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## The Beach, From Invasions to Bikinis

By AMANDA FOREMAN

School is out. Casual Fridays are back. Hot lattes have given way to icy Frappuccinos. According to the Farmer's Almanac, we have entered the Dog Days of summer, because from now until Aug. 11, Sirius, the Dog Star, will chase the fiery sun across the sky.



For millions of Americans, relief is a day at the beach. It took many centuries for Europeans to realize that their beaches could be more than just a welcome mat for invaders. Meanwhile, across the Channel, the attitude of the English bordered on the eccentric. With the encouragement of the medical profession, they drank the seawater when in hot weather and dunked themselves in the cold.

The beach in its modern incarnation was invented on July 22, 1736, by the Rev. William Clarke and his wife. After a day spent "plashing" in the waves (the initial "s" came later), Rev. Clarke recorded the first known description of a seaside holiday. "We are sunning ourselves upon the beach at Brighton," he wrote to a friend. The views were stunning, the lodging cheap and the fish as fresh as could be: "The place is really pleasant...Come and see," he urged.

From then on, there was no stopping the English. Their love affair with the beach was complete and absolute. At first, they were drawn to the seaside by its wildness and potential danger. "There is a rapture on the lonely shore," sighed the Romantic poet Lord Byron in "Childe Harold." "I love not man the less, but Nature more."

Soon the West set about taming the beach with pleasure piers, deck chairs and donkey rides. The Wright brothers briefly revived the ancient mysteries of the seashore: There they harnessed the primordial forces that swirl along the edge of civilization. Taking advantage of the four elements—water, earth, wind, and fire—Wilbur and Orville succeeded in flying their plane for almost 900 feet until the rudder broke.

But by 1910, when T.S. Eliot began to write his dirge on modern life, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the seaside had come to symbolize the essence of bourgeois respectability. For the sensitive types of Harvard or Bloomsbury Square, nothing was more emblematic of humanity's spiritual decay than a bucket-and-spade holiday. "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" laments Prufrock about his ineffectual life. "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach."

Luckily, the beach was rescued from its descent into moral decrepitude by the famous fashion editor Diana Vreeland. In 1946, Vreeland was sunbathing in St. Tropez when she spotted a young girl wearing little more than two triangle cutouts. On learning that the sexy get-up was called a bikini, Vreeland announced that she had discovered "the most important thing since the atom bomb." The "swoonsuit," as she dubbed it, revealed "everything about a girl except her mother's maiden name." The seaside would never be the same again.

A year later, Vreeland caused international outrage by featuring a bikini-clad model on the May cover of Harper's Bazaar. Spain, Portugal and Italy immediately banned the bikini from public beaches; women in the U.S. nervously reverted to their one-pieces. Vreeland responded: "It's that kind of thinking that holds people back for thousands of years." Her fears proved groundless. The bikini was here to stay.

By the 1960s—thanks to good vibrations, a girl from Ipanema and an itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka-dot bikini—the beach had recovered its verve. The current state of Nirvana followed soon after, when women's beach volleyball turned professional in 1986.

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