



EVERYBODY INTO THE POOL!

**IN ZURICH, THE QUEST FOR SOMETHING
COOL ENDS AT THE NEAREST BADI.**

BY JESSICA BRIDGER

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It is hard not to feel extremely self-satisfied on a late summer afternoon in Zurich, relaxing in the sun. Not only because you perhaps just closed a multibillion euro-Swiss franc M&A deal but because you know that you live in a modern fairy-tale paradise of a city. Where else can you lie out suntanning on a weathered wooden deck, dark aquamarine lake sloshing under you, glass of rosé at your side, steps away from your office in the heart of the city? Zurich is an amazing city for many reasons, and the public baths, known as badis, along the river and lake are certainly not the least of them. If they sometimes seem as perfect as a mid-1990s Abercrombie & Fitch photo shoot with a European city backdrop, this is because they largely are. But this is no accident of urban fortune, nor is it an example of mysterious Swiss superiority. Zurich is a place that leveraged its fortunate position on a lake early, and from its hygienic beginnings to its recreational present, steps were taken to ensure high environmental and open space quality. All with a healthy dash of Swiss sophisticate lifestyle mixed in the blue-green watery bliss.



ZURICH BADI

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FRAUENBAD, FAR RIGHT AND INSET
The badi tradition in Zurich started in the 19th century, with enclosed bathing structures on the city's rivers. Many are transformed into bars at night.

And what water it is. It is clean enough to swim in on a hot summer day. It is potable—Lake Zurich currently provides 70 percent of the city's drinking water. It is clean enough to make ice cubes. It would seem to be alpine fortune, an accidental natural wonder, blissfully free of industrial and human effluent. Actually, starting in the mid-1970s, water treatment effectively reduced pollutants, including algae-blooming phosphorus, sickening *E. coli*, and chemical and biological contaminants. Water treatment plants, overflow sewers, and industrial pretreatment transformed the water from typical urban filth to drinking water. As cities across the globe shift their focus to waterfronts as a public amenity instead of a site of industry, reclaiming urban space, Zurich's badis have the power to inspire. Swiss bathing culture is deeply embedded, with everyone from former Swiss National Bank chairmen eating popsicles at Seebad Enge to teens and grandparents building sand castles alongside whiny toddlers.

The truth of the matter is that Zurich as a whole is somewhat lacking in public open space. The character of the Swiss landscape is almost completely urban, within a pastoral setting. Cities and landscapes, along with villages and mountain peaks, are linked by a high-speed rail and a bus system to rival any other, and one is never very far from urban life. Yet Zurich lacks ample city parks; for all the nature around the city, it has a very binary feeling between concrete and green. While there are many places to promenade in Zurich, aside from the badi and the lakeshore, there are few chances to lie down in public and take a deep breath.

The story of the badi begins with dirty people: the necessity for public health and sanitation as rising industrialization resulted in urban populations that needed a place to take a bath. Zurich had ample options, and a culture of bathing devel-

SEEBAD ENGE, TOP AND INSET
Seebad Enge is the kind of place where you could die happy—or get a tan on your lunch break before easing into cocktail hour, all on Lake Zurich in the heart of the city.

DAVID BIEDERT, TOP; GOOGLE EARTH, BOTTOM LEFT; LUCA ZANIER, BOTTOM RIGHT

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oped. The Sihl and Limmat Rivers flow through the city and into Lake Zurich, all vital to the life of the city for power, hygiene, and more entertaining cultural options. Urban waterways could wash away human effluent and dirt along with factory waste and, as plumbing tended to serve only a few, bathing was outside the home.

Zurich's first public baths included the still popular men-only Schanzengraben (1864) and women-only Frauenbad (1888); both are wooden structures surrounding suspended platforms below the water level for safe swimming, built to be suitably discreet places for the washing of the

masses. Their initial popularity and a growing interest in public health led to the construction of more bathing facilities on the Limmat River and along Lake Zurich, following the model of a sheltering wood structure for privacy. By the mid-20th century, Zurich's public baths had evolved from enclosed bathing areas to more explicitly recreational designs, with exposed suntanning decks and access to open water, some with sand beaches, lawns, and picnic and sport areas.

Zurich is now home to a range of badi options, from the chic Seebad Enge on the lake to the thrilling Oberer Letten or peaceful Mythenquai. Some of the municipally owned badis are run and managed independently, and the people behind the scenes give them a unique character, choosing café options along with music and event offerings. Almost all of the Zurich badis have



**TIEFENBRUNNEN,
ABOVE AND INSET**

The more sedate badis along the lake have lawns and pools suitable for families, games of lawn darts, and picnics.

cafés that serve small meals, coffee, and alcohol, transforming them from recreational places into something more like daytime miniresorts. Come evening, the badis close for swimming as the cold air descends. The Alps, visible on a clear day from the lake, signal that even a late summer night gets too cool to swim, as the water turns dark at close of day.

But some of the badis do not close completely: They transform into open-air bars, cushions piled on decks, lights strung in the trees, lit like Christmas in July for a bit of summer bacchanal. Fire pits crackle and smoke, water sloshes under the wooden platforms. With the thrum of cars in the distance, their lights sweeping over the roads, and yellow rectangles of lit life in buildings, this feels like an insight into the fundamental, evidence of the life of the city itself with its own logic and rhythm.

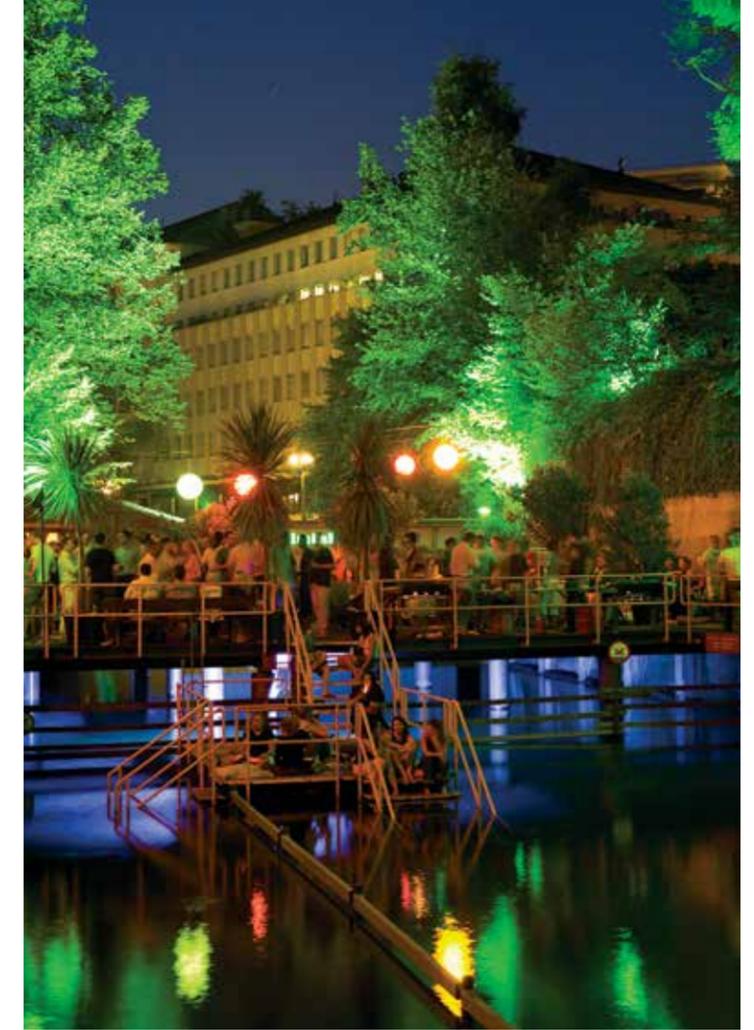
Utoquai, on the lake near the old city, has the feeling of an urbanistic gesture turned in on itself; it is a building-as-beach, compact and closed, with the occasional topless sunbather greeting the city from the mostly concealed rooftop sundeck. Tiefenbrunnen, built in 1950, lies on the eastern shore of Lake Zurich, a woodland setting that is connected to the center of the old city by the Seeuferweg lakeside promenade, built for the 1959 Swiss Horticulture Exhibition, designed in part by Ernst Cramer, one of the best-loved Swiss modernist landscape architects. A self-consciously pastoral area of lawn and trees ends in a shoreline of rock and lake plants. It's a small idyll just south of the old city, made for lounging on the lawn and bathing. Like many of the baths, Tiefenbrunnen has a distinct feature that allows water access: a circular wooden deck enclosing a shallow pool, accessed from the shore via a narrow, floating promenade. An adjacent water park, private and

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**SCHANZENGRABEN,
TOP RIGHT**

Known as Rimini Bar at night, the men-only badi opens up to all at dusk, with music and events.

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constructed later, provides, when the wind is blowing in the right direction, a shrieking child chorus with the audible splash of playful adrenaline. Peace is otherwise undisturbed, the scenography more important than the water access, and the many picnicking people pass the Tilsiter cheese and lean back in the lush grass. Tiefenbrunnen's earlier counterpoint on the western lakeshore is Mythenquai, built in 1922. It features the only true sandy beach of the Zurich badis, and while its park space is not as extensive as that of Tiefenbrunnen, Mythenquai still has the feeling of being slightly removed from the city in a pleasure ground.

Some of the best iced coffee in Zurich is served at Seebad Enge, one of the most sophisticated, activity-oriented of the baths. Designed in 1959 by Robert Landolt, Seebad Enge is a concrete modern-style box, progressive considering the wood of most of the other baths from that time.

It sits in the lake, with pontoon-supported decks and paths connecting to two pavilion-like structures over water. Once the entrance fee is paid, a modest 7 Swiss francs for visitors or a 100 Swiss francs subscription for the season, valid in all badis, changing rooms with lockers enable even nearby office workers a chance for a quick swim. Enge has a wonderful small café, paddleboarding, morning yoga, culinary events, and music sessions. All of this is run by an entrepreneur, Thomas Maurer. Enge was also reconfigured masterfully by architects Meier Hug Architekten in 2004 to be usable year-round, with the addition of another Swiss passion: saunas.

If Enge is the sleek luxury scene bath (it is), then Unterer Letten, on a canalized portion of the Limmat River, is the bath for thrill seekers. The badi is a modified version of the classic model of the Frauenbad: A narrow wooden building separates



the bathing area from the road, and entering from this direction, you arrive at a rectangular wooden platform, suspended above the swiftly moving Limmat. An electric plant along this stretch draws the water, creating a fierce current. Unterer Letten has an aura of outright danger—the movement of the water is so strong that the down-current side of the bath’s structure culminates in a metal underwater grate to prevent swimmers from certain disaster. Diving from the far end of the platform, you float down the length of it, suntanners above, and the thrill intensifies, until you make contact with the grate; the signs warn you to do this feet first. Lifeguards monitor the bath constantly, and it is under their watch that you climb the ladder back to the level of the decking, to bask in the sun until you have the courage to do it all again.

Oberer Letten is upstream from Unterer Letten, and across from the Letten Areal along the river.

Less extreme bathing happens at both locations, where the current is present but calmer, good for a nice float. It is here, on the back side of the city, behind the central train station’s considerable track infrastructure, that the changes in the city come together in the most interesting way. The original structures of Oberer Letten and Letten Areal date from 1952, but by the 1990s they were all but abandoned as the baths crumbled and the area, like many near European central stations, had become a favorite haunt of the narcotics and prostitution trades. Zurich is not often associated with this kind of activity at any noticeable scale, but the city has struggled with petty crime and drug trade like any other metropolitan area, and the wooded and dark canal was a conduit for the mainlining of humanity’s darker desires. Recognizing the solution to the problem could incorporate a spatial response, the city took steps to change the public area of Letten Areal to make

UNTERER LETTEN, ABOVE

Thrill seekers plunge into swiftly moving water close to the city center.

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THE LETTEN AREAL AND OBERER LETTEN, ABOVE

On warm sunny days these river badis fill with Zurich residents ready to enjoy the city’s short summer.

it safer. The city contracted the landscape architect Stefan Rotzler and his firm, Rotzler Krebs Partner Landscape Architects. Rotzler, who carries the moniker of “River King,” is indeed a king of the river: In the small city of Zurich he has worked on many of the projects along the Limmat and Sihl Rivers, including the Letten Areal.

Rotzler’s design intention was clear: to clean up the existing conditions and establish a promenade that refurbished and reestablished the Zurich tradition of a no-frills, no-nonsense bathing structure, and to make the areas for bathing into places where activity could concentrate and focus could be refined to give each a distinct character. The site is a narrow stretch that widens at one point, and the design worked with the original elements and the volunteer vegetation that had weedyly crept in during the seedy interlude. This badi is not separated by a wall-like wooden structure as it is

elsewhere; instead, its elements are set in a linear parade between the road and canal. Concrete seating steps, punctuated by riparian trees, create a spatial transition to a wooden deck along the water, and a café structure, volleyball court, and a second elevated sundeck provide more active amusement. The riverside promenade passes directly through the project in front of the steps, and people traipse down it, as others float slowly by. The project also reserved land, restricting human access, for the protection of the rare flora and fauna that had moved in during the long dark night of the area. Completed in 2005, the bath is popular, with a variety of daytime events and evening amusements. The whole area has improved dramatically, though evenings are a bit colorful still. ●

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