



Mary-Jane Wiltsher heads to Muswell Hill's The Laboratory Spa & Health Club to banish bad memories of swimming

Not many of us love the smell of chlorine in the morning. Swimming lessons can evoke traumatic memories: communal showers and demonic teachers. Worse still, they can instill bad postural habits, or scare you off the sport for life. So what can be done to rekindle our love of the water?

I arrive, swimming bag in tow, at The Laboratory Spa & Health Club. Nestled next to Alexandra Park, it's the cream-tiled oasis that you might expect. Offering a well-equipped gym and pool, beauty treatments and personal training, this North London retreat has more than a touch of luxury about it.

The reason for my visit is an introductory session in the Shaw Method, a swimming technique used by amateurs and professionals alike. With principles based on the Alexander Technique (used to unlearn ingrained physical responses), the Shaw Method aims to improve body alignment and breathing, resulting in a smoother, more enjoyable swimming experience. Billed as accessible, the Shaw Method is the everyman option for increasing your pool finesse.

My teacher, Maciek Sikora – a passionate open water enthusiast and swimmer – works with clients of all ages and abilities. Having tutored the Shaw Method for eight years, he's convinced of its benefits. "People make the mistake of approaching land and water in the same way," he tells me. "They don't allow for gravitational differences. Bad habits can lead to back problems, especially if you swim regularly. The Shaw Method lets you understand the mind and body in relation to the water."

After discussing what I consider my swimming strengths and weaknesses, Maciek advises that we concentrate on my most accomplished stroke first. "It's often best to begin by improving breast stroke," he explains. "That way you can see a faster rate of

improvement and feel encouraged. A stroke like front crawl might need further sessions."

To start, I swim two lengths, so that Maciek can assess my habits and ability. Next, he begins to break down the stroke into separate movements, making the learning process manageable. Like so many people, I swim with my head above the water, which Maciek explains is an unnatural position, inhibiting movement and causing neck strain. We tackle this first – I learn how to breathe with my face underwater, holding the side of the pool. Once relaxed, you notice how it's a natural reaction to water pressure.

Gliding comes second: face down, breathing out, arms outstretched, shoulder relaxed. Maciek makes me repeat the same routine with my head raised to illustrate the difference, and my movement is completely capped.

The following elements are harder – learning when, and to what extent, to lift your head to breathe. Combining this with alternate arm strokes and a strong kick is the final stage. I don't find the breathing an issue, but I'm used to moving my arms and legs at the same time – a conditioned response that's tricky to counteract. Maciek is patient and thorough, showing me how to lock my thumbs and attempt the kicking and breathing separately, before putting everything together.

I leave feeling surprised at how much I've learnt in an hour, and confident that I've got a good basis for practise. It's easy to see how beginners could have their approach transformed in a single lesson. The secret is out, swim-phobes; throw away your armbands and book your first session. }

labspa.co.uk, 020 8482 3000