

A walk along the

The sky was the grey of lead and was as still as the sea beneath, which also sat dull and inert as it 'Surf's up' should have been heard a little way offshore if all the hype had been believed, but instead a curled between the cones that marked the newly-built artificial seabed.

On that damp dull day in February the promenade at Boscombe was almost devoid of visitors, just a few hardy souls who like me were enjoying the peace and tranquillity of a seaside walk out of season. The Dorset promenade had been highlighted much in the press over recent months with the building of pods (posh chalets) and the artificial reef that was made of sandbags built up on the sea floor. Once upon a time Boscombe was merely the poor cousin of nearby Bournemouth and although it had a pier it just came to a stubby end with no unfair highlights and no end of pier theatre that held the all-important summer show. Over the recent past, however, this end of the typically-English promenade has been upgraded and redeveloped and is now a trendy part of the coast.

As the approach road dips down to the sea a roundabout that was once scruffy now plays host to an attractive and solid sculpture that seems to set the tone for the whole visit – new, refreshing and tasteful. The pier, just a finger of a construction that juts out into the sea, has been tarted up and is very retro in its signage and design, and visitors now feel almost obliged to walk to the end under the glass awning, and then return again on the other side after standing for a while a distance from shore and looking out to sea. I would imagine when conditions allow it would also be a great place to pull up a deck-chair and watch the young surfers ride their artificial waves.

The new reef does not create waves like a swimming pool wave machine but instead large sandbags have been laid on the seabed in the shape of a wedge that acts like a giant ramp for the incoming waves.

As those natural waves reach the reef it pushes them upward causing them to crest and curl before running, or peeling, down the reef and making ridable waves that also run at an angle making them cone-shaped and perfect for surfers. Even in the flat calm seas that drifted ashore the day I visited small wavelets curled over the reef like miniature surf waves. The new reef does not create these waves but just amplifies what nature sends its way, and the submerged construction takes up approximately the size of a football pitch which is some 230 yards from the shoreline. This reef mimics the effects of a natural reef and is built from large geo-textile bags pumped hard with sand. The sandbags weigh up to 2,500 tonnes and the biggest are up to 70 metres long, two metres high and six metres wide.

A lovely beachside café that keeps up the trendy feel of the area was very welcome on the overcast day, although it was still not too cold that we could not sit outside and enjoy the hot chocolates that were a perfect antidote to the weather and warmed the insides before beginning the stroll along the promenade.

The winter storms had pushed the sand up from the beach and it clung around the sides of the shelters that, come summer, will be home to visitors as they sit and eat fish and chips from white sheets of paper while looking out to sea and recalling the days when dad wore a knotted hanky on his head to stop his pate from burning, and swimming trunks were of a knitted material and held up by a belt.

Now fronting the promenade that heads east of Boscombe pier are new constructions of private homes and apartments that all boast



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promenade...

crept almost stealthily up onto the shore in short timid waves. The cry of couple of hundred yards or so away from the deserted beach a short ripple

balconies looking out toward the sea and that are stuck on the front of clapboard housing in various pastel colours that seem to suit their location. One was almost envious of the seafront living and come the big lottery win maybe a weekend home for yours truly to enjoy.

The best walk, however, is to head west toward Bournemouth; if memory serves me right it is about a mile and a half between piers. As the promenade was so quiet apart from the odd keen jogger or regular local walker I stayed down alongside the shore, apart from at one point having to chase my two-year-old grandson along the sandy and deserted beach where he stopped at regular intervals to pick up another shell or to toss stones into the sea. In fact, the sea was so calm I was even able to skip flat stones across its surface as there were also no swimmers out there in the cold waters to get annoyed as they dodged my skipping stones.

As you leave Boscombe pier behind you white railings zigzag up from the promenade and they mark a footpath as they climb up to the top of the sandy cliffs. Up there was another adventure and a bit more exploring that would have to wait for my next visit; that day I decided to stay down on the flat and level promenade.

Despite the greyness of the day it was a lovely walk wrapped up warm against the invading winter weather. By the time you get to do this walk yourselves there will be daffodils springing up along the cliff-top path with their yellow trumpets pointing toward the sun and warm rays of that yellow orb beating down on you, or maybe not with our fickle English climate.

One thing is for sure – the walk will bring back memories of childhood trips to the seaside, of building sandcastles and saucy postcards. Thoughts return of Mum and Dad reclining in striped deckchairs while you dug channels in the sand with your tiny bucket and spade and the onrushing waves filling in the sandy holes again. All these dreams of the past are heightened because of the retro feel of the Boscombe seafront, and welcome memories they are too.

There is something polite and private about walking along a promenade out of season and I had almost forgotten what a joy it was to stroll along an almost empty seafront with the ozone clearing the dirty air of town from your nostrils and then finishing up the day with a fine portion of chips to further bring back memories of what the seaside used to be like when I was a kid.



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