

Age is just a number for Hong Kong's harbour swimmers

June 6 2017, by Laura Mannering



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The city's older generations fill public spaces as the sun rises, practising sword dancing and tai chi, or playing impromptu games of badminton.

On the western tip of Hong Kong Island, they choose to take a dip, rarely put off by inclement weather or imminent typhoons.

Lau Sam-lan, 74, has been swimming there daily for around 30 years, one of many regulars who have been doing so for decades.

"Swimming makes me feel healthier and relaxed," he says, goggles perched atop his head.

"I would feel uncomfortable if I didn't come."

Known as the "Sai Wan swimming shed", with basic changing rooms and showers housed in corrugated iron-clad huts, it harks back to a time in the mid-20th century when there were many others dotted around the harbour.

But with worsening pollution and the arrival of chlorinated public pools, the sheds fell out of fashion.

Sai Wan is the last one standing.

It was built in 1988 by local residents with approval from the government after one swimming shed nearby was swept away by a typhoon and another demolished for redevelopment.



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Below the changing huts there, swimmers dive off a spindly wooden pier with the hazy city skyline in the distance.

Fast commuter ferries ply the channel behind and rickety sampans putter past, with hulking [cargo ships](#) easing by like slow-moving buildings further out.

The swimmers are not worried about pollution—water quality has improved recently as the government tries to clean up the harbour, they say.

There have been four drownings since the shed was built, but that has not put them off.

"I'm not scared, I've even saved two people," says retiree Lau.



The Sai Wan swimmers pay HK\$150 (\$19) a month to use the shed and there are around 80 members of what has become a close-knit community, the youngest in their 50s.

A ring attached to a rope is thrown to anyone in trouble, there is no lifeguard.

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Lita Wong, 62, says visiting gives her a moment of calm before she heads to work at a trading company. She has been swimming there for 25 years.

"I know the people here and I like the environment, although there are a lot of mosquitoes," says Wong.

She comes despite having two shared pools at her apartment complex, saying she prefers salt water.

"The first day I came here I felt scared because of the stones, the waves, the ferries, the hydrofoils," Wong remembers.

"But time goes by and I overcome."



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