

# A bigger splash

Once considered the height of naff, the swimming pool is now the ultimate outdoor status symbol, says **Samuel Fishwick**. The only problem? The great British weather, of course



The ultimate outdoor status symbol  
BRUNO POINSARD

“My swimming pool is my happy place,” Pearl Lowe says. A good thing too: the designer, 52, bought a by-the-sea East Sussex bolt hole in February last year and quickly dropped a “very cheap” £48,000 on the 4m x 9m pool of her dreams — thus joining Pool Britannia, Britain’s exclusive swimming club. The life aquatic is back. As any on-duty lifeguard would say, there’s no running from it.

In this sweltering summer of 30C-plus heatwaves, the nouveau swim set is rising. Rishi Sunak has sunk hundreds of thousands of

pounds of his own estimated £730 million fortune into a new leisure centre at his £1.5 million grade II listed mansion in North Yorkshire, complete with 12-metre swimming pool (chummy locals are calling it “Sunak’s spa”), while the TV presenter Stacey Solomon unveiled a glistening white, freshly renovated swimming pool at her £1.2 million Tudor-style Essex mansion last month.

“Before lockdown we were close to completing on a house in Palm Springs,” says Claire Rothstein, a fashion photographer and director

who lives in Hornsey, north London. Then lockdown put the kibosh on California, so she and her partner, Paul (also a photographer), set about renovating their London home and “bringing Palm Springs to Turnpike Lane”. They bought palm trees, jazzy art deco garden furniture and took the plunge on a slick, stainless-steel pool. “But we didn’t think about how to get it into the garden. We had to hire a huge crane and have it winched over the house while all the neighbours came out to watch. It was quite embarrassing really.”

Still, it’s hard to feel shame when floating on a unicorn inflatable yards from your kitchen. In the estate agency Savills’ most recent survey of agents, 30 per cent ranked a swimming pool the most sought-after outdoor amenity for buyers (beating a tennis court and outdoor kitchen). And not a moment too soon — prior to lockdown, the age of the private pool was sinking without trace.

“For a long time people saw an outdoor pool almost as a hindrance,” says Camilla Elwell, director of the country house department at Savills. “At best, buyers were ambivalent. At worst, a pool was a turn-off. No one really cared.” The bottom dropped out of the pool market after the financial crash as easy credit drained away: the Financial Times called pools “a large, blue money pit” for the super-rich, an aquatic



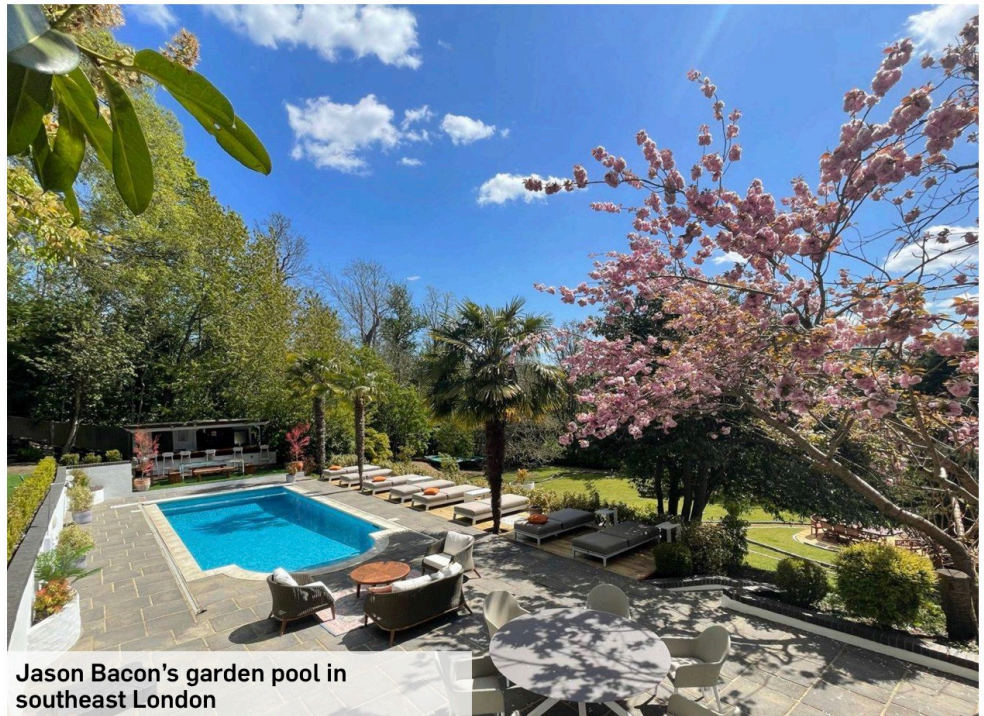


extravagance absorbing (at least) £5,000 in annual charges: enough gas to heat it, electricity to pump it and expensive chemicals required to clean it. Fun was sponged. The pool became uncool. “But now it has completely switched around,” Elwell says. “It’s all about having all those lifestyle elements on tap at home.”

What changed? The price of heating a pool has plummeted for canny buyers, thanks to nifty air source heat pumps. Designs have moved with the times too: deep ends are out of vogue, since a shallower pool needs less heating, bringing costs down further even as energy bills soar. “I’ve got one client in particular who doesn’t actually heat their pool because they like cold-water swimming,” Elwell says. “That’s quite on trend —very Wim Hof.”

At least one pull of the pool is obvious. “We’ve had loads of parties,” Rothstein says. “It heats up to hot tub temperature, so we had parties in the middle of winter in it, so that has been really fun.” (The fortnightly maintenance visit, she admits, is a financial drag — and we’re on the cusp of a national chlorine shortage).

The 6m x 10m pool at the property in southeast London was a big reason why Jason Bacon, the founder of the sound-engineering company Project Audio, and his wife chose the house four years ago — and parties were part of his plan too. “We were previously



Jason Bacon's garden pool in southeast London



Pearl Lowe and Edie Campbell

living in Ibiza and always had pools in the houses over there,” the father of three says. “We use the pool all the time — it’s the heartbeat of the garden, the garden being our biggest room. I’ve got my 50th coming up and the party will be epic, with a couple of stages and lots of friends from the music industry.”

The return of the Ibiza-style

pool party has been a hallmark of the post-lockdown age in affluent Essex, for instance: one teen — asking to remain anonymous for fear of incurring his parents’ wrath — tells me he had a party for 100 people in their new pool as soon as Mum and Dad took their first post-pandemic holiday. “We had a little rowing boat in the middle loaded with drinks, but it kept capsizing.”

Lowe says that she and her husband, the Supergrass drummer Danny Goffey, can’t wait to have a “poolwarming” in August: welcoming guests to their stunning, mini Babington House-like abode (the pool is sunk into reclaimed wood decking and surrounded by tasteful shell statues, plus a sweet little wooden sauna). “I’ve never had a pool party before. I’m





quite excited. I'll be getting out all the cheesy floats. The flamingos. The ostrich. Danny has already invited the lead singer of his band [Gaz Coombes]."

Yet for most of the poolistas I speak to, wellness outweighs wine time by the pool.

Rothstein taught her five-year-old to swim in her garden: "A great joy." Lowe says her 20-minute daily swims are like "meditation" and help her get into a creative mood (plus, she says, swimming helps with the menopause). In London Robin Chatwin, a colleague of Elwell's at Savills, says that the big trend is for £30,000 counter-current units — or "endless pool machines" — smart, small and versatile machines that generate an adjustable current so you can swim on the spot. (Rothstein has one, but says she hardly uses it.)

Not all pools are bespoke; some like to make a bigger splash. In 2020 the model Edie Campbell built her "house between two lakes" atop a flooded fishery site in Northamptonshire. "If it's hot and sunny we might get in and do a circuit round the island to cool off, or if we have friends over we might swim throughout the day," says Campbell's partner, the writer Hanna Hanra. Then they'll retreat to their snug modern barn above, perched on steel rods over the wild, swampy lakeland, all big windows and light. Its enamelled Bette bathtub is the same green as



Edie Campbell and Hanna Hanra's home in Northamptonshire

the lake water.

Water, water everywhere is life-changing, Hanra says. "The main difference is one of mental health; looking at the water and all who sail on her is not only unbelievably beautiful but also incredibly calming. The house is all windows and each side looks over a lake — the reflections, sky, weather, animals are ever-moving and changing." Plus, it's a big social draw. An inflatable unicorn usually ends up on the lake at parties (sometimes local farmers gatecrash). "There's no upkeep," Hanra says. "And we welcome animals and wildlife — we have a family of geese and some coots and herons and ducks — who are all very lovely to watch paddling about and enjoying life."

In these trying times, get yourself a pal with a pool, pronto. Come on in, the water's lovely.

**The fashion set's five favourite swimming spots**  
*by Helen Atkin*

**London Aquatics Centre,**

**London E20**

Post Olympics, the fashion crowd have made Zaha Hadid's cavernous space their own, with both Rejina Pyo and David Koma staging their latest shows there.

[londonaquaticscentre.org](http://londonaquaticscentre.org)

**The Ned, City of London**

If one pool isn't enough, the Ned has two — the slick rooftop pool reminiscent of a New York terrace, and the spa's pool in the basement (chicer than it sounds). The latter oasis is the fashion editor's choice for a swim pre or post-treatments.

[thened.com](http://thened.com)

**Heckfield Place, Hampshire**

Cara and Poppy Delevingne, Liv Tyler and Derek Blasberg have all stayed at this Georgian pile set deep in the Hampshire countryside, and the hotel's Lower Lake is the perfect spot for a refreshing dip from the wooden pontoon.

[heckfieldplace.com](http://heckfieldplace.com)

**The Newt, Somerset**

At the most lusted-after UK hotel for the second year running, the pool — housed in a converted Georgian barn — is an absolute beauty.

[thenewtinsomerset.com](http://thenewtinsomerset.com)

**Portavadie, Loch Fyne**

The wilds of Scotland have long been a draw for those who fancy a bit of adventure, and Portavadie's picturesque sea pool is a good place to start.

[portavadie.com](http://portavadie.com) ■

