

## Bravery or Idiocy? You Decide

> **S**wimmers looking for a way to burn off the calories of their plum pudding this Christmas Day might consider traveling to London, where members of the Serpentine Swimming Club will gather once again to celebrate a 145-year-old tradition called the Peter Pan Cup Christmas Morning Handicap Swim.

At 9 a.m. GMT, club members who have met the training requirements for the event will dive into the sub-40-degree F waters of the club's namesake swimming hole, Serpentine Lake, which forms the border between Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens in London's West End. Then they must aqua-navigate 100 yards to the race's finish line – where club officials present the winner with the Peter Pan Cup.

Among the earliest fans of this famous aquatic event was James M. Barrie, author of the eminently successful children's play, "Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up." Barrie showed up for the first time in 1904, just two days before his play opened in the city's Duke of York's Theatre. He was so taken with the swimmers' bravery (or idiocy, perhaps) that he spent some of the proceeds from his literary successes to purchase a cup to award the swimmer who finished first in the race.

Henceforth, Peter Pan was the name of the race. There is no evidence the playwright ever attempted the chilly swim, but he was familiar with the goings-on in the West End, and referenced the Serpentine Lake in more than one of his plays and books.

In the closing scenes of Peter Pan, the evil Captain Hook has followed Peter and Wendy back to Wendy's home near Kensington



Serpentine Swimming Club

Gardens. Hook hides in a tree to wait for Peter, but what he doesn't know is that nearby, lurking in Serpentine Lake, is his nemesis, the crocodile. When Hook slithers down to re-capture Peter, he lands directly in the croc's gaping mouth, which snaps shut, and Hook is transported back to the lake for digestion.

If Captain Hook's fictional demise isn't gory enough, then consider the real-life fate of Harriett Westbrook, the pregnant wife of renowned romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Westbrook was found drowned

in the lake in December 1816, after leaving a suicide note for her father.

Since that time, there have been no reported sightings of crocodiles or poets' wives in the Serpentine Lake, especially around Christmas, but members of the Serpentine Swimming Club say there are other, more present dangers for yuletide swimmers, including hypothermia and something known as the "cold shock response."

Experts in sea rescue say the initial shock of cold water can cause a gasp response that

kills almost instantly if a victim's head is still underwater when this gasp occurs. The person may inhale water instead of air – and drown. The shock of cold water also can cause the heart to simply stop beating.

According to club records, at least one participant in the Peter Pan Cup Christmas Morning Handicap Swim event has succumbed to this cold shock response.

Consequently, the Serpentine Swimming Club is a rigid enforcer of its rules for the Peter Pan Cup race. The event is for members only; swimmers who show up on race day are turned away. Participants must sign up in advance, and undergo a gradual acclimatization to the increasingly cooler water temperatures by participating in the club's winter race series. Swimmers interested in swimming the Christmas Day event may find more information at [serpenteswimmingclub.com](http://serpenteswimmingclub.com).

Others might prefer instead to snuggle back under the covers on Christmas morning, allowing visions of sugarplums to swim in their heads. <<<

### Other Chilling Adventures

U.S. Masters swimmers don't really have to travel all the way to London to enjoy a bone-chilling group dip this season. Here is a sampling:

Founded in 1903, the **CONEY ISLAND POLAR BEAR CLUB** claims to be the oldest winter bathing organization in the United States. The club sponsors swims in the Atlantic off Coney Island every Sunday, November through April. The club's New Year's Day swims are charity fundraisers. **Go to [polarbearclub.org](http://polarbearclub.org).**

This is serious. San Francisco's **SOUTH END ROWING CLUB** sponsors a members-only New Year's Day Alcatraz Swim. The club's Alcatraz Invitational in July is open to the public. Also in the SF Bay area is the **DOLPHIN CLUB**, another Masters club, that sponsors the Polar Bear Challenge. To qualify, club members (only) must swim at least 40 miles in 90 days, between December 21 and March 21. Both clubs have Masters programs. **Go to [south-end.org](http://south-end.org) and [dolphinsclub.org](http://dolphinsclub.org).**

The **CHICAGO POLAR BEAR CLUB** sponsors a variety of cold-water swims in Lake Michigan throughout the year (some would argue that Lake Michigan is always cold), including a New Year's Day Swim and the March 1 Polar Bear Plunge. Most events are fundraisers. **Go to [chicagopolarbearclub.googlepages.com/chicagopolarbearclub](http://chicagopolarbearclub.googlepages.com/chicagopolarbearclub).**

A bit farther from home ... The **2010 WORLD WINTER SWIMMING CHAMPIONSHIPS** are scheduled for January 22-24 in the stunningly gorgeous mountain resort of Bled, Slovenia. **Go to [2010winterswimming.com](http://2010winterswimming.com).**

**Editor's Note: Swimming in very cold water without protection can result in illness, injury or death. U.S. Masters Swimming recognizes the inherent dangers of such activities. No one should attempt such a cold-water event without first seeking medical advice, and undertaking the proper conditioning and training.**