



The Last RESORT

A CHRONICLE OF PARADISE,
PROFIT, AND PERIL
AT THE BEACH

SARAH STODOLA

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Prologue

I grew up, as you probably did, with an ingrained concept of the beach as shorthand for paradise. Life's a beach, the beach is great, and so is life, if you're at the beach. I accepted that there was no more coveted environment than 82 degrees, with a light breeze tousling the leaves of a palm tree as it provided sun-dappled shade for a lounge chair and a piña colada, a soundtrack of lapping waves underscoring the vibe. Still today, I can think of no more surefire way to elicit expressions of envy from another person than by mentioning a recent trip to such a place. This person will "hate you." "Tough life," she will say, enjoying the sarcasm. Such is the position the beach resort has attained today. It plays host in our collective imagination to the highest form of leisure.

It's a phenomenon that has always struck me as thorny. The envy is unexamined, almost compulsory. It treats loving the beach as an innate human characteristic, although before the late eighteenth century, the oceans mostly instilled fear in general populations the world over and were avoided altogether if possible. Even at the first seaside resorts, the beach and ocean were not cherished, but tolerated in service of one's health.

A couple of centuries later, the allure of the beach resort came to be considered self-evident, a truth seldom questioned. The presumed universal appeal of beaches has been mirrored back to us by the media, leaving little room for serious consideration of the major global industry that has bred economic and social inequalities in many a locale, as well as contributed to the climate crisis while coming under existential threat from it—a paradise both threatening

and threatened. With regard to these lapses, *The Last Resort* is meant as both corrective and warning.

I consider my relative newcomer status to resort life to be an asset in this pursuit. Mine is not a family historically concerned with the beach. My parents grew up in small towns in Wisconsin, where the oceans were irrelevant to everyday life. As a child, my mom took an annual family road trip in the 1950s to Florida, on two-lane Highway 41 all the way. The journey took three days in each direction. Once in Florida, she tells me, the family spent more time inland than at the shores. My dad saw the ocean for the first time at age twenty-two—the Indian Ocean, as it turns out, after he arrived in Tanzania with the Peace Corps. I grew up with their view of the beach as incidental, although I did recognize its elevated role in the culture at large, from movies and television to the aforementioned envy I saw when classmates traveled to beach destinations during school holidays.

When I finally began traveling to beach destinations regularly, as a concession to a relationship with a surfer, I came to the culture as an outsider. By this time, I was publishing travel journalism, which familiarized me with the always-sunny disposition required of destination coverage. After so many hours spent endorsing places as a default position, I knew I wanted to look at them through a more critical lens.

This aligned with my tendency to approach my beach breaks analytically, and anthropologically. I often enjoyed the sun and the snorkeling and the views, but I found the sanitized bubbles in which resorts existed curious. Their common culture, so widely treasured, necessitated further examination. To be honest, beach resorts weirded me out a little—their insistence on indolence, and on forgetting the world outside, both the one back home and the one immediately beyond the property; their soundtrack of Bob Marley and Jimmy Buffett; the amount one has to fork over for a margarita. I've often found resorts' peculiar brand of utopia more disquieting than relaxing. At the same time, I've seen economies and cultures transformed by them. Sometimes for better, and sometimes for worse, but always in ways that seem coated with ambivalence.

I've traveled around the globe to destinations that have been singularly affected by beach tourism, to understand who goes where and why, to document resorts' underreported role in economies large and small, and to contend with climate change's impact on them. I've chatted at the pool bar with honeymooners and hedge funders and spring breakers. I've visited once-remote villages that have been altered completely by the arrival of a resort. I've seen how the explosion of the global middle class is forcing travel companies to evolve and creating new ones to compete with them. I've seen prominent resort areas going to great lengths to preserve the eroding shorelines that buttress their prosperity, even as their behavior contributes to an unsustainable carbon footprint via air-conditioning, excessive water consumption, golf courses, coral reef damage, and persistent emissions generated by importing food and drink to remote locations. My hope is that, together, the stories in *The Last Resort* will create a nuanced understanding of the beach resort industry where none currently exists.

To see the locations necessary in completing the research, long-haul flights were often required, making me an accessory to the industry's growing carbon footprint. I purchased offsets for all flights taken in service of writing this book, while acknowledging that doing so is not enough to rationalize the emissions.

Unease with the concept of the beach as paradise may be sinking into our psyches. In 2021, despite the promise of revived international travel during the waning days of the COVID pandemic, we largely sat on our sofas, presented with a string of TV shows and movies in which things go sideways at the beach: In *White Lotus*, guests and staff at a five-star resort in Hawaii grapple with their place on the spectrum of white privilege and inequality. In M. Night Shyamalan's *Old*, a family on vacation heads to a beach that compresses their entire lives into a single horrifying day. And *Nine Perfect Strangers*, filmed in Byron Bay, Australia, starred Nicole Kidman as a wellness guru with sinister undertones running a resort for troubled wealthy folks. Even *Bachelor in Paradise*, the stalwart show putting former contestants on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* together on a beach in Mexico, documented the cast being evacuated in the face of an approaching tropical storm. The

beach resort became a de facto setting for stories probing our contemporary fears and concerns.

“The Last Resort” on one hand implies an end to the beach vacation as we know it. With sand that can’t be relied on to stay in place, and water threatening to inundate properties, developers may eventually find the current resort model untenable. It’s happened before: There was a last resort in Baiae, ancient seaside escape of the Roman elite, and a last resort in Rockaway, New York, once the preeminent beach destination in America. On the other hand, we are unlikely to see the global beach resort’s definitive demise in our lifetimes. We may instead have a last resort of another kind, one that comes when all other options have been exhausted, when we’ve failed to curb climate change and have no choice but to accommodate its directives. This book aims to find out where the beach resort is headed, as a last resort.

One

I'm Never Coming Home

Thailand and England

When I first encountered Railay, a small peninsula of unreasonable beauty protruding into Thailand's Andaman Sea, I was wallowing in the demise of the major relationship of my twenties. The timing compounded my mood—2009, the thick of the financial crisis, when I'd wake up, open my laptop, and read another email from another laid-off editor who would no longer be hiring me. My formerly live-in boyfriend had returned to his native England, and my state of mind was such that for several months I took up smoking, not in earnest, but melodramatically, sitting in the pocket window of my apartment, glass pushed open into the dead of winter.

By the time I booked a flight to Thailand in April, the smoking phase had ended, replaced by one in which the cultivating of distance became my preferred diversion. The other side of the world appealed in its polarity to home. I found Thailand recommended as a good place both for first-time Asia travelers and solo women, and that settled it.

I wasn't anticipating a beach vacation, but after a couple of days in Bangkok, I understood for the first time that not every major world city would be for me—too many beer-swilling backpackers and brazen sex tourists for my taste. I got a bus south and when I got off at Krabi, Railay emerged as a nearby option. Cliffs and jungle rendered it inaccessible by land, so I took a wooden long-tail boat—the kind featured on every promotional material for Thailand ever.

The half-hour ride introduced me to a landscape of tropical waters and high limestone cliffs, some of them jutting out of the water to form unearthly, multicolored vertical islands, something like if Gaudi had built them.

After landing at Railay East, an inferior beach used mostly for transport, I set out to find a place to stay, heading up a paved jungle path and renting a cabana for five dollars a night at a ramshackle spot that would take its place atop the list of the most revolting places I've ever slept—bugs, stained sheets, a toilet that potentially was cleaned once. Immediately after checking in, I dropped my bag off and headed back into town for a meal, without even a glance at my bed or the bathroom.



Phra Nang Beach, on the Railay peninsula in Thailand.

The town arranged itself around a path bisecting the peninsula from Railay East to the magnificent Railay West Beach, with its fine white sand flanked by more karst limestone cliffs. Next to town, the sprawling, five-star Rayavadee Resort seemed to monopolize a bigger chunk of land on the peninsula than the town itself. No matter

—one could easily walk around the perimeter of the resort to arrive at Phra Nang Beach, the best of them all.

After the nightmare maze of Bangkok, where I was never not lost, Railay presented a small and faultless world unto itself. It was a place made for walking; there were no cars, and only a handful of motorbikes. The beers and the pad thai were priced right for my financial situation. I couldn't afford to stay on the beach but that didn't matter here, because every part of the place felt so accessible. I was just getting to the age when New York no longer promised an adventure down every block, and here I was on this tiny peninsula where everywhere I looked I found something new or beautiful or exhilarating.

Certain details would stick in my mind: the young Thai Rasta men who worked behind the bars. The jet lag that woke me up at 5 a.m. in my wretched stained bed, leading me on a walk to Phra Nang Beach and a swim with all of Railay to myself, the breakfasting monkeys notwithstanding. The seawater, almost too warm in the heat of the afternoon, that felt just right in the morning calm. How good the cold beers tasted in the late afternoon.

I checked out of my cabana and found a clean room in town with AC for twenty-five dollars a night, from which the next couple of days rambled by in a contented haze. I'd go swimming every morning, and then, after a few drinks, again at night, lured by the bioluminescent waters. I'd never even heard of bioluminescence, so to jump into the dark sea and find my every movement trailed by incandescent fairy dust was a shock of delight, if not an act of downright magic.

One afternoon, as I was sitting on the sand in the shade of a tree, two German guys struck up a conversation with me. I hung out with them for the rest of the day and for dinner. They were heading to Thailand's eastern islands the next day and invited me to join. I would do so, after a couple more days in Railay, meeting them just in time for a half-moon party on Ko Pha Ngan that would get busted by the cops half an hour after we arrived. Still, the adventure represented just the kind of serendipity that Railay seemed to produce endlessly.

On my final afternoon, I signed up for a snorkeling trip—I had snorkeled only once before, off a beach in Baja California with little in

the way of underwater ocean life. This time I was gobsmacked. Afterward, the guides took us to an empty sandbar for dinner and beers. At a distance of maybe one thousand feet, a much larger, hilly island loomed with nary a sign of human activity.

And then, the sunset. It did not present itself to us as a spectacle in the distance. It didn't contain itself to the horizon in one direction. We were *in* this sunset. It subsumed us. The sky and water in every direction lit up with the intensity of melted iron. Toward the end of this show, just when the sun dipped below the horizon entirely, from the much larger island rose hundreds of giant bats. *Giant* bats, like you've never seen, creating solid black silhouettes against the sky's lingering glow.

IN AN ESSAY FOR THE *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS* TITLED "FIND YOUR Beach," Zadie Smith recalls a two-story ad for beer on a building outside her Manhattan window, bearing those three words. The ad works thanks to our widely held understanding that "your beach" equals your happy place; the beach is contentment. Just saying "beach" can work as shorthand for the best place to be in life. Drink this beer and you'll get there, to the beach.

Think how entrenched a concept has to be in a culture for that phrase—find your beach—to be effective unto itself as an advertisement. Somehow, we came to love the beach so much that the word ceases to mean the beach and comes to mean something else entirely, so that Smith can write of her home country, "In England even at the actual beach I cannot find my beach," and have us know what she means.

With its beauty and spectacle, Railay became an ideal for me against which all other beachfront locations were to be measured. I remember my five days there as a saturnalia of new and amazing occurrences. The cumulative effect was one of wonder. I found my beach in Railay.

THE RAILAY BEACHES MAY HAVE BEEN THE FIRST ONES I LOVED, BUT I don't know if I learned to love the concept of the beach, truly, on that

trip. It's a suspicion about myself that is brought into relief as I'm poking around one day on the website of *Coastal Living*, a magazine dedicated to beachfront lifestyles in or near the United States. Partway through a slide show of America's historic beach resorts, including the Breakers in Palm Beach and the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego, a pop-up window prompts me to sign up for the magazine's email newsletter. I want to decline, but instead of a simple *No Thanks* button, I am presented with a declaration I must own if I want to wriggle free of *Coastal Living's* emails in my inbox: *I don't like the beach.*

It's funny, I understand, because it's implausible. Nobody doesn't like the beach. Who could possibly click on that. I click. There is a small pang of . . . shame? *I don't like the beach.* I wonder if it's true. And if it is, how did I find my beach?

It wouldn't be without precedent if I didn't love the beach. Before the Enlightenment, humans mostly wanted nothing to do with the ocean. In the opening sentence to his widely regarded 1994 book, *The Lure of the Sea*, Alain Corbin states right up front that "with few exceptions, the classical period knew nothing of the attraction of seaside beaches, the emotion of a bather plunging into the waves, or the pleasures of a stay at the seaside." Although the Greeks and especially the Romans had been smitten with the oceans and seas, by the time Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, the ancient resort areas along the Mediterranean had fallen into the well of history.

Corbin rightly points out that throughout the Bible, the ocean generally represents chaos and evil. In one of the book's most famous stories, God basically overruns the entire surface of the Earth with ocean, sparing only the creatures on Noah's Ark—this is the ocean as agent of destruction. In another biblical tale, the sea monster Leviathan provides an early example of the horrifying creatures used to represent the fury of the ocean in cultures around the world.

But then Europeans began to tame the oceans. The Ferdinand Magellans and Amerigo Vespuccis sailed into the great beyond and returned to tell the tale of previously unknown lands. In 1719 Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe*, arguably the first-ever novel in

English, an immensely popular tale of a shipwrecked sailor who survives on an island beach for years on end—Defoe presents the ocean as the setting for a riveting adventure with a triumphant conclusion. In the three centuries since its publication, the novel has never gone out of print, and it still today ranks among the most famous English novels of all time.

Later in the 1700s, the Romantic Era arrived, during which European philosophers, poets, and artists took a renewed approach to their relationships with nature, the ocean especially. They found in its vastness a medium through which the self could be lost to something bigger, then reconsidered and reclaimed. In doing so, the inherent terror inspired by nature could be overcome. The philosophers called this the sublime. An early-nineteenth-century painting by Casper David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, depicts a single faceless figure lost in self-reflection next to a monastic, slightly menacing seascape, and encapsulates the period's moody, solitary search for the sublime. The painting shows the ocean becoming, rather than a source only of fear, a place for contemplation, and even self-improvement. "There is a rapture on the lonely shore," Lord Byron wrote a few years later.

We see the ocean differently today, but echoes of the primordial fear remain, expressed in pop culture phenomena like 1975's *Jaws*, which opens on a classic beach scene of teenagers around a late-night bonfire during the run-up to the Fourth of July. A pretty girl entices a boy away from the group for a skinny-dip, and is terrorized by a great white shark. The following day, a young boy is similarly killed during a busy beach afternoon, and panic sets in.

More recently, *The Beach*—both the 2000 film and the novel by Alex Garland on which it's based—presents the beach as a utopia that inevitably devolves into a nightmare. In it, a young, white American man named Richard heads to Thailand and (paralleling my own trip) leaves Bangkok after a few days for the beaches in the south of the country. He's in search of a rumored secret community, and he finds it—filled with Westerners. "It was just a beach resort for people who don't like beach resorts," says the on-screen version of Richard, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. What seems like paradise quickly turns sour after a shark attack leads to the same kinds of

power struggles you'll find in any society, and the same disregard for those in need. Throughout, the community ignores the inherent imperial nature of the paradise they've created in a nonwhite country that they presume is theirs for the taking.

These fictional stories, it turns out, are no match for the devastation that can be wrought by the ocean in real life. The Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004 killed more than 225,000 people, among them staff and beach vacationers at resorts from Thailand to the Maldives to Sri Lanka. Recent hurricanes have caused untold destruction to beach resorts in the Caribbean, East Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and on North American coasts. Sunny-day flooding brings chaos even when the weather is good. Sea level rise echoes the great flood in the book of Genesis. These natural events keep the fears of centuries past relevant. In their presence, we don't enjoy the beach at all. *I don't like the beach* becomes more reasonable. We find our beach only where the ocean is friendly, and still today this happens at the ocean's discretion, not ours.

Scrolling through my Instagram feed, I come across a post from a Bay Area nurse named Nicole Elgin, who posts under the handle @wheretopeanut. In it, she's in an infinity pool overlooking the ocean, incidentally the same pool featured in *Bachelor in Paradise*. In her caption, Nicole says that "as much as I love the beach, I gotta say an infinity pool overlooking a beach is second to none."

I write to ask her why. "I think it's primarily about the view from the pool," she tells me. "Without waves or sand to contend with, I truly can allow my mind to open and to allow wonder to enter, uninterrupted. It's a meditative space for me, even more than having the sea wash over my feet. Mother nature and I are not contending with one another, I am observing as an outsider from a vantage point that mimics nature."

Mimicking nature. This seems central to the concept of the beach resort, and connected to the Romanticists' sublime. Paradise is not nature; paradise is nature conquered, nature tamed. The infinity pool erases—visually at least—the demarcation between nature and civilization. It gives us the illusion of the sublime, without the part where we confront the terror inherent in nature.

Last New Year's Day, as we were sitting around a bonfire on an island beach in Florida, my dad commented, *There's infinity in the ocean*. He meant it as a compliment, a nod to the sublime. And it's true, there's a lot of room in infinity for awe, but also for things to go terribly wrong. Wallace Stevens, in his 1937 poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar," writes: *The sea is a form of ridicule*. We haven't really conquered the sea, as it likes to remind us. The beach resort only works as well as our ability to pretend otherwise.

CRITICS OF ALAIN CORBIN POINT OUT THAT IN SOME PARTS OF THE world, including northern Africa and southern Europe, people were jumping into the waves well before the eighteenth century. In Polynesia, people were surfing at least as far back as the 1700s. This is true, but these were not the swimmers around whom resort culture sprang, and no line can be drawn from them to the beach industry as we know it today. The English lie at the start of that line. More specifically: the English upper classes.

As early as the late 1500s, they'd begun retreating, or "resorting," to inland spa towns for the treatment of various physical ailments, real or perceived. There, they'd developed a keen affinity for the apparent power of water to address all manner of conditions. The spa trips proved so enjoyable that the leisure classes started spending entire seasons at Bath or Tunbridge Wells, often only nominally for their health.

Then in 1660 a doctor named Robert Wittie came to Scarborough, on England's northeastern shore, having heard about a mineral spring there being used by the locals for its supposed restorative powers. He soon published *Scarborough Spaw*, in which he promoted the town as a curative destination. Scarborough became the world's first modern seaside resort on a technicality—the ocean was incidental until Dr. Wittie, in a bid to distinguish his spa business from all the others, thought to promote the health benefits of ocean water in addition to the waters from the spring. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the idea that submersion in cold ocean water could produce positive health effects had taken hold at Scarborough, and it soon spread.

In 1736, a reverend named William Clarke spent a month on the southern coast of England, in a small trading and fishing town called Brighthelmstone. His letter to a friend became perhaps the first written account of beach resort life: “My morning business is bathing in the sea, and then buying fish; the evening is riding out for air, viewing the remains of old Saxon camps, and counting the ships in the road, and the boats that are trawling.” Brighthelmstone, an unwieldy name for a place, soon shortened to Brighton.

In *A Dissertation on the Use of Sea Water in the Diseases of the Glands*, published in 1750, the English doctor Richard Russell prescribed, among other “cures,” bathing in cold seawater, drinking seawater, and even washing the eyes with seawater. His recommendations reached an amenable public. Initially published in Latin, as was standard for medical literature at the time, the book created a sensation and was quickly translated into English for mass consumption. In 1753, Russell moved to Brighton and built a seaside house for himself and his visiting patients. In Brighton and other towns along the English shores, the resort concept took hold.

Around this time, someone invented the first bathing machine, not so much a machine as a horse-drawn dressing room that brought a lady some distance into the ocean for her salubrious swim. She’d enter through the land-side door in her standard clothes, change into a bathing costume or simply strip down while being hauled out into the water, then jump into the sea via the sea-side door, completing her dip in privacy. The bathing machine became a hallmark of beach resorts throughout northern Europe, and held on into the early twentieth century.

Visitors to the ocean engaged in all kinds of unpleasant activities for the sake of their health. They drank seawater just before bed and again just after rising; they drank seawater mixed with wine, seawater mixed with milk; they dipped into cold seawater for some ailments, and into hot seawater for others. People didn’t yet love the beach. They endured it for their well-being, egged on by doctors set to profit from the “cures.” Eighteenth-century Gwyneth Paltrow would have been all over it.

Soon the first true seaside resorts were built to serve this wellness industry. These early hotels prioritized not proximity to the

beach itself, but the creation of a self-contained atmosphere for “polite society.” Only as people began to consider the beauty, the infinity, and the awe-inspiring qualities of the ocean did hotels reorient themselves toward it over the course of the nineteenth century.

SOMETIME BETWEEN THE FIRST BATHING MACHINES AT BRIGHTON AND the all-inclusive resorts of today, the beach softened into an ideal. The ascetic painting of a monk in contemplation gave way to relaxed Impressionist seascapes full of light and color. Dips into the gray English waters gave way to frolics in the blue Mediterranean. The seawater beverage gave way to umbrella-festooned cocktails. Lord Byron’s “rapture on the lonely shore” gave way to Philip Larkin’s “miniature gaiety of seashores,” in his poem “To the Sea.”

The great literature of the early twentieth century often used beaches and beach resorts as its setting, especially in depicting the upper classes—the Lido in *Death in Venice*; Balbec, modeled on the Norman resort town of Cabourg, in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*; Newport in *The Age of Innocence*; Long Island’s North Shore in *The Great Gatsby*; the Isle of Skye in *To the Lighthouse*.

The beach entrenched itself as a cultural phenomenon, bigger in a way than its physical self. We started to refer to the beach, and only the beach, as paradise, a loaded word stemming from an ancient Iranian word for the walled gardens popular with Persian nobles. Like its Persian forebear, the original Christian paradise—the Garden of Eden—existed near no body of water. Paradise’s relocation to the shore is a twentieth-century phenomenon.

Not all beach destinations qualify. People love the Hamptons, but I’ve never heard anyone refer to them as paradise. They don’t even have palm trees there. The beach of paradise has to be somewhere far away, preferably another country. The sand must be white and fine. The water must be a superior shade of turquoise. It must give the visitor the feeling of having the place—to some extent—to herself. It must be a good place for newlywed couples to wrap themselves in romance for a week or two.

I think about my favorite beach experiences. There's the Octopus Resort in Fiji's Yasawa Islands, where the front steps of my bungalow led me directly onto the sand and, beyond that, onto a great coral reef ten or so feet into the water. There's the island beach house off the coast of Florida where I sat around a bonfire on New Year's Day. And there is, of course, Railay. Difficult places to get to, all of them. Paradise is also—and this is important—a finite resource. If it weren't, we might not covet it so intensely.

The beach of paradise removes us from our frenzied contemporary daily life, harking back to what we perceive as a simpler and, by implication, better time. In other words, more primitive. This approach is of course selective in its conception. The beach of paradise is simpler in that there's no rush hour traffic or PowerPoint presentations, but surely not simpler in the infant mortality rate or suppression of women's rights or the widespread starvation during a drought that may be the reality of the place for those who live there permanently, and who are likely to see the beach as a place where they must cater to outsiders. In an essay for *The Nation*, Marilynne Robinson captures the foundation on which the beach of paradise is built:

I was in college when Margaret Mead was in her glory and anthropologists could still claim to find societies untouched by the modern world. The idea was that in such places human nature would have been preserved in a purer form than in the rationalist and technological societies of the West. By observing these societies we could learn what we are essentially and how we ought to live. These societies were gentle, violent, uninhibited, and so on, depending, it came to seem, on the preferences of the anthropologist. . . . In any case, the "primitivity" of these populations could in general be called poverty.

Paradise is only paradise when we have travel insurance that includes medevac.

THE FIRST BEACH TRIP I REMEMBER CARING ABOUT CAME AT AGE NINE, when after an edifying few days spent ticking off the monuments of