

The sands of crime

Want a fun, carefree day in the sun? Then forget going to the beach, where the chuckles are rigidly rationed and any attempt at amusement meets suffocation by regulation ... and that's official. Beach bum **Kenneth Howe** takes a walk on the wild side, where the law meets the shore. Pictures by **Graham Uden**.

I never meant to be a martyr — and I'm probably not — but breaking the law in Hong Kong is as easy as partaking in traditional beach pastimes. I have dogs, surfboards, rollerblades, a volleyball, a Frisbee, a kite, waterskis and a bicycle, all items that might make for a weekend of good, clean fun. Except that where I live, fun seems to be illegal: I live on a beach.

Like the 39 other gazetted beaches throughout the SAR, Big Wave Bay's is manned by lifeguards seemingly charged with keeping the good times at arm's length. Twelve rules, which are clearly stated at beach edges on bright yellow signs, stop just short of No Swimming. It seems I can't help but break the law, even though I've never set out to do so; nor do I feel proud when my transgressions, usually walking the dog, persuade the lifeguards to play a recording of rules aired over loudspeakers. It drones at considerable length, first in Cantonese, then Putonghua, then English. I break the law by default in my modest pursuit of happiness.

But when I set off for Shek O one recent Sunday I was out to bait the lifeguards. The wind was up, and full of purpose I strode to the water's edge. For what I did next, ignorance was no excuse: I began to fly a kite. I let out the string and it took off in full view of the crowds and dozens of lifeguards, and in clear violation of the Bathing Beaches Regulation, Chapter 132E, Section 5 (offence punishable by a \$400 fine).

In the eyes of local lawmakers I had unleashed death on a string and put innocent bathers in harm's way. But in my eyes, I was the closest I've ever come to activism, unfurling a flag of freedom, a humble plastic kite, for all to see. I was giving a voice to the voiceless: the beach bum.

As disgruntled civil servants protest against pay cuts, displaced recyclers dump lorries into Victoria Harbour and commuters gripe about hikes in bus fares, has everybody missed the point in this summer of discontent? Nobody has railed against the heavy hand that rules our beaches. Where else on Earth do closed-circuit televisions (CCTV) monitor tan lines?

Seaside delinquents know that, in the event of misbehaviour, the lifeguards follow a predictable pattern. After seeing the trilingual warning ignored, they take the microphone and personalise the message. They'll get up off their backsides and confront you eventually, but that's the last resort.

"No dogs allowed!" boomed a disembodied voice, ignoring the kite. With my Walkman headphones strategically in place, I pretended **W**



The official Shek O beach greeting, exhorting visitors to enjoy themselves ... within the rules.