

Beach party

BY CHARLES LEADBEATER

Beaches are giant blank spaces, washed clean every day, on to which all sorts of hopes are projected. But they do not transcend politics—in fact, they represent a third way between market and state

A LONG WITH FOOTBALL and cricket, railway travel and the public library, it is an enduring British innovation, still enjoyed every year by millions of people: the beach holiday.

Most of us carry a store of memories and hopes of beach life, from rockpools and sandcastles to romantic encounters walking along the silver sands on a desert island. Beaches are locations of childhood adventures from the *Famous Five* to Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Rider* series. Properties overlooking beaches are our preferred sites for retirement. Adolescents go to beaches to lose their virginity. Adults go to become children again.

What explains the beach's appeal across generations, eras and cultures? Much of what surrounds beach life has come and gone—piers and bingo halls, art deco hotels and candyfloss. The location of Britons' favoured beaches has shifted from Scarborough and Southend to Spain and the Seychelles. Yet despite these changes in taste and commerce, the idea of the beach as a hallowed space has endured. Why?

The answer is that beaches are places where normal rules and authority do not apply. Beaches are ordered without being controlled. There is no one in charge. They rely on mass self-organisation. They are also largely beyond the reach of corporations, the

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mall and the market: shifting sand does not support billboards and branding. Beaches are a model civic space: tolerant, playful, self-regulating.

The idea that going to the beach was good for you was a creation of 18th-century Britain. Entrepreneurs keen to promote an alternative to the spa hit upon the idea that immersing people in cold salty water might be healthy. One of the first recorded bathing expeditions took to the North sea at Scarborough in 1627. A century later, a string of seaside alternatives to the spas at Bath and Buxton were well established. Before that, beaches had been regarded as hostile places, at best a working space for people who made their living from the sea: fishermen, smugglers, wreckers. Swimming for pleasure, and sunbathing, were unheard of.

By the mid-19th century, the beach had become an aspirational destination, helped along by Byron and Shelley, aristocratic tourists to the Mediterranean and colonists in the south seas. By the early 20th century, despite its chilly waters, Britain had the most developed beach economy in the world. It was spurred by the rising wealth of an expanded middle class; an upper working class with more time and money than their counterparts elsewhere; urban dwellers who wanted to escape from uncomfortably polluted conditions; the early development of the railways; and the entrepreneurial verve of a local business class, responding to increasing demand. By the end of the 19th century, few places along the coast of England and Wales were more than ten miles from a resort.

It helped that nowhere in Britain or Ireland is more than 120 miles from a shoreline. Britain's coast stretches for around 9,000 miles and includes cliffs and beaches formed from almost every major kind of rock. At low tide, this creates an open area of hundreds of thousands of hectares, which is regarded as a vast public property.

British culture was so influential in the 19th and 20th centuries that much of its beach culture travelled around the world. In Montevideo, the beach had a pier, gardens, bandstand and putting green. Many beach cultures still show traces of 19th-century Britain, from the Victorian formalism and fantasy of Brighton to the glitzy elegance of Biarritz, the populist pleasure machine at Coney Island and the hippy culture of California. At the core of each is the beach: a place where the pleasure principle is given freer rein, normal constraints on dress and behaviour are suspended and a mildly carnival-like atmosphere rules. Beaches are giant blank spaces, washed clean every day, on to which all sorts of hopes are projected.

People started going to beaches in search of better health, and while we no longer drink seawater in large quantities, as visitors to 18th-century Scarborough were encouraged to, most of us still like to think

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The Ocean Dome, part of the Phoenix Seagaia resort in Miyazaki, Japan

that sea air, a blast of sun and perhaps a bracing dip will make us feel better. The Romantic poets, and painters such as Turner, introduced the idea that the seashore might be the source of sublime experiences. They helped to turn the beach into an outpost for solitary self-reflection and rediscovery, a source of therapy—a theme now echoed in posters advertising beaches from Queensland to Oregon. Maintaining that sense of escape these days takes time and money. We have to pay handsomely to do without luxury.

For most people, beaches are gregarious places for fun and games, cricket and football, volleyball and kites. But beaches have never just been a place for wholesome family entertainment. From the Baiae, a legendary Roman beach resort and gay paradise, to Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*, the beach has been a place for sex that breaks the rules. Beaches and their surroundings are places where people jump in at the deep end. Resorts are

where people go both for illicit affairs and to stare deeply into the eyes of the one they love.

For elderly people, beaches are just good to look at. As Paul Theroux noted in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, his 1982 tour of the British coastline, on every beach road there are parked cars with old people in them, often silently munching on their sandwiches, wearing coats, drinking tea, keeping vigil, perhaps vaguely hoping to see something coming from over the horizon. And it is because beaches are such idealised places, where a natural co-operative order is meant to reign, that they also provide the perfect setting for some of our most savage dystopias, from *Lord of the Flies* to *The Beach*.

AS A DAY on the beach unfolds, everyone takes their chosen spot, adjusting minutely to where everyone else has pitched their towel or windbreak. There are no regulations, zoning restrictions, fences or white lines to tell you where to go.

Other than the odd lifeguard to look after safety, no one is boss. The sense of order emerges as each new group joins the throng. There is no permanent property. The tide sweeps the beach every day, so the next day's colonists have to start again from scratch. The order will not be exactly the same two days running. While popular beaches are crowded with people in close proximity, they are generally civil places. People do not interfere with one another. Disputes between neighbours are rare. Excessive noise is generally frowned upon. Everyone generally gets along, avoiding stepping on one another's towels or crossing impromptu football pitches.

Complexity theorists have a fancy name for this: they call it emergence, when an overall order emerges from a system with many players, in which no one person is in charge and every player is adjusting to local conditions. Beaches are democratic and egalitarian in spirit. That is not to say that there are no posh resorts. But generally the beach is a place where social competition is reduced to fashions in swimsuits, surfboards and body bronzing. There is no room for BMWs, Mont Blanc pens and other signifiers of status. On the beach, status goes to the young, fit and handsome. Generally beaches are places where classes, ages and sexes mix and mingle. They were among the first places in the 19th century where women could openly enjoy themselves along-

side men. Quite different people have always been able to get what they wanted from the same beach resorts: Queen Victoria and Karl Marx were both fond of the Isle of Wight.

Beaches are home to oddities. In architecture, there is the pier, fantastical buildings such as the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, and art deco hotels. There's odd food that you don't get anywhere else, like rock. You are carried around by odd modes of transport—narrow gauge railways, trams, cliff lifts and cable cars—and amused by odd forms of entertainment: Punch and Judy, putting greens and crazy golf. No wonder people feel able to wear odd clothes and expose their bodies in ways they never would in a city. Beaches are places where people don't have to behave normally.

Beaches are vital to the world's publishing industry. People too hassled to read at home do so on the beach. Yet despite all the reading, the beach is largely beyond the work ethic: it's still the best place on which to do nothing, en masse. That is partly because the beach is a hostile environment for modern technology. Sand and computers do not mix, though silicon is an ingredient in both.

A day on the beach at St Ives over Easter 2004 was as resolutely low-tech as Scarborough 1963: wind-breaks and sandwiches, games of cricket and football, toddlers rockpooling with nets in search of crabs, and boys with their fathers wielding small plastic spades



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to dam up streams. The technological acceleration and institutional upheaval that has marked so much of our lives in the past 30 years has left the beach largely untouched.

Beaches are also still largely non-commercial spaces. True, commerce abounds around the beach. But cafés and shops tend to be set back, closer to the land than the sea, while the beaches themselves are left virtually devoid of overt branding. Those that ply their wares on the beach too insistently are regarded as a hassle. Even the competitive posturing of a Bondi or Rio is more about pectorals and buttocks than fashionwear. If the shopping mall sums up our public commercial culture, the beach is close to the other end of the spectrum.


Yet that does not mean the beach is part of the formal, organised public domain, beloved by old-fashioned social democrats. A beach is civic without being overseen by a body of well-meaning professionals—beach wardens—telling us where to put our towels and how long we may stay. We do not need lessons in beach etiquette.

Given the special place that beaches hold in our lives, it should be no wonder that people want to replicate elements of beach culture in other walks of life. The Center Parcs leisure villages are centred around a large dome containing an artificial pool with spaces akin to beaches. In Japan, the Phoenix

Seagaia Resort has a 462-foot-wide ocean with a 280-foot-wide beach made from crushed marble. The temperature is controlled by 120 sensors, which automatically open a vast retractable roof. Paris and Brisbane have both created city beaches and Bob Geldof was trying to establish one in London, until Southwark council rebuffed him. Many primary school classrooms and playgrounds have a little bit of beach available in the form of a sandpit. These attempts have not gone far enough. Beach culture should infiltrate our lives more deeply.

The beach has long outlived the cotton and coal industries that spawned it as a mass destination for the northern working class in the 19th century. Now it acts as an escape route from commerce and branding, technology and corporations. Not only do we like what beaches do for us as individuals, we like the kind of society we keep on beaches: civil, playful, active, open. The beach is a prime example of successful collective self-organisation, without either the heavy hand of the state or the competition of the market. Our summer holidays are a homage to the third way.

As Alex Garland puts it in *The Beach*, there is the beach and the rest of the world. And as we reluctantly drag ourselves back to the world at the end of our two weeks there, how many of us wish that our offices and companies were governed, at least for some of the time, by the spirit of the beach? ■



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