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Dropping \$100 for a Day at Jacob Riis, the 'People's Beach'

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Big City

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Standing in line at Pier 11, where Wall Street terminates at the East River, on a Sunday morning in July can make you feel old and dull and limited, at once socially and idiomatically. “Your shoe game is strong,” a young woman tells a friend who has arrived just in time to board the ferry that is scheduled to leave at 11:30. The shoes in question are flat-heeled gladiator sandals in coral suede. The woman wearing them is tired. “We started with bottomless brunch and drank all day and I didn’t get home until midnight,” she says. Another friend caroused more aggressively, not landing at home until 7 o’clock, and the feeling is that she will not rouse for the beach.

Later, on the return ferry from the Rockaways to Manhattan, a tawny bohemian mother, in only vaguely apparent middle age, tells me that the 9 a. m. boat is even more alienating, as it is full of 25-year-olds coming directly from whatever they had done the night before. She is with her 4-year-old daughter, who attends a Mandarin Montessori school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In a context like this one it is hard to imagine what it is all for — the constant prodding of children toward achievement, the endless roundelay of enrichments that begins at conception, the eviscerating process of admission to a suitable college when, really, it will all end here, in a hangover on a boat to the beach where the only corrective is more to drink.

On the weekends from Memorial Day to Labor Day, American Princess Cruises sends one or two vessels a day, with a capacity for 250 passengers and an actively used full bar, to Jacob Riis Park on the western end of the Rockaway Peninsula. Built in 1936, under the auspices of Robert Moses, Riis Park is a spectacular urban beach, in part because of the absence of high-rises behind it and in part because it is so wide that it avoids seeming unbearably cramped, though historical images tell us that in previous decades it was significantly more crowded.

Named after the famed Progressive-era journalist and photographer who documented the rank indignities of tenement life in New York, Riis is typically described as the “people’s beach,” a place developed for poor immigrants as a counterpoint to Jones Beach, intended to draw the middle class. In his biography of Moses, “The Power Broker,” Robert Caro counters this impression, writing that at the time it was built Riis held the largest parking lot in the world; it now has space for more than 9,000 cars. (The parking lot is so enormous that it served as a dump for debris in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.)

As you walk the shoreline today from the western tip at the Fort Tilden border, it is hard to distinguish the demographic at Jacob Riis from whatever you might find on the eastern end of Long Island. In the way that no definition of 21st-century urbanism is sufficient without an incorporation of the epicurean, the concessionaire at Riis Park this year and for the next several is the Brooklyn Night Bazaar. The bazaar is an amalgamator of small-batch indulgences, which, like so much cooking now, exist as rarefied interpretations of average-Joe mainstays.

There is something about going to a public beach in Queens and having moules-frites (or tacos for \$7, each made with locally caught monkfish) and washing all of that down with a \$10 Ginni Hendricks cocktail (made with Hendricks gin) before you top it off with a paleo chocolate mousse made from cacao, dates and cashews — every one of these things completely delicious — that feels a little like flying privately to the mullet toss at the state fair. As one beachgoer in front of me on the seafood line so aptly put it, “I think it is all great. But then again I’m a gentrifier.”

Belvy Klein and Aaron Broudo, the entrepreneurs behind the Riis Park Beach Bazaar, argue that, as Mr. Klein put it, “You can go out to the Hamptons or Montauk

or the Jersey Shore and find concessions that are a lot more.”

While that is undoubtedly true, there were many decades when there would have been no reflexive analogies to be made between East Hampton and whatever might be on offer at a city beach. As the aesthetic of wealth has become ever more dominant, so too has the upscaling of public recreation space. Six years ago, San Francisco parks opened to gourmet food vendors. This spring, the Bronx got a public golf course, managed by Donald J. Trump, where green fees are nearly twice what they are at other municipal courses. The point, obviously, is that you're not supposed to think you are at a public course; you're supposed to think you're at Winged Foot.

If you take the ferry to Jacob Riis (round trip \$30), rent a beach chair and umbrella (\$30), eat lunch, have a drink, buy a bottle or two of water and have some ice cream (from Brooklyn's Ample Hills), you will have spent approximately \$90 for a day at the beach. If you bring houseguests or children you will have spent much more. If you come by Uber and return home that way, as many people now do, if you buy a sarong or a pair of sunglasses from one of the fashion trucks located near the food hall, then you probably could have flown to Miami.

On the day I visited Jacob Riis, it was not that black and Latino families were not to be found. They were there, though mostly not in the vicinity of the culinary theater or on the beach. They had congregated back behind the boardwalk on a lawn given over to grills where they were barbecuing. Chances are that for most of the people waiting in line for oysters by the beach, segregation is a dirty word.

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