

VANITY FAIR

HOME

society ► August 2013

From Coast to Toast

At opposite ends of the country, two of America's most golden coastal enclaves are waging the same desperate battle against erosion. With beaches and bluffs in both Malibu and Nantucket disappearing into the ocean, wealthy homeowners are prepared to do almost anything—spend tens of millions on new sand, berms, retaining walls, and other measures—to save their precious waterfront properties. What's stopping them? William D. Cohan and Vanessa Grigoriadis report on the clash between deep-pocketed summer people and local working folks.

By William D. Cohan AND Vanessa Grigoriadis



LEFT, PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK HOLTZMAN; RIGHT, BY GEORGE RIETHOF.

SAND CASTLES *Left*, The coastline of Broad Beach, in Malibu, with a stone seawall protecting the houses. *Right*, Houses perched on the edge of Sconset Bluff, on Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Earlier this summer, on what passed for a clear morning in Los Angeles, Tom Ford, director of marine programs at the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation, went to the Santa Monica Municipal Airport to catch a ride up the Pacific coast in a Beechcraft Bonanza G36. (Clad in a plaid shirt and chinos, he seemed not to be related to the designer.) “What a totally sweet glass cockpit,” he told the pilot, who was donating this flight through LightHawk, a nonprofit group dedicated to helping environmentalists document problems from the air. As Santa Monica drifted by below, its famous boardwalk and Ferris wheel appearing as though they were little pieces on a game board, the minuscule Bonanza headed toward the great blue ocean, which was gently undulating like a fresh duvet being fluffed on a bed.

The pilot then hooked a right and headed up the coast. The purpose of this flight was to check out the beach erosion that's affecting Malibu, Los Angeles's most expensive and storied summertime playground. A town of less than 13,000, sandwiched between the sea and the vertiginous cliffsides of the Santa Monica Mountains, it has only one main road, the Pacific Coast Highway, but is stuffed with homes owned by what seems like half of Hollywood's power brokers and stars—from Courteney Cox's five-bedroom midcentury on the beach, bought for \$17 million, to Cher's Italian Renaissance mansion, with hand-carved marble details and stamped copper ceilings, which is quietly on the market for \$41 million. “California beaches are more temperamental than on the East Coast, but mercifully, in most places, development is much further inland,” says Costas Synolakis, an environmental engineering professor at the University of Southern California. That's not the case in Malibu, though, where many of the best houses are literally built on sand

dunes.

Soon, the Beechcraft was flying over one of Malibu's premier neighborhoods, the one-and-a-half-mile-long Carbon Beach, also known as "Billionaire's Beach." Oracle C.E.O. Larry Ellison, the country's third-richest man, has been madly snapping up properties there, including nine homes for which he spent at least \$140 million and the building that houses the recently reopened Malibu outpost of Nobu, one of the area's few flashy oceanfront restaurants, where patrons sit on plush couches next to fireplaces. As the plane passed over the restaurant, one could see that the valet had color-coded the cars—the black ones on one side of the lot, the white on the other, with the tan and silver ones clumped together, and a small pocket reserved for outliers like red vintage Aston Martins and yellow Lamborghinis.

Ford spotted some erosion on Carbon Beach. Kids were playing down there, but the beach was not voluminous. "Not great over here," he noted. But this was nothing compared with what was to come, in Malibu's other premier neighborhood: Broad Beach. The plane nudged up the coast, passing Julia Roberts's \$20 million eco-friendly compound and Barbra Streisand's four-home lot (main house, millhouse, barn, and "grandma's house") estimated to be worth as much as \$100 million, both of which—lucky for them—are somewhat protected by a large bluff, and eventually made its way around Point Dume, a rocky outcropping that marks the shift from a primarily south-facing beach to one angled west. As Ford knew, the west-facing exposure in Malibu is far more vulnerable to wave action than the south-facing.

Suddenly, Malibu's big beach-erosion calamity whipped into view. Broad Beach is about one mile long, with 114 homes built right up against the Pacific. These homes have always been owned by the biggest of Hollywood's big names. Jack Lemmon, Steve McQueen, and Frank Sinatra (who liked to sit on the beach in his fedora) once lived here. Sinatra's widow, Barbara, does still. Current residents include Steven Spielberg, Dustin Hoffman, Pierce Brosnan, Danny DeVito, Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell, Michael Ovitz, Sidney Sheinberg, and Patrick Soon-Shiong, the doctor who developed the cancer drug Abraxane and is L.A.'s richest man.

Over the past decade, Broad Beach residents estimate, they've lost up to 60 feet of their beach. This day, it wasn't even high tide, and for the most part the waves lapped at a huge, 13-foot-high wall of rocks. The tiny bit of sand that Ford could spy between rock and ocean was dark gray; it had been wet recently and would soon be again. You couldn't put a towel down without soaking your derriere. "I don't call it Broad Beach anymore," says Bill Patzert, a climatologist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, in Pasadena. "I call it Invisible Beach."

"I do think the Broad Beach homes are in jeopardy, and I don't want to be cold or callous about that," says Ford. "But we have to recognize that scientists in Rhode Island and New Jersey [and other places where there's a lot of erosion] are talking about 'managed retreat.' That means abandoning these houses and moving away, preferably way, way upland." Ford takes a breath. "We simply have to recognize that building homes on beaches is not sound policy," he says.

More than 3,000 miles to the east, Holly Finigan, the founder of the Nantucket blACKbook—"THE 'it' guide connecting those on & off island with all things hip & fresh! Crazy for ACK"—was tweeting her more than 3,000 followers:

"Word on Baxter [Road] is this Bluff House only has a few more days ...

Right?" Finigan attached to her tweet a stark picture of the back of the house, which not so long ago had been a large, gracious, shingle-style manor with drop-dead Atlantic Ocean views. But in the photo the windows were boarded up and the foundation was exposed to the sea. The backyard deck, where the house's wealthy Tennessee owners, Sam and Ann Furrow, once enjoyed sipping cocktails on lazy summer afternoons, was suspended over the roiling Atlantic.

The Furrows had been praying for years that the inevitable would not happen but probably knew in their hearts that at some point it would. The knockout blow to their aptly named Bluff House—located at 87 Baxter Road, atop Sconset Bluff, the sand cliff named for its proximity to the charming village of Sconset—came this past winter from a combination of the remnants of Hurricane Sandy, a February blizzard that hit Nantucket particularly

hard, and finally a classic March nor'easter, which lingered above the island for days, with winds gusting over 90 miles per hour, causing the surf to pound relentlessly into the unprotected bluff. Finigan was right: Bluff House was a goner, a victim of the devastating erosion of Sconset Bluff, which forms the eastern edge of Nantucket.

Nantucket, a disappearing spit of land deposited by melting glaciers 30 miles south of Cape Cod eons ago, has, like Malibu, long been a summer playground of the rich and famous. With its whale oil, Nantucket was once the uncontested Silicon Valley of its day, the supplier of light to America. Nowadays, Chris Matthews and David Gregory are seasonal residents, as is the 102-year-old Bunny Mellon (Matthews's neighbor). There is a sprinkling of writers too: the late David Halberstam summered on the island, as now do Daniel Yergin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Prize and The Quest*, and columnist Russell Baker. (*Vanity Fair* contributing editor William D. Cohan, one of the authors of this piece, owns a home at 81 Baxter Road, just two doors south of the former Bluff House.)

In the early 2000s, as real-estate prices on the island shot into the stratosphere, rising as much as 20 percent a year, the summer people were increasingly made up of bankers, hedge-fund moguls, and industrialists, such as Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google; Roger Penske, the rental-truck and auto-racing magnate; David Rubenstein, one of the co-founders of the Carlyle Group; Bob Diamond, the former C.E.O. of Barclays P.L.C.; Lou Gerstner, the former C.E.O. of IBM; and Bob Greenhill, the Wall Street mogul. The late Mark Madoff, son of Bernie, used to summer on Nantucket. Current homeowners on Sconset Bluff include the extended family of fabled investor George Soros (they have three homes on the east side of Baxter Road); Amos Hostetter, one of the founders of Continental Cablevision; Jimmy Haslam, the owner of the N.F.L.'s Cleveland Browns and the C.E.O. of the Pilot Flying J truck-stop chain; and Norwood Davis, the retired chairman of Trigon Healthcare. Farther south on Baxter Road, where the erosion problems are less acute due to tidal flows and the curve of the land, lives Brian Simmons, the managing partner of the Chicago buyout firm Code Hennessy & Simmons. Michael Berman, the co-founder of *George* magazine, and his wife, interior designer Victoria Hagan, just built a new home off the bluff, across the street from Haslam and Davis, on Sankaty Head Road.

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