

## **Seaside Tourism on a Global Stage**

### **Conference Report**

**‘Resorting to the Coast: Tourism, Heritage and Cultures of the Seaside’, Blackpool, UK, 25-29 June 2009**

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The international conference on ‘Resorting to the Coast: Tourism, Heritage and Cultures of the Seaside’, which took place at the English seaside resort of Blackpool at the end of June 2009, was the first of its kind. It attracted 160 papers from all over the world, most of which focused on specialised beach tourism destinations, although some dealt with tourism of other kinds in seaports and other coastal settings. Many of the papers had a historical focus, contained significant historical content, or included transferable concepts which could be appropriated to extend the historian’s repertoire; so there was a great deal of direct interest to historians of tourism. This report tries to convey, in brief thematic compass, some of the riches that were on offer. It is based on a selection from the formal papers presented for the CD of the conference proceedings, as presented below in the list of references. The criteria for defining a paper as ‘historical’ are based on direct analysis of processes of change over time, of past circumstances or representations; or on examination of the ways in which perceptions or constructions of the past affect current issues and policies, particularly in terms of the uses of history or ‘heritage’. We hope that several of the papers presented will appear in future issues of this journal.

The event was organised by the Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change and the Institute of Northern Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK, and supported by Blackpool Council, English Heritage, Northern Rail and Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), who sponsored a launch party for the *Journal of Tourism History*. Blackpool Council made the historic Winter Gardens available to the conference organisers, enabling papers to be presented in a Victorian entertainment complex with many later additions and embellishments, which first opened its doors in 1878. Professor Vanessa Toulmin’s plenary lecture made delegates aware of the nature and evolution of their

immediate surroundings in and around the Spanish Hall, which featured elaborate and enjoyably kitsch plaster decoration from the 1930s, and of the history and present circumstances of the extensive Winter Gardens site. This was reinforced by a study tour, alongside parallel offerings on Blackpool's resort architecture (Mr Carl Carrington) and its historic holiday accommodation district (Professor John K. Walton). (Walton, 1994)

Blackpool was an eminently suitable place for such a gathering. It has undisputable claims to the status of the world's first working-class seaside resort, in the sense that during the late nineteenth century its tourist economy came to be dominated by wage-earning industrial workers from the cotton mills, engineering workshops, coal mines and multifarious other industries of Lancashire (the first industrial region and society) and then from a wider area of northern and midland England.. (Walton, 1998) It has enough surviving architectural and cultural heritage from those formative years, and from its subsequent development as a popular resort for the whole of Britain during the twentieth century, to generate a promising case for inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site under the 'cultural landscape' rubric. (Walton and Wood, 2009) It proved possible to dedicate a whole parallel session of the conference to studies of aspects of Blackpool's own history, with a central focus on entertainment and popular culture, which could be set alongside the great diversity of experiences from other climes and shores. (Arthur, 2009)

Blackpool has been less visible outside Britain than its size, visitor numbers and significance should merit, largely because, like all British seaside resorts, its markets have been overwhelmingly domestic and its projection beyond the islands' shores has been almost non-existent. But work on British destinations has dominated the historiography of seaside resorts and coastal tourism, to an extent that might be thought distorting. Waleed Hazbun, in a plenary presentation, pointed out some of the problems that might arise from the uncritical adoption of a simple diffusion model for the beach resort and seaside holiday, starting in Britain and Western Europe and spreading outwards. (Hazbun, 2009) He drew attention to the persistence and adaptation of distinctive practices associated with domestic demand, and cultural traditions identified

with sea-bathing, in Mediterranean locations; to Islamic opposition to the coastal tourism development policies of the Tunisian government in the later twentieth century; to the incorporation of holiday practices associated with local extended families and their beach usages into ‘international’ coastal resorts in Tunisia alongside those of international ‘mass tourists’; and to separate and distinct traditions of ritual and recreational use of the sea among Moroccans. (See also Hazbun, 2008; Boukraa, 1993) This is a salutary reminder of the perils of focusing studies of coastal (and other) tourism history solely on international tourism as big business, to the detriment of domestic demand, smaller businesses and local traditions, and of over-generalising about the presumed uniformity of Fordist ‘mass tourism’ provision and practice. (See also Singh, 2009) It should also reinforce our awareness of the nuanced and negotiated processes whereby such cultural practices are diffused and adapted, as well as the ways in which developments of ‘Western’ origin encounter and interact with independent traditions in other cultures. Among the papers presented at Blackpool were studies of coastal tourism in (for example) Vietnam, China, Thailand, South Africa, Turkey and the Lebanon, opening out opportunities for the critical and (eventually) the comparative analysis of relationships between ‘Western’ models of international coastal tourism, colonial vectors for hybrid development, and indigenous traditions of seaside use and enjoyment. This is not to discount the strong evidence for the global diffusion from northern Europe in the eighteenth century, and especially from England, of a distinctive kind of modern coastal tourism, combining new medical orthodoxies with commercialised leisure and the fashion cycle. Indeed, two of the Blackpool papers extend our understanding of the origins of European coastal tourism, by providing new evidence on medical treatises on sea-bathing in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and on early commercial provision in Liverpool as well as North Yorkshire at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Winter, 2009), and of Dutch claims for primacy in the commercial development of seaside leisure, at Scheveningen in 1663. (Spits, 2009) But Hazbun’s evidence draws attention to hybridity and diversity on a broader canvas, and to alternative ways of experiencing coastlines and beaches; and it therefore constitutes a very important agenda for further work.

Daniel Hiernaux's plenary introduced a similar, overlapping range of issues. Over the last forty years Mexico has consolidated a position as a global leader in providing international beach tourism, and there is a considerable literature on the politics (national and international) behind governmental use of 'sun, sea and sand' tourism as an engine of economic growth, the associated social and cultural problems and conflicts, and recent changes of approach involving diversification of offer, multiplication of sites, and a growing emphasis on residential developments for second homes and retirement. A great deal of research has been channelled into the gigantic developments in and around Cancún, by far the most successful (at least in terms of attractiveness to tourists from the United States and Europe) of the growth 'poles' identified and promoted by the Mexican government and its agency FONATUR at the start of the programme. Hiernaux provides a broad critical overview of these developments, pulling together and building on the critiques of FONATUR, but also directing our attention towards alternative modes of coastal tourism development in Mexico, where domestic demand and more informal, unplanned, even chaotic provision have been much in evidence. A comparison between Cancún and Acapulco is particularly revealing. The paper also emphasizes the unpleasant side-effects of Mexican coastal tourism development, in and around Cancún as elsewhere: dispossessions and evictions for development, tourism workers consigned to low-grade accommodation on and beyond the urban fringe, low wages and underemployment, prostitution, drugs, money-laundering through tourism businesses, the neglect of hurricane relief outside the hotel zones, the destruction of cultures and the degradation of environments. There is a good deal of parallel research on some of these themes in Mexican settings, and especially on the problems associated with Cancún; but Hiernaux, a pioneer in this field, pulls the material together across a uniquely broad spectrum of issues and places. (Hiernaux, 2003; Hiernaux, 2009; Torres and Momsen, 2005; Berger, 2006; Gullette, 2007; Walton, 2009)

Hazbun's use of Edward Said's concept of 'orientalism' to destabilise straightforward assumptions about the diffusion of Western models of coastal tourism encounters an ironic counterpart in Fred Gray's plenary discussion of seaside architecture and design, a project which begins on Professor Gray's home territory in Brighton, England, and works

outwards. Pastiche of the 'oriental' have provided strong and enduring motifs in British seaside leisure architecture since the embellishment of Brighton's Royal Pavilion in the early nineteenth century, especially but far from exclusively in the liminal setting of the pleasure pier, communicating an embrace of the 'exotic' that connoted suspension of the usual rules, grammars and constraints of canonical expression, which might be extended beyond the built or planned environment to include coastal pleasures and holiday behaviours. This was not a peculiarity of the British, as Davy Depelchin's paper on Belgian 'orientalist' seaside architecture made clear; and such frivolities were in evidence in North America as well. (Gray, 2006; see also Brodie and Winter, 2007; Walton, 2007) What this says about perceptions and expressions of the 'exotic East', about colonial values and appropriations, again deserves further investigation, perhaps along lines that were first traced a quarter of a century ago in Anthony King's examination of the bungalow as an architectural type which soon developed strong associations with the 'Western' seaside. (King, 1984) But twentieth-century modernisms are also strongly associated with coastal resorts, and Gray's paper examined a spectrum of 'seaside architecture', an interestingly problematic category which was further explored by several of the conference participants.

Several papers examined relationships between architectural expression and civic, regional or national identities in the context of coastal tourism. Balducci introduced the remarkable modernist architecture associated with the spread of *colonie di vacanza*, sponsored holiday camps for the promotion of health, recuperation and recreation (especially for children and young people). These foundations proliferated from the early twentieth century under the auspices of various political, industrial and voluntary organizations, especially in Italy during the 1930s, when they constituted an aspect of Fascist social policy which was also a strong marker of national and regional identity. This programme, and its legacy, also needs to be seen in the context of parallel architectural and social movements in other European countries during the first four decades of the twentieth century; and Orioli's paper on the Adriatic resort of Cesenatico provided a complementary local study which discussed the role of the *colonie* in a particular setting, while examining the emergence, congestion and saturation of a planned

resort environment, and the building of a spectacular and controversial ‘grattacielo’ (skyscraper) which was the tallest structure in Italy on its completion in 1957. (Balducci, 2005 and 2009; Balducci and Bica, 2007; Orioli, 2008 and 2009; see also BBK, 2000) Chorvát and Brezovec developed ideas about relationships between resorts and identities on contested terrain further along the Adriatic coast, where the evolution of particular destinations was affected by reallocation between Italy and Yugoslavia and then by the break-up of the latter state, while tourists from neighbouring land-locked territories developed an emotional stake in their most accessible stretches of coastline. (Chorvát, 2009; Brezovec, 2009; and see also Grandits and Taylor, 2010)

The Baltic coast has encountered similar issues of political and cultural identity, and Omilanowska’s presentation on the role of architecture and planning in the appropriation and celebration of a ‘Polish seaside’ between the wars was particularly stimulating and evocative, especially in conjunction with Kurilo’s contribution on the significance of the seaside holiday reminiscences of families of ‘Baltic Germans’, who preferred not to mix with Russian and other visitors to the Eastern Baltic coastline, and whose memories are accessible through what appears to be a fascinating archive. This is also a reminder of the general need to access and analyse tourists’ voices, particularly through the enduringly neglected means of oral history. (Omilanowska, 2009; Kurilo, 2009) Da Rocha and Reis, in a paper on current developments at Rio de Janeiro’s beaches that took full account of the coexistence of tradition with innovation, offered a perspective on the significance of the changing operation and design of beach vending outlets, which again engaged with questions of architecture and identity; while Costa opened out issues around symbolism, national identity, ‘heritage’, the visual, the literary, the romantic and the maritime in her treatment of Portuguese lighthouses. (Da Rocha and Reis, 2009; Costa, 2009)

The conference also revealed the ways in which coastal tourism history is developing in new settings, not least in hitherto neglected parts of Western Europe. Four further papers on Portugal not only narrated the development of Cascais and Estoril as international beach resorts, relating this (again) to an authoritarian political regime, the ‘Estado Novo’ of Oliveira Salazar (1926-74), as well as to the earlier interventions of the Portuguese

royal family. They also explored the development of beach resorts further north, with tantalising allusions to the influence of the British mercantile presence around Porto. There is more work to do here, not least on the Algarve. (Cadavez, 2009; Carvalho, 2009a, 2009b; Pinho and Veludo Coelho, 2009) Ireland is also coming into the frame, as earlier work on architectural history is supplemented by case-studies of particular resorts (among which Bray and Tramore are particularly interesting) and by Cusack's analysis of the role of the cultural and imperial power of large landowners in shaping the development and use of coastal leisure settlements. (Cusack, 2009; Furlong, 2009b; Davies, 2009; and see also Davies, 2007) This can now be framed by two long overdue studies of the development of Irish tourism policy since the late nineteenth century, set firmly in the context of the island's complex political trajectory and difficult economic experiences over that period. (Furlong, 2009a; Zuelow, 2009)

Alongside the strong themes associating coastal tourism with politics and (often contested) national identities, the conference brought out the continuing development of interests in popular culture and entertainment at the seaside. The themes were brought together in White's paper on the Australian beach holiday, which began with a brisk critique of Lencek and Bosker's widely-used anecdotal survey of the beach as 'paradise on earth', pointing out their distorting preference for the privatised and upscale, and proceeded to develop an argument about the 'traditional' Australian beach holiday as informal, democratic, communal and accessible, to the extent that Queensland's famous Gold Coast developments might be seen as not quite 'Australian'. White identifies the heyday of this kind of beach holiday with a distinctively Australian approach to work and leisure which prioritised time and access to the beach above the maximisation of earnings and consumption, and which has been steadily eroded since the 1970s. (White, 2005, 2009; Lencek and Bosker, 1999) Ford's paper on the changing fortunes of seaside fairgrounds on Sydney's coastline at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, a version of which can be found in this volume, reinforces this argument by relating the fairgrounds' problems to the growth of popular attachment to the uncommodified pleasures of swimming and surfing, which led governments to recognise a strong democratic desire for recreational access to shoreline and sea. (Ford, 2007, 2009) There

are important transferable themes here. Sobocinska's paper on the impact of Vietnam War 'rest and recreation' facilities on the construction of new kinds of Australian tourism practices in the later twentieth century, involving 'beach party' and sex tourism to South Asian destinations, is highly relevant to this thesis, over and above its importance in its own right. (Sobocinska, 2009)

The most sustained attention to seaside popular culture, however, comes in the British, and above all the English, setting. Spits' presentation of the contents and agenda of the Dutch maritime museum, indeed, points out a deficit in exhibits relating to seaside tourism which is probably widespread, reflecting limited engagement with the cultural importance of this theme, although there is no shortage of attention to it on the part of Dutch artists (as in, for example, the work of Isaac and Josef Israels), and indeed those of northern Europe generally. (Spits, 2009) Hayler's analysis of patterns of entertainment provision and attendance in English coastal resorts in the early twenty-first century pays heed to older traditions and legacies, although the limited number of resorts in his sample means that little credence can be accorded to aggregative material: what should interest us here are trends over time within, and comparisons between, particular places. (Hayler, 2009). Arthur's reconstruction of popular entertainment in the Blackpool of the 1930s, extrapolating from a famous monologue of the period, draws attention to the need to pay more heed to this crucial aspect of coastal tourism, and to what might be specifically 'seaside' about what was on offer in different places and cultures. (Arthur, 2009a, 2009b) Vanessa Toulmin's 'Admission All Classes' project, which uses historical research to revive and invigorate seaside entertainment in Blackpool, is a key reference point here (<http://www.admissionallclasses.com/>) Chapman's papers on seaside amusement parks, with a telling analysis of the closure of the Pleasurelands park at Southport, and on the possibilities for reviving the seaside amusement arcade through nostalgia and technological 'heritage', are also highly relevant. (Chapman 2009a, 2009b; see also Cross and Walton, 2005; Walton, 2007a) Leggett's impressionistic but lively contribution on Southend, a contrasting, metropolitan centre for seaside popular culture, is particularly interesting on the role of London's East End, and especially its criminal connections, in the post-war development of the resort; but he also has useful material on the revival of

conflicts between the rival youth cultures of mods and rockers, with an added infusion of skinheads, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period which, as noted elsewhere, comes well within the frame of contemporary history. (Leggett, 2009) Meanwhile, Wells' entertaining presentation of disaster tourism, in the form of shipwreck and salvage operations as popular spectacle, not only draws attention to the ways in which untoward events could enliven dormant coastal economies out of season (especially if railway companies were alert and flexible), but also reminds us that some early coastal resorts were already languishing and in need of revitalisation as early as the 1890s, as in the case of New Jersey's Long Branch. (Wells, 2009)

This was partly a matter of image; and several contributions addressed the important theme of how coastal resorts were represented, verbally or visually, whether in travel literature, brochures and promotional material, novels, poetry or correspondence. Pennington's examination of the transition from 'remnants of Victorian morality' to images of sub-tropical informality and accessibility in Sarasota, Florida, partly expressed through 'Mediterranean revival' architecture and car-friendliness, sits alongside Mariné Roig's study of French and German guide-book representations of Catalan coastal destinations and Budenbender's analysis of popular visual representations of the 'tropical beach'. (Pennington, 2009; Mariné Roig, 2009; Budenbender, 2009) A strong English Victorian literary strand was also in evidence. Brodie illustrated an early graphic novel by John Leighton to present the recognisable preoccupations and dilemmas of a London family at the coast in the transitional 1840s, Keirstead examined poetical representations of the seaside in 'High Culture', and Levitan looked at the seaside correspondence of two English novelists. (Brodie, 2009; Keirstead, 2009; Levitan, 2009)

Image, revival and regeneration in coastal communities were brought together in three papers. Rojas Rabaneda examines an interesting trend, since 1990, to diversifying the attractions of fading Catalan coastal resorts by reconstructing 'historical' fairs and markets, often with medieval or even Roman themes. (Rojas Rabaneda, 2009) Swensen and Haupt looked at the resources for developing cultural tourism using the wharves, boathouses and shanties of former fishing and commercial port settlements in Norway, in

a paper which resonates with Johnsen's article in the current issue of this journal. (Swensen and Haupt, 2009). Solet's presentation pursued similar themes in an excellent comparative study of three maritime towns along the northern Gulf of Mexico since the 1960s, where surviving fishing communities were struggling with pressures to gentrify, and the picture was complicated by questions of ethnicity and vulnerability to hurricane damage. (Solet, 2009)

Environmental issues in relation to coastal tourism were highlighted in several other papers, none of which were 'historical' in the conventional sense, but all of which depended on interpreting the past and changing understandings of conservation and sustainability. Bade's examination of the issues raised by conflicts between 'natural' and 'cultural' heritage and usage, and by the rival 'heritage' claims of native and introduced species, was set firmly in the context of Motuihe Island's established status as a place of recreation for the inhabitants of nearby Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, alongside its other historic uses. (Bade, 2009) LeBourdais' contribution on changing representations of Greenland landscapes had a significant 'history of art' component, and drew attention to the development of what might be called 'iceberg tourism' since the 1970s at Ilulissat, while emphasizing the paradoxes this (together with the designation of the relevant fiord as a World Heritage Site in 2004) presents in an area where the impact of global warming is particularly visible, disruptive and indeed terrifying. (LeBourdais, 2009) In related ways Murray's paper on the decline of coral gardens, while not 'historical' in a conventional sense, depended on an understanding of both long-term processes and short-term impacts, and on setting the environmental impacts of reef and related tourism in a much wider context. (Murray, 2009)

Finally, we can pull out three papers that look at coastal tourism in the context of the sea as channel of communication, and of the related links between coast and hinterland, extending the field of vision in other ways. Braasch's comparative study of Southampton and New York as transatlantic passenger ports between the 1950s and the 1970s emphasizes coastal sites as gateways rather than destinations, raising questions of coastal liminality from a novel angle, while the liners themselves might be seen from this

perspective as the destinations and resorts. (Braasch, 2009; Shields, 1991) The paper by Mancino and colleagues on Cilento in southern Italy, another instance of very contemporary and policy-driven 'history', is interesting here because of the way it seeks to integrate coastal communities into a wider regional tourism offer, which has many parallels elsewhere. (Mancino *et al.*, 2009) Similarly, Tatham's analysis of the traffic of two Welsh narrow-gauge 'heritage' railways looks at coastal settings in necessary wider contexts, although it would have benefited from acquaintanceship with Carter's recent study of the often fraught and decidedly un-neighbourly politics of the relationships between the two systems. (Tatham, 2009; Carter, 2008, Chapter 6)

This is a broad and rich, but far from complete, perspective on the rapidly-developing academic interest in the history of coastal tourism across the globe. In terms of geographical coverage, the conference CD does not include the fascinating papers that were presented on (for example) China, Vietnam, South Africa, the Lebanon and Turkey, while the strong showing of papers from Italy, Portugal and Ireland was not matched by contributions from the equally lively coastal tourism researchers from (for example) France and Spain. Latin America was unfortunately unrepresented, apart from Daniel Hiernaux's plenary. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this thematic, if necessarily brief, presentation of the content of those historical papers that did arrive in time for the CD will whet the appetite for future publications in this journal on such a crucial dimension of tourism history.

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