

BACK TO THE BEACH OR THE ENDLESS SUMMER BEACH GUIDE

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This beach guide is a copy of many blog entries that I compiled between 2011 and 2012. All of the beaches are places I have personally visited except for Malibu which is a guest entry from Laura Hernandez. The entries take you all around the world so I hope you will have as much fun reading, making plans to travel, or just sitting back in your armchair as I had writing these blogs. Let's get going and hit the beach!

Let's face it; you are either a beach person or you aren't. If you still relate to Gidget and Moondoggie, sing along with the Beach Boys, and think Annette and Frankie should never have left the beach, you're a beach person.

I have friends who cannot understand why I love the beach. They complain about coming home covered in sand no matter how hard you try to wash it off, feeling gritty and dirty, they don't like the salt water, the parking is impossible and then there's the jellyfish (okay, they MIGHT have a point there). Then they tell me they come home with filthy towels, sunburned, and worn out. From my point of view, the bottom line is they see the beach this way because **THEY ARE NOT BEACH PEOPLE.**

Me—I could hit the beach every day. I never get tired of the sight, sound, and smell of the water, the breeze, the waves, the colors, the feel of the sand—wet and dry. I just plain love it. I've been to lots of places, traveled all over the world and hit a lot of beaches so I thought I would talk about a few I really enjoy and why. You can make up your mind for yourself if that's the beach for you. So this going to be a city by city guide to beaches all around the world because you just never know when you might have the opportunity to travel and then voila! You know which beach to hit.

TEL AVIV ISRAEL or THE WHITE CITY

Tel Aviv is a city with a beach culture and that's no surprise since it is a coastal city, and the entire coastline of Israel has beaches on the Mediterranean. Unlike Jerusalem which is inland, hilly and considered a far more "religious" city, Tel Aviv is flat which makes for easy walking and considered quite "secular." A local expression is that Jerusalem prays and Tel Aviv plays.

Summer is long, swimming season even for the fainthearted is from May to October. The braver souls swim all year. All the beaches are public and they have lifeguards and medics. That's good to know because you can never underestimate the power of the ocean no matter how strong a swimmer you are and you never know if you might need medical attention. I found that out recently after a bee sting and ran straight to the medic who fixed me up.

You can get to any of the beaches by public transport unless you are lucky and staying at one of the hotels located along the beach or within walking distance. Beaches are clean in Tel Aviv; trash containers are located on all the beaches and the beach is cleaned daily. Smoking is not permitted at the risk of a fine. (Smoking is allowed in the beach open air cafes, just not on the beach itself.)

All of the beaches also have chairs and umbrellas for rent and there's plenty of shade so you don't have to sit in the sun. You can bring your own chair but if you're a tourist I don't think you're going to be carrying that in your luggage so good to know that you don't have to melt in the sun which is fierce in the summer. The beaches are also lined with cafes so you can sit on the beach, order a drink, breakfast, lunch or a snack and they will serve you right there as you are enjoying the beautiful view. On a sunny winter's day, it's still nice to sit out on the beach and have a meal even if a bit too chilly to swim.

Best summer treat---freshly squeezed juice depending on what is in season. I recommend late August-early September for fresh pomegranate juice. Earlier in the season best treat---ice cold slices of watermelon. You will find plenty of variety in food in case you don't like that sort of thing.

The beaches are one long string and you can walk along the beach from one to the other or climb the stairs and walk the promenade called the "Tiyelet" but you do have to watch out for joggers and cyclists on the promenade. The character of the promenade changes at night and you'll see crowds of people, lots of jam-packed pubs and restaurants, discos and music clubs just across the street.

Showers, toilets and faucets for washing feet are located periodically along the strip of beaches so you can wash off. Most of the time the toilets are reasonably clean, or as clean as beach bathrooms are going to be.

One of the most fascinating things about Tel Aviv beaches is that the individual beaches have different characters. Some attract families, others seem to attract singles. Some of the beaches attract surfers---yes, you can surf the Mediterranean, just don't expect huge waves or slow rollers. And, maybe the most interesting, there are a few segregated beaches. Segregated means "Women Only" or "Men Only" due to religious concerns about modesty and swimwear. You don't have to be religious to use those beaches, but if you are concerned with appearances, well, those beaches might be for you. You will find them towards the north, close to Tel Aviv Port.

Gordon beach has volleyball nets if that's your thing and playground areas for small children. It's a given on any Israeli beach you will see people, mostly men, playing "Matkot"---a kind of beach paddleball game. The paddles and balls are sold all over the world even if they originated in Israel so you've probably seen them if you are beach goer. If that's your thing you will have lots of company. Looking for a salt water pool? Yep, that's at Gordon Beach, too.

What should you wear? Anything goes on the Tel Aviv beaches (except for the segregated ones). Bright colors, short, cute little dresses, or longer ones are the typical cover up if you wear one. I still see men in very skimpy swimwear (and a lot of them should consider board shorts). Interestingly, in my experience, the younger guys are wearing the board shorts. Ditto with women; I see a lot of women who could only be called a bit overweight, (that's being really polite) but they're still wearing bikinis. Hey, if that's your choice, go right ahead in Tel Aviv.

Water Sports Beaches

You've got a choice here. If surfing is your thing, you can have a lesson with Oded who usually uses Bograshov Beach. He will meet you on the beach and bring the board for you, never lose patience, and on occasion, has been known to demonstrate personally how to catch a wave. This is after you swear it is impossible. You can find Oded at www.surfinginIsrael.com

Best recommendation: Share a lesson with another person. You'll get a break between waves, feel better as you watch someone else struggle to stand and fall off too, and afterwards, you can head off together to a café on the beach and kick back with a drink or snack. You might even make a new friend by sharing a lesson. Surfing is also available a bit further north at Topsea. Topsea was the first person to introduce surfing in Israel in the 1950's and today his sons run the business. They have group lessons and boards for hire. I haven't tried their services but I can vouch for Oded who is a great guy and yes, he can teach in English.

If you want to try windsurfing or parasailing, head to the Dolphinarium Beach. I've never tried it, but if that's your thing or the one thing you always wanted to try, just head over there. BTW, you will probably find music on this beach on Friday afternoons. In Israel, Friday is the first day of the "weekend." Musicians just come along and start to play on this particular beach so if music is your thing, stick around on Friday.

At the Marina, you can also rent windsurfing gear, sailboats and motorboats, so you won't lack for water sports in Tel Aviv.

You don't HAVE to do anything; you can just kick back and people watch with plenty of variety and you will hear a lot of languages too. I could write a lot more but one final recommendation and this is a must; you MUST hang out on the beach for sunset at least once. The sun sinks very quickly and you sit there watching a huge orange disk moving rapidly down to the waterline until it disappears. Absolutely fantastic!

One warning: The good news is that you really do not have to worry about sharks on Tel Aviv beaches but there is a jellyfish season from about late June to late July. I know; I've seen enough of them, so don't say you were not warned. And BTW the treatment is vinegar as fast as possible. The medics are ready with spray bottles of the stuff but I always carry a bottle of my own just in case. Contrary to popular myth, no, urinating on the sting site is not a treatment. Stick with the vinegar.

One final tip for exploring Tel Aviv. If you enjoy cycling, you can rent a bike at a number of stations around the city and return it at another station which is kind of neat. Alternatively, public transportation is very good other than Saturdays all over Israel since it is the Sabbath and nothing much runs. There are taxis if you must get somewhere, you're never completely stranded. Tel Aviv has great clubs, night life, some nice museums and Bauhaus buildings that are worth the effort to see. I'm heading off to Bograshov Beach now so just might see you there!

Next destination on the beach guide---Sydney, Australia. Here is a short quiz on Sydney beaches—let's see how smart you are. Answers are in the next instalment.

The nude beach in Sydney is:

Balmoral Beach
Manly Beach
Whale Beach
Lady Jane Beach

A beach with shark nets is located at:

Newport Beach
Avalon Beach
Balmoral Beach
Manly Beach

The most popular beach cover up for women on Sydney beaches is:

A muu-muu
A very short cotton dress
Board shorts
A sarong

Loads of volleyball nets are located at:

Manly Beach
Bondi Beach
Palm Beach
Bronte Beach

The dog beach is located in:

Manly Beach
Bondi Beach
Pittwater Beach
Bilgola Plateau

A surf lifesaver on a Sydney beach:

Is a waiter who serves you a pina colada
The bathroom attendant with toilet paper
The Aussie equivalent of a lifeguard
The guy selling ice cream on the beach

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Aussies (pronounced Ozzies) love the beach. They love swimming and water sports in general. Whether you get to the beach or not, Sydney is a beautiful city. There is nothing like a beautiful sunny day on the harbor (spelled harbour there), kicking back with a latte at a café at Circular Quay which is right between the Opera House and

Harbour Bridge and watching the ferries come in with that beautiful blue sky in the background.

Sydney is blessed with numerous beaches, both Harbourside and Oceanside so depending on what you want, you choose. Many of the beaches are inner city and easy to get to with public transport; others require a car. Parking is not easy at the beaches for the most part, but if you get outside the city, you will find beautiful ocean beaches where parking might be easier. I have never failed to find parking immediately at Newport Beach which is north of Sydney in the northern suburbs. Yes, take change for the meters and don't count on being able to change bills into small change.

Why Harbourside or Oceanside? Depends on whether or not you want real waves or calm water. Some of the Harbourside beaches also have shark nets which is a big criteria for some folks. The Pacific is home to sharks and we invade their territory. There are shark sightings in Sydney and on many beaches an alarm will sound if one is in the vicinity. Watch how fast people move getting out of the water!

Like Tel Aviv, Sydney beaches tend to attract different sorts of people to different beaches. There are surfer beaches, family beaches, dog beaches and nude beaches. You take your pick. Some of the inner city beaches will have cafes and restaurants across the street from the beach, Bondi and Manly in particular. Other places might only have one or two fast food outlets or you might have to walk down to the main street of the town if you are technically out of Sydney, and find a few places with food.

Beaches are patrolled by surf-lifeguards which is a big organization in Australia. You will know them by their distinctive red and yellow swim caps or shirts. What you won't find is shade unless you happen to choose a spot that has trees at the back of the beach; you won't find chairs or umbrellas for rent so you need to bring your own which is a problem if you are a tourist. There are so many beaches in Sydney, it's hard to choose which ones to talk about but here are a few.

Manly Beach

I love Manly Beach for a lot of reasons. You can drive there and park in municipal parking—yes, you pay, but you can also get there by ferry if you are coming from the other side of the harbour. Just head down to Circular Quay and take the Manly Ferry which is a nice ride. Why do I like Manly? Its beach fronts the Oceanside, but you are still in the city. The Corso is a promenade which is always packed with people. Watch out for the rollerbladers! Lots of cafes and restaurants and shops along the Corso so you won't starve, and you will find a variety of cuisine. The beach is lovely, nice waves, well patrolled and more beach volleyball nets than you can count.

It's a fun atmosphere at Manly, almost feels like a carnival without the rides. Just plain happy vibe. There are lots of little beaches like Fairy Beach in the Manly area but you do need a car to get there. I personally prefer Manly to Bondi which I find very crowded and just a personal opinion, but I think the beach is nicer at Manly but that's up to you. Bondi is also a city beach and easy to get to—good luck parking! And, it is also along a strip of other beaches and beach walks. It does have a real fame, has a salt water pool and you might see the Bondi Icebergs—the folks who

swim in the winter as well as summer. Remember, summer in Sydney is December to February. Weather can be hot and humid but usually cools off in the evening. This also means that an Aussie Christmas is likely to be spent at the beach because it is hot. Yes, you will still see Santa, roasting in that hot suit in the summer. It might seem strange to Northern Hemisphere people but that's how it is Down Under.

Pay attention to weather reports in Sydney—the direction of the wind will tell you what the weather might be. For example, a “southerly buster” is wind coming from the south—ie the South Pole so it tends to cool things off. A “northwesterly” means it is going to be hot air coming from the desert so it's going to be hot and dryer. Really hot sometimes and since summer is bush fire season, people pay attention to wind direction since the wind can carry fires. This should not concern you at the beach—lucky you.

Going To The Dogs

There are several dog beaches in Sydney, specifically set aside for our canine friends. I know Sandy Beach at Clontarf is one of them, but haven't been there personally. I have been to Pittwater which is north of the city. You will need a car to get there which you probably want anyway with a dog.

This is lovely for the dogs. Plenty of parking and you just walk onto the lawn which is set aside for the dogs. It's fun to let them off leash and run around in a safe area and the dogs who love the water run down the small slope to the water and in they plunge. I have often seen owners in there with them tossing Frisbees for the dogs to chase. My dog isn't a water canine, he's a terrier who prefers terra firma and the “firma” the better in his opinion. He sat and watched that spectacle and looked at me like, “You're kidding me, right?” But, he had a great time running around the lawn with the other dogs. YES you are expected to clean up after your pooch which is fair enough.

There are some benches on the lawn so you can sit back if you want, chat with the other dog owners and watch your doggy pal run around and make friends and remember he or she is a dog, not another person in the family. There are dog parks in Sydney, but this is specifically a beach for dogs and fun.

Back to Nature

Nudity is not illegal in Australia but if you want to go back to nature at the beach, you have to choose one that permits it. There are several in Sydney, the one I know about, not from experience but from hearing about from other people, is Lady Jane Beach. I remember meeting a couple of lady tourists who were heading to the beach and the bus driver kept asking if they were sure they were looking for Lady Jane Beach. Apparently, they didn't know about the nudity and got a big shocker when they arrived. They made tracks fast and found another beach and laughed it off. If this is what you are looking for, well, head on down. You might also hear it referred to as Lady Bay Beach.

Surfing

Aussies love surfing so if that's your thing, your best bet is to head north of the city to Curl Curl and Dee Why Beach. You might catch some waves at Narrabeen which is also along the same road leading north out of the city. If you can't get there, you can

try Tamarama which is along the cliff walk from Bondi. The water can get rough so be careful if you head there. Finally, you can try Cronulla on the South Shore which attracts surfers too.

Swimming in calm waters

Some of the city beaches have shark nets which can be very reassuring. You have the sense of feeling safe because there are shark sightings in Sydney and there have been a few terrible attacks. Not common but I guess that doesn't matter if it happens to you. Balmoral Beach has a net so the water is calm and it's a nice family sort of beach. You see all sorts of people at Balmoral,--families, older people and teens who also walk along a promenade on the beach which is a nice walk. Parking is not easy; you will have to drive around forever until you get lucky and catch a spot. You will catch one but you do have to be patient. Balmoral is in the Mosman area so you are really in the city, or more correctly the North Shore city suburbs, but it's a nice relaxing place. Not a lot of places to eat so if you are planning a whole day, bear that in mind.

I want to be on television

If you are a fan of the Aussie soap, Home and Away, then you should head up to the most northern beaches, a good hour if not more, away from Sydney, until you get to Palm Beach. It's a nice ride and a nice beach. The soap is filmed there so you might happen to catch them filming some episodes. Don't count on being enlisted as an extra but you never know, you might get lucky. Rather, go with the idea that you will have a lovely ride, enjoy a beach that is not too crowded and have a nice day out.

I could talk about a lot more Sydney beaches—there are heaps of them, but this should get you started.

And finally, what do you wear on a Sydney beach, (other than Lady Jane where that is not a problem!)? Anything goes but you will see many women wearing sarongs over their "cossies"—Aussie lingo for bathing suits, probably from the British term "swimming costume." You might also hear "swimmer" used too. Grab a sarong and you will fit right in whatever cossie you are wearing.

Where's our next destination? It's Cartagena, Colombia—the jewel of the Spanish Main.

Here's your quiz:

The pirate who succeeded in raiding the city was:

Jean-Francois Robeval

Francis Drake

John Hawkins

Henry Morgan

The dance most closely associated with Colombia is:

The cumbia

The samba

The rumba

The merengue

A common snack in Cartagena is:

French fries

Coconut fries

Yucca fries

Fried green tomatoes

The opening of *Romancing The Stone* with Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas is supposed to be Cartagena but was actually filmed in:

Mexico

Belize

Brazil

Colombia

CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA

Do you remember *Romancing The Stone* with Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas? If you do, you might recall the story starts with Turner in Cartagena delivering a treasure map to ransom her sister. Being Hollywood, it wasn't filmed in Cartagena, but in Mexico. Oh well.

If you loved *Pirates of the Caribbean*, if you want Caribbean history, romance and a sense of adventure with your beach then it's Cartagena for you. Cartagena is one of the oldest beach resorts in the New World thanks to the Spanish. This was a very wealthy city so pirates, or if you prefer, privateers made raids or attempts to raid Cartagena, the most famous being Sir Francis Drake who detested the Spanish. Pirates galore in the city's history and you can find out more about them at the museums. Even if you're heading to Cartagena primarily for the beach, you should make time to see the Gold Museum which includes a stronghold room with beautiful gold jewelry along with pre-Colombian items.

Like many other beach cities, there are plenty of things to do including a horse drawn carriage ride down the narrow streets—kind of fun, and excursions to islands off the coast, especially the Rosario Islands—about 2 hours by boat from Cartagena. For now, just concentrate on this walled city with its cathedrals and old town. Because this city is on a peninsula, it is almost surrounded by beaches which is nice for you. You will also see an old fort at Bocachica built to guard the entrance when it was a major city on the Spanish Main.

Don't pack your surfboard

Don't plan on a lot of surfing at Cartagena, it's pretty unusual unless the red flag that is supposed to warn swimmers out of the water appears. That seems to be a signal to optimistic surfers to hit the waves. Generally, the water on these beaches is safe, not a lot of riptides and little heavy wave action. If you are looking for water sports, you can go kite-surfing, wind-surfing, and scuba diving. There's a load of water sports schools that cater to tourists, just make sure your instructor speaks enough of your language so that you understand what to do. Generally, this is not going to be a problem; Cartagena is a tourist mecca although remember, the primary language is still Spanish. If you enjoy kayaking or paddling a boat, you can do this at Cartagena. We were paddling out to the fort and nearly run over by commercial tuna fishermen

who were FAR TOO CLOSE to the shoreline and they didn't seem to care that they nearly plowed into us. They were flying an international flag so I always wondered if they were doing something very illegal and this was an anomaly but take it as a warning to watch out although enough people take out small boats that you should feel safe. If you want to snorkel, go for it, because this is the Caribbean and you should see some tropical fish.

En garde!

Shopping Tip: Watch out for anyone touting emeralds and gold in Cartagena. Yes, it's true, Colombian emeralds are magnificent but if the price is ridiculously low, you are not getting emeralds. For that matter, even if the price is high, you might be buying junk unless you are knowledgeable enough to know what you are looking at. If you must buy them, go to a bonafide shop, pay more and know you are not throwing money away.

What's great about Cartagena? You are definitely in another culture and won't forget it. One of the things I got a kick out of was the beach peddling, especially fresh fruit. I can remember telling some woman that I would love a nice big slice of her fresh pineapple—it looked so juicy and tempting. She wasn't fussed at all that I didn't have any money on me (and I wouldn't take much to the beach if you are alone because chances are it might not be there when you get out of the water). This woman was quite an entrepreneur in her own way, she was more than happy to give me some of the fruit on the proviso that she would collect the money on the following day. Suffice to say, she was back the next day and was paid. After that, she was happy to open a line of credit for me on the beach; if I didn't carry money, she trusted me to be back the next day with whatever I owed her and she was going to collect. It worked out fine. I definitely recommend the fresh fruit sellers on the beach. Try some of the local fruit in juices—my favourite was guanabana, but go ahead and try them all.

Rosario Islands and wildlife

While you are in Cartagena, you should make the time to get to the Rosario Islands. These islands are coral formations so it's a natural habitat for all sorts of marine life and it's a great place for snorkelling and diving. If that is not your thing, you can water ski, canoe and windsurf. Waters are very calm and clear and just plain beautiful. And, the sand is white, unlike Cartagena where it is brown. I got a huge kick out of the parrots on the islands. Over the years, they have become accustomed to tourists being around and they dive-bombed my plate at lunch time to help themselves to whatever I had not eaten. No fear at all of getting close to people and it was fun to watch.

I've heard there is good deep sea fishing around Cartagena, (heck, if there wasn't, why were those boats that nearly ran us over, be out there?) but have not checked it personally. I recommend chilling out, and don't neglect any chance to enjoy the local music and dancing. Colombians, like many South Americans, are great dancers so if you catch a dance going on somewhere in the evening (usually at the hotels) go ahead and join the fun! It's part of the culture and older people, kids and everyone in between will be up and dancing. I was amazed at all of them and pretty hopeless in comparison, but hey, part of the experience. Don't expect to Samba, that is Brazilian. Cumbia is the most well known Colombian dance so give it a shot.

Dancing Tip: Most Latin dances are fast so some of the tricks to success include taking very small steps—no long ones, you don't have time. Stay close to the floor, barely lift your feet, you don't have time. You will notice this if you watch the other dancers. Finally, the movement looks like it is in the hips but it is really in the bent knees that enables you to shift the hip forward or backward. Get out there now and go for it!

How's the food? Like any seaside city, you are going to find lots of fish restaurants and cerviche is pretty common on menus. Sweet potatoes served in a variety of ways is part of Cartagena cuisine. A typical meal will include something salty and something sweet. If you're worried about food being too spicy, no need to fret. Typical food is not overly spiced. Do try the empanadas—meat filled pastry, and grilled plantains. I am not going to recommend the yucca fries—they look like French fries but made from yucca. I didn't like them, found them too dry but other people might enjoy them. Most of all, enjoy the beaches and the beautiful Caribbean water. Vamos a la playa!

Where's our next stop on the tour? Rhodes, one of the many Greek islands. See you on the beach!

Here's your quiz:

Ixia Beach is located on which side of the island:

- West
- South
- East
- North

The beach that is crowded with day trippers from ships is:

- Lindos Beach
- Ixia Beach
- Kalithia Beach
- Elli Beach

The beach that is located under the acropolis is:

- Falokraki Beach
- Lindos Beach
- Kalitheia Beach
- Ixia Beach

The language of the ancient Jewish community of Rhodes was:

- Aramaic
- Hebrew
- Ladino
- Greek

RHODES, GREECE

There are so many Greek islands you could spend months going from one to the other and enjoying the sights and the beaches and that doesn't take into account the Greek

mainland. I went to Rhodes on a whim, happened to catch a fantastic package at a very cheap price that included a 5 star hotel and 2 meals a day. One of the best parts was that because it was a relatively short trip, I decided to ditch the luggage and just use a carry-on. What did I need? Two bathing suits, a few light dresses that didn't wrinkle (I was not going to spend my time ironing) and two pairs of sandals and a beach cover up. Rhodes is pretty laid back and you don't need dressy clothes. If you have one item that can do double-duty, you're all set. Stuffing minimal clothing into a carry on bag with the requisite sunblock and toiletries did not take a lot of space so it was on and off the plane. Easy.

Let's Hit The Beach

Rhodes is an island so you're going to find plenty of beaches. It's also a fairly laid back place, the water is warm in summer being the Mediterranean, and there are heaps of things to see and do if you get tired of the beach or need a break or feel you're *supposed* to see something. You should be aware that a lot of cruise ships dock at Rhodes and some beaches get more overrun than others. One other thing, it is not unusual to see topless women on the beaches so try not to gawk. Rhodes does tend to get crowded in the summer anyway, but you will find your beach.

Like Tel Aviv, you will find plenty of chairs and umbrellas for rent on the beach or if they are part of your hotel, they might be free for guests. Wherever you go, the water is very blue, just beautiful and for the most part, quite calm. Also be aware that the ocean floor tends to be rocky on these beaches, even if the beach itself is sand. Some are not, by the way. The most crowded beaches tend to be on the south and west coast of the island so if heading south, I would keep going past Lindos Beach, but I'll still mention it because it is beautiful. (Just crowded!) Also, do bear in mind you may not find lifeguards on every beach and you swim at your own risk. Even if the water is calm, I never believe I know better than the sea so keep that in mind.

Lindos Beach is gorgeous. Yes, you will definitely have umbrellas and lounge chairs for rent there. The beach is right under the acropolis and popular for jet-skiing and banana boat rides. This beach gets crowded so you might want to consider a few others.

If you are staying near Rhodes City, Elli beach might be the one for you. It also tends to get crowded—it's hard to get away from that in the summer. This beach is on the northernmost tip of the island. You will find volleyball nets on this beach and lots of restaurants since it is so close to the city. The water is particularly clear and clean here so despite the crowding, it is a nice hangout. Personally, despite Elli's reputation of sophistication, I prefer Ixia Beach which is also on the north coast. One of the reasons is that there is wind on this beach, so the breeze is welcome and you have a better chance of some surfing if you want to try that, and there are windsurfing lessons for those who want to try it out. I find the sunsets particularly spectacular on this beach so hang out for the evening and watch that sunset.

Kalitheia Beach is on the east coast of the island but I would avoid this one unless you are on a ship—this particular beach fills up quickly with people on day trips on the ships. It's worse than the subway at rush hour. That's my opinion, but you might want to find out for yourself. Instead, try Falikari Beach just south of this one. I wouldn't do it because I'm chicken but they do have Bungee Jumps near this beach.

It also has lots of restaurants and clubs so there tends to be a lively night life once the sun goes down if that's your thing. In that case, Falikari Beach is for you. Just south of Falikari is the Nude Beach, if that's your thing, go right ahead. Just keep in mind, this is not a "sight-seeing" beach; you get in by being nude.

What's fun to do in Rhodes other than the beach?

Don't forget that this is the site of The Colossus of Rhodes—one of the ancient wonders of the world, so if you are interested in ancient history, you should make time to see this. The medieval town of Rhodes is world heritage listed and you should make some time to wander within its walls. Have a look at things like the gates to the city with the flanking turreted towers—think medieval England and you'll be able to imagine it before you get there. Be sure to walk the Street of Knights and see the Grand Masters Palace. Even if you aren't Jewish, make the time to visit the Jewish Quarter because this was a very old community, dating back to around the time of Jesus. The community was decimated by the Nazis in 1943 during which time most of the Jews on the island were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau so there are very few Jews on Rhodes today but the synagogue is still there. The Jewish Quarter is in the southeast of the city and a small museum is located in a part of the synagogue. This was an interesting linguistic community; like many Mediterranean Jews in exile, they spoke Ladino which combined Hebrew and Spanish. Once the language of the Jews in North Africa and many parts of the Mediterranean, hardly anyone speaks it today and you will be hard pressed to find anyone who can. (I have met a few people who do and I was interested in all this because I know someone descended from this community.).

Everywhere you go in Rhodes, you will find signs of ancient Greek and Byzantine culture and if that is your thing, spend some time at the museums that specialize in these areas.

If you have to go shopping, lots of handicrafts for sale and you can peruse as you wander the cobbled street down to the bottom of the hill which is lined with shops selling leather goods, ceramics and pottery, beachwear, jewelry, etc. I wasn't too keen on shopping and I don't recall the prices were any bargain but if you **MUST** shop, check out and compare prices before you pay. This is pretty easy to do, just keep wandering down the street and pop into shops along the way.

It's Greek to me

Food? Well, take your pick. As you would expect, in addition to typical Greek food, yep, you are going to find a lot of fish and a great variety from tuna, sea bass, squid, swordfish, halibut, anchovies, grouper and more but I recommend a dish that is typical of Rhodes—Rouzetia which is a small fish fried in garlic sauce. If you are a meat eater, lots of lamb and goat on menus and kebabs for snacks. Of course, you will find stuffed vine leaves, eggplant and feta cheese served in a variety of ways on menus. Lots of garlic used in the cooking and of course, olive oil. Wander around and try samples of some of these items at food stands and then decide if you want to try a full meal at a restaurant at another time.

How to get around? Don't rely on public transport too much on Rhodes. You will either be using taxis, rent a car, or a scooter. Scooters seem to be everywhere and if

you are going to visit lots of beaches or other sights, you will need transport. If you are staying at a hotel, check to see if they offer any shuttle services.

Rhodes is great for a short break and while I do recommend giving a few hours in the morning to sight-seeing, I would reserve the afternoon hours for the beach (with an umbrella because the sun is fierce). So have fun, enjoy the sun, sea, Greek food and laid back atmosphere.

What's our next stop? Singapore, an amazing Asian destination.

Here's your quiz:

The main language in Singapore is:

- Malaysian
- Indonesian
- Cantonese
- English

The beaches are located at:

- The end of Orchard Street
- On Sentosa Island
- Adjacent to Chinatown
- One subway stop from Little India

One of the best buys in Singapore is

- Custom made clothing
- Sapphire jewellery
- Locally made cameras
- Hand crafted batiks

The beach with the most activity is

- Siloso Beach
- Palawan Beach
- Tanjong Beach
- Raffles Beach

Singapore culture is a blend of

- Indonesian and Mandarin
- Indonesian and Japanese
- Indonesian and Malaysian
- Indonesian and Korean

SINGAPORE

If you have never been to Asia, I think Singapore is a great place to start. I cannot tell you how much I like Singapore and I've been there a number of times. Now this might sound a bit spoiled, but among the things I love about Singapore is that it is safe, and I do mean really safe and so clean you cannot believe it, compared to other cities. People are multi-lingual and they all speak English because it is their primary language. There is a wonderful blend of cultures including Malay, Indian, former British colonial, and Indonesian, and this is reflected in the marvelous food.

The orchids are magnificent, you can't help being amazed by them everywhere you go. Weather is hot and humid, after all you are very close to the equator. There is a monsoon season in Singapore, highest rainfall is usually from November through January but it rains all year so you should bear that in mind.

Dressing Tip: Light cotton clothing is going to be the most comfortable and perfectly acceptable in Singapore.

If you have never been to Singapore, there is no doubt you will spend time shopping—it feels like the world's biggest shopping mall, and you will go sight-seeing because there is so much to see and do in Singapore even if a fairly small place. In fact, that's a benefit because it is so compact, it's easy to get almost anywhere. I won't list all the places but probably you will want to visit Chinatown, the Butterfly Park, Jurong Zoo, Underwater World, and if you are thinking about the former British Empire, you will want to go to the Raffles Hotel and at least have a drink and pretend you are back in history. You won't have any problem finding things to do or buy—bring a suitcase with spare room because you will buy things no matter how hard you try to resist. Even if you don't want to buy electronics, you are going to end up tempted with batiks, local artwork, crafts, etc. A very popular item to buy in Singapore is fabric and the best place to buy that is Little India. Isn't that great? It won't break in luggage and usually not too heavy.

Food Tip: While you are out and about, pop into Tang's Department Store. The external façade is shaped like a pagoda and if you are not sure about local cuisine which is fabulous—try the satay, Hainanese Chicken Rice and laksa (not all at once). These are a MUST. You can go downstairs to the basement floor of Tang's which has a food court although there are plenty of others that are equally good. You will be with locals and not surrounded by tourists. Try a bit of lots of things at great prices. Loads of various noodle dishes if you aren't game for other things.

Watch what the locals are eating and you will get some ideas. Remember, the cuisine is a blend of Asia, particularly Malaysian, Indonesian and Indian so why would you settle for a burger when you could try all this? Try the local fresh fruit juices too. If I remember correctly I had a great blend of green apple, carrot and ginger.

All roads or cable cars lead to Sentosa

By now, you are ready to head to the beach so how do you get there? You can choose any number of ways. The beaches are located on Sentosa Island about half a mile off Singapore City. Sentosa has been developed as a resort area so it's full of hotels, amusements of all sorts and for the beachgoers, this is where the beaches have been created. You can actually walk there if that is your choice. There is now a boardwalk. Take the MRT (the equivalent of a subway which is so clean you could eat off the floor and I am not kidding. It's fast, efficient and reasonably priced). Get

off the MRT at Vivo City Shopping Mall. From here you can easily walk over the boardwalk to Sentosa. Alternatively, you can take the Sentosa Express from the same station which will get you to Sentosa in under five minutes. There is also a shuttle bus that operates along Orchard Street—the main street of Singapore, or you can take a cable car. Whichever route you choose, you will get a spectacular view over the harbor. Do not rent a car; you have no need for one in Singapore because public transport is so readily available, safe and affordable. Cars are not encouraged in Sentosa and you won't need it.

Tip: I would take the cable car just for the ride around sunset, unforgettable.

Okay, now you're on Sentosa, so what next? Take your pick.

An interesting thing about Singapore beaches—most of them, okay, all of them, are not natural. They are reclaimed land but that doesn't detract from them. There are basically 3 beaches on Sentosa with sand imported from Indonesia or Malaysia. Does that really matter?—it's still the beach. All of the beaches have lifeguards and they all have first aid training too.

If you are looking for activity, head straight for Siloso Beach. That's the most likely one for activity with beach volleyball and some water sports like canoeing. Siloso is considered the coolest beach in Singapore. There are also man made waves and a whirlpool so if you must catch a wave (surf) you can do it here at Wave House. Probably the reason this beach is considered so cool is the party atmosphere at night with clubs, restaurants, parties and bars so if that's your thing, definitely stick around this beach. If you are hoping for a beach party, this is the most likely beach to find one going on.

Unless you are traveling with family (kids) you might want to avoid Palawan Beach. Nothing wrong with it but it is very much a family sort of beach with kids' activities and that means the shops and restaurants cater to that kind of crowd.

Tanjong Beach does not offer the activity or amenities of the other two beaches, but if you want a bit more quiet then this is the beach for you.

Sentosa is filled with amusements and activities so you will have plenty to do if that's what you want and chances are you will go into Singapore and come back to the island or the other way around.

There is no way you won't enjoy Singapore. It won't have the beach culture of other places and the number of beaches is limited but you will have so much else to do, experience and enjoy that this is a destination that is well worth thinking about.

Next stop: Bali, the island of the gods. Here's your quiz:

The primary culture in Bali is:

- Muslim
- Pentacostal
- Hindu
- Buddhist

Garang Asam is:
A spicy local soup
A local version of soccer
The southern beach
A local fruit

A beach for dolphin watching is:
Kuta Beach
Lovina Beach
Legian Beach
Nusa Lembogan

Things to try in Bali include:
A massage
Water skiing
Bungee jumps
Kickboxing

BALI, INDONESIA

If you are going to pick one “exotic” beach to visit, then my vote is for Bali. Everyone who goes to Bali comes home calling it a paradise and it’s true for so many reasons. You will find gorgeous white sand beaches and palm trees on the coast while in the interior, the tiered, lush green rice fields framed by volcanic mountains are an incredible contrast.

While Bali is part of Indonesia, it is unique in many ways. For starters, the culture is different being primarily Hindu rather than Muslim and you will see evidence of that with statues of gods and goddesses everywhere and the local people making offerings and praying. My children were quite young when I took them to Bali and one of the things they truly enjoyed was an early morning walk, stopping to watch the local people leaving their fruit and floral offerings while we stood at a respectful distance.

People are delightful and gentle. They adore children and my son, who was too young for camp at the hotel, had a Balinese “nanny” who took him every morning to camp to be around other kids and gave him such loving, gentle care that I never had to worry. She would return him to me at lunch time, sorry to hand him over. I can only think he must have been on his best behavior with her because he was a handful, but she never complained, only laughed and smiled and thought he was wonderful—doing what little boys should do.

There is **no way** you are not going to go shopping in Bali. Forget it. You don’t stand a chance of having the willpower to resist. Leave plenty of room in your suitcase. You are going to be tempted by fabulous local clothing for adults and kids, local crafts such as beautiful batiks, paintings, all sorts of carved items, and particularly unique craft such as Balinese shadow puppets. There’s so much you could buy, I can’t even go into detail. If you are really interested in Balinese art, head to Ubud where you will find plenty of galleries and shops. Finally, you are going to find name

brand beachwear at prices much cheaper than you would pay at home, so have a look at some of those great buys.

You should also make the time to do some sightseeing and take in a local dance/music performance because it reflects so much of the culture. You might also catch a shadow puppet show. Many of these shows have themes that relate to local religious beliefs but even if you don't understand them, it is still worth your time and don't miss this wonderful expression of the culture.

Food, Glorious Food

What to eat in Bali? Indulge in the local cuisine which is a combination or fusion of many cultures. You'll find many of the cafes and restaurants are open air, like so many beachside places. Many of them feature Indonesian or Chinese sorts of food. You will also see three-wheeled carts selling anything and everything. If you are brave, then go ahead and try the Garang Asam. This is a fishy soup with ginger and chilli, very hot and spicy. Trust me on that one.

Common snacks from the carts and probably on some menus include bakso which is a sort of meatball soup, lemper which is sticky rice, satay which is meat served on a skewer and typically, served with peanut sauce and nasi goreng which is fried rice. Don't forget to try the pisang goreng which is a dish of fried bananas.

Then there's the fresh fruit which is terrific and I recommend this. Mangoes, pineapple, rambutan and papaya are all wonderful. If you have never encountered the durian; well, what can I say? It's a popular fruit in Asia and to western noses it smells like a garbage can. I can only say **take it easy** with the food. A lot of people complain they get sick but it's partly from overdoing it compounded by a complete change of diet so be warned. That is not a reason not to indulge, just don't overdo it.

The beach, thought we'd never get there!

Well, it's finally time to hit the beach and you will have more choices than you can imagine. I can't possibly mention all of them. Generally, the southern end of the island tends to be more crowded and that applies to the beaches too but I still like those beaches.

Personally, I have a fondness for Kuta. Way back during The Age of Aquarius, it was the hippie beach/surfers' beach of Bali but today it's a beach that is close to great shopping and food. Admittedly, because it has become so popular, it can seem very chaotic because infrastructure has not caught up with the number of tourists who flock here but just take it in stride. My tip which you will discover on your own is to watch out on streets near the beach because I don't think anyone pays the slightest attention to any traffic laws.

Kuta Beach is safe and clean. The sand is so white and the water so blue, you want to swoon. Yes, you will be approached by vendors selling all kinds of services; massages, surfboard rental, hair-braiding and anything they can think of to make a buck. I would not personally recommend renting a surfboard from these sources because unless you know what you are doing (and if you are renting a board, instead of using your own, chances are you don't) you may not be able to assess the condition

of the board. Pay a bit more and rent one from a shop or a surf school which you will find at the hotels. If you are looking for lessons you can also try the surf shops and see who is offering lessons. This beach might be crowded but it's still a surfer's beach so give it shot.

There is a big water park near Kuta so if you are traveling with kids, take them there if they are getting tired of the beach. They'll have a ball and you'll have fun too.

Legian Beach is close to Kuta but a bit more laid back and you can walk there. The beach has paddle ball and almost every afternoon there is a football game. Yes, you can get a manicure and massage at the beach, isn't that great? Again, this is a surfer's beach and you will be able to rent a board or a boogie board if you are too chicken or too frustrated with surfing. On weekends, you will be likely to find musicians just turning up to play on the beach so stick around for the music and definitely stay to watch the sunset.

Both these beaches are considered relatively beginner beaches but for those who are looking for the big surf, it's more likely to be found around Bukit Peninsula. You can get a surf report in Bali so take your pick. Personally, I stick to beginner only.

Other water sports and I wish I had Noah's Ark

Lovina Beach is basically a cove. Don't be put off by the gray color of the sand because it is a lot quieter than some of the other beaches but the best reason to head here is the chance to see dolphins who appear just off the beach.

There are a few beaches where I would beware. Sanur has excellent snorkelling but it gets very crowded although it might be worth it if you want to snorkel. It's about half an hour from Kuta in the south, on the eastern coast of Bali. I would consider avoiding Nusa Lembongan because it is the beach where cruise ships make their day stop. On the other hand, the snorkelling is very good, so just be warned if you choose to hit this beach because you definitely will not be alone.

I am not a scuba diver so I can't recommend any particular service or school but there are loads of scuba sites around Bali and there are plenty of dive centers. Just check their affiliation. I've also heard that you can find white water rafting in the Ubud area but I'm guessing that you are more likely to find that in the wetter seasons which is October to April and peak rain is January and I do mean a lot of rain.

I was in Kuta around this time and went into a shop that sold fabulous kids' clothes. Had a wonderful time picking out all sorts of things for my kids, especially a patchwork quilted jacket, which my daughter wore for years. Finally finished shopping, turned to go back outside and not only was it pouring but a veritable river was flowing down the street. I am not kidding; not a creek or a stream, but a raging river sweeping rubbish and everything else in its path. Panic must have shown on my face and the shop attendant told me not to worry; just wait a while and it will disappear. That's exactly what happened. I stood looking out the window and watched braver souls take off their shoes and just wade through to wherever they were going. Not me. Sorry, too chicken because I honestly wondered what was IN that water but sure enough, the rain stopped and the river disappeared. So don't say you weren't warned.

It doesn't matter what you are looking for, beautiful beach, exotic culture, gentle people, great surf, fascinating food. Whatever, you're going to find it in Bali.

Our next stop on the Beach Tour is Hollywood—Ft. Lauderdale in Florida, the Sunshine State.

Here's your quiz:

If you want to explore a lighthouse, head to:

Deerfield Beach
Lauderdale By The Sea
Hillsboro Beach
Coconut Creek

Hurricane season is from:

January to May
July to November
September to November
All year

Canine Beach is located in:

Ft. Lauderdale
Dania Beach
Pompano Beach
Hollywood Beach

The Planetarium is located at:

Palm Beach Community College
Broward Community College
University of Miami
Museum of Science

In Ft. Lauderdale, you can join in a nature walk with a naturalist who will explain and show you:

Turtle hatching
Jellyfish sting prevention
Alligator rescue
Armadillo nesting

HOLLYWOOD AND FT. LAUDERDALE

Were you a fan of 60's movies like *Where The Boys Are*? If you remember the movie or caught it on countless re-runs like *I Have You* you will remember that thousands of college students packed into Ft. Lauderdale beach for the annual Spring Break. They

still come down there but travel options being a lot more diverse today, things are not quite as hysterical as they were and the area is far more upmarket, so to speak, so don't worry about massive hoards of students all over the place. Nothing says you have to go there during Spring Break anyway.

Being a peninsula, you are never far from a beach in Florida and they are all beautiful. It would be easy to write a book just on Florida beaches but I'm confining myself to a few. I'm sure everyone has their favorite whether it is east coast or west coast. My family lives on the east coast and I visit there very often which is why I have chosen a few of the south Florida beaches for this entry. These beaches are clean and the authorities make darn sure they stay that way. South Florida prides itself on clean beaches and clean water. I remember a story years ago about some cruise ship that dumped rubbish that eventually floated up on one of the beaches. The authorities tracked them down, fined them and issued a severe warning that if it ever happened again, the company would not be allowed to sail in their waters. That's pretty serious.

Food and entertainment are great and there are plenty of things for families to do too, so you cannot lose on these beaches unless you are there during hurricane season and you are in the middle of one. (Hurricane season is July—November but the peak time is August—October). And by the way, Florida is great in the summer. It is not that much hotter, and sometimes, less so than points north and a lot more comfortable in the heat because of the proximity of those beaches and the ocean breeze so I recommend Florida for summer or any time of year visit. The greater Ft. Lauderdale area has over 20 miles of beach so let's hit the water.

If you have a car, you will find distances fairly short for most of these things. If you don't have a car you can use the train which stops at all the towns along the beach strip. I've used it for plenty of things and yes, the train goes into Miami Airport and also stops at Ft. Lauderdale--Hollywood Airport too.

Hurray for Hollywood!

Just along Hollywood, there are about 6—7 miles of beach and locally, Hollywood is considered a very cool beach. Before you even hit the water, or maybe after, you will probably want to have a stroll on the boardwalk. This is over 2 miles in length and all you have to do is watch out for rollerbladers and cyclists unless you are one of them. Maybe you still should be watching out! You can rent bikes on the boardwalk and you will also find jet-ski rentals.

At the Hollywood Beach Theatre, there is free music and dancing almost every night and it's literally right next to the beach, so if music and dancing is your thing head over there. If you are looking for more entertainment, then head over to the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino. This is not on the beach but not far; nothing is far from the beach in Hollywood. It's a huge complex with music, gambling, comedy clubs, restaurants and shops. My sister and cousins keep saying we are going to spend a weekend there instead of the evening but we haven't gotten around to it yet. The complex is so big that chances are, we'll all lose each other and spend the weekend trying to reunite!

If you are looking for a slightly less frenetic or quieter scene, then head over to Dania Beach. **Dania Beach** also has kayaking available, not necessarily a lot else but then again, you want to be there because it's a bit less hectic.

For those looking to snorkel, I recommend **Lauderdale by the Sea Beach**. This is one of the few beaches with a reef that is close enough to the beach for you to swim out and snorkel. For those who want to explore a lighthouse or learn a bit about turtles (more about that below,) your best beach is **Hillsboro**.

All sorts of water sports are available on these beaches and you are pretty much going to find them everywhere. In **Ft. Lauderdale** you will definitely find parasailing, water parks, scuba diving and catamarans. There are also shops that rent boogie boards and surfboards in case you left yours at home and you can book lessons for any of these sports. Of course there is a surf school in Ft. Lauderdale although the surf is not always fantastic but for beginners it might be a good place to start.

It's a given that you will also find lots of land sports like golf courses and tennis courts. Hey, this is Florida!—but I would guess most people are interested in the water sorts of activities. Whatever you are looking for on the water, you are going to find. If you're not sure, just ask someone because they will be happy to tell you. Enjoy the Atlantic surf, keep the beach clean (or you know what will happen—they really are strict about it), and if you are parked on the beach take a lot of change to feed those parking meters.

Doggie friendly beaches

If your dog is on vacation with you, there's good news for him or her. There is definitely a doggie designated beach in Ft. Lauderdale. **Canine Beach** is on Sunrise Blvd. It has designated hours that differ from summer to winter and you must have a permit. Locals buy an annual permit for their pooches. Visitors can buy a weekend permit from the park ranger on site. A weekend permit is \$7.00 as far as I know. This is not like the dog beach in Sydney; the dog must be on leash. BTW the ranger is supposed to keep extra pooper scoopers because YES you must clean up after your dog which is fair enough.

I'm Beached Out, Now What Do We Do?

Here comes the turtle information in more detail. Florida has a lot of sea turtle nests and during the summer months, you can go with a naturalist to learn about them and see the hatchlings being released. I have never done this but heard it's a great experience and I hope I get to do this on my next trip. Rather than talk about what I don't know, I will give you their website and you can check it out for yourselves in case you are in the vicinity at the right time of year. Personally, I think this would be as interesting for adults, if not more so, than kids. You can find out more about them at the Museum of Science in Ft. Lauderdale or go to this website:

<http://www.sunny.org/visitors/beaches/seaturtles/>

There are plenty of other family sorts of activities from tours of the Everglades, to skimboarding lessons. My kids always loved going to Boomers which is an amusement center that includes mini-golf, bumper boat rides, (they *loved* those) laser tag and go-karting, among other things. Boomers is located in Dania Beach. My kids still remember a mini-golf course in the area (not at Boomers) with the craziest things

on it including one hole that was like a toilet and they had to reach in to get the ball back to proceed. They thought this was hilarious—you probably have to be a kid to find that so funny although we all laughed.

If your kids or you are into astronomy, there is a Planetarium at Broward Community College and for those who adore butterflies (I do) there is Butterfly World in **Coconut Creek** with waterfalls, lorikeets and tropical gardens.

I can't remember where the heck it was but I went with my Mom and the kids to a boardwalk kind of walkway that passed over water just above alligators. I was scared to death the whole time that one of us would take a wrong step and end up as someone's dinner. There are so many gators in Florida, it isn't funny but if you are interested in the beasts, you will find plenty of places where you can get up close (don't get too close) to them. Not saying more about that. There are heaps of other things to do which you can easily explore once you are in the area so just ask around and you will find them.

For more adult activity, there are casinos, race tracks and proximity to professional sports like football during the season. Tickets are not cheap and book out fast so if you are considering attending a game, make sure you book asap.

Tip: if you are in Florida in the summer, you should use insect repellent, especially around sunset because of the mosquitoes. **Don't neglect that.**

Food

I can't begin to list all the places for great eating. It's your choice to eat healthy, decide to indulge a bit, go overboard or somewhere in between. There are family friendly restaurants, fast food places, and fine dining as well so you take your pick. You will have to dress decently for the more upmarket restaurants and not walk in off the beach. Technically, this is not in the area, it's further north in Delray Beach but I used to love to go a restaurant across the street from the beach when my own kids and nephew were little because we could literally roll in the strollers and be seated outside so we didn't drag in sand all over the place. The kids loved that and loved the food and so did we and you will find places like that all over the beach area.

Many restaurants have family deals or Early Bird specials which are really good value so it's always worth checking in advance. This may not be a gourmet tip, but I don't really care. I eat very few sweets—just not my weakness, but I ALWAYS make sure to indulge in some Key Lime Pie while in Florida. I just love it and it doesn't taste the same with regular limes no matter how you try to duplicate it at home, so definitely try that very local dessert because it is gorgeous (and not for calorie counters so make sure you hit the beach with lots of activity before or the next day to make up for that aberration!).

Listen, I could go on and on about Florida beaches and the general south Florida area. I didn't even talk about Miami and South Beach because that's an entire entry in itself, but enough's enough for this week. I'm heading there again soon and will be thinking of you.

Our next stop is Fiji in the beautiful South Pacific destination of over 300 islands.

Here's your quiz:

The capital of Fiji is:

Nadi
Suva
Malucca
Denarau

A local dish, Ota Miti is made from:

Bananas
Mangoes
Fern shoots
Pineapple

The word you will hear all the time as a greeting in Fiji is:

G'day
Buri
Yagona
Bula

The local pearls in Fiji are known as:

Fiji Gold
Fiji Pink
Fiji Black
Fiji Cream

The local dancing in Fiji is called:

Hula Fiji
Meke
Tamure
Fiafia

FIJI

Fiji probably sounds like the end of the world (maybe it is to some people) but it is a very popular destination for Kiwis and Aussies being relatively nearby and affordable. It is not unusual to see students on a break, honeymooners and families all vacationing in Fiji. It's generally a friendly place and the one word you will remember is "Bula" which is a greeting but also means "health."

A bit of information about the weather that you need to know: There are basically, only two seasons in Fiji; dry and wet. Wet season is between November and April and it's pretty hot and humid; after all, it's Southern Hemisphere summer. Unfortunately this is also typhoon season. Does that mean you should not go during

those months? No, not necessarily but you do need to be aware. It didn't stop me and for that matter, it didn't stop me from being in Florida during hurricane season but everyone is different and you make your decisions based on what you set as criteria. At least, you know now.

Let's go South Pacific Culture

Fiji is mixed culturally, so you'll see the influence of India, China and Europe within this South Pacific island destination. If I recall correctly, there are over 300 islands but only about one third are inhabited. Some are going to be relatively crowded, or as crowded as things get in Fiji, which is not excessive. This is around the more popular resorts, but plenty of beaches and areas are really isolated. About half of the population of Fiji live in Suva and if you are keen on sightseeing, this is where you will find the Fiji Museum which includes some of the indigenous musical instruments and war implements. You should also stop off in Suva Market and there are some Indian temples you might want to see while in Fiji but mostly you are going to kick back and relax.

Many of the hotels will have some "local dancing" (meke) which is Melanesian culturally and always fun. I first saw this outside of Fiji but saw plenty of it there. They will encourage you to get up and dance with them as you cringe but it's part of the fun. Don't feel too silly, you ARE a tourist, and it is a touristy thing to do. Expect lots of hand clapping to set the beat along with drumming. You might see some dances performed by men only (the spear dance) or women only. Some dances are performed sitting down and some standing up. If you want to see something else that you might consider indigenous to the locale, you can also visit a copra plantation which is essentially a plantation that grows coconuts and extracts the oil for all sorts of purposes, so if that is something really local that interests you, check out **Vatuwari Farm**.

What should you eat in Fiji?

DO NOT REFUSE THE PINEAPPLES AND MANGOS – They are all local produce. You are also going to find nice curries and fish dishes such as local fish cooked and wrapped in taro leaves. If you are game, go ahead and try **Yagona**, a local spirit made from kava root but drink at your own risk. You will find lots of coconut flavoured dishes and that shouldn't surprise you in a South Pacific nation.

For those who love Indian food, you are going to find lots of Indian restaurants with all sorts of variety from hot southern food to the northern Indian cuisine and of course, plenty of vegetarian dishes for those who do not eat meat. You can take your pick with fish, plenty of variety and some restaurants do lovo cooking, (cooking in an underground oven, similar to what you may have seen in Hawaii at a tourist luau). A local dish is **Ota Miti**—the wood fern shoots that are cooked in coconut milk, so go ahead and try that. If none of this is your thing, you will find "Western" food and by the way, you can check out the Chinese supermarkets in Fiji too.

Shopping

Sorry, but I don't consider Fiji a shopping mecca but the beaches make up for that. You will find resort and beach wear and some nice handicrafts—check before you buy if you are allowed to carry wooden items in your luggage. Australia, for example, may not allow those items to be brought back. That applies to tourists who

are stopping off in Australia too and in case you don't know, you had better be honest on the customs form because they x-ray your bag on entry and they will find any suspect items. If you were less than honest, well, you could be fined and quite heavily. Odds are that most things will be allowed in but not if you are dishonest so be warned.

I have not bought pearls in Fiji although I have in other places and I know that many people do buy there, especially the black pearls which are typical of the South Pacific. What you will see are yellow pearls locally called "Fiji Gold." So if you're in the market for pearls, Fiji might be a good place to buy.

Get Active If You Can

If you like water sports, you will find some of them in Fiji. Some, not all. Kayaking is very popular between the small islands and a nice way to get around so make sure you do some of that while there. For the divers, well, you're in luck because Fiji is a major dive site. I don't dive so I am not going to recommend any particular service or school but you will find plenty of them. Even as a non-diver, I know that one of the most popular sites is between the islands of Vanua Levu and Taveuni because of the soft coral, so if you are interested in diving, this is probably one of the spots you are going to want to check out.

You are not going to find surfing in Fiji and this is primarily because of the many coral reefs. Instead, you are more likely to find lagoons, not exactly Gilligan's Island, but some of them might feel that way with all the coconut palm trees. You will find great snorkelling because of the coral reefs and there is some river rafting available.

Mostly you will enjoy the beautiful scenery, the lush palm trees, lovely beach and turquoise to deep green colored waters. You are in Fiji to relax, not run yourself ragged and you will relax and de-stress.

I should point out to families a key point. You are not going to find water parks, amusement parks, etc for kids. That does not mean they won't have fun because mine certainly did but you should consider a family oriented resort that explicitly runs a children's program. The Fijian people like kids which helps and the resorts will keep the kids busy and entertained. My kids had a wonderful time at one place where all the kids would head off with the children's program staff to a "Buri"—something that looks like a grass hut. I also had a less than fabulous experience at another place although the kids were contented enough.

Some resorts are specifically for honeymooners, or at any rate, adults only and will not cater to kids so be careful when you make any booking if you are looking for family geared atmosphere. I should also point out that you want to know where the island or resort is and how to get there. I made the mistake of having to get into a small plane with little kids to one place and I was terrified; I am afraid of small planes anyway, and there were no seatbelts for the kids. I hope that has changed. I insisted on taking a boat to get off the island—refused to go through that plane business again but some people might love that. Just giving you a fair warning.

Denarau Island is the one where you are likely to find family resorts that will cater to kids. That doesn't mean they aren't suitable for adults, too, but thinking in terms of

family, this is the best place to consider. They have all the services you would expect, swimming pools, tour programs, etc.

I've heard, but not seen, that **Treasure Island** has a very good kids' program with miniature golf and nature sorts of activities where kids can see baby turtles. I am not going to name the resort, but I stayed at one in the Mamanuca Islands of Fiji and I hated it. It was dirty, the staff was lazy, and I couldn't wait to get out of the place. I hope it has changed, but again, pick and choose very carefully. You might want to think about choosing the better resorts rather than budget but that has to be your choice and some people don't mind that kind of thing. I draw the line at towels with big holes left in the guest rooms. That is not common but it happened at this one place and ruined the few days there, on top of the dirt, rotten staff attitude, and screening inappropriate movies for kids with violence and terrible language, etc. I am sure the staff chose movies they wanted to see rather than think of the kids. I was more than happy to get on to the next stop which was wonderful on **Denarau Island**.

Mostly, you are going to enjoy the water, the slow pace, the beautiful scenery, and laid back atmosphere. So go with the idea that you are in the romantic South Pacific, going to have some fun but also relax and you will have a great time.

The Original Beach Party: Malibu, California **Copyright: Laura Hernandez 2011**

This entry has been contributed by writer Laura Hernandez who is the original California Girl. If you dreamed of Malibu, imagined you were Gidget, wished Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys were singing about you, you're a California surfer girl at heart. Laura is the real thing so enjoy your time on the beach with her! Before she gets us going, here's a little bit about Laura.

Laura has a Master's in Cultural Anthropology and is a Law School graduate. While still in law school she worked as the Death Penalty Law Clerk in a Public Defenders' Office in Southern California. She writes about those adventures and integrates stories about growing up on a horse ranch near the beach as the eldest of many kids, and the only blonde in a half-Mexican family.

Despite having more education than people should be allowed to have, she tries to maintain her sense of humor, writes almost everyday around her full time job, kayaks in the summer; and only occasionally sips coconut rum through her Mickey Mouse bendy straw.

She tries to find time to surf in Hawaii since she noticed too late that there is no beach in her Northern California town. She is a member of

Sisters in Crime and is a member of the Board of Directors of Writer's Forum in Redding, California.

Beachy: California Dreaming

Copyright:

Laura Hernandez 2011

Malibu Beach is the beach of my childhood and the beach of my dreams. Maybe yours, too.

When I was a kid you got to the beach by parking parallel to Pacific Coast Highway; a crazy, screaming zoom into the shoulder of a fast moving, two lane road where you could easily get creamed by a Mercedes or karoomed off the road and into the sea! Then you walked about 4 blocks worth through a swamp with stinky puddles and cattails along the dirt path to the sand. And yes, you carry all your stuff. No snack stands, no drinking fountain. No lifeguard.

Malibu has been cleaned of the swamp now. There is a nice, paved parking lot (\$10 to the guard shack or to the unattended box—you will be ticketed by cops if you don't have the top of your parking envelope on your dashboard). There is a nice smoothed out dirt road with bridges to the sand. It's still about 2 blocks worth to the sand.

There is a dirty little secret to Malibu, though: it's not a great swimming beach. There are, and always have been, hundreds of smooth rocks for a hundred yards from the wet sand to the water and beyond. The surfers are way beyond the rocks, and that's the way they like it. The waves are the long, slow rollers that are great for everyone to learn and get good on! But the sets of three, have a long space of nothing in between, and the wait can seem too long. There are no teachers organized there, no place to rent boards, so you bring your own from somewhere else. When I was a kid, girls weren't really allowed to surf. The boys would make fun of you, knock you out of the way on the water or just threaten to do that. So I didn't learn until I was an adult and I learned in Hawaii. That will be another article!

There are no restaurants on the beach side of Malibu. You can walk the ½ mile to the pier, but restaurants come and go there, so bring your own food and drink. As with most California beaches, no booze. Save your coconut rum with your Mickey Mouse bendy straw for home.

Malibu is for watching people. You can see movie stars, and if you can keep the secret, and be "cool" I'll tell you how. When the tide is low, and you grimmies (novices) can tell that because there is more wet sand, more shore rocks exposed; the chain link fence to the right of the beach is up off the ground and you can walk upright, under it. This gets you to the beach of The Colony, where the gated community of the rich and famous

occupies the land. This is “private” property, but if you are “cool”, meaning you don’t scream, and ask for autographs, you can walk on the wet sand, not the dry sand, and see who you can see, gawk but keep walking, and dream of belonging there! The wet sand is public, which is why you must stay on that. Since the tide is low, you are not in much real danger of getting swept out to sea by a rogue wave! You can walk for about two miles to the cliffs, and see some of the most beautiful beach homes you’ve ever wished for! When you see a movie star, act like a neighbor and just say “Hi!”, and leave it at that! No, “I love your work!” or anything like that! It’s gauche, and not cool, and you might be asked to leave before you get a chance to explain the “wet sand/ dry sand” rule, and you would be embarrassed. No pictures, either, don’t be a jerk!

There is one Life Guard shack on Malibu now, and I think being a CUTE GUY is a job requirement, so dress accordingly. Tell your mom (and mine) to leave the hat with the green, built- in sun visor at home. Ya gotta wear a bathing suit of some kind. Mostly, Speedo wear is OUT for guys, and board shorts are good for everyone. Walking around on the sand is required, so don’t leave valuables on your towel as they might not be there when you return. You can do your hair big, since you might not want to brave the rocks to swim! I’ve always got my make-up on, so you can, too!

People from all over the world come to Malibu, and saying “hello” is welcomed. You won’t find a lot of shells on the beach, but it’s OK to take home the few that you find. Since Southern California has such a mild climate, Malibu is great during the winter. I’ve spent many of my January birthdays on the beach in the sunshine. The water is cold then, “refreshing” in the summer. Whatever time of year you go, you’ll feel like you’ve arrived on a little piece of paradise, famous for who goes there, and now it’s famous because you have been there, too!

Thanks so much to Laura! We’re off to New England, home of the Yankees (not the baseball team), birth of the American Revolution with lots of other American history popping up almost everywhere you go.

Your Cape Cod Quiz:

The best place for a whale sighting is:

Provincetown Lighthouse
Stellwagen Bank
Nantucket Island
Martha’s Vineyard

The roughest waves on The Cape are:

The beaches along the sound
The beaches along the bay
The beaches along Atlantic Coast
All of them are pretty rough

Wicked in this part of the world means:

Vile
Magical
Supernatural
Very

The travel time by ferry or boat to Nantucket is about:
Seventy-five minutes
Sixty minutes
Half an hour
Two hours

A chowder is:
A local term for a stupid person
A dairy based thick soup
A non-dairy based thick soup
A generic term for soup in New England

NEW ENGLAND'S PLAYGROUND: CAPE COD

Dunes. Rugged coast. Spectacular scenery. Old towns and villages, at least by American standards. If that isn't enough, New England has some gorgeous beaches. Everyone has probably heard of Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, and the many Cape Cod beaches. There are also beaches north of Boston, as you head up to Salem (a stop I *definitely* recommend for sightseers if you are in the Boston area, including The Witches' Trail—some might be corny, but you can't get away from the Witch Trials in this town let alone the many shops and their merchandise capitalizing on the town history, as if you forgot, Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The House of Seven Gables*. North of Boston is Swampscott, Gloucester, Rockport and Marblehead and you will find more beaches all the way up the coast through Maine. The only catch, and it might not be one for you, but it is for me, the water is cold and I do mean cold. This is not the gentle Atlantic surf further south; this is frigid, rough water and not for the fainthearted.

I can remember a miserable, steamy hot summer in Boston and my sister and I felt we had to find somewhere cool because the city could have qualified as a stop in Dante's *Inferno*. We went down to Plymouth which is about 30 miles from Boston. (Yes, the Pilgrims' Plymouth) ran into the water and screamed. It was so bitter cold we couldn't stand it more than a minute (No wonder she ended up in Florida after that <g>). Ran out to the beach, dripping sweat with the heat, back to the Siberian temperature water and went back and forth all day looking like we were crazed. No middle ground; it was either broil or freeze.

Fortunately, Cape Cod is not quite that cold and it offers many beaches to choose from. Come late spring or early summer, when I was a student which was long ago, anyone who had a car in Boston among my friends would round us up and we'd head down to The Cape (you don't say Cape Cod there, it's The Cape) which is a nice ride and very doable in one day back and forth. (About 60 miles from Boston.) My Jersey girlfriends would make the annual pilgrimage to Boston to do the same thing and we all always had a ball because The Cape is great. Many students look for summer jobs down there and it jumps with tourists during the summer but there's enough room for everyone to spread out. So what's so great about Cape Cod anyway?

Bayside, Sound, or Atlantic Coast?

You are going to have fun finding your beach because you can choose from so many from Barnstable to Sandwich to Falmouth. Just listen to those names, so typically New England. Our favorite was Hyannisport but you will discover your own.

The Cape can be divided into 3 distinct areas, the Upper Cape which is the section closest to the rest of Massachusetts (this includes Woods' Hole and Falmouth and has the ferry connections to Martha's Vineyard.) The Middle Cape which has the warmer water beaches, and the Lower Cape which reaches to the end of the entire cape at Provincetown.

Effectively, The Cape is a peninsula with coasts along Cape Cod Bay, the Sound or the Atlantic Coast. Like Sydney, Australia where there are Oceanside and Harbourside beaches, the cape also has different sorts of beaches and waves, depending on which side you are on. Now that you have your geographic bearings, you should be aware that the beaches that face the bay are the least likely to have much surf, so if you are with young children, this should be the safest area for them. Beach is never safe for kids, no telling what they can get into so you still need to be vigilant. The beaches on the south face towards Nantucket and have waves but nothing really large. If you head towards the beaches on the Atlantic, you can expect waves and most likely an undertow so make sure you take precautions because you can get caught in that undertow and even a strong swimmer can get into trouble. Some beaches are private, or more accurately, resident beaches, but there are plenty of public beaches with parking and yes, you pay for parking. Did you really think you wouldn't?

Anchors Aweigh

It always seemed to me that everyone in New England must be a sailor, something genetically coded into their DNA because there were and are boats everywhere. It's a beautiful sight to watch those sails out there and the continual movement and motion. If sailing is your thing you will find plenty of that at The Cape as well as other sea craft if you don't know how to handle a sailboat. Alternatively, you could take a lesson. I dunked my friend who was teaching me. Turned around and suddenly he was gone! Panic, hysteria, I've lost The Skipper and not even Gilligan to bail me out of this mess <g> and then his head popped up beside the boat. No idea how the heck I did that, just sent him overboard, but I left the technicalities of sailing to him for the rest of the ride.

You can do local cruises on The Cape, I know that some boats leave from Hyannisport and there are other places that will offer some sort of boating excursion, or you can go on a four hour boat ride around The Cape and some of those excursions will include a meal. You can expect on some of these tours to see lighthouses and “Mayflower II.” There are also whale sighting trips and if you get lucky, you might see a variety of whales and maybe even some dolphins which is fun. Best chance of catching a sighting is around Stellwagen Bank. If you want to get a look at seals, then head to Chatham, where you can get a boat to Monomoy Island. Chatham, by the way, is a nice town to stroll.

For those who enjoy parasailing, head to Yarmouth. You will also find banana boat rides in that area too. Of course, you can just take the ferry from Woods’ Hole to Martha’s Vineyard which is a lovely ride. Deep sea fishing? I don’t do it but you have come to the right place and you will find boats for hire, charters, or organized fishing expeditions. I know for sure there are boats in this business in Hyannisport and you can bet there are plenty of others available around The Cape in general.

Some beaches are considered more hip than others although I have never figured out why. If hip is your thing, you’d better check out Nauset Beach. To me, it seems far too crowded but that might be just what you are looking for because you know you are cool. On the other hand, if you are looking for the best beach for families and activities, head to Nantucket because you will find volleyball nets, playgrounds for little ones, boat rentals, windsurfing, and some fairly calm water.

If you are taking the ferry or other boat services to Nantucket, you can figure on about a 75 minute trip each way, so plan accordingly. If you are doing a day trip to Nantucket but not staying overnight, check to see if you can get free parking as a customer of whatever line you are taking because you often can, so take advantage.

If you prefer being a landlubber, there are lots of bikes for rent and biking trails and it is not a bad way to get around if you are sure your legs are going to hold out over the distances. You can rent bikes in loads of places from Chatham to Brewster to Buzzards’ Bay. Don’t forget to check out a lighthouse somewhere in your cycling (or driving around) because there are working lighthouses on The Cape. There’s something quite magical and romantic about them and you will find them dotted around the area.

Antiques, Art and Crafts

If you are interested in more culturally minded pursuits, loads of people head to The Cape for antiquing. Now look, nobody get offended here, but I wouldn’t know a Queen Anne from a Queen Latifah. I only know antique means second hand <g> but there are plenty of people who can think of nothing better to do than browse all the antique shops around The Cape and I am sure they know what they are looking at, the value, and how to bargain. It’s like multiple re-runs of Antiques Roadshow at The Cape, believe me.

Provincetown has long been known as an artists’ colony but you will find artisans, craftsmen or women, and galleries in most of the towns. You will also find barns and even attics housing the works of local artists so have a browse and enjoy. Typical crafts could include pewter, bird carvings and glass blown items among many others.

Sometimes you can stand and watch them as they create which is always intriguing, or at least, to me it is.

The Cape Playhouse is a recommendation for catching theatrical productions. This is supposedly the oldest summer playhouse in the US. A lot of actors who went on to fame performed here which is still considered a great place for summer stock. No guarantees you will see a performance by a relatively unknown who goes on to become famous but if you want to catch some summer theatre, then it's still the place to go.

Finally, if you hit a rainy day, don't despair. Remember that many of these towns are around 400 years old and they are proud of their history so spend some time finding out about the early settlers. Head off to the Natural History Museum in Brewster and if you are with kids, ask about the kids' programs which include nature walks. You might be interested in the Woods' Hole Oceanographic Institute which is world famous.

Yankee Cooking

You are going to find any kind of food you want but most people who come to New England want to try some of the local cuisine and it's a given that you should try seafood, mostly commonly clams, scallops, haddock and/or steamers, cod and Atlantic salmon, among the choices. I won't tell you what to choose because it might depend on your taste. You will have a choice of broiled, fried, baked, steamed or fish cakes so you should find something that appeals. I have always enjoyed the haddock and scrod but that's me. If fish is not your thing don't worry, you'll find anything and everything to eat on The Cape.

Don't expect food to be heavily spiced because it isn't but they make up for it with nice apple based desserts since apples are locally grown in Massachusetts. You will find a lot of blueberry desserts too although the berries might not be local but come from further north in Maine. The cranberries are local so make sure to have something with cranberry that you wouldn't get at home.

Dairy is also considered a traditionally strong component in New England or "Yankee" food and you can expect to find a lot of "wicked" (see note below about local expressions) ice cream parlors.

If you are a soup eater, then you should try any of the local chowders, whether clam, potato, corn or anything else. A chowder is a generic name for a thick soup or stew, that real stick to your ribs kind of soup, not a light, delicate offering and usually has a cream or milk base. Remember I said, dairy is a big part of New England food? My kids still eat a combination fish and cheese chowder on a cold night which combines two New England staples and we think it is a full meal in itself without anything else. A chowder is satisfying, filling and just scrumptious.

The biggest problem with The Cape is its relatively short season. On a busy day in summer, it would not be unusual for thousands of people to flock into the towns and for traffic to back up. Go back after the season and everything is empty. Of course, it's also pretty cold and going to get colder. A lot colder. For the local residents, this is just something they endure with varying degrees of grace because the fishing

industry is dying or dead and they need the summer tourists. Have some patience and you should be fine.

It's Wicked

Like many places in the US, there are local expressions and words. You might know some of them but just in case, these are a few that you are bound to hear around The Cape.

Wicked. The first time I heard this, I genuinely thought it referred to something dire only it didn't make sense. When I heard something was "wicked good" I caught on that it means "very," or just plain great.

If you are asked if you want jimmies on your ice cream, say yes. Being a Jersey girl, to me, sprinkles on an ice cream cone were sprinkles. Not in New England—they will ask if you want "jimmies." You might know a sandwich as a sub or a hoagie. In New England, you will order a grinder.

There's plenty more to say but this will get you started on The Cape. And by the way, if you don't mind not hitting the beach, this part of the world is gorgeous in the autumn and not anywhere near as crowded, so you might consider a trip after the summer tourists have disappeared and enjoy it just as much, just don't count on swimming unless you are very brave!

Next stop: We're heading south to the Caribbean and The Bahamas

Here's your quiz:

The most famous pirate in Bahamian history is:

Bluebeard
Henry Morgan
Blackbeard
Elizabeth Bonney

Potter's Cay is:

The local fish market
The local straw market
The local artist colony
The best local nightclub

A local dessert you should try is:

Guava Duff
Mango Duff
Papaya Duff
Coconut Duff

Aquaventure is located at:

Grand Bahama Island
Paradise Island

New Providence Island
Coco Cay

BAHAMAMAMA!

I'm a little prejudiced, but I think the Bahamas are great. The last time I was there was short stay of two nights because it was part of a cruise but I've been there under other circumstances too. The Bahamas have everything, great shopping if that's your thing, and sightseeing, but most people head to the islands for the beaches and for good reason. The Bahamas are a touch of Britain and Africa with a splash of pirates in its past. Blackbeard and Anne Bonney were among the famous pirates who spent time on these islands.

These are the islands, or at least, supposedly, that Columbus first visited in the New World thinking he had found the route to India. Obviously, he took a wrong turn somewhere. During the 18th century, at least 20 pirates used Nassau as their home base. It was also during the 18th century that the slave trade brought Africans to the Bahamas and their descendants primarily compose the people of the Bahamas today. Former British control of the islands, which are independent, can still be seen in the left side driving and for those who are interested in the American Civil War, Nassau was an important base for the Confederate blockade runners. Between the pirates, blockade runners and all the rest, these islands have had a pretty colorful history.

You can generally expect the weather almost always to be pleasant, a bit cooler in winter but still nice. You do have to keep in mind that this is the Caribbean and there is a hurricane season.

Nassau, the capital, is home to the majority of Bahamanians. I always enjoy the pastel colored buildings; lots of pink ones and I just find them really pretty. In general, this is a laid back place with friendly people. While English most definitely is the language of the islands, it has a lilt to it and you might have to adjust to hearing it. Like most places, there is also local slang. Two words or phrases you might hear are:

Big eye—greedy

Gussy-mae- large sized Bahamanian girl (that's a polite translation)

Let's Hit The Shops

Just about everyone who goes to the Bahamas ends up doing some shopping. It's kind of hard to avoid. I don't know that the prices are that fantastic, you have to really check carefully but there's plenty of shopping with all sorts of prices available. Some of the shops are, well, trashy, and others are very good quality.

Bay Street is the main shopping street in Nassau. If you are arriving by cruise ship, you can easily walk there. Just walk past all the ships parked at the docks—there's always plenty of them, turn right, keep walking and you will hit Bay Street.

This street has some well known stores—Fendi, MAC, etc. Lots of perfume and cosmetics shops, jewellery, fashion, etc. The last time we were there, my Mom

insisted on going to Del Sol; their merchandise includes tote bags and tee-shirts, etc. that change color when exposed to the sun. I have a bag with a plain black and white picture on it but when I get outside, the picture starts to change and all sorts of colors appear in the drawing which always invites comments from people. It's kind of cute. Anyway, if you want to do serious shopping, head to Bay Street. If this isn't enough for you, you'll find more shops on Paradise Island and on Grand Bahama Island at the International Bazaar at Freeport.

Most tourists who are in Nassau for the first time will head to the Straw Market. I haven't been there in years to be honest and I'm not in the market for straw goods but it is a place to come, browse, and possibly buy. One thing you must remember: don't pay the asking price. You are *supposed* to bargain. Personally, I don't like bargaining and this might be because of a childhood incident in the Straw Market. I was a kid the first time my family went to the Bahamas, and my sister and I wanted straw dolls. Why, I don't know. And, like everything else, you bargain the price. This is my mother's best sport. She lives to bargain, tells sellers their merchandise is junk, they should pay her to take it off their hands, walks away and they chase after her shouting "Madame! Come back!" I've seen her pull this routine all over the world. Then the serious bargaining starts. My sister and I were dumbfounded, my father so embarrassed, that he slipped the woman selling the dolls some extra money in the end which Mom knew nothing about. The point is, yes, bargain at the Straw Market. You or your tween or teenage daughter might want to bargain to get your hair braided around the Straw Market area too.

You should also visit Potter's Cay which is a local fish market. You'll find lots of fish and tropical dishes available. Local dishes are made from the conch which is a shellfish. You can order conch salad, conch fritters, conch chowder and sometimes, conch stew. Conch is pronounced "konk" by the way. Speaking of food, what should you try other than conch?

Bahamas Cuisine

You can find anything you like in terms of food here. If you insist on the fast food outlets, they're available. If you must eat Italian food, French food or whatever, no problem but you should try at least some of the local food.

You're on an island and like most islands, expect a lot of fish. Local fish that you might be familiar with are red snapper (I really like that one), yellow tail and grouper. Try the local fish stew which is usually made with grouper or the chowder flavoured with rum, lime juice and tomatoes. There are also local lobsters although I have never eaten them so I can't recommend personally. Southerners should feel right at home with the fish and grits cooked with green peppers and onions which is often served for breakfast.

You can, of course, get meat but I have never ordered raccoon stew. Feel free to try it and let me know how it was.

Calorie Alert! You should try some of the desserts. I love anything with coconut so I'm recommending the coconut pies and tarts. You'll also want to try the pineapple tarts and guava duff which combines the fruit in the dough and tops it off with sauce that includes brandy or rum. None of these desserts is for calorie counters but you're

going to work that off in water sports, right? Or, you could choose to dance it off at some of the local clubs but you should know they have cover charges. Finally, there are indeed casinos in the Bahamas, so if you love to gamble, go for it! You won't lose weight there but you probably will lose money if you choose to gamble. Chalk it off to entertainment and know your limits.

White Sand, Dolphins and Sharks, Oh My!

Okay, you're ready to hit the beach and those Bahama beaches are beautiful with white sand and crystal clear water. Some of the cruise ships have arrangements for visits to cays or little islands that they own or lease, I don't know which but everything is exclusive to their companies. If you are not on a cruise, you have your pick of beaches that are public. Many of the hotels have private beaches and that can be a problem unless you are staying at one of those hotels.

I am not necessarily recommending the ones around Nassau, I think there are better ones, but if you are in Nassau, there are a few that might be worth checking out. The Western Esplanade or Junkanoo Beach is an easy walk from "downtown" Nassau. Because this beach is frequented by tourists, they do have public bathrooms and change areas and there are plenty of snack places nearby. I have heard that this beach is not well maintained in the "off season" which is December-January so before you head there, find out before you are disappointed. It also tends to get extremely crowded during "Spring Break," so I urge caution before you go to this beach or you might end up hating it.

If this is too crowded for your taste, and it might be, head down to Caves Beach. This is not walking distance; it's a good 7 miles from Nassau and you won't find public facilities like Junkanoo but it will be less crowded.

Personally, I think you would be far better off heading to Paradise Island. The first time I went there, it was still being developed but that was a long time ago and it has really changed. You can be pretty sure of snorkelling, boating and deep sea fishing excursions, diving, jet-skiing, kite-surfing/boarding (which I have not tried but trying to rev up the courage to do it) and there's always beach volleyball going on somewhere. It doesn't matter if you are experienced or a complete beginner at any of these sports; they will tailor things to suit you so give them all a try.

I am not a diver but I know people who are and they say there are shipwrecks to be explored and the coral reefs that are a habitat for the fish are fantastic. The fishing charters are usually 4 to 8 hours. I don't think they can guarantee you a fish, but you'd have to be pretty unlucky not to come back with some. You can choose between shallow waters where there are likely to be more fish or go deeper. You might hook a shark but then how the heck are you going to fit that in a suitcase to take home? Yes, there are sharks in these waters; it's their habitat. If you catch some nice grouper, I would be happy to cook it up for you but I'll skip the shark, thanks anyway.

Keeping the Kids Happy

Traveling with kids means accommodating to some extent to their interests and at least some of the time, the things they want to do could be things you want to do

too. So, if you are traveling with kids, you will probably have to go to the Aquaventure Water Park. It's a jam-packed water park with its rides, paddle boats, marine life, etc. This place has around 14 or 15 pools, wave surges, river rides and slides. It also has climbing facilities and probably everything you could want to entertain kids at whatever age from fairly young children to teens. You should also visit Dolphin Cay and Dolphin Encounters. This might not only be for the kids; the adults will enjoy it just as much. Dolphin Encounter also has sea lions, or it did as far as I know.

Paradise Beach is both public and private. The Atlantis Hotel owns a strip of the beach but parts of it are open to the public so you don't have to be a guest to use this beach. One of the nice things is the shade, with little huts to help avoid too much sun exposure. Cabbage Beach is also nice, a bit crowded at times and you can have lunch at the cafes near the beach.

If you are looking for a bit more quiet, you might try Eleuthera Island. It doesn't matter where you are on Eleuthera, you are never far from the beach. A lot of people head there for fishing but you can sit back and loaf around the beaches which are white sand and sometimes look sort of pink. There are water sports and snorkelling and diving and again, the shipwrecks to explore but generally, this is a quieter island.

There are plenty of other beaches, islands and activities or quiet depending on what you are looking for on Grand Bahama Island. I think if you plan well, you can't go wrong with a nice break in the Bahamas.

ALOHA FROM OAHU!

This is a special entry because I am writing it live almost as it happens since I am here in Honolulu on the island of Oahu. I've been here before but I still love coming to Hawaii. There are so many beaches, you could write a book just about Oahu, never mind the other islands but I am just back from Hyatt Beach which is part of Waikiki where I took a surfing lesson and YES!!! I finally managed to stand up and more than one time. Okay, wiped out in about one second but I DID IT! So this entry is going to be about Hyatt Beach, the great time I had with my instructor Stella as well as bit more about Waikiki.

Okay, so you've landed in Honolulu. A few things you need to know about Hawaii etiquette. There's more than a good chance you are going to be "leid" (receive a lei) at the airport if you are being met by a friend or tour group operator. First of all, it's considered bad luck and rude to remove it in the presence of the person who gave you the lei. If you are allergic of course, that's another story. Leis are made from fresh flowers and are sold everywhere including supermarkets and given for any and every occasion—birthdays, graduations, starting a new job, etc. Weddings have special leis for the bride and groom. All of them are gorgeous. You can sometimes see people stringing them if you are interested in the art of making leis and the hotels run workshops to teach the craft. If you are in Chinatown you will definitely see lei shops and people stringing them there. A lei should not dangle from your neck, it should be worn halfway down the chest and halfway down your back. More on Hawaiiana later

in this entry but you should learn a few important words even if everyone speaks English (this is the US but a bit different to the Mainland), so here's a few you are going to hear and probably use.

I'm sure you know Aloha, which means hello and goodbye but it also implies love. Mahalo, which means thank you. I know this sounds nuts, but you will see Mahalo on all the trash bins in Waikiki and some tourists think it means garbage. Nope. They are thanking you for cleaning up after yourself and throwing rubbish in the bin. Mahalo.

Directions are not north, east, etc. They are always given as follows:

Mauka— towards the mountains

Makai---toward the sea

Ewa-----west

Diamond Head---east

Another word you may hear is Kama'ina which means a local. Hawaiian is a very short alphabet, not many letters but with a lot of "K." Undoubtedly you will come across more words, but these are the absolute basics.

Chances are, you will be staying on or near the beach, and the beach is never far away from anything on Oahu—it's an island, after all. It's getting to be that time of year (winter) when the bigger swells of surf are coming in to the North Shore and in another month or so, the big waves will be coming which attracts the pro-surfers and their big money competitions. Big surf can reach 30 feet so this is not for novices. Even pros have been killed in these events because if you wipe out, you can become totally disoriented, that is, not know which way is up and swim further down rather than up and out. For the less intrepid, sensible or plain sissies (I qualify as all of those) it also means the waves are getting smaller in Waikiki which is the other end of the island. The weather is great, in the 70's to 80's, so it isn't hot and really comfortable with the breeze from the trade winds. The water temperature is also comfortable and you don't have to wade in tentatively afraid of a shocking cold temperature.

Truthfully, there is not a great temperature variation from winter to summer. Yes, it is cooler in winter and you might need a light jacket in the evening. It is more likely to rain and flash floods do happen. Pay attention and DO NOT CROSS a flash flood warning area. People have been swept away and killed. They will broadcast continually if a flash flood is imminent; you can't miss the news. Summer, on the other hand, is cooler than a lot of places on the Mainland due to the trade winds. That's another thing to understand; the trade winds keep the weather comfortable. When they die down, and Kona winds come in which are hot and sticky, it's very uncomfortable. You can always tell if trade winds are up by looking at a flag which will be whipping around and for sure you can tell Kona wind weather. Kona winds usually don't last long but they may also bring in the VOG. VOG? That's volcanic ash and I always know because my voice weakens and eyes itch and I feel tired. It may not affect you, it is individual and like I said, doesn't last more than a couple of days. Just be warned.

Wiki Wiki to Waikiki

Wiki Wiki is another Hawaiian word which means quick, fast, etc.

Hyatt Beach is on Kalakaua Avenue, between Kaiulani and Uluniu Avenue. You can't miss it because the Waikiki Police station is on the beach entrance. For a police station, it looks nice with little waterfall and water pools around the building.

As you walk onto the beach you will see an enclosure with several large stones. These are healing stones, sacred in Polynesian culture and you will see local people leaving leis on the fence surrounding the stones. Just step onto the beach which is beautiful. It's clean, there are racks of surfboards for hire, almost like a forest of them, paddle surfboards, outrigger canoes and sailboats. The beach concession rents lounge chairs for \$5.00 an hour and you can add an umbrella for another \$5.00. I recommend taking both, especially if you intend to spend time in the water because you will get plenty of sun. This is not the only concession on Waikiki, there are plenty so take your pick wherever you want to sit. I have an arrangement with one place where they give me a Kama'ina discount. I have to keep that a secret and can't reveal which one.

If you are going to take a surf lesson or try other water sports and rent your equipment from StarBeachBoys or probably most of the other concessions, you can leave your beach bag with them which is definitely recommended—I would not leave money or a credit card just sitting around on the beach and expect to find them when you get back. You might get lucky but why take that chance and spoil your day? Just because the police station is conveniently on the beach doesn't mean you want to pay them a visit.

The view is spectacular along all of Waikiki. On your left is Diamond Head and just a short distance down the beach are the other hotels, especially the famous pink one. I didn't find the beach overcrowded but that might vary on different days and time of year. It's just about that time when people seeking an escape from the cold (Yes, it's snowing in the Northeast of the US and very early in the year for snow) are starting to arrive. Truthfully, it's always tourist season in Hawaii because the weather doesn't vary too much. Yes, it does drop down to the 60's at night in winter and it is more likely to rain. It still isn't snow and you don't have to shovel it and a benefit of the rain is a good chance of seeing a rainbow after. You haven't been to Hawaii if you haven't seen a few really gorgeous rainbows. I've heard there are moonbows, would love to see one, but so far no luck. Maybe you'll get lucky! And by the way, yes it does snow on the Big Island in winter, high up on the volcano slopes, believe it or not.

Gidget Goes Hawaiian and so can you!

In the past few years I have had the pleasure of a correspondence with the real Gidget. If you didn't know, she is a real person. Her father based the books on her life with the Malibu surfers. After many years away from surfing, at age 60, she took it up again and she's still out there. It's the Gidget Can Do Spirit—those are her words. If she can at age 70—can you believe that?--- so can you and so can I, at least, that's what I figured. I'm not anywhere near 70 so no excuses!

I have been trying to learn to surf this summer and not getting very far in Israel despite determination. I figured this is the place to learn, after all, this is where surfing was born, so I trotted right over to StarBeachboys, told them my problem and they said, "Don't worry. You're going to stand up today. Keep your head up and you're going to get it." Sure. But then again, I'm an optimist. I took a lesson with

Stella who is a native Hawaiian and started surfing as a kid. She is my age, which is not exactly young and she told me, “Girl, you’re going to stand up today, I guarantee it.” Sounded good to me.

For starters, being tall, she chose a longer board for me so I would feel more balanced and I did. It helped enormously. The waves are also longer so it gives that bit of extra time to get upright. There were loads of people surfing and I kind of watched in awe as people of all ages were gliding on the waves and thinking, I want to be like that.

Well, Stella was right! She kept giving me little hints, or different ways of trying—keep your head up, don’t look down, look straight ahead, start on your knees if you have to even though you are not supposed to do that, anything to get you up and we correct it later. What was the result? YES I DID IT. And more than once. Okay, I fell off after about one second each time, but at least I was up and I am sure next time I will get up more times, and maybe be able to stay up longer. This was so thrilling and cool, I have no words. I did scrape my toes on some rock, probably coral, and one toe looks like it’s bent out of shape, so not going out again until that heals but I am definitely getting out there again. To prevent those cuts, you might want to wear well fitting surf shoes that won’t interfere with the surfboard standup.

StarBeachBoys also takes photos of you surfing so you can see yourself afterwards. (Maybe you don’t want to see what you looked like!). If you have never tried surfing, I can really recommend it and especially if you are here in Hawaii. I was really happy with Stella. She laughs, she gives you confidence, she makes you feel you can do anything. You can choose to do a group lesson or semi-private, but I felt for me today at least, the private lesson was the way to go and I am really happy with the results. By the way, she told me the oldest person she has successfully taught was 70, so don’t say you can’t do this!

Once you are finished with your surfing or paddling or outrigger boating, if you are hungry, there is a stand on the beach with soft drinks, smoothies, burgers, sandwiches, and the typical Hawaiian plate lunch (usually something like a burger and fried eggs always served with rice and macaroni salad) and of course, shave ice. You will be hungry and thirsty after an hour of water sports so bring some extra money to feed and hydrate yourself. You can always walk down the block and find something else if you really want, just mentioning that there is a place right on the beach. Afterwards would be a good time to rent that chair and umbrella and kick back and relax. I take my Kindle everywhere and saw lots of people with the same idea.

My son’s absolute favorite place to eat is just a short walk down the beach towards the pink Sheraton. Duke’s is a Waikiki landmark, always buzzing. The menu is a bit limited but everything they serve is terrific, the prices are good and so is the service. The best part is you are sitting right on the beach. I absolutely recommend breakfast, lunch or a snack at Duke’s—don’t miss it. If you hang around in the afternoon, you will probably see Bear, an original surfer guy, still doing tandem surfing. You’ll know right away if you see him.

One final word of warning about the beach and *this is important*. Once a month, there is an invasion of box jellyfish. It is always broadcast on the news which will tell you

which days to avoid the water. It's never long but it is regular and you really don't want to be stung, so those are the days to either stay out, or do something else. A few ideas follow.

Traffic

If you are going to drive, I can only say traffic is terrible on Oahu. Let's face it, it's an island with limited space so roads get backed up and there's nothing much you can do but put up with it. Public transportation is pretty good, The Bus, provides excellent service for disabled passengers with lifts for wheelchairs and nobody loses patience which is nice. If you are going to be here for a while, it might be worth the money to invest in a monthly bus pass which is \$60 and good on any bus. You have to decide yourself what works for you. Just be warned about traffic and allow enough time to get places.

Hawaii Five-0 and show biz

There are loads of things to do on Oahu, the biggies being Pearl Harbor and the Arizona Memorial, Polynesian Cultural Center, Iolani Palace (the only palace in the US since Hawaii was a monarchy) and the Bishop Museum for Hawaiiana. Loads of tours and other things but you can figure that out for yourself, no problem. If you are hoping to see the filming of Hawaii Five-0, the new one that is, well, you might get lucky. Everyone I know has caught them somewhere but me. Yet. I do know they often film on Queens Beach in Waikiki and the Hilton Hawaiian Hotel and beach. If you are looking for the King Kamehameha statue seen so often which is supposed to be in front of their headquarters and always on the show, (it's in front of a government building complex including the post office and next to the law courts), you can't miss it. The statue is right out front, I often see tourists busy snapping photos. Right across the street is the Iolani Palace, so take some time there, too.

They do often film at Halawa Correctional Institution (the prison) but you won't get closer than the main gates and it's at least an hour drive so maybe you want to give that one a miss. The show is a big deal in the Islands and they always have a huge launch party on the beach with the cast the night before the first episode airs. If you happen to be here at that time, you'll get lucky. If not, just watch the show!

For those who remember further back in time, and my mom sure does, Honolulu is the home of that fictional and film detective Charlie Chan. Rather, Charlie was meant to be fictional but actually based or certainly resembled a real Honolulu detective, Chang Apana. The author and Apana did meet at one point. Apana was famous for his beat in Chinatown, his bullwhip and famously arrested a gang of gamblers with only the whip for a weapon and no backup. If you are interested, HPD (Honolulu Police Dept) has an exhibit about him at their headquarters on Beretania Street. Apana is more interesting than anything fictional and certainly worth your time to learn about him.

If you want to learn about Hawaiian history, and it is unique, not only because of the Polynesians but also the monarchy and the overthrow which has still not been completely forgiven and rightly so in some ways, do some reading. I went on a terrific walking tour of historic Honolulu. Absolutely fantastic! I cannot remember the guide's name but he was a former Honolulu cop and this is his hobby and passion.

He was marvelous, knew so much, and I would recommend such a tour if that is your thing because you will learn a lot. I had a read considerably and still learned new things and so did my friend who has lived here for 20 years.

Hula, Ukulele and I love a parade!

Hula is of course, the dance of Hawaii and outlawed by the missionaries for being lewd. Fortunately, it survived. There are 2 kinds of hula, modern and traditional. Modern is what you will see at a show for tourists which is perfectly fine and nice. Traditional is another matter, but also lovely. Hula is graceful, tells a story and is downright enchanting. I did go to a hula school for a while but had to give it up since I never had enough time to really commit and you are expected to commit seriously to your hula school, but I still enjoy it. If your hotel is offering a lesson, go ahead and don't feel dumb. Hula is a state of mind and I just love it. There are heaps of hula schools and the annual Merrie Monarch Hula Competition. BTW, Hula is for men and not just women, so don't think it's women only.

Ukulele is that miniature sized looking guitar with four strings. Loads of people play them, easy to carry around and I hear them all over the place. It's just another of those Hawaiian sounds. If you want to give it a try, do so, by all means. They can be pricey but you can pick up a cheap one if you are just trying out for under \$30 and a song book with instructions before you invest in a better quality instrument. It takes practice like anything but kind of fun and a happy sound. That's the best way I can describe it.

One more really fun thing about Honolulu and Waikiki. This is parade central. Hawaiians love parades and they have them for any and every occasion. Every possible holiday will have a parade and they almost always come right down Kalakaua Avenue in Waikiki. Do not miss the parade, enjoy the color, the fun, the Royal Hawaiian Band, the local military bands (there are a lot of military bases on Oahu), the hula dancers and everything else. It's terrific!

I am going to haul my tired but exhilarated body off to bed. Mahalo for joining me and Aloha until the next entry.

HUMUHUMUNUKUNUKUAPUA'A (CAN YOU SAY THAT?)

If you don't feel like surfing, or paddling, or other water activities, Hanauma Bay is considered a prime snorkel spot on Oahu. Even if you are not that keen on snorkeling, it might be worth a trip. The bay was formed thousands of years ago by an underwater volcano and shaped like a horseshoe. The bay has lovely sandy beaches but there is a lot of coral and rock in the water so you should think about either using flippers or reef walkers to avoid a painful cut to your feet. The beach does have lifeguards and first aid if the worst happens.

Getting to the bay is pretty easy. If you are in Waikiki, you can book a shuttle from a number of companies that will also include a snorkel mask and flippers as part of the deal. You do have to pay an entry fee, by the way unless you are a resident of Hawaii or on military service based on the islands. In that case, you get in free so bring ID if that applies to you. The ride to the bay takes you past Diamond Head and if you are planning on going in a private vehicle, keep in mind the parking lot fills up very quickly so you might be better off with the shuttle service.

Because the bay is a protected environment, you are warned not to touch the coral. You also must sit through a short video about the bay. Protection of the environment is very important and they can't emphasize that enough. After the video, you head downhill, about 5 minute walk at the most. If you can't make it down on your own power, there is a shuttle for 75 cents and coming back up is 1 dollar. The walk really is not hard and you can stop along the way and admire the view which is pretty spectacular.

You should also know that there are no food or concession stands down on the beach although you are welcome to bring food as long as you clean up your trash and there are picnic tables. There is a food stand at the top if you want to hike all the way back up again. At the very least, bring a drink because you do need fluids.

There are also lockers if you need to lock up your bag which I would recommend. A locker rental is 7 dollars but at least you know your things will be there when you get out of the water. There are also showers and bathrooms down on the beach if you need those facilities.

You can expect to see all kinds of fish, depending on the time of day and you might see a sea turtle or even a monk seal. I didn't this time but have in the past and someone saw an eel—again something I missed but not especially sorry.

You should be on the lookout for Humuhumunukunua'pua'a —if you can pronounce that, you are way ahead of me. This is the name of Hawaii's state fish and you will see that for sure. During the winter, occasionally you can see whales in the distance too.

The best time to go if you want to see fish is the morning. Hanauma Bay is crowded, you will not find a quiet, secluded, empty beach. Forget it, not gonna happen, but it is a nice place to spend a few hours or even a whole day. Many of the staff are volunteers and they are happy to answer questions. The bay is closed to the public on Tuesday. When the Obamas are here for their winter vacation, the bay or anything else could be closed if they are there so check to be sure if it's that time of year.

The water is pleasant, not cold, and you really can't go wrong with this trip so the next time you are in Honolulu, think about a trip to the bay and practice saying that word! I did take pictures but they refuse to upload, no idea why. If you want to have a look, just go to this website and you can learn anything you might want to know and see pictures of the bay.

<http://www1.honolulu.gov/parks/facility/hanaumabay/>

So, it's time to say Aloha and see you on the bay.

EILAT HAS A LOT GOING FOR IT

This week we are heading to Eilat, a beautiful beach town at the very southern end of Israel on the Red Sea. Eilat is the southern gateway to the Sinai which now belongs to Egypt and is just across the water from Aqaba in Jordan.

I've been to Eilat a number of times. Years ago, it was a very small place indeed, hardly anyone lived there, it was an outpost at the end of the Negev Desert with one or two hotels at the most. Boy, has that changed. Today, 60,000 people live and work in Eilat. There are loads of hotels, lots of water activities, desert activities and other amusements to keep you busy if that's what you want and you are certainly able to do a one day or longer if you wish, trip to Petra in Jordan. I really recommend that and

will tell you more later. Most people in Eilat speak some English and quite a few speak French. Eilat is really geared to tourists so you should be able to manage no matter what you speak. Israelis tend to have multiple language skills, so, someone will speak your language.

Weather

I've been to Eilat several times in the past few years, both winter and summer which are different (it's stinking hot in the summer, over 100 degrees or above 40 and more like 45 Celsius every day. People say, but it's dry. Well yeah, but it's still HOT.) And, lots of Israeli families are on vacation with their kids in the summer so the hotels are jam packed and sorry, but Israelis are noisy, especially the kids. I would recommend spring or autumn for a visit—it still may be crowded if it's one of the longer Jewish holidays when people go on vacation, but the weather is a lot more comfortable. It's still hot but not brutal. Winter is very pleasant, still warm during the day, but you might need a light jacket at night. This is desert and the temperatures drop dramatically once the sun goes down. I find the water too cold to swim in the winter but you might not. You will not need to pack an umbrella because it hardly ever rains in Eilat, maybe one week out of the whole year.

Getting there

Once upon a time, you had to drive or take a bus to get to Eilat. You still can and have a drive through the Negev Desert which will take several hours and longer if you have to stop for breaks. (You will and should). Alternatively, you can fly from Tel Aviv and I know there are a number of places in Europe that have direct charter flights to Eilat. The trip from Tel Aviv is under an hour, the airport small so you get your luggage right away, and you are only a five minute taxi ride to the hotels. I most recently did this trip with my son who really enjoyed the flight because you can see the landscape all the way. One idea is to drive one way and fly the other but it's up to you.

What should I do?

I'm in Eilat, now what do I do? You can take your pick. Eilat is a great place for things like water skiing although most people who go to Eilat really want to see the Red Sea fish and they are spectacular so chances are you want to go diving or snorkelling. If neither of these things is for you, then by all means, visit the Coral World aquarium where you will see incredibly colorful Red Sea fish. One of the cool things is that part of the aquarium is underwater so you are seeing the fish in their habitat. By the way, two things that might interest you---in Hebrew the term is Reed Sea, not Red, and no, it is not red so all I can think is somewhere a mistranslation crept into English and it stuck. You will also notice the sea water is far more saline than in other places; not enough to really bother you but noticeably more saline.

If dolphins are your thing, then head to the Dolphin Reef where you can swim and dive with the dolphins. There are also times when wind-surfing is popular and one of my former dance teachers told me her father coached Israelis that went on to the Olympics so obviously, conditions are pretty good. Of course, you can always hang out at the hotel pool, but you could do that anywhere, so at least give the Red Sea some of your time. If water sports are not your thing, there's always the desert.

Into The Desert

There are lots of things you can enjoy in the nearby desert but the one thing not to be missed is Timna Park. This is Israel and you are walking in history almost everywhere. Timna is a short distance from Eilat where you can hike and learn about the geology of the area. There is also a replica of the Tabernacle of the Children of Israel that they carried throughout their 40 years of wandering in the desert. I would recommend going early in the morning before it gets too hot, give yourself some time in the museum at the entry, then set out on the trails and enjoy the shapes and colors and make sure you see the petroglyphs and ancient copper mine shafts that are associated with the time period of King Solomon. Don't forget to visit Solomon's Pillar, a rock formation, and the artificial lake which is pretty popular for recreation too.

If you have more time in the desert, definitely try to visit Hai Bar Nature Reserve. I had a friend who was a volunteer there for a while and again, if you want to see animals, go early when they are inclined to be up and moving. If you are lucky, you might see leopards, cheetahs, hyenas, gazelles and ostriches (who pecked incessantly at the car windows on one trip years ago.) All of these species live in the park and are local, endangered desert animals.

Once you are worn out from swimming, snorkelling, etc. and need to feed yourself or the kids or both, there are lots of restaurants in Eilat, no problem finding food. Undoubtedly, you will find Middle Eastern food as well as other cuisines but do try the local felafel, kebab, hummus and techina while you re there. For entertaining the kids out of the water, Eilat also has an IMAX which the kids will enjoy. Do not miss sunset—look across the water to Jordan as the mountains seem to glow red while the sun sets—this is spectacular and a highlight of your trip.

Heading across the border

Once upon a time, there was no way to cross the border between Israel and Jordan, at least not legally. During the 1950's, there was a popular song called The Red Rock about the rose colored city of Petra in Jordan, a center of Nabatean civilization thousands of years ago. Teenage boys used to dream of a visit and occasionally attempted to get across the border to see Petra. Some of them ended up being shot and the song was banned. Today, it's played as an "oldie" on the radio and anyone can cross the border to visit Petra, a trip I highly recommend so here are a few tips.

Petra, Jordan

Petra is an easy day trip from Eilat. Of course, you can go for more than one day, that's up to you. I did the trip with my teenage son because that was what I wanted for my birthday. I wondered if he'd give me a hard time, teenagers being notoriously difficult to please but fortunately, he had a great time, paid rapt attention to the guide, and couldn't wait to get back to Eilat so he could post all his photos on Facebook so I knew he loved it.

My recommendation is to go with a tour company that you book in advance. After talking with a few friends, I booked Eco Tours and we both found them terrific. Going with a tour company is good for several reasons. They will pick you up early in the morning because there are long lines on the Israeli side for crossing the border, but once you are over on the other side, their rep will meet you, collect your passports and stand in line to get the visas instead of you having to do it. There isn't much to

do while you are waiting except get a drink and look at tacky souvenirs which I don't recommend, but then your guide will round up the group and you're off to the bus. Our group was very international, our young Jordanian guide spoke English quite well and tailored his talks to everyone. All the teens enjoyed this as much as the adults.

There is another reason I recommend the tours. Someone I know decided she did not need a tour guide, took a car without really knowing the hairpin turns in the mountains and you guessed it. She had an accident, fractured her leg and had to be sent back to Aqaba and airlifted to Eilat. You don't want that, so take the tour.

Back to Petra. The ride is not long, you can enjoy the trip through the mountains which are spectacular. Within a short time, you're at the entrance to Petra. This is a downhill walk through the Siq, a narrow path between the cliffs, which is not too hard but if you can't walk, there are horse carts available, no motorized vehicles are allowed in the area since this is Jordan's most important archeological site. Personally, I would not take a cart unless I had no choice because I imagine they bounce around quite a lot on that rocky surface but that's up to you. There are also camels for a ride further down.

All along the walk down, the guide would point out various remnants of Nabatean civilization carved into the rock over 2500 years ago but nothing prepares you for the sight and site of The Treasury—that magnificent pink stone building. If you saw Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade, then you know the building I mean. It's incredible and we spent a long time just examining this truly ancient wonder of the world. For a surprise, I booked horses to ride back up, a la Indiana Jones which my son really enjoyed. I admit, I did not gallop up but went at a very sedate trot but we were humming the theme music anyway and both of us thought this was a cool way to end our time in Petra. The best time for photos in my opinion is mid morning when the colors of the rocks are most spectacular.

Some of the tours will take you to Aqaba but it's a long and tiring day and that option might be better for a two day trip. We came back to Eilat exhausted and very happy. There's lots more to do in the Eilat area including heading down to Sinai which is now part of Egypt so that's another entry.

Enjoy Eilat because you will have a great time!

TAKE THE ELEVATOR TO NETANYA AND ITS BEACHES

If you're thinking about summer vacation, or even just dreaming of somewhere warm for the time being, it's time to head to Netanya, a lovely little city on the Mediterranean coast in Israel, north of Tel Aviv. I remember Netanya when it was fairly small and it was a nice town. It's still a nice place but much bigger and there's been an influx of a lot of French people so in some ways, it feels like the Riviera minus the glitz and gambling. If you're traveling with kids, that might be better anyway. You're in luck with plenty of beaches to choose from in Netanya—it has about 8 or 9, so no lack of variety and they are all public beaches. Like most beaches in Israel, there are lifeguards and medics on duty, public shower and bathroom facilities and easy to find food. This is Israel, and people are always eating!

Netanya is on the train line from Tel Aviv and on an express train, just 15 minutes from the big city, but a world away with quite a long coastline so the beaches tend to be the type that attract particular activities. For example, Blue Bay Beach which also has a hotel, has areas set aside for fishing, water sports and just plain swimming.

Stroll the Promenade and Take The Elevator To The Beach—Yes, Really!

There's a lovely promenade that runs along the beach for about 4 or 5 kilometers and it's a nice walk. I know lots of people who walk it every morning, really early, before they go to work. Alternatively, it's just as nice in the evening as you watch the sun set into the Mediterranean and I recommend that if you've never seen that sunset which is spectacular. At the height of summer, it will be light until around 8:30 so you get lots of beach time, even if you are tourist and been out all day, or working or anything else. The promenade is on the top of cliffs overlooking the beach so the view really is incredible. And, you can take a picnic and sit at tables or on the lawn if you don't feel like going down to the beach. Speaking of which, it's quite a number of steps down the stairs to the beach, BUT, don't worry. If you are traveling with someone with disabilities, there is an elevator. Yes, an elevator, down to the beach which you can find in the south central part of the beach strip. I kid you not! I think it's fantastic that the beach has been made so accessible and I've never seen that before anywhere.

Which Beach to choose?

If you're looking for the younger crowd, head over to Haonot Beach where they tend to congregate. Being a beach that attracts younger people, there's usually beach volleyball going on and, of course, a pub on the beach. This beach does tend to get crowded so if that bothers you, keep going.

Herzl beach has multiple sports including basketball, soccer and more beach volleyball so if you are the type that doesn't like to sit around and laze on the beach but feel that you must do something, well, this is for you. Sironit Beach which is right next to Herzl also has sports, but it's a lot louder; mostly because there's a DJ and music always seems to be blasting. Of course, if you love dancing, and I do, then this is a great beach with a lot of salsa dancing, so head over and join everyone else trying to get that "Cuban motion"—Middle East style, that is.

BTW If it's Israeli folkdancing you want, and it's very popular, you can often find free public dancing in the summer in Israel. I definitely remember doing that in the city center during Netanya summers. It's fun, the music is nice and a little less energetic than salsa, depending on which dances they play.

If it's sailing and surfing you're looking for, then head over to Amphi Beach. It's called Amphi because it's near the amphitheatre. More about that later. This beach is pretty close to the city center so it does tend to get crowded but personally I like this one and I love people watching on this beach because just about anything and anyone could turn up. It's a given that you will also hear a lot of languages—Hebrew, of course, but lots of French, Russian, English and some Arabic so it feels like an international meeting going on along the Netanya beaches.

If you are reading this, I am guessing you don't need a religious beach. That is, a beach that has separate areas for men and women for religious modesty reasons. Nevertheless, there is one in Netanya that caters to the observant crowd. Nothing stops you from using Tzanz beach, other than being sure you are the appropriate gender for that day and time. Unless they have changed the schedule, it should be as follows:

Women:

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in the morning from 08:30 till 13:00
Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays and from 13:30.

Men:

Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 08:30 till 13:00
Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 13:30 on.

Obviously, on Saturday, they are all in synagogue or home, celebrating the Sabbath, so no beach that day. I've heard but not seen, they have super-kosher food stands on this beach if that is important to you.

I'm beached out, now what do I do?

Like I said, Netanya is a nice place and one of the things I like about the city is the amphitheatre which is right in the center of the beach promenade and close to Independence Square. During the summer, there are lots of concerts and things like that because it never rains in Israel in the summer. Sometimes, you wish it would to cool things off, but it doesn't, so you can count on outdoor activities.

If you want to venture further, Israel is a small country and pretty easy to get around. You can easily head south to Tel Aviv, but I would recommend heading north to a few places in particular. My first choice is Akko or Acre. If you read history of the Crusades, the name will be familiar. Akko is full of mosques, markets and of course, Crusader ruins. You're walking in history in Akko and you can't fail to enjoy walking through the cobbled alleys down to the port and then sit back and enjoy the view. You can also visit Akko prison, site of the famous Akko prison break by the Irgun who broke out the prisoners held during the British Mandate. If you love history, head to Akko.

If you're interested in another culture, head to the Druze villages of Isfiya and Daliyat el Karmel. The Druze live in Israel, Syria and Lebanon and are loyal to whatever country they are in; many serve in the IDF—the Israel Defense Forces. You'll see houses built on the mountain on pillars with several generations of the same family residing together. If you get lucky, you'll get to hear a bit about the Druze and even get invited to eat something at someone's home—the Druze are famous for hospitality. It might not be interesting for kids but it will for adults for sure.

I could make other suggestions but you'll find them if you are there and you can always drop into the local Ministry of Tourism spots and ask. Whatever you are looking for, you will find. Trust me.

You Gotta Eat

Israel was never known as a culinary hotspot but it's changed a lot. It's still true there is nothing to beat the fresh local fruit and vegetables. Even if the best goes for export,

you would never know it. The local produce is fabulous. Nothing tops the cold local watermelon in season but the rest of the seasonal fruit—apricots, plums, peaches, nectarines and grapes are all marvelous. (Years ago, I picked all that stuff!) Cherry season is pretty short, usually just during June but good while it lasts.

Personally, I really enjoy a fresh salad while sitting at a beach café. The additions vary from tuna, eggs, and cheeses. Try the Bulgarian cheese with your salad, a kind of Brinza cheese. Depending on the background, ethnic, that is, people add mint, chilli, roasted eggplant, and all sorts of things to salads. Of course, there is the humus and techina along with felafel for a snack—all to be eaten with fresh pita bread and salads of your choice. Really delicious as long as it is fresh.

If you want meat, try some grilled beef or lamb kebabs—they are really good. All of these things are meant for a light lunch or snack. You will find heaps of variety in Israel due to the extraordinary diversity of immigrants who left the Old Country, whatever it was, but their stomachs craved the food they left behind. You can find French, Russian, Georgian, Yemenite, Moroccan food and anything else in restaurants and I do recommend trying some of these great dishes.

Your kids will find the French fries they all seem to want and they will love the Israeli snacks. My kids were addicted to Bamba which we had to hunt down in London and yes, we found it. Bamba, Bisli and lots of other snacky things in bags like potato chips are sold everywhere. Bamba is made from puffed corn and peanut butter. I have never seen a kid who didn't love it, and a lot of adults too. Finally, make sure to have some fresh squeezed juice of whatever is in season—absolutely fantastic and sold on streets and beaches. If you need to shop for food, the supermarkets are really good and so are the “hole in the wall” grocery stores. I used to go to one regularly down the street from my place where the owner kindly minded my dog while I did the shopping. Can't top that!

All in all, I know you will have a fabulous time in Netanya so see you there!

One final note: i had planned to end this with a visit to the Jersey Shore, the beach of my childhood, the place where everyone went “down the shore” –never to the beach, but down the shore. Hurricane Sandy destroyed so many of those wonderful places with their boardwalks, beaches and amusements. Asbury Park, Wildwood, Seaside, Belmar and so many other names bring back the memories of salt water taffy, good friends, and that fun vibe.

I know they will rebuild because Jersey folks are tough and the Jersey Shore is a way of life. I'm thinking of everyone there and hope to be back for the new, revitalized Jersey Shore.

Thanks for joining me on the beach. I hope you've enjoyed some of the travels and if I find the time and strength, maybe I'll work on a second guide because there are still plenty of beaches out there to road test!

Shalom, Aloha, Hasta La Vista, AuRevoir, and Bye for Now!

Elle

