



Beyond the Horizon – The Logics of Exclusive Seaside Resorts

by Tijo Salverda

Through images of boats at the mercy of huge waves, icebergs sinking massive ships like the Titanic, and storms battering coastal areas, most of us know about the destructive force of the oceans covering most of the earth's surface. At the same time, in hot summers people are drawn *en masse* to the seaside, tourists have found their ways to many of the world's tropical beaches, while beachfront properties are often among the most expensive.



Following the Paris elite, who from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards chose to holiday in [Deauville](#), on the coast of Normandy, the affluent around the world have often been the first to develop seaside resorts for their pleasure – in line with Thorstein Veblen's (1994 [1899]) '[leisure class](#)', they were initially the only ones in a position to enjoy leisure time at all. Luckily, many others are nowadays equally in a position to cherish the seaside. This notwithstanding, elites have still maintained control over plenty of exclusive seaside resorts by constantly searching for new destinations, buying whole islands, or simply residing in locations where the property and hotel prices are well above what any ordinary citizen could afford.



Every summer the rich and famous of New York migrate to the [Hamptons](#), while the French elite (and international jet set) nowadays meet and greet at the Côte d'Azur rather than in Deauville. In the Caribbean, the billionaires dock their [super yachts](#) off the coasts of islands like St. Barth, while [beach properties in Cape Town](#) draw not only the South African rich to the city's ocean views, but also many wealthy international guests. Yet apart from the beauty of the locations and the wish to hang around with like-minded people, the elites' attraction to these locations appears to have an interesting underlying sociological component. With only a horizon in the distance, the emptiness of large water masses allows elites to (temporarily) exclude themselves from the everyday realities of the world we live in.



Based on [my research](#) on the Franco-Mauritians, the white elite of Mauritius, I argue that for elites oceans are not only about the joy of cooling off and the beauty of the sunsets, but also about evading other people. This feature, though, is not exclusive to oceans. As [David Hughes has argued](#), whites in Zimbabwe were

drawn to the region's wilderness, for example, because it allowed them to escape the (in their eyes) chaotic life of African societies in which they only constituted a tiny (elite) minority. Yet as among others the case of Franco-Mauritian seaside properties nicely illustrates, water may even be a more powerful tool in shaping and maintaining exclusion.

Standing behind the Franco-Mauritians' seaside villas are big stone walls that make it impossible for most other Mauritians to peek into their private lives, while in front of them there is nothing but the island's renowned beaches and the Indian Ocean beyond. Many Franco-Mauritians, as a colleague and I have discussed in more detail [here](#), consider these places to be one of their last exclusive resorts, where there is a relaxed atmosphere and they can retreat from hectic everyday life. Children can swim and enjoy other aquatic activities while adults spend time relaxing, fishing and sunbathing. Put briefly, life is rather carefree here because of the sea, the sun and the beaches and the pampering by nannies and servants who look after the children and take care of a number of daily chores. In other exclusive seaside resorts around the world, the situation is not much different. Properties are often hidden from view by large walls and hedges, and if possible, elites do their best [to restrict others](#) from accessing the beaches between their properties and the ocean beyond. The intimidating nature of the oceans' water also provides a relatively good guarantee that others will not inhabit their immediate space – in the direction of their views, at least. The vast empty expanse of water, as far as the eye can see, allows elites to (temporarily) forget that they actually share a social world with the majority of the less affluent.