

Coastal STORIES

MAN ON A BEACH ASKS:
WHAT DOES THE BEACH MEAN TO YOU?

Words by **Yayeri van Baarsen**, photographs by **Mike Newman**

For me, it's some peace and quiet after a busy day in the office; a chance to let the wind blow away the cobwebs in my head as I stroll along the seaside. But it's also an opportunity to have fun, go rock pooling and run through the sand with my eyes closed while holding hands with my partner. For others, it might be a holiday, a place for leisure activities or a reminder of their childhood.

The beach has a different meaning to everyone. Under the pseudonym Man On A Beach, an anonymous Cornish resident asked hundreds of people the question: "What does the beach mean to you?" He then posted films of these narrative interviews on his website, thus creating a legacy of stories and memories.

Since the site appeared as CT's website of the month in January 2012, it has been viewed more than 100,000 times by people from 104 different countries. The project is a Cornish success story; economically viable and supported by 77 businesses, 50 of which are of this county. "Some things are meant to happen, and I believe this is one of them," the maker of the site explains when asked about his success. "I love doing what I do - it's a vocation. I have never had a master plan; the project just led me along. All I did was try to understand the effect of the beach."

I meet the mysterious film-maker on Porthbeor beach in the Roseland, one of his favourite sandy stretches in Cornwall. "Although," he says immediately, "I don't really have a favourite. The beach is never the same; circumstances, weather and tides change all the time. This permanent state of flux is what the beach means to me."

We park at the side of a narrow Roseland road. There is no sign whatsoever, apart from a little wooden plate saying 'footpath'. When we climb over the stile and make our way through a wet field, our shoes sink further in the mud with each step until the grass makes way for a slippery path of rocks leading down between the bushes. Suddenly, when the path turns around a corner, it's like being in a different world. The secluded, isolated cove of Porthbeor, with just a small stretch of sand visible due to the high tide, comes into view and -despite the weather being





gloomy and grey - makes for a picture perfect scene.

Never mind the pouring rain or the slippery steps; as always, seeing the beach makes me smile. According to Man On A Beach, this is the reason he started his project. "Having lived in Cornwall for over 20 years, it became clear to me that almost everyone is happier when they are on the beach. I wanted to know exactly what that enhancing effect of the beach is, so I just asked people. Cornwall is a beautiful place with stunning beaches so it seemed like the perfect place to start," he says.

The stats: since the project began in December 2011, he has visited 120 different Cornish beaches, many of them in all four seasons. He has conducted 537 interviews, which provided him with 421 different answers to the same question. Having divided those answers into different sections (emotional and spiritual, livelihood and occupation, friends and family, sensory, nature, and activities), he's now working together with the European Centre for Environment and Human Health (ECEHH) on research projects, such as one about our relation with the aquatic environment.

All beaches on the website are featured in both a short scene-setting film and an



interview with a beachgoer. These interviews are carried out using a small camera phone, and Man On A Beach selects his subjects carefully. "I sometimes get approached by people who want to be filmed, but I tend to avoid that as I don't want attention seekers," he says. "I look for people who are in tune with their environment, and I know I have a good chat when people are showing their humanity." Apparently I am in tune with the rainy stretch of Porthbeor sand, for we swap places and I get interviewed. (Curious? Visit <http://manonabeach.com/?p=616>).

Despite my attempts to get him in front of the camera, the Man On A Beach closely guards his anonymity to a degree where he refuses to pose for any pictures, even from behind. "I don't want to be a celebrity; this project is not about me," he insists. "I am merely a passive everyman who forms the link between the website visitor and the beachgoer; all I do is pass on the message. When you're sitting at home and you're missing the beach fondly, you can look at my website and, because of my anonymity, you can really imagine yourself being there on that beach."

When we met, the film-maker had just returned to Cornwall after spending time on the coasts of Norfolk, Suffolk and Dorset. He is hoping to continue filming on both national and international levels, having planned trips to Denmark and Scotland. "It's an endless project. I want to explore and show the effect of the beach as widely as possible and spread the word around the world, for I believe the beach has a universal appeal. Many visitors tell me they draw comfort from my website, so I believe it touches a nerve."

The man himself is certainly touched by the beach. "I need to be on the beach every day; this project has sensitised me to the coastline." And indeed, during our talk he is constantly aware of the gorgeous surroundings; looking at the stones, spotting unusual rock formations and commenting on the rolling of the waves.

His ultimate goal? "I hope my project inspires people to visit the beach more often. And if they look on the website and see visitors' stories, I hope they think about what the beach actually means to them. Maybe next time they go there, they'll feel more in harmony with this place where the air, land and sea meet." 

www.manonabeach.com

WHAT DOES THE BEACH MEAN TO YOU?

► The four most popular answers given to the question "What does the beach mean to you?" according to Man On A Beach:

- 1 Childhood
- 2 Beauty
- 3 Dog-walking
- 4 Family