Introduction

Come summer, the beach was the center of the world. For a typical Southern California teenager, the attractions were body surfing, lazing around, and girls. Summers went by in a blur of sun, sand, and surf before the water got cold and school beckoned. It was an idyll. Much later, having become an historian but fortunate to live in a beach town, I came to recognize there was a history of going to the beach. It was one of those moments when one realizes that something very familiar—I still loved the beach—also had an intriguing past. Once aroused, this curiosity did not vanish but lingered. Did people in the past go to the beach for the same reasons I did, or did they seek other pleasures? This book, then, is my search of discovery. Why did people go to the beach and what did they do there? It started a long time ago.

The beach was the original end and beginning. The land was home for humanity, the sea the great unknown. The beach was the boundary and last place of safety for our distant ancestors before the restless sea crashed into the sand. The land nurtured them, while the sea promised little and remained a great mystery. Yet the shore attracted them. Perhaps it was the daily drama of sunsets and sunrises and the moods of the sea, but more likely it was access to food. During the summer, mussels, oysters, crabs, and fish were available and certainly varied their diets. Footprints in the sand, left thousands of years ago, mark their passage. Homo sapiens appear to have originated in the Okavango wetlands in present-day Botswana and moved under changing climate

conditions toward southern Africa.[1] At two sites in South Africa, Langebaan and Nahoon, preserved footprints record their visits to the beach over one hundred thousand years ago.[2] Recently archaeologists have found that a group of Neanderthal children cavorted at a beach in Normandy eighty thousand years ago.[3] One can imagine them splashing around in the surf before retreating inland away from the storms of winter on the exposed beach. So we know that, however they perceived the ocean, the beach was a place of relative safety.

Our most ancient ancestors, then, walked upon the beaches and contemplated the sea until they finally took to the sea. With rafts and canoes, they could begin to fish and finally use the sea as a convenient way to explore other lands. The more time they spent at sea, the more they learned to read the moods of the ocean and placate the god who controlled those moods. Over time, more and more people came to accept the sea and build their habitations close to the beach. Some would even become "sea people" in that they lived on, and adapted to, the perils of the sea. Polynesians created the catamaran and with it ventured over hundreds of miles of open water in their Pacific Ocean migrations.[4] As the oceans of the world slowly came to be the scene of more and more human endeavor, they also came to be regarded as a place of religious significance. Various cultures assumed there were gods or spirits who influenced the winds and the waves and appealed to them for a safe voyage or relief from storms.

Ocean water was also imagined to have special powers. Jews had an ancient ceremony, Tashlikh, where the community, at the new year, cast bread on the water in order to erase the sins of the last year. Many communities in France and England went to the sea every year to spend a few days splashing around in a rite of renewal. These are traditional practices that are tied not to medicinal theory, but to time-honored practice and superstition. The comfort brought to the practitioners was real and appreciated. The Romans, however, went further and created a haven at Biaie on the Bay of Naples where they found very many comforts of a more immediate sort, among them licentiousness, a reputation that would always be associated with resorts, where the restraints of one's community were loosened and bathing costumes exposed the body.

However, it was medical theory, accepting the efficacy of seawater, that would create a new phenomenon—the beach resort. Healing waters were nothing new to many people. The medicinal qualities of mineral springs were highly regarded in many cultures. A dip in the water or just a glass of it was enough to derive a benefit. However, a rival arrived in

the early eighteenth century when English medical practitioners published books asserting that seawater was therapeutic and curative. In a world with few cures, the rush to the seaside was on, and England created the first beach resorts. Resorts emerged right at the beginning of this movement because they provided needed services such as housing, meals, and entertainment to anyone who sought the comfort of seawater. They would be, from now on, the new site for leisure and recreation in a world of constant change that they would reflect. The existing mineral-spring spas, such as Bath, provided models for the early entrepreneurs who were creating the resorts. The recommended therapy at the sea consisted of no more than a brief dip or in some cases a drink of seawater. Whatever the benefits of the water, beaches also had the drama of the sea. In this they had an advantage over beaches on lakes or rivers, which, however nice the setting, did not have the therapeutic power or the beauty of the ocean. In the long run they would also eclipse spas in popularity, as again they had the ocean versus a building containing the spring where one could take a dip or drink the mineral water. There was no comparison—the ocean won.

In time, a resort might be a single hotel on a small beach or a number of large hotels serving an extensive shoreline. Vacation homes accompanied the hotels, as did boarding houses and other accommodations, all making up part of the resort. The hotels, however, were central, for besides being a place to stay and eat, they also provided entertainment. This latter was important, for the therapeutic dip was a matter of moments, leaving the remainder of the day to be filled with diversions.

At first, only the English upper class—aristocrats, gentry, bankers, and merchants—could afford time for leisure and to meet the expenses of vacations. They also had the means to get to the sea in that they had horses and coaches, among the most expensive attributes of elite status. The early resorts were designed to meet their demands for appropriate housing and services, and when it came to entertainment, they expected the familiar world of assembly rooms where ladies and gentlemen danced, played cards, and had supper. Soon the hotels would absorb the role of the assembly rooms. This Jane Austin world would continue for some time.

Beach resorts, however, did not remain an English monopoly. There was a slow and steady geographic expansion. They developed on the Continent, first in France, and finally, all the way across northern Europe to the Baltic, where Germans turned to the sea. In France, the early resorts were on the English Channel, but soon enough bathers could be seen in the Mediterranean in places such as Nice. The expenses

of travel and upkeep meant that here, too, the visitors were members of the upper classes. The emphasis on the therapeutic benefits of salt water pervaded these resorts as well. Americans joined the rush to the beach in the 1820s. Long averse to the sandy shore that attracted only hunters and fishermen, they finally accepted it as a therapeutic site because they read the same medical books as did the English. Soon enough, rustic resorts, in comparison to the English, sprang up from Cape May, New Jersey, to Nahant, Massachusetts. While not as aristocratic as the British and European beach resorts, nonetheless the American resorts were dominated by local elites. Here too, it took a degree of prosperity to get to the seaside and then stay there.

While the early resorts served elites, during the nineteenth century their exclusive reign came to an end with the coming of the railroads. As long as horse-driven carriages were the only way to reach the seaside, elites had a monopoly, but the railroads changed the social composition of the resorts. They attracted customers by dropping fares and running excursion specials, permitting middle- and even some working-class visitors the chance to go to the seaside, even if it was just for the day. Their demands for services and entertainment differed from those of the elites. The hotels were usually beyond their reach, so boarding houses flourished. Resorts had to adapt and decide which group they were going to entertain. If not just aristocrats, their offerings had to be in tune with popular culture. Dance halls and music halls, which blossomed everywhere in the middle of the century, popped up at the resorts. They would bring an end to the assembly rooms. Local entrepreneurs financed these additions plus piers, aquaria, towers, and winter gardens, all to entertain the visitors. The constant demand for something novel for the repeat visitor drove these entrepreneurs to explore every new innovation. As a result, while all resorts seized upon electricity for lighting and power, some used it to turn night into day and to create new and thrilling rides, such as the roller coaster. They evolved into amusement parks of a new and daring kind prepared to entertain the masses. Yet they never forgot that they were, in fact, beach resorts and had to have the facilities that catered to the guests who came to enjoy the water.

The coming of the railway in the nineteenth century affected resorts everywhere, although there were always differences in national outcomes. Americans quickly accepted the steam engine on land and water, while the French were cautious, as railroads had security implications in case of invasion. Yet, in the end, even they could not deny the benefits of steam power. This new mode of transportation caused a significant

expansion in the number of resorts. The bigger resorts tried to please nearly all classes, while those operating on a smaller scale sought to build facilities for an appropriate social group. By the end of the century, visitors were counted in the millions. With this expansion, new problems, such as a growing volume of untreated sewage, presented a challenge to the resort towns. The diseases that accompanied sewage directly challenged the claims for cures available at the sea, so it had to be dealt with. As always, growth brought new problems.

Nineteenth-century expansion, no matter how impressive in creating many new sites, was nothing compared to the explosion in the twentieth century. Powerful generators of the increasing number of vacationers were the widespread prosperity and paid holidays, which became a common practice first in the West and then elsewhere. Nations such as South Korea and China emerged as economic powerhouses, and their people joined millions of others in spending their leisure time at the seaside. Exotic resorts on the Maldive islands, the Andaman Sea, the Philippines, and in Thailand suddenly became go-to places for international tourists. Nearly anyplace with a stretch of sand now became a potential resort as hotel chains and entrepreneurs sought places to be developed. Local communities sometimes found themselves overwhelmed by tourists who had scant regard for their societies and cultures. It was a new form of colonialism. Nonetheless, beach resorts had become a worldwide phenomenon, so millions of holiday makers would find the beach of their dreams.

Other drivers of change were national governments and new modes of transportation. Governments decided that developing tourism was a way to boost regional development and national prosperity. Countries such as Mexico and Spain, each with wonderful beaches, aided the development of their coastal resorts and, while local entrepreneurs stilled played a role, now the big international hotel chains became involved. Besides the governments, transportation innovation played a role as the automobile and the airplane, especially jets, carried people near and far. In the countries that already had resorts, getting to the beach became a quicker journey as new highways whisked families there. The airlines, meanwhile, were able to transport elite travelers to tropical resorts no matter how remote. Like the railways, the airlines also developed excursions, or charter flights, and the low-cost airlines that emerged later made it possible for working-class tourists to leave behind local beaches and experience exotic locales. Suddenly vacations could be had in any number of new resorts such as those in Torremolinos, Spain, or in old favorite locales such as Miami Beach, Florida.

As beach resorts have now been with us for over two centuries, it is easy to record how they have evolved in other ways. Therapeutic dipping started things off in eighteenth-century England and remained important, but recreation in the form of swimming and a plethora of other activities later came to dominate the seaside. Now rather than a quick dip to meet medical needs, adults and children cavorted on the beach and plunged into the water to challenge the waves. As activity changed, so did the costumes of the bathers. To get the full effect of salt water in seeking a cure, it was best to be naked, but that was not possible for aristocratic women in these societies. In the eighteenth century, shapeless gowns from neck to ankle covered women who only expected a quick dunking and then a return to the beach. Men believed they had a natural right to bathe nude. How to maintain modesty? In England the sexes were separated by space, with men at one end of the beach and women at the other. If the beach was not big enough, then they were separated by time—men in the morning and women to follow. While for men bathing naked was nearly universal, still each country dealt with male nudity differently. In France and America, mixed bathing was accepted while clothed. However, men could bathe nude very early in the morning so long as they were out of sight. Afterwards, it was expected that they would be dressed in appropriate bathing attire for the rest of the day and accompany women to the beach. Issues of gender and the body remained. Decade by decade, shorter and shorter costumes for men and women were the trend as they engaged in more and more physical activities. Then in the early twentieth century, sunbathing became fashionable and a tan came to be considered a sign of good health, so bathing suits had to expose more and more flesh. Cartoonists never missed the chance to focus on sex, and romance novels soon followed. The ultimate in exposure was realized in the bikini in the 1940s. The acceptance of skimpier suits was never universal. For instance, in traditional religious communities, protecting female bodies from inappropriate male viewing led to the burkini for Muslim women. In secular countries, the bikini and toplessness, not to mention nudity, have flourished on the beach. These and many other aspects of beach life evolved, always with an eye to national culture and style. The French, for instance, always led the way in beach fashion.

By the twenty-first century, beach resorts have become a mature industry. Some resorts are on a grand scale, encompassing as much as sixty miles of shore lined with hotel and condominium towers. With such huge facilities and millions of visitors, they are a long way from the

small resorts of the eighteenth century. They are also embedded in contemporary popular culture through movies and television, mostly through the popularity of surfing and the glamour of lifeguards. Some beaches have even become iconic, such as those in Southern California and the Riviera. With greater and greater numbers involved, new issues have arisen, none more important than that of access. This is especially so on the public beaches, which have flourished in the twentieth century. While the right to access below the mean high tide line is nearly universal, the problem is getting to the high tide line. If a recalcitrant property owner does not want to provide access across his or her land to the beach, disputes are sure to follow. Private property rights versus public access is, and will remain, a volatile issue. Access has also been a problem for those who are regarded as minorities by the dominant culture. Black folks in America struggled to find a place on segregated beaches, as did Jews and Latinos.

There is one looming threat to beaches that may put an end to these disputes, and that is sea level rise. Signs of the rise now come with every king tide as seawater sloshes across the beach, envelops the sea wall, and rolls right over the coastal roads. Predictions of what is to come are dire. Depending on the date chosen—2050, 2100, or later—the rise will be anywhere from three feet to fifteen feet. The latter will be catastrophic to resorts everywhere. Beaches will be erased and hotels moved inland, hopefully to new beaches, or in some instances having to become hotels with nice swimming pools. Some governments, mostly local, are beginning to accept the inevitability of the rise and are elaborating policies to try and meet the threat, but in many places the costs can only be met by national governments. It is one thing to deal with the effects of a hurricane or cyclone, quite another to turn back the sea on a permanent basis. No government can face that with equanimity. So, beach resorts are about to face their ultimate challenge.

Eighteenth-century Brighton and modern Waikiki are very different communities. A long stretch of time lies between them. In that time beach resorts have evolved to absorb many technological innovations and social changes. This book attempts to explain how they came about and how people have experienced those changes.