

Malibu Beaches Owners Manual

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Photo Credit: Jérôme Daoust

PART I August 11, 2006

Last weekend, I drove out to Broad Beach in western Malibu — one of my favorite L.A. County beaches — and was met by a private security guard who had been hired to stand at the public entrance gate to enforce the laws on dogs and alcohol. The weekend before, I went to Escondido Beach to kayak, and was met with signs that prohibit the public from doing things that are actually completely legal. And the week before that, I met some friends at Lechuza Beach—only they couldn't find it, because the "private property" sign on the access road convinced them that that couldn't be the access road.

So the summer goes on the Malibu beaches—well, at least the 20 miles of beaches (out of 27) lined by private development. Of course, every single one of these beaches is fully public below the mean high tide line (working definition: the

wet sand), and all of them have plenty of public easements on the dry sand.

They're gorgeous beaches, and the public owns big pieces of them, and it'd be nice if you didn't feel like you have to bring property maps, a lawyer, and a copy of the California constitution, and to put the Coastal Commission on speed-dial, to use them.

The Coastal Commission has been winning key battles for public access. But while we own these beaches, they really still do require an owner's manual. So for my first post on Native Intelligence, I'd like to offer a few tips on how to operate a Malibu beach. And I'll start with the three beaches I just visited in western Malibu — with an eye to adding other beaches to this owner's manual in the future.

From west to east:

LECHUZA BEACH

An interesting thing about Lechuza, at the west end of Broad Beach Rd., is that much of it is a state beach — public wet and dry. Its three entrances also make it the developed Malibu beach that has the best access. Another interesting thing about Lechuza is that no one seems to know that it includes a state beach — or that it's there at all. Also, it's very beautiful.

How to Operate:

Ignore the illegal "private property" signs at the public access entrances. These are public access routes on private roads. Ignore the quite wrong sign that says the public's right to pass is "subject to control by owner."

"Private parking" signs on Broad Beach Road are illegal, as are any orange cones that block public parking (look for the bright shiny ones

that look like they're fresh off the shelf from Home Depot). Any problems? Report them to the Coastal Commission. They're very serious about following up on access troubles: 805-585-1800.

Access on Broad Beach Rd. at East Sea Level Dr., Bunnie Ln., and West Sea Level Dr. Push hard on the gates—they feel locked but they're not. And West Sea Level Dr. is a road, not a driveway, and you can walk on it. Really. Trust me. Park on Broad Beach Rd.

Enjoy the dry sand: The all-state stretch runs east from the West Sea Level Dr. entrance to the house west of Bunnie Ln. East of Bunnie Ln., the first 9 properties all have big public easements on the dry sand, where you're welcome to venture 50 feet inland from the mean high tide line.

BROAD BEACH

This is a mile-long beach just west of Zuma. There are two access gates, and public easements on the dry sand on almost half the properties. It's a very accessible beach. And it's beautiful.

It's also the mother of all beaches for tussles over public access. The problem isn't that you can't get to it. The problem is that the homeowners here have engaged in the most systematic efforts to keep people away. For a brief shining moment last August, when the Coastal Commission finally got rid of the mean and illegal signs and the big sullen summer-weekend guards, the public beach felt magically and wonderfully like a real public beach.

It's still far better than before--the signs say please and the guards are nicer--and they're on foot, not on ATVs. But the private guards tell

people what they can do on public land. Does that sound legal to you? And the guards are still misinformed about where the public beach is, and the homeowners are still building berms in front of their properties, and so on and so on.

How to Operate:

Download the terrific public-easement maps off the Coastal Commission site. They'll show you exactly where you can sit on the dry sand. And note that this beach is a lot easier to operate on weekdays and from Labor Day to Memorial Day.

Don't hesitate to go on summer weekends, though. Ignore any sizable beefy person stationed on an easement. Ignore guards who tell you that you can't hang out on the wet sand below the properties that don't have easements. Well, don't ignore them, these guys are big, but they also seem civil and pleasant, so do just explain to them that you are on public land. There's likely little to be gained by pointing out to the guards at the entrances that they have no authority to be there, but feel free. Also feel free to call the Coastal Commission to report any problems: 805-585-1800.

Access gates are next to 31138 and 31340 Broad Beach Rd. Park on the road. Or walk west from Zuma and you'll be on Broad Beach.

ESCONDIDO BEACH

This is a short and narrow beach that runs from Escondido Beach Rd. on the PCH west to Geoffrey's restaurant. It's a popular put-in point for kayakers. You can kayak to Paradise Cove Cafe for lunch and come back. And also, it's beautiful.

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How to Operate:

Ignore the sign that says you're only allowed to use the beach to walk to the next accessway. You can use the public beach to do whatever you reasonably want to do.

Ignore the sign that says the beach is closed dusk to dawn: the beach is open 24 hours. The access gates aren't, but hey, you can swim in if you want or visit by boat! Ignore the sign that prohibits horses, but I admit to not wanting to share the beach with a horse that has just eaten.

The sign that says "private beach to the mean high tide line" is likewise inaccurate and illegal. Several of the properties do have public easements — the Coastal Commission's easement maps for beaches other than Broad Beach are hard to read, but you can call them at 805-585-1800 and just ask where the easements are. Anyway, this beach is so narrow that the high tide just about comes up to most of the houses.

Access at the gates at either end of the beach — just west of Geoffrey's, and between Escondido Beach Rd. and Malibu Cove Colony Dr. Park on the PCH.

Troubleshooting: Not always passable at high tide. And I wouldn't go in the water after a rain, since this isn't the world's cleanest beach. Escondido Creek pours a lot of urban runoff into the bay here.

Are these beaches worth the effort? I think so. They're not nearly as hard as to operate as they sound. And did I mention they're beautiful? There's still 3 weeks to Labor Day. Enjoy your beaches.



PART II November 24, 2006

Like to walk off the turkey dinner on a Malibu beach? Tired of Zuma, Surfriider, and the rest of the 7 miles of beaches that have parking lots and are easy to find? Want to see the other 20 miles of the stunning Malibu coast — the beaches that are lined with private development?

Herewith Part 2 of the Malibu Beaches Owner's Manual, for public owners who want to enjoy their extensive public lands on beaches that aren't always easy to find or use. Part 1 covered the three westernmost beaches with accessways — Lechuza, Broad, and Escondido. This second installment continues east to the Latigo Shore, Malibu Rd., and Malibu Colony beaches.

This is a great time of year to go. The sea turns to painterly grays and dark blues, and crowds are nonexistent. And the winter months bring spectacular super-low tides, generally around the full moon. Check the tide tables in the L.A. Times (look for negative ##s, esp. lower than -1), or on one of the tide prediction websites.

And do check the tables, because these beaches are very narrow — as are all the beaches east of Broad — and along many

stretches, the tide often comes up to the houses. The obvious downside is that you often can't use them at high tide. The good news, though, is that while all these beaches are public to the "mean high tide line" (working definition: the wet sand), there often isn't a lot of private dry sand to worry about.

All these beaches offer plenty of public easements on whatever dry sand there is, too. Unfortunately, while the Coastal Commission has drawn up wonderfully user-friendly easement maps for Broad Beach, they haven't done so yet for the rest. The more technical maps are hard to read — but not impossible (go to p. 23 of the PDF), if you want to find out where you can play volleyball or plant your umbrella. Or just call the Coastal Commission to find the easements on any particular stretch of beach — 805-585-1800.

Use the same # to report any access troubles. Most visits are trouble-free, but problems are not unknown....

From west to east:

LATIGO SHORE

The beach below Latigo Shore Dr. should get a lot easier to operate very soon. According to the Coastal Commission, this road is public. Well, right now it's plastered with "private st." and "no parking" signs, but the state is in the legal process of opening it up. Caltrans gave up ownership of this piece of the old PCH several years ago, and the homeowners snapped it up — but the public actually had the right to do so first, and the state treats the transfer as illegal and therefore invalid.

Access For All — the tireless nonprofit that works for access all along the Malibu coast — is

working to bring the signs down, too, and is planning to open more accessways along the road.

How to operate:

The current single accessway is a half-minute walk down the road from the PCH. You can park on the road, since it is public, but you might get a ticket from the city. For now, I'd park on the PCH, and just wave at the "no parking" signs that we hope are not long for this world. Also wave at the ones on the PCH just west of the road: they're among many unofficial "no parking" signs that have mysteriously been appearing near public accessways along the Malibu coast, and that the Coastal Commission has asked Caltrans to remove.

On the beach, the condos just west of the gate all have dry-sand easements (courtesy of the state and Access For All). As do several properties west of there, so the sign that says the "beach west of this sign is private" to the tide line is inaccurate. As are the signs that claim the tide line lies a certain # of feet "seaward from this sign" — which you can figure out yourself, since the signs themselves are so often in the sea.

At low tide, you can run all the way west to Point Dume. But run fast.

Advanced features: The county owns the pretty bluff just west of the first set of homes. While I wouldn't park just yet on this public road lined with "private st." signs, walking on it doesn't bring the risk of a ticket. If anyone objects, you can explain that the Coastal Commission assures you that the road is public and that you're off to enjoy a visit to your very nice bluff.

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MALIBU ROAD

The great thing about the 2.5 miles of beach along Malibu Rd. is that there are 5 accessways along the 1.5 miles on the western end. The bad news is that this beach seems to be a breeding colony for inaccurate signs and bad faith.

How to operate:

This beach teems with dry-sand easements (check the maps or call the Coastal Commission — see above). So the signs that say the entire beach is private above the tide line are inaccurate. Just ignore the illegal signs, too, that say the private beach extends 50 or 70 or 80 ft. seaward — unless you've brought your scuba gear. And the signs that say your right to pass is "by permission and subject to control of owner." And the sign that tells you not to lie on the sand.

And my favorite — "No stopping." Ignore that sign too.

Worth stopping for: the 6 (yes, 6!) various signs on the house in the 24600 block of Malibu Rd.

Troubleshooting: The access paths tend to be next to storm drains, so you may want to walk a few houses down before wading into the water.

Advanced features: There's a 6th entrance near the road's eastern end, through a 200-ft. roadside parcel that the CA Coastal Conservancy has owned since 2002. A lock mysteriously appeared on the gate, and the Conservancy staff removed it. A bigger lock appeared, and then a bigger one — and so on, until last spring, when the state halted the arms race and tore down the entire fence. A trail leads through

the property to a viewpoint, and you can scramble down boulders to the beach.

Malibu Rd. can be entered only at the east end (from Webb Wy. off the PCH). The viewpoint is next to 24016 Malibu Rd. The 5 access gates — all very easy to miss, so watch for them — are next to 24436, 24604 (slightly wider beach here), 24712, 25120, and 25446 Malibu Rd. Park on the road.

MALIBU COLONY

The storied Colony may be one of the most famously gated communities in the L.A. area, but the beach is easy to access from Malibu Lagoon State Park on the eastern end.

How to operate:

An amazingly simple beach to use. It's easy to walk or duck under the fence at the entrance, and the signs inside are few. The "private beach to the mean high tide line" sign at the entrance is inaccurate, since some properties have dry-sand easements. But more germane, it's hard to say whether this narrow beach has any private sand — since the high tide washes daily against the wooden seawalls.

Bonus feature: Malibu Lagoon is one of the richest shorebird and waterbird areas in the county.

Access from the Malibu Lagoon State Beach parking lot (off Cross Ck. Rd.): take the trail to the right, and stay to the right through the lagoon. \$10 to park in the lot — or park free on the PCH.



PART III March 23, 2007

Ever wondered what lies behind that wall of houses on the PCH between Topanga and the Malibu Country Mart? Would you like to see what the view looks like on the other side?

Herewith Part 3 of the Malibu Beaches Owners Manual, for public owners who want to know how to find and use the 20 miles of public beaches (out of 27) that are lined with private development. This third installment covers the beaches east of the Malibu pier. Parts 1 and 2 covered the beaches to the west.

Happily, these beaches aren't nearly as sign-crazy as in the western half. Sadly, the access to them is minimal. The nearly six miles of beaches have three — count 'em, three — officially open accessways. Three. And why bother with all those inaccurate "private beach" signs when the public can't get there?

Remember: all California beaches are public below the mean high tide line (working definition: the wet sand). Like all Malibu beaches, these beaches also have abundant public easements on the dry sand. Check the

easement maps on the Coastal Commission site (go to p. 23 of the PDF): they're a bit hard to read, but you can just call the good folks there at 805-585-1800.

Also, these eastern beaches are narrow, and are often covered at high tide — so check the tide charts in the L.A. Times or at a tide-prediction website to make sure you haven't planned your walk too close to high tide.

Three accessways — which is all the more aggravating since this stretch includes two unopened accessways that are tied up in lawsuits and four fenced-off public properties along the PCH. And, rather incomprehensibly, one official accessway that's been closed for repairs for six years.

But know what's a good place to go when you get aggravated? Where you can forget about all these cares and woes and all those lawsuits? Where you can enjoy the fresh air and watch the sunset?

The Beach. Here's how to do it, from west to east:

CARBON BEACH: Zonker Harris accessway

Betw. 22706-22664 PCH

Carbon Beach, aka Billionaires Beach, is one of the widest and nicest of the eastern beaches. It's still far from a public-access paradise, but with the opening of the Geffen accessway (below), it has two access paths. The county Zonker Harris stairway has been open since 1981.

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How to operate:

Ignore the few "private beach" signs — on the adjacent property to the east, for example, which has a public easement.

Public easements — Upcoast:
1st property (old Windsail restaurant) — 50 ft from mean high tide line (MHTL)

Public easements — Downcoast:
1st property (big white) — to bldg
3rd property (red roofs) — 25 ft from MHTL — to 5 ft from bldg
4th property (white) — 25 ft from MHTL — to 10 ft from bldg
5th property (white w/brn deck) — 25 ft from MHTL — to 10 ft from bldg
6th property (white U w/pool) — to bldg

CARBON BEACH: New accessway

Betw. 22140-22126 PCH

The world-renowned walkway next to David Geffen's house. Why not call it the Hooray for Geffen Accessway, since it's made Carbon Beach far more accessible — and the 22-year battle and new 24-hour video surveillance notwithstanding, the public now uses this walkway with nary an incident. Maintained by the indomitable nonprofit Access For All.

How to operate:

Carbon Beach teems with public easements — on the DG property, but there are lots and lots and lots more (thanks to the Coastal Commission and Access For All) — and why should DG have the public sunbathers all to himself?

Public easements — DG property:
You can plant a towel and umbrella anywhere up to 10 ft. from the compound. See the maps in the walkway.

Public easements--Upcoast:

7th house (white w/dk brn roof) — 25 ft from MHTL
9th house (white w/lt gray roof) — 25 ft from MHTL
10th house (white/brn w/gray roofs) — 10 ft from house

Public easements — Downcoast:

1st house (red corrugated roof) — 25 ft from MHTL
2nd house — to deck
3rd house (blue roof) — to deck
7th house (gray roofs, white chimney) — 25 ft from MHTL
10th house (reddish 1st story, white 2nd) — 10 ft from house
11th house (white) — 25 ft from MHTL_12th house (white w/dk gray roof) — 25 ft from MHTL
13th house (white w/blue roof) — 25 ft from MHTL
14th house (big yellow) — 25 ft from MHTL

CARBON BEACH: Advanced features

Want to visit your Carbon Beach accessway that's stalled in litigation? It's easy to find with a lovely stroll along the beach — just 13 houses downcoast from Zonker Harris and 31 houses (or compounds) upcoast from Hooray for DG. Look for the big white several-story house with the tennis court on the east side. Your accessway is on the east edge: well, it has a wall in it right now, but one would hope that the victory at DG means that all the money on the continent won't stall the opening of new entrances for too long.

In the meantime, enjoy the public easements on this stretch:

Public easement — white house (and tennis court) — to seawall

Public easement — Upcoast:

1st house — to seawall

Public easements — Downcoast:

1st house (lawsuit source) — 25 ft. from MHTL
3rd house--to seawall

LA COSTA BEACH

Zip. Nada. (Though you can make a roadside visit to the big Coastal Conservancy lot betw. 21746-21660 PCH, which is now free of lawsuits and should open in the near future.)

LAS FLORES BEACH:

A sort-of accessway

Betw. 20516-20466 PCH

A sweet little Caltrans-owned empty lot, which the Coastal Commission would like to see unfenced and developed for public access. Still, the gate (east end) is unlocked, so check it out if you like. The neighbors have got boats and chairs in there, and the rest of the public should use it freely as well.

BIG ROCK BEACH:

The backward-progress accessway (aka the fix-it-already accessway)

Betw. Moonshadows-20340 PCH

This official county accessway has been closed off for repairs. For six years. The county keeps declining to fix it despite the state's offers of help.

It's inexcusable. And can you imagine the frustration of anyone who lives across the street? The closest accessways to a beach they can see out their windows are 1/2 mile downcoast and 2+ miles upcoast.

BIG ROCK BEACH:

Big wide accessway

Betw. 20000-19958 PCH

A great wide staircase. This is a pretty stretch of beach, with big rocks, yes, in the tide and an especially scenic view upcoast.

How to operate:

The "private property above mean high tide line" county sign at the entrance is inaccurate since there are plenty of public easements here--starting with the adjacent properties on both sides of the accessway.

Parking: The ocean side of the PCH is overrun with illegal "no parking" signs, that residents have posted in the public right of way. The Coastal Commission has asked Caltrans to have them removed. In the meantime, you still might get towed, so it's best to park in the few no-sign gaps or on the other side of the PCH.

LAS TUNAS BEACH

If you're driving east on the PCH to get home, feel free to pay your respects to your other unopened accessway that's under litigation, at 19016 PCH. I'm told that the locals have a way of getting to this Las Tunas stretch, that involves a culvert, a rickety ladder, and wading through sludge — access deprivation leads to desperate acts — but best to wait until this accessway opens, which we trust and hope will be soon.

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