in order to use a room. Despite strong disapproval on the part of the management, some surreptitious drug dealing took place among patrons; consumption of mind-altering drugs, often taken just before arriving, was certainly common. As a rule, alcohol was not served, but could be brought in. Stereotypically, sexual encounters in the baths were completely anonymous; however, a few clients report having begun love affairs or friendships as a result of meetings there. A curious dynamic is that during off-hours, when few people were present, contacts could generally be made quickly, while when the building was crowded patrons could become quite choosy, in hopes that the continuing intake would produce more desirable individuals. Some patrons would have ten or more contacts, but the majority seem to have restricted themselves to two or three, or even one.

In the 1980s, with the unfolding of the AIDS crisis in the United States, the bathhouses came under attack because the promiscuous sexual encounters that took place there were held to promote the spread of the disease. Although this charge was denied, and many bathhouses began to distribute safe sex information and condoms as a positive contribution, it was clear that their days of glory were over. Many bathhouses in smaller localities were forced to close for lack of business. The owners of some establishments tried to change them into health clubs, but with mixed success. In San Francisco, as a result of pressure from public officials, the last bathhouse closed its doors in 1987. In Europe, however, bathhouses—usually termed saunas there—continue to flourish, and new ones even open from time to time.


Wayne R. Dynes
gay territory. Original proximity to a tea-
room (public toilet frequented for sexual 
purposes) may generate a tradition that a 
section of beach is gay, and the tradition 
can survive long after the tearoom is gone. 
In any event, the sight of hundreds of men, 
and no women or children, across a stretch 
of beach, readily leads most heterosexuals, 
especially with families, to stay clear. 
Those who unwittingly or stubbornly 
invade may be offended or subjected to 
“grossing out.” This behavior (one form of 
camp among gays) is a deliberate enact-
ment of a stereotype attributed to homo-
sexuals that embarasses the heterosexuals 
into moving.

A gay beach may be more capable 
of defense against intruding or threatening 
heterosexuals than other territories such 
as a park or main cruising street. Teen-
agers intent on harassment at a crowded 
gay beach are likely to find themselves 
surrounded by a silent but menacing group 
of gay men. This added element of safety, 
even if only tacitly understood, often 
encourages gay men and lesbians to more 
outrageous behavior for their own entertain-
ment on a gay beach than in other 
public spaces. This in turn helps establish 
the beach in heterosexual minds as a gay 
place.

Gay beaches are favorite places 
for cruising for several reasons: a large 
number of potential partners is concen-
trated in a small area, and they are likely to 
be above average in attractiveness, since 
the tanned and well-built are readier to 
show the body; there are readily manufac-
tured excuses for introducing oneself to 
strangers (just let the frisbee fly too far); 
what you see is almost what you get, since 
modern beach costumes leave little for the 
imagination; and in many cases, the gay 
beach is isolated by bush or rock outcropp-
ings which serve as cover for impersonal 
sex.

Holiday weekends are obviously 
prime time, but depending on the prevail-
ing gay occupations in the city, certain 
weekdays (e.g., Mondays for waiters and 
bartenders, Wednesday for hair stylists) 
may find the gay beach more occupied 
than other beaches. Cruising is not neces-
sarily limited to the beach, if access is by 
public transport or ferry, this may also 
offer numerous opportunities. Offshore, 
gay men with sailboats or yachts may 
anchor, rowing to shore to offer attractive 
strangers a tour in their craft.

Social skills are as important as 
an attractive body in cruising a beach. 
Some men set up alone on a blanket, sig-
nalling their possible availability, while 
others prefer to gather in groups, hoping 
that mutual friends will facilitate introdu-
tions. In either case, it is common to 
periodically go for a stroll along the beach, 
winding one’s way through the complex of 
towels and blankets, exchanging smiles or 
glances. The slimmest acquaintance or 
familiarity of faces may be used to strike 
up conversation (which may actually be 
directed not to the person conversed with, 
but to a total stranger on the next blanket).

Social visiting between blanket-
based groups, whether by couples or singles, 
is easy and common. A picnic lunch in-
creases socializing and lowers inhibitions 
against introducing oneself to strangers 
(“Are you hungry? There’s lots here.”). 
Ironically, the greater exposure of flesh in 
a public place often makes encounters 
more conversational, and less limited to 
an agenda of impersonal sex, than a dark 
park or gay baths.

Lesbians appear less likely to 
establish a beach and very few cities have 
a lesbian beach. The reasons undoubtedly 
include less cruising behavior in general 
among lesbians, less traditional social 
power (as women) to establish and hold 
territories, and lesbian preference for a 
proper social introduction and some prior 
acquaintanceship before intimate encoun-
ter. When a lesbian community develops 
beach-going social life, lesbians may es-
tablish some section of the existing gay 
male beach as their own. Covert gay men, 
or lesbians, may use a nearby heterosexual 
section of beach, but wander through the
gay beach on apparent errands (trips to the washroom, water fountain, and so on).

Police—mounted on horse, or more recently in all-terrain vehicles—often attempt to discourage or harass gay beachers, or to surprise or entrap those using “the bushes.” Heterosexual resentment of gay male impersonal sex opportunities may lead to political decisions to eliminate gay beaches (e.g., by constructing a promenade, or supervised swimming pool). But an experienced gay man who knows how to search is likely to discover some portion of beach frequented by gays, even in foreign lands.

See also Geography, Social; Resorts; Tourism.


John Alan Lee

BEAT GENERATION

The origins of this trend in American culture can be traced to the friendship of three key figures in New York City at the beginning of the 1940s. Allen Ginsberg (1926–) and Jack Kerouac (1922–1969) met as students at Columbia University, where both were working at becoming writers. In 1944 Ginsberg encountered the somewhat older William Burroughs (1914–), who was not connected with the University, but whose acquaintance with avant-garde literature supplied an essential intellectual complement to college study. Both Ginsberg and Burroughs were homosexual; Kerouac bisexual. At first the ideas and accomplishments of the three were known only to a small circle. But toward the end of the 1950s, as their works began to be published and widely read, large numbers of young people, “beatniks” and “hippies,” took up elements of their lifestyle.

The beat writers and their friends were only sporadically resident in San Francisco, but the media played up this connection, especially during the “flower-child” era in the mid-1960s. This reputation is not without relation to the Bay City’s emerging status as a gay capital. To be sure the beat writers placed little stress on developing a fixed abode—their pads were never photographed for House Beautiful. Seminomadic, they traveled extensively not only in the United States, but in Latin America, Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Significantly, one of the most widely read beat texts was Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road (1957).

The word beat was sometimes traced to “beatific,” and sometimes to “beat out” and similar expressions, suggesting a pleasant exhaustion that derives from intensity of experience. Its appeal also reflects the beat and improvisation of jazz music, one of the principal influences on the trend. Some beat poets tried to match their writings with jazz in barroom recitals, prefiguring the more effective melding of words and music in folk and rock. The ideal of spontaneity was one of the essential elements of the beat aesthetic. These writers sought to capture the immediacy of speech and lived experience, which were, if possible, to be transcribed directly as they occurred. This and related ideals reflect a new version of American folk pragmatism, preferring life to theory, immediacy to reflection, and feeling to reason. Contrary to what one might expect, however, the beat generation was not anti-intellectual, but chose to seek new sources of inspiration in neglected aspects of the European avant-garde and in Eastern thought and religion.

In the view of many, the archetypal figure of the group is William Burroughs. Born into a wealthy business family in St. Louis, Burroughs drifted from one situation to another during his twenties and thirties; only after meeting the younger writers did he find his own voice. First published in Paris in 1959, his novel Naked Lunch became available in the United States only after a series of landmark obscenity decisions. With its phantasmagoric and sometimes sexually explicit sub-