

Shore thing

No one has made such a meal out of beaches as Australians, writes AA Gill. He, too, finds affinity with them, the sensations of an empty hot beach as soulful as you can find.

One of the very few things that all travel writers hold in common is an effete disdain of beaches. We don't do seaside, unless it's ironic or nostalgic. Beaches are for holidays, and travel writers don't do holidays. Holidays are for amateurs, pedestrians. A beach is a sandpit for grown-ups. It's an infantilising experience where the crowds regress through a childish, supine idiocy. On sand a man will wear toddler clothes in colours and patterns that he wouldn't dream of sporting on tarmac or carpet. You eat and drink stuff that would be disgusting under a roof. You play semi-skilled games, paddle geriatrically and get sunburnt. You stare toothlessly at bosoms and horizons. And all beaches are extension of the same beach; they have a repetitive primary simplicity. We want them to do the same thing, which is essentially to regress us back to the holidays we remember with the romance of greening home movies.

I understand that this must come as a sour snobbery from the dank, pebbly old country to you, because no one has made such a meal out of beaches as Australians. A virtue of necessity, perhaps, seeing as most of you

still seem to live within a couple of miles of the sea. You have constructed a national saga, a beachorama: lifeguards and surfing, barbies and shark attacks. Your national costume is derived from the beach. Karen Blixen said the cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears or the sea. That could be Australia's motto. The beach is the philosophical and spiritual home of Oz. This is a rare thing in the world. I think you share it with only one other people that I've ever come across. Eskimos. They are also entranced by and attracted to beaches, and they go down to the shore with the same sense of passion and excitement, and a few more clothes.

Beaches dictate a certain sort of personality, a particular world view. It is, for instance, impossible to be sophisticated on a beach. And as I am prone to fits of meritless sophistication, I'm drawn to the antidote of beaches. Despite the travel writing, I do rather love them.

My childhood memories of them are invigorating but not particularly more-ish. North Berwick, outside Edinburgh, splashing in the North Sea: it was so cold it was like being punched in the kidneys. I'd lose all

sensation below the waist. And I can still see the huddles of spindly post-war children with concave chests and sagging woollen trunks draped in balding cotton towels looking like forlorn schools of forgotten penguins, teeth chattering, eyes bright with hypothermia. Happy days. In Britain, beaches are more endurance than entertainment. I still have the niggling sense that there is something wasteful about a hot beach. It seems a profligate waste of the sun, being squandered just on sand.

I've just come back from Mozambique. I'd never been before. It's not on many people's country wish-list, this huge country sprawled on the east coast of Africa. It was a collection of Swahili-Arab trading posts, slave ports and smuggling, and then a Portuguese colony that continued to trade slaves long after it was illegal, and smuggle ivory and gold. The Portuguese were very bad at giving their nicked bits of the globe back. They had to be terrorised out of Mozambique and there was none of the polite handover ceremony, the promises to keep in touch and exchange students, which may be why Mozambique joined the Commonwealth – just to spite Lisbon. Or perhaps they fancied

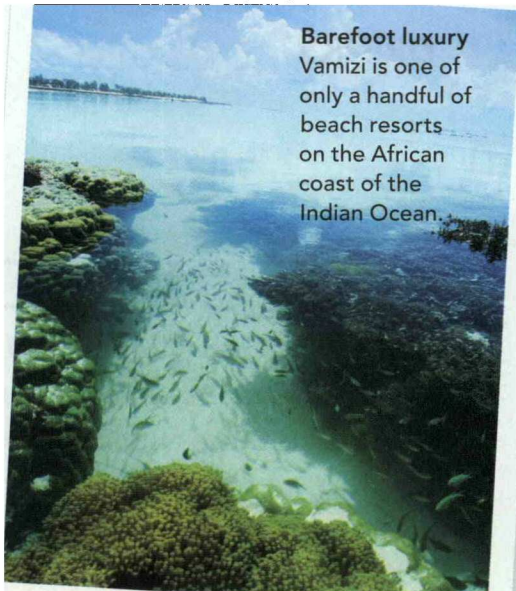
the Commonwealth Games and a Christmas card from the Queen. (I've never really seen the point of the Commonwealth; it's like having to have dinner with your ex-wives.) Mozambique is a bit confused. It's doing its best, but it has issues, resentments. It's the only country I can think of that has a Kalashnikov on its flag.

In the north of the country, up by the Tanzanian border, there is a long archipelago of coral islands. One of these is Vamizi, and it has a resort with what they call oxymoronicly in the travel business "barefoot luxury". That means handmade huts on a beach, comfortable and charming, but without a telly or a telephone, without WiFi or room service, just the sand and the sea and the weaver birds in the rafters.

The African coast of the Indian Ocean must be one of the least utilised tourist possibilities on the planet. There are barely a handful of African beach resorts. The coast is of a miraculously enchanting beauty. The sea is pale and warm; the diving, they say, is world-class; the sport fishing is spectacular. Nicola, my partner, caught a near-record giant trevally, and she's still beaming. It's supplanted our twins as her screen-saver. But what I particularly love is a beach with shells. I don't quite know why the combing meander of picking up shells should be so blissfully satisfying, or why its attraction and joy never seems to pall. There is something about shells that is so very precious and yet plainly free, so beautifully crafted, yet ubiquitous. And every morning, more of them are dumped on the strand, a tide line of miraculous carving, impossible intricacy; sea jewellery that comes with its own echo of the waves still inside it. This is the imitation of the shopping along with the antidote to

consuming. They are infinitely precious and virtually valueless. They are pleasing to hold and Zenishly fascinating to peruse.

The reason I like beaches, and the reason travel writers don't, is that they have no narrative. They don't tell stories. They are atonal song cycles, mood without plot. And if you spend your life dissecting and reconstructing things into sentences and paragraphs, beginnings, middles and endings, then a beach, with its sighs and hisses, its slow breath, is a wonderful poultice. It makes no inquiries, demands no reactions. It fills your head with space and sounds and feelings. The sensations of an empty hot beach are as soulful as you can find this side of a grave. There is no end to this peace, just as Blake said, to see the world in a grain of sand, to pick up shells and see an infinity in your hand.*



AA GILL IS AWAY

Bondi soul

The beach, according to AA Gill, is the philosophical and spiritual home of Australians. North Berwick, Scotland: cold like a kidney-punch (right).

