

The allure of the British seaside

adapted from an article by Arwa Haider

- 1 At the entrance to Margate's newly reopened *Dreamland* theme park, there is a sculpture created from the salvaged scraps of former fairground rides. Entitled *Be Entranced*, it is a colourful mash-up of coastal carnival motifs. At its heart is a red devil rising from flames poised to make mischief. The image feels apt. The British seaside has cast a spell on pop culture over many generations, but it has never banished its demons. Despite a 'candyfloss culture' of sweet treats, bright sun and giddy day-trippers, it also has an edge: the promise of escape and excess. That edge is exactly why artists, writers and film-makers seem to find it so alluring.
- 2 That has been due in part to a stumbling economy. Once-booming coastal resorts fell into decline around the 1960s and 1970s, suffering from the closure of railway lines and from a new wave of affordable flights abroad. More recent recessions hit seaside towns including Margate, Blackpool and Hastings particularly hard, with the Office of National Statistics reporting increasing deprivation in the poorest spots. At the same time, seaside towns have seen the arrival of high-end art venues such as Margate's *Turner Contemporary* and Hastings' *Jerwood Gallery* – as well as the multi-million-pound revival of *Dreamland*, which originally dated from 1920, but had closed in 2003.
- 3 The seaside's portrayal in popular culture traditionally has been dark and heady, not least in Graham Greene's 1938 novel *Brighton Rock*, featuring cold-blooded young killer Pinkie. The introduction to the 1947 film version seems anxious not to 22 Brighton, "a large, jolly, friendly seaside town in Sussex", by displaying the disclaimer that rather, it recalls "another Brighton of dark alleyways and festering slums... the poison of crime and violence and gang warfare... now happily no more". Brighton would recur as a battleground in the 1979 film *Quadrophenia* and Helen Zahravi's 1991 novel, the feminist revenge thriller *Dirty Weekend*.
- 4 "The seaside encourages and capitalises on transgression," says Brighton-based cultural commentator Andy Medhurst. "Seaside culture is somewhere where the everyday rules of behaviour are put on hold. Compared to the average working week, where most people have to do set things at set times for set rewards, the seaside is a zone where all bets are off. It gives us the opportunity to write our own rules; in some cases, that can mean the usual codes of decency cease to hold much sway. Seaside towns are literally and metaphorically on the edge. They

give a very particular perspective. When you look back inland, nothing seems as settled as it once did – and those instabilities can be culturally productive."

- 5 Seaside resorts have spawned multi-genre music scenes, though their once-packed piers and pavilions have lapsed into seasons of washed-up entertainers. But that trend may be shifting. Newer big-name programming is taking place at venues from Blackpool *Tower Ballroom* to Bexhill-on-Sea's *De La Warr Pavilion* as well as *Dreamland*. 24, Morrissey's 1988 hit *Everyday Is Like Sunday* lingers as the ultimate catchy seaside lament about "the coastal town/They forgot to shut down."
- 6 It's unsurprising that scepticism surrounds the gentrification of coastal resorts and the invasion of 'DFL' (down from London) hipsters seeking cheap property. In towns like Margate, kitsch vintage boutiques spring up yards from run-down charity shops. But even against such forces the British seaside exudes a defiant strength. The North Yorkshire resort of Whitby (a landing-spot in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*) has drawn international crowds for a bi-annual Goth Weekend since 1994. Street art legend Banksy's 2015 bemusement park *Dismaland* transformed a disused lido in Weston-super-Mare into a dystopian satire of death, decay and violence for five weeks. The British seaside retains its weird and wonderful dark side – and it keeps going, because nobody could go any further.



bbc.co.uk, 2017