



TREASURES ON THE SAND

By ROCHEL HURSTYN

Have you ever seen someone stroll purposefully along the beach, looking, looking... until – *Aha!* He finds what he’s looking for? Today we’re joining Dr. Deacon Ritterbush, better known as Dr. Beachcomb, as she combs a Hawaiian shoreline for treasures.

Hi, Dr. Beachcomb. What is beachcombing?

It’s when you wander along a shoreline, looking for treasures. “Treasures” can mean anything that attracts you, that’s beautiful to *you*. They could be ceramic shards, sea glass, driftwood, stones, shells—even plastic, though I personally think of plastic as beach trash!

How did you get started?

I grew up beachcombing, as did my mother and my grandmother. I have childhood memories of going down to the beach and wandering along, looking for shells with my mother.

When did it become more than that?

I always beachcombed wherever I was, but in 2006-7, I found myself in Maryland, writing a play. I’d mull over plot points as I walked along the shore. That’s where I began questioning why I was finding certain things there, like French pottery shards or clay pipe stems that dated back to the late 1700s! I also wondered, “Why does one beach have oyster shells on it, but the two beaches down have no oyster shells but lots of iron ore?”

[I began to take] a whole new look at beachcombing. I’m an anthropologist [someone who studies people, social relations and culture] by training, and all the scientific and historical aspects of

beach artifacts began to really intrigue me.

What did that lead to?

I wrote a book called *A Beachcomber’s Odyssey*. The success of the book took me by surprise. People really liked it. It won several awards. People told me the book had changed their lives!

Around the same time, I began running summer beachcombing workshops for kids. After lunch we’d go beachcombing. One of the kids came running over to show me what he found and, in his excitement, got mixed up and called me “Dr. Beachcomb,” which is how I got my nickname.

One thing led to another and now I’m considered a leading expert on beachcombing and certain beach treasures. Through this fantastic hobby, I’ve met some wonderful people, including oceanographers [scientists who study the oceans], geologists [scientists who study the earth] and bottle and ceramics experts. I have made new friends all around the world.

I also founded the International Beachcombing Conference, a yearly event where leading beachcomb, coastal and marine experts get together to share beachcombing tips, techniques and insights into what you find on the shore and why. All the participants get a “goody bag” filled with beautiful shells, shards of sea glass and other special things! There’s a giant swap table where people take whatever they want.

Do you use any equipment?

I don’t, although some people use ladles attached to golf clubs



or grabbers to pick up things so they don't have to bend over. I'm a "purist." There's nothing specific you need for this. There's no commercial "look" for a beachcomber, although sunblock and a hat are always critical. In winter, I sometimes wear rubber gloves in case I find something in the shallows that looks interesting. I'll stick my hand in the water to retrieve it without risk of frostbite. Winter-time combing also calls for boots, a neck warmer, and a hood and, oftentimes, if the beaches are icy, I bring along a thermos filled with hot water. If I find something embedded in ice, I've learned that prying it out can make it snap, so I'll pour hot water around it.

What do you love finding?

Here in Hawaii, I like to find slag glass, which looks like rocks but is actually a glassy residue from burned rubbish that lined the insides of furnaces. When the residue built up too much, it was broken off the furnace walls and tossed into the nearby rivers [from where it traveled to the oceans]. After years of tumbling in the strong ocean waves and currents, it returns to the beaches looking like smoothed chunks of jade or turquoise!

I also adore fishing floats, because [to me] they signify hope. I remember one day, the year after my mother died, I was walking along a beach, feeling blue, and I came across a Japanese fishing float, which had probably floated all the way from the South China Sea. It reminded me that I, too, would get through the hard times in my life.

I also really love finding ceramic shards with designs on them and certain colors of sea glass or shards with embossing [a raised pattern or design]. These things tell a story. Through research, we can often figure out how old they are and learn about their origins. Sometimes it's linked to a shipwreck! It's fascinating!

What kind of stories do some of your finds tell?

On one Hawaiian shoreline, my archaeologist husband and I kept finding pieces of English china dating back to 1780, and black glass that was used in voyages across the globe from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries [1500s-1800s]. We don't know much about that time period in Hawaiian history, but our beach findings indicate that there was perhaps more interaction with Europeans than is currently documented.

Have you ever found real valuables?

Some people do find valuables, especially with the help of metal

detectors. I don't use detectors or dig deep holes. No harm should ever be done to the shoreline. I know one beachcomber who found a 200-year-old gold bar from a shipwreck peeking out of the sand after a strong storm! The best time to comb is after storms. There is less beach traffic, and the winds, waves and wild weather often stir things up, exposing treasures that were hidden for long periods of time, sometimes as far back as several centuries!

I know one beachcomber who found ambergris [pronounced am-bur-gree], which is whale vomit. It might sound disgusting, but French perfumeries value it. It holds scent better than chemicals do. She sold her find for several thousand dollars!

What do you do with the stuff you find?

I give most of it away. I sometimes make artwork. I keep just two boxes of things I truly love. I'm not big on amassing. Too much junk weighs you down. My theory is "Share, don't hoard. There is more than enough to go around."

I've met people who say, "I have buckets of this stuff in my basement." And I always ask, "Why?"

What's the biggest challenge involved with beachcombing?

Lack of access. Some beaches are getting privatized, and it's hard for people to get on them. Greed is also a problem. People take more than they need or comb in a way that is detrimental to the coastline, like gauging cliff sides. Even though only a few cause problems, when they do, governments restrict combing in that area.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

Children are totally captivated by nature, whether ants crawling on a leaf, flitting butterflies or soap bubbles sailing through the sky. But, sadly, most outgrow it.

Nature grounds us; it eases our minds, calms our souls and can fill us with a sense of wonderment at life's beauty and miracles. Beachcombing can lead you back to those moments of awe, discovery and pure joy again: finding a treasure at an unexpected moment, walking to the rhythm of the waves, watching the birds soar overhead or the sun making its way down from the sky. It's impossible to come back from a beachcomb unhappy.

Thank you, Dr. Beachcomb. I'll never look at a beach in the same way again! ■