

My Fascination with Decaying Seaside Resorts

Shôn Ellerton, August 23, 2023

Strange how those seaside resorts battered by the elements throughout the years share that odd sense of being in a time warp.



Llandudno, North Wales

That salty sea air mixed with the smell of creosote on wooden piers and the frameworks of ancient rickety roller coasters. That raucous sound coming from seagulls hovering precariously over your head eyeing their next opportunity of grabbing a fallen French fry or chip. That sickly-sweet smell of popcorn and caramel apples for those on one side of the big Atlantic ‘pond’ whilst for those on the other side, the smell of candy floss and greasy sausages and onions in baps.

There’s a peculiar sense of nostalgia for me when it comes to these seaside amusement towns in America and Britain. As a child, it was more the experience of being with either my parents or grandparents. Seaside amusement resorts seem designed to reconnect the ‘boy’ in the father, taking in such delights as showing off to his son how to shoot down a rubber yellow duck with an underpowered and essentially, useless, air rifle only to explain in the least convincing of ways that the guns are not the proper ones we used to have as kids after failing to hit any of the targets.

Yeah. Sure, Dad!

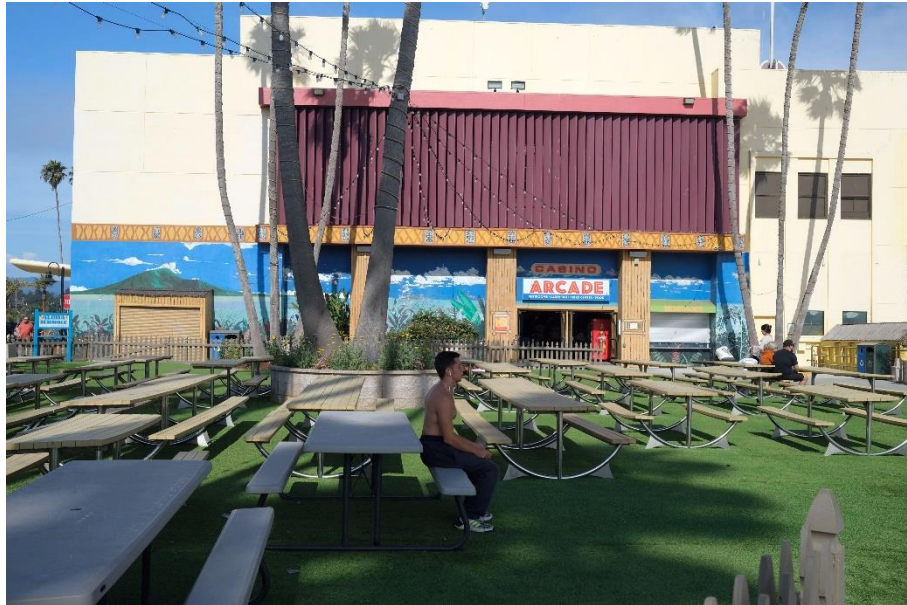


Southend-on-Sea, Essex, England

Now as for the ladies. The rides, arcade games, and all the other sideshow exhibits were usually not of profound interest. In the interest of not being sexist, I'd qualify the statement that there are always exceptions, of course. However, the ladies tend to be quite content either bathing in the sun's rays on the sand, browsing the souvenir shops, or chilling out at the cocktail lounge, if one's to hand. A little bit of solace away from the rest of the family.

Apart from the obvious things seaside amusement towns have in common, such as the rides, the noise, the sea air, and the smell of food, there is one particularly interesting thing that they share. They all seem to be quaint little time warps, as if their heydays had happened many years ago, being forsaken by more exotic holidays accessible by jet.

Most recently, I visited the Californian seaside town of Santa Cruz, not far south of San Francisco and separated from Silicon Valley by a range of hilly forests. Being so near to the endless overpriced suburbia of Silicon Valley, I was not entirely expecting to find so many ramshackle properties along Santa Cruz's esplanade. As if they were left there from the flower-power days of the late 60s. Little wooden clapboard houses, many with verandas sporting such objects as tired old armchairs, colourful surfboards, and hanging windchimes. Meanwhile, just up the road close to the beachside rides and amusement park known as The Boardwalk, there are seaside cafes and restaurants which look a little worse for wear, presumably from the many years of battering from the salty sea elements.



Santa Cruz, California

British seaside towns during the low season in winter are, in particular, very strange places. Howling winds and horizontal rain mixed with sea spray and salt play havoc with buildings making it an almost impossible task to maintain throughout the year. Magnificently brightly painted art deco buildings, but now turned bleak and foreboding from the concrete spalling off due to the rusting and expansion of steel reinforcement. Being battered by the elements stripping off the paint and tearing off bits of the sign showing the name of the establishment, the occasional letter missing.



Southend-on-Sea, Essex, England

The winter off-season is the most interesting time for me to wander through seaside resorts. Very quiet places save for the faint memory of the echoes of laughter, fun, and the screams of happy children. And most peculiar of them all, the seaside resorts which died completely. For example, I remember wandering around the completely abandoned lakeside resorts around Salton Sea in southern California, an inland body of water in the desert which had receded and turned foul through successive generations of farming. Abandoned diners and rusty signs creaking in the dry, dusty, and hot winds blowing off the desolate and inhospitable desert.

I love walking down these avenues of yesteryear, especially with a camera. Taking snapshots of old worn-out bingo halls juxtaposed with a couple of modern holidaymakers holding up smartphones taking selfies of each other whilst holding sticks of cotton candy. Once ornate and grand looking hotels on the esplanade sporting such names as the Grand Imperial or Royal Excelsior with half its windows boarded up and abandoned. Imagine what it's like to walk in its gloomy interior with the smell of mildew and the muffled sound of crashing waves from the beach and the screams from kids on the esplanade fairground rides. The ground floor restaurant room surrounded by Victorian bay windows where the guests were once served kippers, poached eggs, and racks of cold burnt toast spread with thick wads of butter. Oddly enough, I've always liked that kind of breakfast.



Burnham-on-Sea, England

During our age of relatively cheap international travel, thousands of seaside towns had fallen into this odd time warp of yesterday, which, personally, for me, adds to its charm. However, it must be terribly difficult to eke out a living for those trying to make a business out of it. Some British seaside towns have been left to the elements such as rising waters and storms and have now been abandoned by the government in making remedial repairs to seawalls and other water defence measures. Such a town is the little Welsh town of Fairbourne surrounded by the beautiful and verdant Snowdonia National Park. It is a town I am very familiar with. As a family, we once ran a tourist steam railway back during the 90s and it still runs today. That is, until the rising sea eventually drowns the town out of its existence. The town has still held on to a few of its cafes and amusement arcades, but it is near to extinction. At least it still has a faint pulse in thanks to the steam railway which brings in some tourists.



Town of Fairbourne in Wales

There are, of course, those mega seaside towns such as Blackpool, famous for its illuminations and quirky fairground rides and Southend-on-Sea with its incredibly long pier stretching over the endless tidal mud flats across the Thames Estuary. Neither have very nice beaches, or decent weather for most of its year. Especially Blackpool, known for its howling winds and the stalwart and hardy British Northerner obstinately sat in a deckchair on the beach complete with red and white striped windbreaker and a can of lager defying Nature's attempt to deprive him of his hard-earned holiday.

Sad and forlorn seaside resorts are not confined to Britain alone during the off seasons. Dunkirk, a town in northern France on the shores of the English Channel, is such a place. During the summer, there is a hive of activity. The beach esplanade is lined with endless bars and cafes all with al fresco dining in which tourists are munching on mussels and baguettes while downing glasses of white wine, Ricard, or Orangina. The beaches are reasonably inviting, and the water shows a semblance of blue rather than brown or grey. Bronzed beachgoers wearing ever so tight and rather too small speedos glisten in the sun while happy kids throw bouncy balls in the sea. It paints a nice picture but look closely at the buildings, some of which look like they are going to fall apart during the next storm. But all the jolliness seems to make this all the less important.



Dunkirk, France

The winter off-season is almost unearthly like, as if one is stepping into the Twilight Zone. I wandered there during the month of October on a road trip from Germany to the UK as a bit of a detour. It was undoubtedly grim being there. The howling wind, the bleakness, and simply the greyness of it all. The sea was very uninviting, grey, and cold. The buildings looked very much worse for wear. There was hardly anyone around except for the occasional odd local. I felt confident that I was, perhaps, the only tourist around for miles. More foreboding was the fact that Dunkirk had a rather dark history during World War Two when Hitler's soldiers were closing in on the Allies.

As for the rides and the attractions, seaside towns exude character, which big ticket parks like Disney and Six Flags fail to deliver. The roller coasters in major parks like Six Flags or other major attractions around the world may have the most extreme, fast, and modern roller coasters, but there is something about those old decaying rides and attractions which are so curiously interesting. On my recent trip to the Boardwalk in Santa Cruz, I wandered into one of those so-called scare house maze contraptions called The Fright Walk. Walking down the stairs to near-dark corridors with lots of scary things popping out at you and wandering around creepy rooms with shelves lined with morbid looking objects like babies in jars, satanic curios, and sinister looking clocks. It was genuinely disconcerting. Southend had some odd attractions too. The Mouse, a two-person car on a neck-jerking roller coaster track which probably delivered more physical injuries than scares and thrills. And a somewhat disturbing and, given the family atmosphere of the place, inappropriate waxwork museum exhibiting an evil topless woman with a knife and a man with a look of agony on his face being impaled on a hook. Sure! Visit our attractions for all that family fun!

In the world of TV and movies, the seaside town which seems to get the most attention is Coney Island in New York. I've never been there but it looks like one of those incredibly sad and lonely places which nobody really wants to go or, perhaps, they are forced to in the absence of finding any spot of sunshine or beach without having to travel too far from the Big Apple. The movie, [*Angel Heart*](#), shows a solitary man in a deckchair on an unattractive litter-strewn beach whilst his wife is alone in the water enjoying a dip in the grey waters. [*Requiem For a Dream*](#), a difficult movie to watch at the best of times, shows Coney Island during the summer, and even then, it is spookily quiet. And [*Mr Robot*](#), a TV series shows Coney Island in a gloomier light again. More litter strewn on the beach. Rundown looking amusement stalls and eateries. The strange haunting look of the big red lattice structure called the Parachute Jump, which was built during the 1939 World Fair but now since disused. I thought it was a radio tower! And the peculiar and eccentric Wonder Wheel, a giant Ferris wheel with cars that seem to slip into inner and outer wheels through some sort of rail contraption. In all, it looks like a fascinating place to wander around imagining the ghosts of history during happier and more festive times.



Dunkirk, France

I find exploring those relatively small ageing and dilapidated seaside towns quite surreal experiences. Many are located on the edge of a spit of land at the end of the road or the railway. Sometimes, they have the feel of being at the end of the world. And those who live in such towns often live in a strange community in which all the locals know each other, and what they all do, including all the myriad of bizarre relationships, some bordering on incest. Quiet and cosy pubs, most of which, are quite utilitarian, sparse, and functional are not only drinking holes but sanctuaries from the tourists who are regarded as mere nuisances, but, albeit necessary ones.

Seaside resort towns are fascinating places to visit. Kids love them. There's food and drink, although overpriced and average. Kitsch souvenir shops selling an endless variety of fridge magnets, T-shirts, and useless trinkets guaranteed to keep the women entertained for hours and hours. If you're lucky, there might be a decent beach, unlike Brighton in southern England with its gravelly stones which, amazingly, doesn't deter holidaymakers from dipping in its, often, frigid waters. In short, seaside resorts are little microcosms of human activity away from the drab dreary suburbia that most of our cities suffer from. Most show signs of ageing and dilapidation, but that's what makes them so special in my opinion.

So, which seaside town should I visit next?