

National

Water sports

# Coming soon: 'chlorine surfers' keen to wave goodbye to packed beaches



**City swell**  
An artist's impression of how the world's first outdoor surfing machine will look when it opens at Silvertown Quays in 2011. Those behind the project hope it will draw 100,000 urban surfers each year

Plan may relieve pressure on Cornish coast but purists say sport cannot be tamed

Robert Booth

Six-foot swells are set to break on the Thames at an attraction aiming to tempt the growing ranks of urban surfers to taste the "quintessential California surf lifestyle" in the unlikely surroundings of a disused dock in east London.

From 2011, the world's first outdoor artificial surfing machine will try to rival the Atlantic breakers of Devon and Cornwall using cleaned river water. The plan is to persuade surfers to take to their boards in Tower Hamlets rather than make the long drive to the West Country, where the surf is sometimes more millpond than Maui.

The £20m Venture Xtreme project at Silvertown Quays has secured outline planning permission, and building work to transform the former grain dock will begin this year. An artificial beach with palm trees, boardwalks and rentable fire-pits and barbecues is planned for post-surf relaxation.

**After-work surf**

The project is the brainchild of Steve Jones, an adventure sports enthusiast who climbs, canoes and surfs and believes that urban surfers, mocked as "weekend warriors" by coast-dwelling locals, want to take to the waves after work instead of going to the gym.

It is being backed by David Taylor, a former regeneration adviser to John Prescott, who is also building 5,000 new homes as part of a development that includes Biotia, an aquarium for London Zoo which will replicate life in the Amazon in a tank the size of 12 Olympic swimming pools.

Surfers can expect to pay £30 for an hour's session that will offer at least

10 waves per rider, each rolling more than 100 metres as the swell spreads from the dock to the wide beach. The wave machine can be set to make the surf break left and right from a central peak, allowing surfers to ride comfortably without fear of collision – a hazard which plagues the increasingly crowded breaks in Devon and Cornwall. Floodlit surfing and screens highlighting riders' best moves aim to attract an estimated 100,000 surfers and body-boarders a year, as well as half a million spectators.

Last year the British Surfing Association estimated that almost half of the country's 500,000 surfers were based outside the south-west where the most consistent waves are available, and 60,000 live in London.

But not everyone is convinced that riding a wave generated by dumping 560 tonnes of river water from a cistern into an industrial dock captures the essence of surfing's Polynesian roots as an almost spiritual pursuit.

"This is not surfing except in its most limited sense," said Drew Kampion, the associate editor of *The Surfer's Path*. "It may replicate real waves and it can teach riding and balance. But 90% of surfing is paddling out among the elements, breathing in the negative ions in the sea air – and wave machines fail to capture any of that."

Nevertheless, inconsistent surf on British shores and time pressure on office workers means technology is being pressed into action. Permission has been granted for an artificial reef off Bournemouth, and an artificial wave is due to come into operation at Swansea's leisure centre this year. Such "standing waves", where a sheet of water is forced over a padded concrete berm are in use across the US, South Africa and Asia.

Fans of artificial waves are sometimes maligned as "chlorine surfers" by their ocean-going counterparts, but Duncan Scott, 29, the chairman of the British Surfing Association and a professional

surfer, said they have a future. "Everything about the experience is fake, but the fun is real," said Scott, who has tackled artificial waves in Japan and South Africa. "Some think high-performance surfing will only really develop when we can artificially replicate the same wave again and again allowing us to perfect manoeuvres which we can then take out into real waves. It won't replace ocean surfing but it will be a good stop-gap, especially if you have to take a gamble and drive five hours to Cornwall from London. You can very easily get there and find a howling onshore wind [which ruins the waves]."

Others hope the London wave will relieve pressure from Cornwall's crowded surf. "This could be a really good way to deal with congestion," said Joanne Hillman, who works at the BSA's office in Newquay, which has Britain's busiest surfing beach. "It is particularly bad in August and the congestion can

cause aggravation between surfers."

Unlike the rugged coast of Cornwall where surfers regularly share the water with seals and sometimes dolphins, the aesthetic in the docks will be industrial chic "which chimes with the heavy industrial equipment required to make the waves work," said Richard Coutts, of Baca Architects, the designer.

"Rather than looking out over the horizon and across to beautiful cliff tops, you will be excited by surfing in the middle of an up-and-coming neighbourhood."

**'Absurd'**

The project will be a departure from the most famous artificial wave in the world at the Miyazaki Ocean Dome in Tokyo, which closed last year due to low visitor numbers. There, faux hillsides were dotted with plastic palms and plaster volcanoes, sand was made from marble chips and the starlit tropical sky was painted onto the ceiling. Jones is convinced the appetite among British surfers will make the Thames project a success.

"Of all the extreme sports, surfing is the biggest in Britain and is the fastest growing," he said.

The wave pool will be thronged with shops, cafes and restaurants, and the beach will be available for hire for corporate entertainment.

Jones's plan to tame the most extreme sports and make them as readily available as a game of squash after work does not stop there. He is also planning a £350m centre in Rotherham with a standing wave, an ice wall for climbers and artificial rapids for white water canoeing.

None of it makes sense to Kampion, who believes surfing is all about harnessing nature's power.

"It's not sustainable," he said. "Huge amounts of energy are used in building these facilities and operating the machinery to make the waves. It seems absurd."

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Post-surf relaxation will take the form of a fake beach with rentable camp fires