Essay by Richard White

Away

The pleasures of idleness mean different things to different folk. For some, holidays are about status and service. But the die-hards enjoy nothing more than closing their eyes to the cacophony of modern life.

Once, when Australians faced the question of where to go for their holidays, the answer was often simple: where we always go. Each year the ritual would be the same: packing the kids in the car, sitting in a traffic jam getting out of the city, enduring the long drive to the coast and the scorching vinyl seats, the cries from the back seat of 'are we there yet?' and 'he's looking out of my window', the Schadenfreude of passing other cars pulled over with their radiators boiling. The destination would be the same – often the same camp-site or caravan or cabin at the same beach among the same people. And then, for two or three or four weeks, nothing much would happen until it was time to face the even more congested roads coming home.

Now of course we are faced with far greater choice. The standard Australian beach holiday has dissolved into a plethora of niches. We juggle short breaks now throughout the year, and designer resorts have replaced the humble beachside camping ground.

As Australian working lives become increasingly stressful, memories of those older holidays are overwhelmingly positive. Nostalgic retirees even turn the holidays they had as children into a permanent way of life. They might be seen through rose-coloured sunglasses but there is surprising unanimity in the memories of holidays steeped in the simpler sensual pleasures of childhood: long lazy days of vacancy, the sounds of surf and children's squeals, the smell of barbecues and sun-screen, the exquisite physical sensations of sunburn, thumping waves, salt drying on the skin and sand between the toes.

Where did that holiday come from and where has it gone?

Many of its elements had been sketched in by the end of the nineteenth century. Australians had already long had a reputation for holiday-making: alone of Anglo-Saxon populations, they had adopted a kind of Mediterranean attitude to work and life, working to live, rather than living to work. Both convicts and Aboriginal people had been condemned for their lackadaisical attitudes to work soon after the British arrived. But even the *Sydney Morning Herald* could, in 1859, proclaim that:

> We are the children of the sunny south, and we borrow from the clear skies above us, and from the general clime, much of that lightness of heart and of that vivacity, which so eminently distinguish us as holiday-making people.

By the end of the century, many Australians were taking recognisably modern holidays. The wealthy had substantial holiday homes. Others could enjoy the cheap guest-houses or great tourist hotels which sprang up in the new coastal resorts and older 'hill stations' close to most colonial capitals. Even many workers could find some time to escape to a weekend's camping or a visit to relatives, aided by cheap excursion fares, long weekends and some limited expectation of constant, fair and reasonable wages.

These kinds of holidays were a product of the second half of the nineteenth century, part of the massive transformations brought about by modernity and urbanisation. The technologies of steamers, railways and photography had promoted the

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spaces to holiday in. The possibilities of profit for entrepreneurs, and the transformation of work, helped create the time. And the experience of modern life itself, of the rush and routines of modern cities, and new ways of thinking about time and space, had created the desire to get away in the first place. Robbed of its distinct identity by civilisation and work, the 'true' self could only be rediscovered, it was now thought, by getting away on holiday.

Yet in 1900 the modern holiday was far from democratic. Many could only indulge in the holiday experience as a day trip on a Sunday or public holiday or at best a long weekend. They could not afford a holiday overnight, and most had no provision for a holiday within their working conditions. Single women and many men and women with families were constrained by social convention, lack of time and poverty.

The motoring classes

Before the long summer holiday could become possible for a majority of Australians, two foundations needed to be put in place: mass car ownership and paid annual leave. Until the majority had access to cars and to paid leave – both achieved in the 1950s – extended summer holidays were more likely to sharpen social distinctions than to weaken them.

Take the car first. Steam – boats and trains – meant large numbers of people could get to the popular beach or mountain resorts that had developed by 1900. But it also meant the typical holiday was a mass experience. The holiday *crowd* was its defining feature. In the 1920s, however, 'mass' culture was increasingly derided by the elite. A stereotype developed of the Australian crowd at leisure, mindlessly demonstrating their philistinism at the beach, the races or the football. The arrival of the motorcar suited the times perfectly, promising a new individualism in travel. Between the wars, the motorcar became the greatest symbol of middle class independence from the mob.

The new motoring classes quickly explored the new holiday opportunities that opened up. Motor camping became a demonstration of independence, happy campers setting up tent wherever the fancy took them. Caravanning also took off, with a number of local manufacturers as well as do-it-yourself kits. The 'weekender' entered the Australian lexicon in the 1920s. Shacks at out-of-the-way fishing spots, only reachable by car, became a new form of individual expression, even if their amenities meant the holiday experience was often comparable to the everyday lives of the very poor.

This changed in the 1950s. Where, between the wars, the car allowed a holiday away from the masses, it now became a democratic right. In 1946, there was one car for every 14 Australians; by 1960, it was one to 3.5. Now the vast majority of families had access to a car. The result was that the 'individuality' and 'distinction' that the car promised in the 1920s disappeared. Everyone had access to the holiday that was intended to get away from everyone else.

The other fundamental precondition for the holiday boom was paid annual leave, which arrived along with full employment and job security. Through the 1940s and 1950s, in arbitration courts and in parliaments, a debate took place about the relative values of time and money. For all the flaws of the arbitration system – it had some, though not nearly as many as those who destroyed it claimed – it did provide a forum for a debate as to whether productivity gains should take the form of more leisure or more consumption. Workers consistently opted for more leisure: shorter hours and longer holidays. For 35 years from the award of a week's paid annual leave to printing workers in 1938, there was a steady move to establishing paid annual leave as a right, and then extending it. In NSW the McKell Labor government passed an *Annual Holidays Act* in 1944, providing all workers with two weeks paid leave. Then it became three weeks, and then four. And then, in the 1970s, it stopped.

photo: Getty Images

Happy campers

Mass car ownership and paid annual leave – in themselves not unique – made the long summer holiday a defining element of the new post-war 'Australian way of life', constructed around the family, home ownership and job security. The annual beach holiday gave shape to the year's rhythms, the holy days of Christmas and Easter now meaningful for the holidays they represented, and created its own rituals. In the very repetition of going to the same place year after year, seeing the same people, doing the same things, there was something ceremonial, dependable and emotionally uplifting. Increasingly fulfilment was to be found, for many Australians, not in church or in the workplace or in the department store, but on holiday. It was built around the family, and that increased its moral value.

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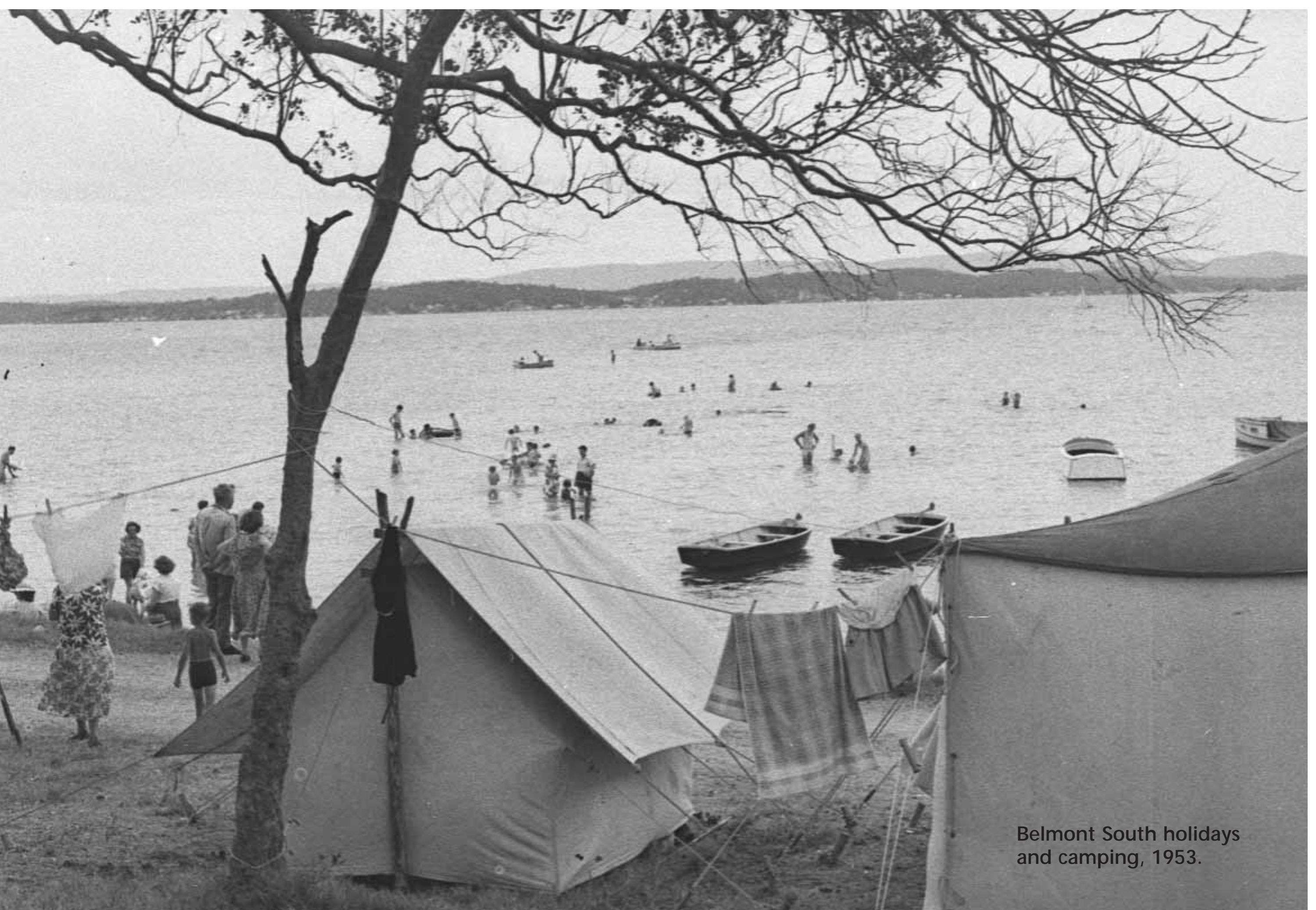
Australia was not a classless society, but it liked to think it was, and holidays seemed proof of it. As J D Pringle put it: "you cannot tell a man's income in a pair of swimming trunks". True, the beach produced new kinds of social distinction – body shape, beauty, depth of tan, physical prowess. The 1950s were the heyday of Mr Atlas body-building advertisements around the theme of weaklings not getting sand kicked in their faces. But for conventional social hierarchies, though they might re-emerge on the return home, on holiday, for a time, they were irrelevant.

Part of the reason was that the stereotypical holiday did not actually cost much. In many cases the camping area – often run on egalitarian principles by local councils – had the best location, closer to the beach than more elaborate motels and apartments. The typical beach holiday kept expenses down: home cooking, barbecues, the occasional take away hamburger or fish and chips. There were not many extras.

There were critics who condemned it as predictable, mindlessly hedonistic, crudely escapist, quintessentially daggy. Serious bush-walking zealots scoffed that far from these campers getting away from it all, they brought it all with them, all packed into the boot of the car. Satirists claimed the camping ground, with its rows of ordered tents or caravans and cars, where people put down roots, and met the same people year after year, simply imitated comfortable suburban routines. Tourism entrepreneurs saw these campers as not spending enough, and wanted to break down the institutionalised seasonality of the family holiday. Teenagers were encouraged to condemn it as uncool. And those who believed life wasn't meant to be easy wanted to see Australians working more.



Belmont South holidays and camping, 1953.

photo: Hood Collection, State Library of New South Wales.

But the attractions were in the very familiarity and enforced sociability. The ritual of returning to the same place was part of the pleasure. Families made friends; social interaction took place around the barbecue and the other queues for the showers and the laundry and the fish and chips. The special camaraderie of the holiday was an escape from the normal day-to-day relationships based on work or shopping or commuting. The cheap holiday meant a special social connection was possible, where everyone could appreciate the sun and sand and sausages together; people who otherwise would not meet outside relationships of power and economic exchange could pretend for a time to be equal. And above all there was time to do nothing, no call of work deadlines or house repairs or cleaning. The critics were missing the point.

Niche markets

It was in the family that the democratic ideal of everyone having access to time off on holiday came unstuck. The family beach holiday was profoundly gendered, the leisure of the male worker and the carefree play of the children underpinned by the work of the housewife. Women complained – only half in jest – that a holiday meant only a change of kitchen sink. The complaint could be overstated in the interests of holiday politics. Often others pitched in. Standards of cleanliness might be compromised. Meals were often 'scratch' meals, the ubiquitous salads of cans of beetroot and pineapple rings and, if the budget stretched, asparagus, or fish and chips from the co-op. Holidays were often the only time a family would eat take-away food.

As mothers entered the paid workforce in increasing numbers, the typical beach holiday satisfied them less. Women's growing insistence that 'they should have a holiday too' produced a holiday structured around the provision of services, supported by the cheap paid labour of hospitality workers rather than the unpaid labour of the housewife. By the 1980s that labour was increasingly out-sourced to Bali, Fiji and Vanuatu.

Two other factors contributed to the decline of the long summer holiday. Working conditions changed dramatically. Job security disappeared in the name of flexibility. Fewer had access to awards providing for holidays. After a century and a quarter of declining standard working hours, Australians began working more from the 1980s. Casualisation, underemployment, part-time work and individual bargaining all made holidays more difficult to negotiate, and with two parents working, more difficult to organise. Declining home ownership also played a role: renters naturally resented paying twice for accommodation when they went on holidays. Economic change was making the idea of long weeks of doing nothing at the beach harder to sustain. Short breaks seemed simpler.

The intrusion of the tourist industry into the family holiday also changed it dramatically. The industry had a clear interest in promoting the dagginess of the cheap, communal camping holiday where pleasures were free rather than paid for. In their place the industry promoted shorter, more expensive holidays that could be taken any time of the year, and which packed in experiences. In the place of sociability, they emphasised status, facilities and service.

At the end of the twentieth century, it was still possible to find Australians going on beach holidays that look a lot like

photo: Bicentennial Copying Project, State Library of New South Wales.

Camping out in luxury, Evans Head, NSW.

those that were typical of the 1950s and 1960s. A proportion were doing it ironically, celebrating its retro-chic nostalgia. Others simply continued to do what they always had done. But these holidays were under siege. Cheap caravan parks were targeted for more intensive development. National Parks began balloting desirable camping spots, preventing groups of campers meeting up in the same place at the same time year after year. Family beach holidays were also threatened as the beach became associated with newly perceived dangers: the sun and skin cancer, strangers, drowning, the lack of surveillance. Irresponsible parents had the traditional beach holiday: the responsible middle classes were measuring their responsibility by how much more they paid and how much their children were kept occupied.

What had once been typical, the family holiday as a shared annual event enjoyed by a mass market, now itself become a niche packaged and marketed by the tourist industry, commodifying the nostalgia. When Ron Clarke opened Couran Cove resort on South Stradbroke Island, he 'wanted a place that would offer an old-fashioned Australian family beach holiday'. But it also offered, among 115 activities, a gym, sprint track, lawn bowls, lifestyle counselling, tai chi, helicopter rides, bead jewellery making, jet skiing, environmental awareness courses and complete body rejuvenation. The industry has trouble conceptualising that 'old-fashioned' beach holiday because it actively resisted consumerism's fundamental assumptions. The regulars want the same holiday every year. They resist change and fashion. They want to just do nothing, to block the ears and close the eyes to the cacophony of modern life in the world of signs, and indulge in the pleasures of idleness.

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