

Why chic seaside chalets make a lot of sense

In this short article Helene Møgelhøj & Bridget Baker discuss the significant opportunities for seafront regeneration in the UK beach hut market

Bridget Baker Consulting, along with Neil Choudhury Architects, has recently undertaken a review of the potential to regenerate an additional section of Hastings promenade. In recent years the Sussex resort has regained its popularity and has received significant national press lately with the opening of the south coast's latest beach side art gallery, The Jerwood. With the staycation an increasing trend we look at the popularity and recent trends in the UK's beach hut market.

Seaside chalets and beach huts are intrinsically linked with the British seaside and date back to the 18th century when sea bathing first became fashionable. The traditional beach hut evolved from horse-drawn bathing machines which were used to safely transport bathers into the sea. These days the nostalgia and simplicity of a beach hut offers the perfect anti-dote to a busy gadget and technology-filled contemporary life. This has made them increasingly desirable and demand tends to outstrip supply.

Beach huts come in many shapes and sizes ranging from traditional small candy-striped wooden huts to architect-designed luxury concrete beach pods complete with bespoke kitchens and beach furniture.



Getting your hands on a beach hut is not necessarily that easy and sometimes come at a steep price too. Beach huts and chalets tend to be either privately owned or leased from a local authority. Purchase prices range from around £5k to over £150k. The latter price achieved at Mudeford in Dorset during a peak in 2004. Annual rental charges along the South Coast range from £275 to £1,100 and at the upper end the fee includes electricity and running water in the chalet. Most local authorities operate waiting lists for beach huts and these tend to be closed due to excessive demand – it is not uncommon to have to wait years to secure a chalet in a desirable location ie in close proximity to parking, potable water and other amenities.

Cash-strapped coastal local authorities are constantly looking for sustainable revenue streams to fund amongst other their high-maintenance public realm and seafronts. According to the architect Piers Gough the long linear park of Hastings' seafront gives this conurbation its identity. He argues that this is what public money should be concentrated on as not only does an attractive seafront benefit local residents, but it also makes visitors feel welcome, stay longer and spend more money all of which is beneficial to the local economy.



During a recent study for Hastings Borough Council we identified more than 3,000 beach huts and chalets situated along the South Coast from Worthing in West Sussex to Whitstable in Kent. Our research findings concluded that investing in additional seaside chalets could provide better seafront animation, support the town's wider regeneration initiatives as well as generate a sustainable revenue stream.

In order to maximise the potential benefits of investing in additional beach huts and chalets it is worth looking at some of the more innovative uses. This is important as consumers are increasingly looking for unique and distinct experiences – think Glamping and 'Room over London' which sold out within minutes of being released online. There is generally a restriction on overnight stays in beach huts although a few places including Whitstable and Mudeford do permit this. Offering visitors the opportunity to stay overnight in beach huts also gives coastal resorts the flexibility to accommodate more people during periods of peak demand. In Whitstable the 'overnight' huts are managed by the Continental Hotel which means guests benefit from the facilities typically associated with a full-service hotel such as a full English breakfast.

Other examples of hotels with beach huts include the Grove Hotel in Bournemouth, owned by Macmillan Caring Locally, a retreat for cancer patients and those suffering from life threatening illnesses, which has its own special 'accessible' beach hut. Surprisingly the luxury five-star Grove

hotel set in the Hertfordshire countryside offers its own urban beach complete with beach huts.



A good way to ensure beach huts enhance the overall destination appeal is to allocate some to artists and other creative professionals. In Worthing a small number of beach chalets are used as artists' studios which are open to the public. In Hove there is an annual advent calendar where during December huts are transformed into different interpretations of the Nativity on public display.



It is clear therefore that one way for local authorities to make their seafront pay its own way is to look at it as a commercial opportunity as opposed to an asset that is costly to maintain. Beach huts and chalets can provide a sustainable revenue stream at a relatively low initial investment and demand consistently outstrips supply.

It will be interesting to see how many resorts follow this strategy in a time when local authorities are constantly seeking new income streams to help balance their books.



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