monkeying around

Exercise is important! Especially so when your job involves sitting (or standing) at a desk for most of the day. So, now I've justified it, I thought I would write about something which is not only my favourite form of exercise, but also one of my favourite things to do. Climbing!

There are a fair amount of climbing gyms in London so to mix things up from week to week I like to visit different ones every now and again to keep things fresh. Going to the same gym three times a week isn't bad if there's a route you're stuck on and really want to finish it before it's reset or you meet up with a group of people that go there and all climb together, but sometimes a change of scenery is appreciated. In this post I'll give an overview of the three I visit the most and what they have to offer.

the arch (building one, the biscuit factory, north)

Let's start with one that's pure bouldering and a bit special. The Arch is split across three buildings with the first two being within a minutes walk of each other in Bermondsey and North is in Burnt Oak (which I haven't actually visited yet). Membership with The Arch will get you into any of the three buildings and even if you just pay-as-you-go, it's really easy to move between Building One and The Biscuit Factory mid-session. It also closes at 22:30/21:00 on weekdays/weekends so even after a late evening in the office, there's still enough time for a lengthy session.
I usually go to Building One as it's often the quieter of the two and has a nice variation of wall shapes including a looped traverse if you really want to burn yourself out at the end of the night. The route setting seems to favour power a bit more than technique so climbing here often should make you pretty strong and it has a good training room to complement that.

Mile End Climbing Wall (in Mile End) is mostly bouldering with a small, busy roped section which I've never used because of those reasons. Bouldering here on the other hand is enjoyable over a good range of difficulties which have a higher focus on technique than at The Arch. Some of my favourite routes I've completed there recently have been the ones which required balanced, precise and controlled moves. One of my favourite parts about this gym is its covered outside area which is nice to climb and cool down in when it inevitably gets too warm indoors. Downsides are that it closes at 6pm on weekends and between 9pm - 9:30pm on weekdays meaning evening weekend visits are impossible to achieve if you're quite busy during the day.

Castle Climbing Centre

Yes. It's a climbing gym inside a castle (Technically it isn't but it looks kinda like one so I'll take it.) Working with English Heritage, the guys over there have managed to create the coolest gym I've been to and for its 20th anniversary last year they made this video about its development. This gym is the most expensive of the three (unless you're a student) but I feel it's worth the money for the quality of climbing you can do here. The roped climbing is excellent with with walls of varying heights for top-rope or leading and if you don't have a partner, there are auto-belay scattered around too. An added bonus to this gym is the quality of the bouldering, as I've found gyms that are more rope focused tend to have boulder problems that aren't very interesting but that's not the case here. Due to the buildings structure, the climbing walls are scattered over various floors and it's also the first climbing gym I've been to that actually has signposts due to its labyrinthian nature!

so where to go?

All of the gyms I've mentioned cater well to beginners for bouldering and The Arch probably has the higher difficulty ceiling, but if you wanted to do some roped climbs Mile End and Castle both have courses and equipment hire available for that. If you manage to find someone to go with who's registered as an experienced climber you can supervise and teach you (within the gyms T&C's) to save you the course or you can join one of the many friendly clubs around London that meet regularly organises outdoor trips and learn that way.

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