

# why are we drawn to the beach?

## A Brief History...



About the author  
Andy Cingolani

*Andy Cingolani is a writer and editor with more than 25 years of experience in a wide range of industries. His background includes both writing and account executive positions for such widely-known hospitality brands as Disney, Wyndham, Marriott and Hilton. He has also done extensive writing in the healthcare field for Orlando Health and Florida Hospital. A native of St. Louis, Andy has lived in Orlando, Florida for more than 30 years.*

What is it about the beach that makes us want to go there? Why does the place where land meets ocean hold such allure for so many people? For nudists, the beach is the perfect place to enjoy the sunshine and cool ocean breezes without clothes getting in the way. Still, while there are plenty of activities people like to do at the beach – swimming, enjoying nature, sunbathing, spending time with family – there are only a few that can *only* be done at the beach. So unless we're talking about people who are passionate about surfing or building sandcastles, what is the big deal?

Well, for starters, this wasn't always true. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, which started in the mid-18th century in Britain, the seas were a source of mystery and fear, and the beach brought people right to the edge of it. At that point, everything that was known about the ocean was based on the fanciful accounts of hardy seafarers who told tales of terrifying sea monsters, beautiful-yet-deadly sirens, and maelstroms capable of devouring entire ships. Standing on a beach would have felt like standing at the edge of a cliff and being afraid of heights.

After the Industrial Revolution started, upper-class people started to become more aware of their own health and how being in a natural setting could improve it. A perception started to take hold that regarded the ability to perform physical labor as a sign of strength. This left many among the elite classes feeling as though they were more fragile and weak by comparison. So they traveled to the seashore to bathe in the ocean, which, along with breathing fresh air and doing strenuous exercise, was thought to provide health benefits and treatment for a number of conditions, including depression, leprosy, rickets, and gout.

This coincided with a work structure that, for the first time in history, gave large numbers of workers time off. Machines were suddenly able to perform tasks that workers previously did manually, like manufacturing fabrics and threshing wheat. This made it possible to plan time off as part of a production schedule. Farming, on the other hand, didn't allow for days off because animals had to be fed, and cows had to be milked every day.

A century later, the beach started to mean something new and different to Europeans. As cities and industry grew in lock-step, the people who lived and worked there started to view nature, and especially beaches, as a place where they could escape from the grind of day-to-day living. Another important development in the historical arc of beach travel was the introduction of train travel starting in about the 1830s in Britain. Within about 20 years, rail lines crisscrossed most of Europe, allowing middle-class families to head to the beach purely for enjoyment. As more and more people started spending time at beaches, as well as nearby resorts that were built to meet the demand, they started socializing with each other, making the experience even more enjoyable.

Expanding train travel also drove beach tourism in the United States. In the late 19th century, Henry Flagler traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, at the suggestion of his wife's doctor due to her failing health. After she died, he continued south to St. Augustine and grew to love the area. Eventually, he built tracks and established rail service from the Northeast U.S. to South Florida, leading to a beach tourism boom that established Florida as a tourist destination.

Throughout the 20th century, spending time at the beach for fun became engrained in the culture throughout most of the world. Movies like *Beach Blanket Bingo* in the 1960s all the way to TV shows like *Baywatch* in the 1990s show how important a place "the beach" holds in popular culture.

So the next time you stretch out on your favorite beach towel and dig your toes in the sand, remember that you're experiencing a fairly recent phenomenon: Enjoying your time on the beach, as opposed to being terrified of what's in the ocean! ●

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