

Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

ON THE WATERFRONT

Discovering the particular charms of Revere Beach



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THE PATH TO THE BEACH where I swam as a child had a gate for blocking unwanted visitors. Heaven forbid one's cows wander onto the neighbor's field. On the secluded shoreline, pale families kept their old New England distance, staying outside of earshot or the radius of an errant Frisbee.

Now, like many Bostonians, a day on the beach involves a drive to the Cape, and a stop at the gate means a \$15 charge to park on roiling tarmac alongside a sea of burned and boisterous vacationers.

There's another option, but whenever the suggestion floats up, it's followed by jokes about hypodermic needles or a concern over mugging. Established as the country's first public beach in 1896, Revere Beach has fallen from its apex. Long gone are the rides and ballrooms. In their place stretches a boardwalk of shacks and dives. When discussing Revere Beach, the subject of swimming never crosses people's minds. When I mentioned my girlfriend and I were making the trip, most people assumed we were grabbing lunch at Kelly's Roast Beef. But after a 15-minute journey, the doors of the Blue Line opened, and the drifting scent of tanning oil confirmed we had arrived at an active seashore.

The scene is distinct. In Wellfleet, a nearby sunbather may point out a seal playing in the waves. Here, a bedraggled gentleman extolled the virtues of a passing *El Dorado*. At the same time, while Cape beaches are littered with crumbling castles built by future geometry-class failures, in Revere, the sandsculpting festival produced towering works, including a monument to Fenway Park complete with reliefs of retired players. Time had eroded Jackie Robinson's nose, but he still stared out, majestic as the sphinx.

We spread our blanket by a volleyball tournament sponsored by *El Planeta*, and Latin dance hits added a backing track to our view of the ocean. The waves rolled in carrying a plastic bag or two, but the sand, I assure you, was free of biological waste. The ideas expressed on that sand, however, weren't always so pristine.

"Are you guys Spanish?" inquired a paunchy Caucasian woman, her glistening sweat allowing her Patriots tattoo to really pop in the sunlight.



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We said we weren't. "Good," she replied. "No... I mean, I'm not alone now." She was soon thereafter.

Revere Beach will throw you in the deep end of diversity, but it's not merely a matter of nationality. Tattoos came in greater variation than skin tones. The removal of a shirt reveals more than the vanilla tramp stamp, as backs provided canvases for massive angel wings or a mural of DC Comics' greatest heroes. Men's bathing suits stretched from gym shorts to board shorts to vacuum-sealed boy shorts. A volleyball referee worked a Speedo so small it could, appropriately, be carried in a coin purse, with room left over for T fare.

An idiosyncrasy we discovered while walking to a boardwalk bar was that you're just as likely to find sunbathers across the street from the beach as you are on the shore. Camped out by a public restroom were four graying men, their hides slowly curing, their chairs facing away from the water. From their conversation—"I rolled in from Lowell at 1:45." "Yeah, I woke up on my couch at 9:30 this morning."—it was clear they were either loving retirement or continuing down a career path one wouldn't deem traditional.

It was at the Shipwreck Lounge that Revere Beach truly seduced me. There were '70s tunes, racing forms, snapshots of the owner with ce-

lebrities (Pacino, Pesci, various Sopranos, Gene Wilder), and not one but two old-timers with canes. It's everything I could want in a dive, complete with a Saturday buffet. In the parking lot, there was a man with a grill stacked with meats and a bikini calendar full of reminders. He served me an Italian sausage and pointed to the condiments. "You want mustard or any of this crap?" I had to restrain myself from hugging him.

An hour later, we stopped at a different bar. As I ordered, a man with a shattered incisor walked up and spun a yarn. Turns out he'd had a vodka-fueled trip to Foxwoods with some Polish gangsters, one of whom found out the hard way he has an allergy to amaretto. Then, studying us with pupils the size of pinheads, he announced he was going to play us a song. Before we left, I overheard him talking to the jukebox about Vladimir Putin.

Seems things turn slightly stranger as the shadows grow long on Revere Beach. Taking one last stroll down the boardwalk, we passed a man walking an iguana and a woman pushing a dog in a baby carriage. We witnessed happy moments, like a busload of dolled-up teens arriving for quinceañera photos. It's just that they happened to unload in front of two men being patted down for drug possession.

So go to Revere Beach. According to today's Mass. Department of Conservation and Recreation's hotline, the water's fine. But consider packing up before the sun goes down. ***

Got an opinion? Send your stories and suggestions to nick@improper.com.