from designing homes to, in the case of the trust, growing produce: ‘Our ethos is no dig, no pesticides or herbicides,’ says Fran Pickering. ‘We propagate perennial food plants and grow organic veg, and there is something deeply connecting and satisfying about harvesting the fruits of your labours.’

Fellow team member Hannah Wilde agrees: ‘There is a sense of hope and joy created by nurturing life in spring and harvesting food in autumn – and a sense of confidence and achievement, too. Plus there are the physical benefits of being active, which, alongside being in the sun and with others, is so good for body and mind.’

The sense of connection between the volunteers – made up of a range of ages and backgrounds – is also a source of wellbeing. ‘Working as a group is incredibly bonding,’ Fran says. ‘Hard work shared is enjoyable and



Brighton Permaculture Trust members with the produce grown on their plot

A Wild in the City group on a walk in the countryside



Wild in the City founder Beth Collier



easier, and we get the chance to talk and learn from each other.'

Plus, it's loads of fun – the plot not only boasts plant beds and polytunnels,

but also a pizza oven and firepit. 'Once, we all brought musical instruments with us, including spoons, and everybody joined in,' smiles Fran. 'I'm not sure how sweet we sounded, but much laughter was had, and no one was left out.'

Fran works at the plot year round. 'Each season is different, but I love late spring, when the days are getting longer and there is the fresh green of new leaves. Studies have shown that gardening and being in nature reduces depression, and for me, being outside reduces my seasonal affective disorder symptoms. I have clearer lungs, too, and I sleep better than usual after working the land.'

It is the act of nurturing that is so healing, Hannah believes. 'For people who have experienced trauma or abuse, it is so powerful to nurture something else and to see new beginnings,' she says. 'For children and young people to nurture rather than be nurtured, and to be trusted with another life, is hugely empowering and confidence-building.'

Other plot volunteers feel just as positive. One, local GP Shivani Mishra, has even started recommending gardening and nature walks for depression. 'Shivani is convinced that this is what is needed to help reconnect people to happier selves with less stress,' says Fran.

Volunteer Caroline Barton, who suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome, has found working on the plot truly life-changing: 'My brain fog lifts when I come to the park, and when I am planting seeds I feel contentment, because I'm doing something real.'

Finding green in the grey

When Beth Collier moved to the city from her childhood home in rural East Anglia, she was shocked to discover how disconnected many urbanites were from the natural world.

'Nature is vital for our emotional health,' says Beth, an anthropologist and nature-based psychotherapist. 'Its capacity to reduce stress, depression and anxiety is an essential antidote to stressful and often isolated city lifestyles. Research shows that "greyscapes" trigger areas of the brain associated with fear and anger, whereas "greenscapes" trigger those associated with love and empathy, making a big difference to our quality of life. In fact, people who interact with green spaces most frequently have improved life expectancy and improved physical and emotional wellbeing.'

In 2013 Beth set up Wild in the City, a community that brings people together in nature to have fun, learn and feel good. It provides a range of experiences for children and adults in London and beyond – from guided hikes to sessions on foraging.

Also fundamental to Wild in the City is bringing the benefits of nature to those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, who often spend less time in nature due to factors such as the under-representation of BAME people in the

environmental sector. Wild in the City trains people of colour to become leaders who can then engage others with nature through, for example, leading walks or sharing skills.

Kojo Adade took part in a Wild in the City 'Nature Connectors' course: 'Growing up in an urban environment means we're quite detached from being in green spaces,' he says. 'But the course has helped me realise how much benefit nature has for my wellbeing, making me calmer and more relaxed, and I want to introduce that to people of similar backgrounds,' he says.

Recognising and promoting the benefits of nature in this way is becoming increasingly urgent because, as Beth points out, by 2030 over 90% of the UK population will live in urban areas. She believes it will be crucial for urban dwellers to seek the therapeutic benefits of nature, which she describes as the 'free health service enhancing our wellbeing'.

Alongside GPs in Croydon, Wild in the City has also worked with a consortium known as the Natural Health Service, providing nature-based activities to improve the wellbeing of residents, some referred by their doctor.

Beth believes it will be crucial for urban dwellers to seek the therapeutic benefits of nature

Alec Baird was a recent participant in a Wild in the City walk. 'My Sunday got off to a bad start,' he recalls. 'I was running late and a bit grouchy, but heading into the hidden countryside behind this area of south London helped me let that go – especially when, within a few minutes of setting out, I saw a kestrel hovering overhead!'

Overall, the results of the project were striking: like Alec, most participants reported feeling less stressed and less angry, and a whole lot happier and more connected. With the Covid-19 pandemic putting unprecedented restrictions on our usual freedoms to go out and enjoy the outdoors, it is to be hoped that, before too long, it will once again be safe for all of us to enjoy the benefits of unlimited fresh air.

BETH COLLIER

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