

Editor's comment from *City Profiles* No. 20 – June/July 2004

Urban beaches for that summer holiday feeling?

Although the poor weather in many parts of Europe this summer may not have encouraged many people – whether residents or tourists – to sun themselves on a city beach, the urban beach craze is sweeping across the continent.

Imitation is supposed to be the sincerest form of flattery. Despite persistent criticisms, the latest figures show that Paris Plage – launched by the mayor of the French capital in 2001– has enjoyed another year of resounding success and has been copied by more than 25 French towns and a handful of foreign cities. These include Toulouse and Lyon, Berlin – its beach area, the Berlin Strand, is a collection of beach bars with sand and hammocks – and Budapest, with its Budapest Plazs. Even London is supposed to have a city beach one of these days, although initial plans for one on the south bank of the Thames near Tower Bridge have so far been scuppered by Southwark Council.

But the concept certainly has its supporters – and for good reason. In 2003, over a four-week period from mid-July to mid-August, more than 3 million people – Parisians in the main – sunbathed and frolicked on Paris Plage, presumably spending money in the process.

Paris Plage is the largest so far of the 'manufactured' urban beaches. Requiring 3,000 tons of sand, the beach – located on the right bank of the Seine on what is normally an expressway – also boasts palm trees, deck chairs, hammocks, parasols, trampolines, a café and swimming pool, open-air showers and fine water mists, plus a paddling pool and the inevitable ice-cream stand.

This year's additions to Paris Plage, open from 21 July to 20 August, included tai-chi and aquagym classes, and free weekend concerts. And there were other activity and relaxation zones – a new climbing wall, a path of flowers to walk through, a lending library, courses in sandcastle building for children, and an area for pétanque (French bowling).

There is no place to holiday like at home

While anecdotal evidence confirms the popularity of Paris Plage for the third consecutive year, there is still no indication as to whether it attracted foreign tourists as well as local inhabitants. Most likely, it is a particularly clever ruse to encourage Parisians to forego their annual vacations in France's overcrowded holiday hotspots by the coast, and to boost leisure spending in the capital.

Paris Plage's success also shows beyond doubt that the French capital is well ahead of the rest of the field in terms of preparing for its 2012 Olympic bid. What better site for the beach volleyball matches?