LIFE’S A BEACH

In the third in our series of features focusing on a renowned photographer’s take on travel, Martin Parr discusses his obsession with beaches – one that began by the British seaside and soon turned worldwide.

INTERVIEW DUNCAN CRAIG PHOTOGRAPHS MARTIN PARR
Whenever I’m abroad, I look at the beaches. It’s the best place to find characteristics of different countries, because it’s simplistic. Everything is brought down to a common denominator.

Lovingly buffed sandals encase ankle socks as white as the sinewy legs over which they are pulled. It’s a classic English seaside cliché and ripe for photographic parody. Martin Parr, who captured the image, sees it differently. He’s always rather matter of fact about his point and laugh – particularly given that his opinion of this questionable sartorial arrangement is nearer admiration than scorn. “That could almost be a self-portrait,” he says about the photograph taken on Eastbourne beach in 2006. “It’s a great believer in socks and sandals.”

Parr is full of surprises, a hallmark of a 40-year career noted for innovation and indelibility. “I don’t have days off! I don’t believe in them,” he says. Countless exhibitions and some 70 photographic books have touched on everything from parking spaces, forest corpses and dubious interior design, to Japanese commuters, Mexican cultural clichés and Western Australian ports. However, his natural habitat, somewhat ironically, is the one in which so many of his fellow Britons appear surprisingly incongruous – the beach.

This is certainly true of The Last Resort, a collection of unflinching photographs taken in the dilapidated Wirral seaside town of New Brighton. The 1986 book brought him prominence and controversy in equal measure, with accusations of working-class exploitation greeting the saturated-colour shots of toddlers paddling in litter-strewn shallows. “I like sunburned bathers gorging on junk food and naked toddlers paddling in litter-strewn shallows,” he says. “I just want people to be themselves.”

In the intervening years, he has photographed beachgoers in countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, China, Latvia, Thailand and Ukraine, honing a “warts and all” aesthetic that has become his signature. Parr for the coarse, if you will. “There’s no way a beach has an elegantuj,” he says. “I never even think about asking for permission,” he says. “I photograph anyone in a public place in Britain.”

Parr is famously reluctant to discuss his images, though the occasional remonstration is, he admits, an occupational hazard. “I never even think about asking for permission,” he says. “I photograph anyone in a public place in Britain.” He’s intentionally reticent to discuss his images, leaving the interpretation and social commentary to others. “I articulate myself through photography,” he says. “I’m a photographer, not a writer or a wordsmith.”

His newest book, the retrospective Life’s a Beach, is testament to this enduring fascination. In the intervening years, he has photographed beachgoers in countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, China, Latvia, Thailand and Ukraine, honing a “warts and all” aesthetic that has become his signature. Parr for the coarse, if you will.

“When I’m abroad I look at the beaches,” says the Surrey-born 61-year-old. “It’s the best place to find characteristics of different countries, because it’s simplistic. With people not having many clothes on, everything is brought down to a common denominator and you can really see the differences.”

This point is illustrated by two of his more memorable shots. A man and a woman of comically contrasting builds shower on Rio’s Copacabana beach in 2007, their beachwear adhering to the unwritten Carioca rule of less is more. A world away is the Ocean Dome in Miyazaki, Japan, visited by Parr in 1996. This cavernous water park offers an unabashed, sanitised version of beach life, in which the temperature is a constant 30°C and images of fluffy white clouds float across a retractable roof.

“That was a great place,” recalls Parr, “though I heard it closed down due to not enough people visiting. Covered beaches are a good idea though – it feels like hot summer days are almost a thing of the past in Britain.” Perhaps so, but his heart clearly lies with the British seaside – despite the sense that its glory days have also long since passed. “A lot of beaches are very run down and, sadly, in decline,” he says. “Britain’s a bit shabby at the edges, which is always good for photography.”

A 2009 photograph of a gloved and flippered man wading into a distinctly uninviting Brighton sea typifies the idiosyncrasy that populates many of his pictures. “This image is far from flattering; indeed, few of Parr’s subjects emerge quite as they might wish. This intrusion has never bothered him, though the occasional remonstration is, he admits, an occupational hazard. ‘I never even think about asking for permission,’ he says. ‘Legally, you can photograph anyone in a public place in Britain.’”

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He’s also views his shots collectively, as ‘bodies of work’, rather than individual components. “It’s a great place to find characteristics of different countries, because it’s simplistic. With people not having many clothes on, everything is brought down to a common denominator and you can really see the differences.”

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“You never know anything,” he says. “You can’t even begin to imagine.”

A new beach-bag-sized edition of Martin Parr’s Life’s a Beach is published by Aperture and available for £15.95. To see more of Parr’s work and details on upcoming exhibitions, visit martinparr.com.
Blue-sky thinking in the southern Japanese city of Miyazaki, where the Seagaia Ocean Dome offered a surreal climate-controlled beach experience complete with retractable roof and non-stick crushed marble ‘sand’. Built at a cost of £1.3 billion, the dome was forced to close in 2007 after running into financial difficulties.

A surfer in the backpacking hotspot of Kuta, on the Indonesian island of Bali, seeks local guidance on the best breaks in 1993. Despite being the target of terrorist bombings in 2002 and 2005, the former fishing village continues to prove a popular party town for young travellers, particularly from Australasia.
A tanning connoisseur, in full make-up and jewellery, models accessorised eye protectors on a beach in Benidorm, south-east Spain. Renowned for its nightlife, golden sands and year-round sunshine, the Costa Blanca resort attracts up to four million tourists a year, many from Britain.

David Sawyers, a member of the Brighton Swimming Club, leaves his walking stick propped against the sea wall as he ventures into the steely waters off the south coast town. Members of the club swim year-round in the sea, including on Christmas Day in an event organised annually since 1860.

The ball is made in Italy, but this scene – captured in Benidorm in 1997 – has an unmistakable ‘Brits abroad’ flavour, with dubious swimwear, pasty torsos and a pleasing symmetry between ball and unathletic build. For Parr, part of the appeal of beaches is the clichés that they throw up.

A swan pops up in the foreground to lend an extrastraining note to a photograph of a family playing in the shallows of Lake Garda in 1999. The elongated lake, Italy’s largest, is renowned for birdlife and characterful lake-side towns. Some of the best images, Parr says, come from the unexpected.
Away with the father’s penchant for garish swimwear as he uses him as an improvised pillow in the Tuscan resort of Marina di Grosseto. It’s a touching image that shows Parr’s keen eye for the intimate – as well as eccentric – moments of beach life.