

ESSAY 01

Clean and serene *Wild parks and lofty gardens*

It may be hard to believe amid the steel-and-glass towers of the City or the bars of east London but you are in one of the most verdant capitals in the world. Almost half of the city is green space, from manicured, flower-bedded spaces to wooded idylls just steps from an Underground station.

by Ben Olsen,
Monocle

Beyond its iconic skyline, blockbuster galleries and ubiquitous grey skies – plus *that* family who live in Buckingham Palace – London’s lesser-known claim to fame is its position among the world’s greenest cities. Celebrated in 1990s anthem “Parklife” by indie stalwarts Blur – its lyrics joyously depicting Londoners dodging the rat race, feeding the sparrows and cutting down on their “pork life” to get some exercise among the city’s green spaces – the turf-clad parks of the capital always figure highly on our weekend agenda.

London doesn’t offer respite by the sea or solace atop a nearby mountain. So the city’s wilder spots – and the chance to kick through leaves, breathe fresh air and justify dog ownership – are as good a

tonic as it gets for an eight-million-strong population renowned for being uptight. It hardly needs science to link these green spaces to happiness; a midsummer visit to any of London’s parks would draw a casual observer to the same conclusion. Still, a 2013 academic study found that, regardless of income, class or marital status, proximity to the great outdoors saw virtually all respondents report higher life satisfaction. Luckily, with 47 per cent of the city – from royal parks to rejuvenated nature reserves – classified as “green”, there is certainly plenty to choose from.

Trophy parks include Hampstead Heath – a wide-and-wild expanse with knockout city views from its upper reaches, ponds you can swim in and parakeets – and Regent’s Park, where amid 160 hectares of gardens, lakes and green spaces you can find 12,000 roses, 100 wild-bird species and a wide variety of team sport. Only slightly more feral are the goings-on at neighbouring London Zoo, where passers-by can glimpse what’s happening on the towering Baboon Mountain.

South of the river the stately Greenwich Park – home to the Royal Observatory and the former benchmark of global time – has museums, markets and an award-winning brewery on its doorstep. London’s long summer days allow time for post-work picnics while spring’s emerging daffodils, autumn’s technicoloured leaf fall and the occasional dusting of snow in winter provide a backdrop for a revolving cast of park dwellers. And beyond nature’s seasonal comings and goings you’ll find contemporary-art fairs (Frieze), musical heavyweights (Lovebox Festival) and a touch of Shakespeare (Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre)

“Long summer days, spring daffodils, autumn leaf-fall and winter snow are the backdrop for a revolving cast of park dwellers”

East London’s great green spaces

- 01 Clissold Park, Stoke Newington**
Biodomes and a petting zoo.
- 02 Hackney City Farm**
For being at one with nature.
- 03 Springfield Park, Clapton**
Canal-bordered, contoured gem with great views and a towpath café.

among those events creating a buzz in the city’s parkland.

Yet London’s greater green spaces often lie beyond the major parks that circle the city centre. Previously unloved infrastructure conceals places to connect with nature in far less manicured environs. There’s the regeneration of Regent’s Canal, for example. Running from Paddington to Limehouse via Camden, Angel and Hackney, it has seen the Victorian-era network of locks and towpaths transformed from poorly maintained blackspots to vibrant hangouts – complete with floating cafés, libraries, florists and cinemas – and convenient routeways for Flyknit-toting runners.

Another former transport link reborn is the disused railway line between Finsbury Park and Highgate. It is now a serene tree-lined amble favoured by dog-walkers, dating couples and day-trippers, who can reward their efforts with a visit to one of Highgate’s olde-worlde pubs. This walk will also deliver you close to the atmospheric Highgate Cemetery, resting place of Karl Marx and one of London’s Magnificent Seven cemeteries.

Not that all of London’s natural spots are static sites of preservation: expect to discover innovative green spaces evolving in unusual places. Right in the heart of the chrome-and-glass-clad City you’ll find the Sky Garden. Situated 160 metres above ground level at the top of Rafael Viñoly’s so-called Walkie Talkie building, this landscaped garden in the heavens is open to the public and comes

with vertigo-inducing views of the River Thames. Meanwhile, beyond a series of plans intended to replicate New York’s High Line, one idea set to become reality is architect Thomas Heatherwick’s “garden bridge” over the Thames that will connect north and south London. Dedicated to trees and gardens and billed as a site of leisure with little improvement to the transport network intended, it is living proof that city architects are increasingly keen to green their plans.

And it’s not just the planners. The rise and rise of the vertical garden – adorning everything from gastropubs to US retailers J.Crew and Anthropologie’s stores – has become part of London’s urban design language. And the city’s population is taking control at ground level, too. It started with guerrilla gardening – stealth floral transformations of drab roundabouts and roadsides – and has evolved to community-based pocket-park projects and the revival of the old-fashioned allotment.

In line with the rise of the organic movement, swathes of Londoners have embraced a new grow-your-own ethos. Be it beehives on rooftops, vegetables growing on windowsills or flower-bedecked frontages blooming across suburbia, this groundswell of city greening is helping to bring even more colour and life to the urban landscape. Now that truly is something to sing about. — (M)



ABOUT THE WRITER: Ben Olsen is a MONOCLE writer. Originally from the “middle of nowhere” in southwest England, braving London’s great outdoors for his essay was a breeze. Apart from his narrow escape from Regent’s Park’s rowdy community of geese.