

# Down to the River to Play

There's always lots to do around the River Thames, but September is a particularly busy month for London's mighty river. Read on for culture, cruises and captains. By Jo Caird

The River Thames has been a vital asset to London since the Romans recognised its strategic and economic importance and established the settlement of Londinium on its northern banks in 43 AD. Over the centuries, the river enabled London to become a dominant force in world trade, as ships carrying everything from sugar to ivory made their way to the city's dockyards.

The Thames has also been highly prized by the country's monarchs, law-makers and artists, many of whom established themselves at now famous sites along the river such as the **Houses of Parliament** (p. 30), **Hampton Court Palace** (p. 29), the **Tower of London** (p. 36) and the Globe Theatre (the original building burned down in 1613; see the Theatreland Map on p. 81 for **Shakespeare's Globe**, Key 40).

Times have changed – the Thames's role in trade has

diminished and kings and queens no longer live in the spectacular palaces along the river's banks – but the waterway is as important to London today as ever before. Take advantage of the culture and leisure opportunities the Thames affords, particularly at this time of year, and you're sure to experience London at its very best.

## FESTIVAL FROLICS

The *Mayor's Thames Festival* (11-12 Sep. ☎ 020 7928 8998.

🌐 [thamesfestival.org](http://thamesfestival.org)) sees the river play host to a series of fantastically diverse free events. It may be the end of the summer, but that doesn't mean that the fun is over, as the city celebrates with live music, dancing, art, food and fireworks.

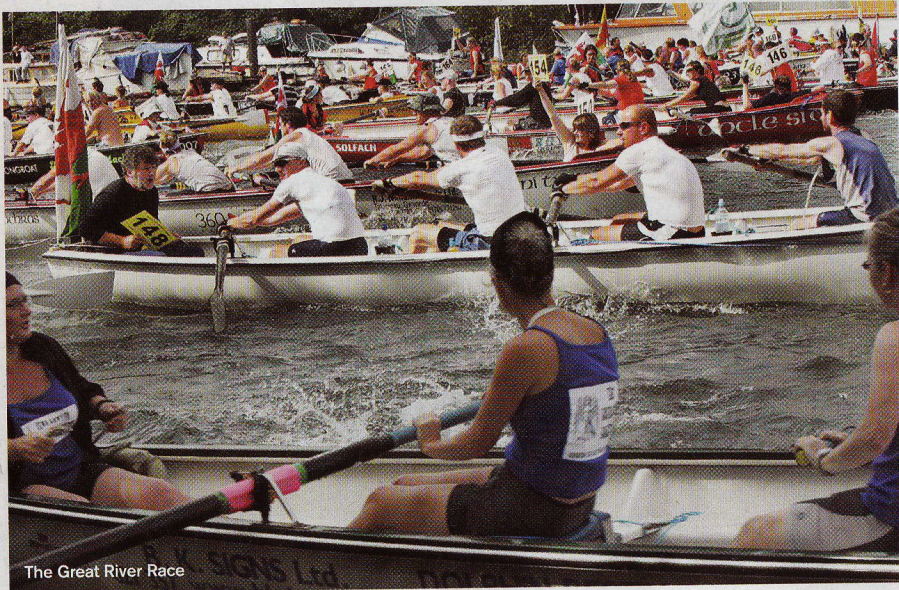
It all kicks off with *River Songs*, a specially commissioned mass choral event at The Scoop amphitheatre, featuring 1,000 London primary school children.



The Mayor's Thames Festival



Feast on the Bridge



The Great River Race





River Thames: Source to Sea at the Tower Bridge Exhibition

War Two to explore London by road, before splashing into the Thames and continuing the experience by water.

### PICTURE THIS

Whichever cruise you choose, a great way to put what you've seen in perspective is to visit the exhibition, *River Thames: Source to Sea*, running **until 30 Sep** at the **Tower Bridge Exhibition** (p. 36). Thirty large-scale photographs show the villages, towns and structures that line the river as it flows the 215 miles from Thames Head near Cirencester to the Thames Estuary. Time your visit to see the magnificent Tower Bridge opening up to allow ships through – it's an awesome sight.

### MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS

The Thames is famous for the Oxford and Cambridge University Boat Race (which takes place in March), but autumn visitors can take advantage of racing fun too, with the *Great British Duck Race* on **5 Sep** (☎ 01691 680 468. [greatbritishduckrace.co.uk](http://greatbritishduckrace.co.uk)) and the *Great River Race* on **25 Sep** (☎ 020 8398 9057 [greatriverrace.co.uk](http://greatriverrace.co.uk)).

The latter, which begins in the Docklands and finishes in Richmond 21 gruelling miles later, boasts a fantastic party atmosphere, while the former, an even more light-hearted affair, sees 200,000 rubber ducks released into Moseley Lock at **Hampton Court Palace** (p. 29). Register on the website to 'adopt' a duck for £2 for a chance to win a first prize of £10,000.

So whether it's art, entertainment or the adrenaline of an old fashioned boat race that you're after, the Thames is the place to be this month. Ahoy!

More music is in store at the festival's *21st Century Hoedown*, a huge line and square dance event with live bands and DJs, as well as at lots of other gigs and show taking place throughout the weekend.

Meanwhile, culture vultures will love *A River Enquiry*, an art and performance piece that includes work by renowned theatre maker Tim Etchells. Food fans will savour the food and drink stalls at the Thames Festival Market and the spectacle of the *Feast on the Bridge*, a harvest celebration taking place on Southwark Bridge, pedestrianised for the occasion.

The festival culminates with a *Night Carnival* featuring 2,000 performers, dancers and musicians, an astonishing illuminated parade and the best fireworks London has to offer. See the website for further programme details.

### CLASSIC CRUISES

Of course, it's not just during the Thames Festival that England's longest river is a great place to visit. A river cruise is an excellent way of taking in a large number of London's top attractions, including **The O<sub>2</sub>**, **HMS Belfast** (p. 29) and the **Royal Observatory** (p. 35).

The *Merlin Entertainments London Eye River Cruise* takes visitors on a 40-minute circular route, and tickets include entrance to the new *London Eye 4D Experience*, a multi-sensory film about the **London**

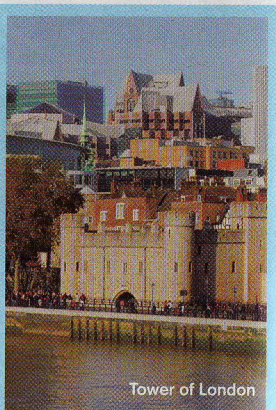
**Eye** (p. 32). The **City Cruises River Red Rover** ticket lets you hop-on and off their services all day, or you can buy tickets for single journeys.

For something a little different, take a trip on the **London Showboat** (p. 41), which offers a night-time cruise along with four-course dinner, dancing and a singer performing hits from West End shows. If jazz is more your thing, then try **Bateaux London's** Sunday lunch cruise with live jazz band. Also available are a range of lunch, dinner and afternoon tea cruises (p. 93).

And for a river trip to keep the kids entertained, a great option is **London Duck Tours** (p. 38), which uses amphibious craft from World

### TOP THAMES ATTRACTIONS

Looking for more great things to do on the riverside? If it's art you're into, don't miss the **Courtauld Gallery** (p. 49) and **Embankment Galleries at Somerset House** (p. 35), and **Tate Modern** (p. 61), exactly opposite **St. Paul's Cathedral** (p. 35). History buffs should head to **HMS Belfast** (p. 29) and the **Tower of London** (p. 36), both of which offer exhibitions and activities perfect for kids. And there's plenty going on further downstream at the **Royal Observatory** (p. 35) and **National Maritime Museum** (p. 54). How to squeeze all these in? Hop on one of the high-speed catamarans run by **Thames Clippers** (p. 41).



Tower of London