

# Under the Boardwalk,



## **Smith Point, Fire Island**

At the eastern point of Fire Island, a barrier isle off Long Island's southern shore and about 60 miles from Manhattan, Smith Point is popular with longboarders for its rolling surf; beachcombers love the miles of powdery white sands.



# Down by the Sea

Call him the bard of the beach: Renowned Italian photographer **Massimo Vitali** made his name with his stunning, iconic images of Europe's surf and sand. In his first beach series shot in America, he turns his gaze to New York's shores, where the tide of humanity meets the wilds of the ocean. **Luc Sante** explains the communion between artist and subject, and why the Empire State's seafronts are like no others





**Y**OU CAN'T CALL MASSIMO Vitali a beach photographer exactly, although he has photographed many, many beaches, mostly in Europe. You might say, rather, that he's a connoisseur of crowds, specifically the sort of crowds that populate mass-leisure sites (he has also shot discos, ski slopes, and pools). Beaches are so frequent in his work presumably because the sand provides a natural canvas, swimsuits and umbrellas supply interesting pinpoints of color, and, of course, ocean light is something you can't get anywhere else—there's a reason why beach painting and vacations started more or less simultaneously in the nineteenth century. But let's not be pedantic: Massimo Vitali is a great photographer of beaches.

Beach photography has a relatively brief but rich history, ranging from Jacques-Henri Lartigue's dreamlike tableaux of elegant French haut-bourgeois families in their summer whites, circa 1910, to Richard Misrach's rapturous studies of ocean swimmers, from the last few years. Vitali's particular affinities would seem to lie with the Coney Island chroniclers of the postwar era—Weegee and Andreas Feininger, for example—who took pleasure in documenting that tabloid standby: the astounding number of humans who once descended upon New York City's democratic sands every July 4.

But this point of comparison may be slightly deceptive. Vitali's neutral gaze, his quasi-scientific detachment, his precise rules—he makes a point of shooting from an elevation, on the periphery of his subject—all call to mind the great German documenters of the end of industry, Bernd and Hilla Becher. Vitali approaches mass leisure the way the Bechers approach water towers and pitheads: with a kind of entomological collector's passion that may appear cold because it is so rigorous. But the passion is key. Vitali has been photographing beaches for years, though it is clear from these pictures' vigor that he is far from tiring of his subject.

Now, for the first time, he has come to the United States to photograph a series of the great proletarian beaches of New York. Changing demographic patterns mean that Coney Island no longer attracts the throbbing carpet of humanity it once regularly drew. Perhaps for that reason, Vitali takes as his subject not the beach itself but the Mermaid Parade, a relatively recent boardwalk tradition that emphasizes community spirit, Mardi Gras abandon, and a connection to the spirits of the area's carnivalesque past. With Coney Island slated for a Las Vegas-inspired makeover, Vitali's photo will soon look as mistily evocative as old postcards of Luna





## Coney Island, Brooklyn

The mid-twentieth-century photographer Weegee famously framed New York's most legendary sun-and-fun beach in a series of iconic images; Vitali recaptures the magic using his trademark technique of shooting from an elevation of just over 16 feet.



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**Shinnecock is a throwback to the way the Hamptons once were, in the**

**Shinnecock Park, Southampton**

Across the bay from the tony Hamptons, this barrier beach park offers easy-access respite from the rich towns' residents-only restrictions.







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**Jones Beach, Wantagh**  
“Everyone can get onto [Jones Beach],” Vitali observed of New York’s premier public beach, a six-and-a-half-mile strand 33 miles from the city, “but not everyone can park [nearby]. It’s a problem.”



**Jacob Riis Park, Queens**  
In 1936, when Robert Moses opened this Queens beach—intended for New York City’s car-owning middle class—it had the world’s largest parking lot. Today, Riis Park hosts up to a million beachgoers a day, some of whom arrive via the nearby subway and bus.



## The people who go to Jones Beach must commit themselves to the task.

Park and Dreamland (two of the Coney amusement parks destroyed by fire decades ago).

By contrast, Jones Beach, in Wantagh, looks about par for the summer course—not as jammed as Coney Island but reasonably dense, especially considering its six-and-a-half-mile length. Jones Beach was opened in 1929 by Robert Moses, the Baron Haussmann of New York, with the specific intent of not making it a proletarian beach; the overpasses on the parkways leading there were initially built too low for buses to drive under them. He also forbade all forms of “honky-tonk,” from ambulant vendors to hot dog stands and arcades. Vitali’s photograph captures the sweep of the place, and in the background you can see the amenities Moses orchestrated, which to his credit are august but not starchy, impressively civic in the way certain train stations once were.

The hand of Moses is also visible at Jacob Riis Park. Here the beach looks oddly underpopulated—at least compared to the last time I saw it, on a sand-covered-bologna-sandwich school outing in the late 1960s. Then you felt you had to surround your towel with a shark-infested moat to prevent others from encroaching upon you. Fire Island’s Robert Moses State Park looks almost wild for a place that has been rebuilt various times in the wake of storms—the island is for all intents and purposes a sandbar. On the mainland a few miles east is Smith Point, which is about as suburban as a beach can get, mere strides from thickly settled blocks.

Finally, there is Shinnecock, which lies on another sandbar island, this one directly opposite the gateway to the Hamptons. Just across the bay is some of the most sumptuous ocean-front property in the United States. Here, though, people who earn somewhat less than six figures back their vehicles directly up to the strand, to camp and fish from the vantage of their tailgates. It is a throwback to the way the Hamptons once were, in the ancient history that lasted until twenty or thirty years ago.

You might be wondering why Vitali didn’t take his camera to Water Mill or Amagansett, to show how the other half spend their days at the beach. I can’t say for sure, but I might venture a guess. The rich of the Hamptons only have to walk out their doors to hit the surf. The people who go to Jones Beach, on the other hand, must commit themselves to the task. They have to pack their cars, drive and drive, haul multiple loads of stuff from a distant parking lot, and claim and hold their turf through a day that, in order to be worthwhile, has to last at least until sunset. They have to earn their day in the sun. They are the workers of leisure. □



### Places & Prices

#### Beach Blanket Bingo!

Whether your taste runs to carnival freaks or bird-watching, you can find satisfaction at the beaches pictured here. For details, see page 134.



They have to earn their day in the sun. They are the workers of leisure

**Robert Moses State Park,  
Fire Island**

This public beach, on Fire Island's western edge and named for the New York public-works mastermind, is particularly popular with local surfers.

