The Beach

Alex Garland

About the author
Alex Garland was born in London in 1970. After leaving school, he spent six months in Southeast Asia, and he has returned there many times since, most frequently to the Philippines. He graduated in history of art from Manchester University in England and began his career as an artist and freelance journalist. The Beach, his first novel, was written in 1996 and became an international bestseller, with five million copies sold worldwide. In 1997 it won the Betty Trask prize for the best first novel by a writer under 35. Garland’s second novel, The Tesseract, was published in 1998. In 2000 The Beach was made into a successful film starring Leonardo di Caprio as Richard and Virginie Ledoyen as Françoise.

Summary
The Beach by Alex Garland tells the story of Richard, a young backpacker from England who goes to Thailand looking for adventure. At a guesthouse in Bangkok he finds a map pinned to his door. The map shows the way to a secret beach on an island in a National Park in the Gulf of Thailand where tourists are forbidden to go. Together with a French couple, Étienne and Françoise, Richard decides to go there. After an adventurous journey, Richard, Étienne and Françoise find the secret beach as well as the small community of travellers who have gone there in search of a place unspoilt by tourism. They soon make friends with the others and settle down to life in paradise. However, tensions develop within the group and things start to go wrong. As events spiral out of control, the community’s inability to cope with a real crisis is revealed.

Chapter 1: Richard is in Bangkok, staying in a cheap hotel on Khao San Road, an area popular with backpackers. On his first night, a man in the room next door keeps him awake talking incoherently about a beach. The next morning, the man next door is dead and Richard finds a map to a secret beach pinned to his door. Also staying in the hotel are a French couple, Étienne and Françoise. When the police come to question them about the dead man, Richard keeps quiet about the map. However he does tell Étienne and Françoise. And although the beach is on an inaccessible island in a National Park, they soon decide to leave Bangkok and head to Koh Samui, a popular tourist island near the park, to see whether they can find the secret beach.

Chapter 2: Richard, Étienne and Françoise stay on Koh Samui for a few days and plan how to reach the beach. Eventually they find a fisherman who is willing to take them to a small island that lies about 1 km from the island where the secret beach should be, and decide that they can swim from there. While they wait on Koh Samui, they meet two Americans, Zeph and Sammy, who have heard a rumour about the secret beach. Étienne and Françoise are keen not to tell anyone else about the map and their plan to find the secret beach. However just before they leave, Richard decides that it might be a good idea let someone know where they are going in case something happens. For this reason he draws Zeph and Sammy a rough map of how to find the beach, and pushes a note about their plan under the door of their hut.

Chapter 3: The fisherman takes Richard, Étienne and Françoise to the small nearby island as agreed. The friends stay there for just a short while before setting off to swim to the island with the secret beach. Putting essential items from their backpacks into plastic bags, which they use to help them swim, they hide their backpacks under bushes and set off. After a long swim they reach the island and collapse with exhaustion, deciding to spend the night on the beach where they arrive and start their search for the secret beach the next day. As walking around the island’s rocky coastline is impossible, they follow a path that leads inland and soon find themselves in a large field of cultivated dope (marijuana plants). Here they have to hide from a group of armed men who they presume to be drug dealers. Unseen, they continue their search. When the path ends abruptly at a high waterfall they jump into the pool below, where they are found by Jed, a member of the community living at the secret beach. Their arrival does not seem to surprise Jed and he takes them to meet the community leader, Sal.
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Chapter 4: Richard, Étienne and Françoise are welcomed into the group and find that life at the isolated lagoon is good. Everyone has jobs to do and the newcomers quickly fall into the routine and feel at home. The outside world is quickly forgotten. Each has a role to play in the life of the community and their existence seems idyllic. Richard, meanwhile, is haunted by the knowledge that he may already have endangered the secret of the beach and lives in fear that Zeph and Sammy will follow his map and that he will get into trouble with the community for betraying their secret. One day, the discovery that the rice supply has become wet and gone bad leads to a ‘rice run’ – a shopping trip to civilization on nearby Koh Pha-Ngan, which Richard volunteers to do with Jed.

Chapter 5: Richard and Jed paddle the community’s boat to Koh Pha-Ngan, hide it under a bush on a quiet beach and spend the day shopping separately. But Jed comes back annoyed because he has overheard two travellers, who turn out to be Zeph and Sammy, talking about Richard and the secret beach to other people. Richard confesses to Jed that he had left a sketch of the beach map with them before he, Étienne and Françoise set off from Koh Samui. After Jed and Richard return to the lagoon, Richard is taken off the fishing duties that he had previously done with Étienne and Françoise and asked to accompany Jed on his trips around the island. Although Richard is upset about the decision, he is curious about what Jed does during his trips away from the group, and soon finds out that these often involve secretly stealing dope from the drug dealers’ fields.

Chapter 6: Jed and Richard start to keep watch on the neighbouring island and, as feared, before long they see Zeph, Sammy and three other people on the opposite beach. As a strange coincidence, shortly after the group are sighted, the community is hit by a series of unlucky incidents. First, almost everyone in the community is affected by an outbreak of food poisoning, which occurs after one of the fishing team spears and cooks a dead squid. Then a shark attack on the fishing party leaves Sten’s body to Koh Pha-Ngan or Koh Samui so that his parents can be told what has happened. But the majority want to bury Sten near the community to preserve the secret of the beach, they also prefer to turn a blind eye to Christo and Karl’s need for help. After Sten has been buried, Sal tries to rally the community together and boost morale by starting preparations for an anniversary party to celebrate the founding of the community. While Jed looks after Christo, who is dying of internal injuries, Richard goes to check on the group that have reached the neighbouring island and sees them heading towards the community on a raft.

Chapter 7: After the shark attack, most of the community are in shock and divided about what to do. Some want to take Christo and Karl to a doctor and return Sten’s body to Koh Pha-Ngan or Koh Samui so that his parents can be told what has happened. But the majority want to turn a blind eye to Christo and Karl’s need for help. After Sten has been buried, Sal tries to rally the community together and boost morale by starting preparations for an anniversary party to celebrate the founding of the community. While Jed looks after Christo, who is dying of internal injuries, Richard goes to check on the group that have reached the neighbouring island and sees them heading towards the community on a raft.

Chapter 8: When the newcomers arrive on the island, Richard secretly follows them. Watching as they find the dope field, he sees them start tearing leaves from the plants in excitement. Suddenly the armed drug dealers arrive. They are angry and feel that their secret business is threatened, and while Richard looks on in shock the rafters are beaten and killed. Back at the community, Karl has lost his mind with fever, and Christo is slowly dying, despite Jed’s care.

Chapter 9: On the day of the party, Sal discusses the community’s need for peace and suggests that Richard should ‘take care’ of Karl. Realizing that she means he should kill him, Richard refuses. When he later goes in search of Karl, he discovers that he has taken the boat and left the island. Richard decides that he also needs to leave the island and returns to the group to persuade Étienne to leave with him, taking Françoise, Jed and Keaty along as well. However, when Jed argues that he needs to stay to look after Christo, Richard decides that he needs to end the fatally injured man’s life. In order to leave unnoticed later that evening, the group put dope in the party food so that they can make their escape once the others are stoned. However, their plans are disrupted when the armed drug dealers suddenly appear from out of the dark carrying the dead bodies of Zeph, Sammy and the other rafters. Warning the community that they will not tolerate the secret of the beach being revealed, the dealers produce the map that the rafters had followed. Shocked and angry, some members of the community start to attack the dead bodies and mutilate them. When Sal picks up the map and finds Richard’s note to Zeph and Sammy on the back, the community immediately turn on Richard, attacking him with knives. In the ensuing chaos, he is rescued by Jed, Keaty, Étienne and Françoise and they make their getaway unhindered through the dark forest. Reaching the other side of the island, they leave on the raft that Zeph and Sammy’s group had arrived on.
Chapter 10: In the final chapter of the book, Richard is back home. He briefly summarizes how he and the others escaped on the raft, were picked up by some fishermen and taken back to Koh Samui. From there they headed straight to Bangkok and with the help of their embassies managed to arrange flights back home within a couple of days. Richard’s life appears to go on without much reflection, and with no apparent remorse for the death of the other backpackers. He lives a life of video games and drugs and appears to be boastful of his ‘scars’.

Background and themes

The search for adventure: In recent years, increasing affluence and a taste for travel have encouraged many young people of all nationalities to take time off between school and university, or university and full-time employment, to explore the world. Many end up in Thailand, a country famous for its beautiful unspoilt beaches and exotic lifestyle, where living is relatively cheap. Travellers and backpackers can meet there, share experiences and discover a world quite different from that in which they have been brought up. Free from the restraints of home, young people find it an exciting place to try new experiences and enjoy themselves to the full. Like Richard, Étienne and Fransçois, they are in search of adventure and for some, typical tourist activities such as river-rafting and trekking no longer offer enough excitement to satisfy them. Furthermore, the popularity of Thailand as a holiday destination has meant that the beaches have become crowded and the resorts touristy. The community of the beach are trying to find a paradise that has not been spoilt by commercialization.

Drugs: Although laws against drugs are strict in Thailand, some, particularly marijuana (dope), are relatively cheap and easy to obtain. Smoking dope is part of daily life in the Beach community and there is a ready supply because drug dealers are using the isolated island to cultivate fields of marijuana plants.

Mutual tolerance: Neither the dealers nor the community can reveal the other’s secret to the authorities without getting into serious trouble themselves, so they exist in an uneasy tolerance of each other. However, the arrival of yet more travellers, this time bearing a map, is too much for the dealers to take and they murder them and bring the mutilated bodies to the camp to act as a warning to the others.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Write these words and phrases on the board: traveller Thailand secret beach drugs community fish escape guns help

Show students the cover of the book and tell them that these words occur in the story they are going to read. Tell them to work in groups and to try to guess what might happen in the story. If any students already know the book or have seen the film, remind them not to tell the other members of their group. Encourage them to say warm if the guesses of the others are close to the truth or cold if they are not.

2 Discuss: Show students the picture on the front of the book. Ask them to tell you their thoughts on the following:
   a Who are the people in the picture?
   b Where are they and what are they doing?

3 Group work: Tell students that this book is about a group of young people who have found a beautiful beach on an isolated island in the Gulf of Thailand. Although they are not supposed to be there, they are tired of the usual tourist resorts and have started their own community, living in secret in this fantastic place. Put students into small groups and ask them to imagine they are part of this community. How long would you like to stay there? How would you find food? What skills do you have which would help the community? What problems do you imagine might have? How would you prevent other people from finding out about the beach? Groups report back to the class.

Breakdown of civilization: The Beach has been compared to Lord of the Flies by William Golding (winner of the Nobel prize for Literature in 1983) which tells the story of a party of schoolboys stranded on an island after their plane is shot down during a war. In this novel, too, a community is formed that seems idyllic until divisions start to occur. Both books portray a society isolated from the rest of the world which starts to disintegrate under pressure, leading to a descent into primitive tribalism, characterized by violence and a struggle for power. In Lord of the Flies, the boys kill two of their number and are engaged in a wild hunt to kill a third when they are rescued from the island. This is echoed in the festival at the end of The Beach when the travelling mutilate the dead bodies of the rafters and turn on Richard. Both books suggest that civilization is a fairly thin veneer and that without the constraints of organized society, humans tend to descend into barbarity.
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4 Research: Put students into groups and ask them to find a detailed map of Thailand. Get them to look at the area of the Gulf of Thailand and to imagine which of the islands there might be the setting for the story. Ask them to give good reasons for their opinions.

While reading

Introduction

5 Read carefully: Ask students to read the Introduction carefully and to make notes on some of the differences between a traveller and a tourist, according to the distinction made in the text. Get them to discuss their thoughts with the class.

6 Discuss: In the Introduction, the beach is described as 'paradise on earth' and 'heaven on earth'. Ask students to tell you what sort of place they imagine 'paradise' and 'heaven' to be. What do you think could go wrong to turn a paradise into hell?

7 Discuss: The Introduction hints that something bad may happen in the paradise that Richard finds. Ask students to predict what might happen.

Chapters 1–2

8 Role play: In pairs, ask students to imagine the interview between Richard and the policeman. Student A is the policeman, who needs to get as much information as he can. Student B is Richard, who wants to keep what he knows about the beach a secret, so as not to get drawn into the investigations. Get them to write up the dialogue they imagine and ask volunteers to act out what they have written in front of the class.

9 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Remind them that when Étienne and Françoise return from a hiking and river rafting trip in Chiang Mai, Étienne tells Richard it was boring. Ask them to think about why he says this, and whether they agree with him. What are the advantages and disadvantages of travelling alone or with other tourists? Ask pairs to present their thoughts to the class.

10 Discuss: Remind students that when Richard talks to the police about Mr Duck's death, he does not hand over the map that was pinned to his door, or tell them about it. Ask them to think about his motives for not doing this and whether they think his actions were morally responsible or not. How might things have been different if Richard had handed over the map to the police?

11 Read carefully: Put students into pairs. Ask them to read pages 1–7 carefully and to make notes on the characters of Richard, Étienne and Françoise. Tell them to think of adjectives to describe each of their characters and to find passages in the text to support their opinions.

12 Pair work: In their pairs, get students to consider whether they think the reactions of Richard, Étienne and Françoise are realistic. Although a man with whom Richard has spoken has committed suicide in the next room, none of the group seem very affected or concerned. Ask students to imagine how they would have reacted in a similar situation. What does this say about the characters of these three people?

Chapters 3–4

13 Artwork: Ask students to re-read Richard's description on page 18 and draw a sketch of the beach as seen from the top of the waterfall.

14 Discuss: Ask students to re-read page 28 where Sal gives Richard, Étienne and Françoise each a seashell necklace. Get students to think about what these necklaces represent. Why do you think it is so important for Richard to feel that he is accepted by the rest of the community?

15 Role play: Put students into pairs. Tell them to imagine that Sal and Bugs are talking late at night about Mr Duck's disappearance and the newcomers arrival at the beach. Tell students to take the roles of Sal and Bugs and to imagine how each of them would talk about and react to the situation. How do you think Sal and Bugs feel about Richard, Étienne and Françoise?

16 Read carefully: Put students into pairs. Ask them to re-read the second paragraph on page 31 carefully and to discuss their thoughts. How do they think Richard is feeling when he imagines this scene? What else does this paragraph tell us about Richard? Why do they think that Richard is so optimistic about island life, despite the fact that he has witnessed Mr Duck's suicide?

17 Write: Write these names on the board:

Sal Mr Duck Bugs

Put students into groups and ask them to write as many sentences as they can giving information about the characters. Ask groups to read out what they have written to the class.

Chapters 5–6

18 Read carefully: Put students into pairs. Ask them to re-read page 46 and to think about Richard's situation. Why do you think Sal has taken Richard out of the fishing group? Why does this move make him feel isolated rather than excited? Why does Richard suddenly feel homesick?

19 Write: Put students into pairs. Get them to imagine they are Richard. He has just been told that he is no longer in the fishing group. He is feeling homesick and writing a letter to a very good friend at home in England. Ask them to think about what Richard might be missing at this moment. How would he describe the situation on the island? What would the tone of his letter be? Do you think he would try to sound cheerful and optimistic or would his letter be miserable and pessimistic? What things do you think he would tell his friend and which things would he leave out?
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20 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs and ask them to discuss the following:
Imagine you live at the beach. What things would you miss from ‘the World’? Richard and Jed are about to do a Rice Run. What things would you ask them to bring back for you?

21 **Write:** Put students into small groups. Ask them to make a list of the things that have started to go wrong for the people at the beach. Tell them to decide which are potentially the most dangerous and put them in order. Ask them to report their ideas back to the whole class.

22 **Discuss:** Ask students to imagine they are Sal. How do you think she will deal with the situations that have occurred up to the end of Chapter 6? What do you think will be her main priorities? How will the community deal with the group’s sickness and injuries? What do students personally feel should be the main priorities, and do they think that the community will make the same decisions or come to the same conclusions? And if not, why not?

**Chapters 7–8**

23 **Discuss:** Ask students to re-read pages 69–73. Ask them to think about the behaviour of the newcomers. How did they act and why did they act this way? What about Richard? Why did he hide? When he saw the newcomers behaving loudly, why didn’t he warn them? How does Richard react when he realizes that the newcomers are going to get into trouble with the guards? Do you feel that Richard’s emotions are normal or acceptable? What do we learn about Richard and the group of newcomers in these pages?

24 **Role play:** Put students into small groups. Get them to imagine they are the armed drug dealers. Ask them to role play a dialogue between the group when they realize that intruders are in the marijuana field and to imagine how they decide to deal with them. Ask students to think about whether the drug dealers are agreed on what to do or divided. What solutions do the dealers foresee the newcomers will cause?

25 **Read carefully:** Put students into pairs. Get them to re-read page 75 and think carefully about what Richard is thinking and what takes place between him and Karl. Do you think that Richard is acting in a rational manner? Is he behaving more rationally than Karl? Who do you think is more insane at this moment, Richard or Karl and why?

26 **Write:** In their pairs, get students to imagine they are Karl. They should imagine that after his fight with Richard he runs off to a quiet spot and writes a page in his journal about the events of the last few days. What do you think he would write and how would he write? Would he write in coherent sentences or just make notes? Would his thoughts be clear or confused? Ask students to write a short passage and present their work to the class.

27 **Discuss:** Put students into groups. Remind them that Chapter 8 is called ‘Paradise to Hell’. In their groups, ask students to discuss in what ways paradise has changed to hell for Richard and the others. Ask groups to report their thoughts back to the whole class.

**Chapters 9–10**

28 **Role play:** Put students into small groups. Ask them to choose a scene from these chapters that they feel is meaningful to them. Tell them they should role play this scene and act it out for the rest of the class.

29 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Ask students to imagine the scene on the island the morning after the party. What do Sal and the other remaining people in the group do when they realize the extent of the breakdown of the community? Who do you think will stay and who do you think will leave? How do those who want to leave plan to get away from the island?

30 **Role play:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to imagine that they are Richard or Frangoise calling home after they arrive in Bangkok. Who will you call and what will you say? How much information do you share? How does the person at home respond? What questions do they ask? What is the tone of the conversation? Do you think that Richard would react differently from Frangoise? And if so, why?

31 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the ending of the story. Do you feel that Chapters 9 and 10 present a satisfying ending to the story? Are there questions that have been raised by the story that are left unanswered? Which parts of the ending do you find good and which not so good? What would you have written differently?

**After reading**

32 **Pair work:** In pairs, students discuss the character of Richard. Is he the sort of person you would like to have as a friend? What do you think about his actions in the book? Was he right to kill Christo? Has Richard become a better person or a worse person because of his experiences? What things has Richard done that he may regret?

33 **Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss the following question:
*Which of these sentences do you most agree with?* Ask them to give reasons for their choices.

- Richard is glad that he had an exciting adventure in Thailand and would probably like to go travelling again.
- Richard knows that he is lucky to have escaped with his life and now regrets going in search of adventure.

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.