



YOUR GUIDE TO FUN ON OREGON'S SOUTH COAST!

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Sand labyrinth artist Denny Dyke gives some raking tips to some of his young volunteer helpers.

Join in the Fun With Sand Labyrinth Artist

By Tom Baake

Bandon's wide-open beaches serve as an expansive canvas for sand labyrinth creator Denny Dyke. There's also plenty of room for helpers and onlookers, and that's a good thing, for these days Denny often draws a crowd when he orchestrates his elaborate designs in the wet sand between high and low tide.

For the uninitiated, labyrinths are maze-like pathways on which one walks, often in contemplation or meditation. But while mazes are puzzles with choices of paths and directions – and dead-ends – a labyrinth has only a single path through or to the center.

Labyrinth patterns and pathways have been created since ancient Greek times, with materials ranging from stone to canvas to sand. Some of the most impressive are found in medieval churches such as Chartres Cathedral in France. They were popular in monasteries, with devotees using them not just for contemplation but for some exercise.

It's from the use of labyrinths in well-known churches that "most people think they have a religious connotation," says labyrinth creator Denny. "They do not." He prefers the term "meditative tool," available to all creeds and cultures.

Denny says his use of a labyrinth as a practitioner with the Church of Religious Science led him to create sand labyrinths on Bandon beaches. The Coquille resident has become something of a fixture, and even has a regular schedule of upcoming "draws," as he calls them. More about that in a moment.

With their flowing shapes and swirling lines, the

elaborate sand labyrinths reflect the interplay of adjacent ocean and beach, every wave bringing new patterns and potential inspirations. The actual pathways are just portions of firm sand left intact, while the borders are outlined with Zen-like patterns of raked sand.

Denny is quick to credit his volunteer groomers and rakers: "They help me look good." His own part is in fact mostly confined to scribing the outlines, a task he deftly accomplishes with a specially-equipped drawing stick. He then breaks out an assortment of rakes, and briefly schools his volunteers in the various techniques. All this while warmly welcoming each new person who wanders up. More often than not they stay to help, or at least walk the labyrinth. Says Denny: "I play Tom Sawyer real well."

Whether viewed from beach-level or from vista points atop the bluffs, the transformation from unassuming flat beach to elaborate sand creation is swift and somehow startling, almost like watching a crop circle form before your eyes. While any low tide will do, Denny likes minus tides – which are usually accompanied 12 hours later by real high tides – because the low tide "stretches the canvas" by revealing more beach on which to draw, while the high tide washes way up to the cliff bases and scours clean the whole beach.

Denny notes no two of his labyrinths are alike, and that not every draw results in a labyrinth, but all are well received. In another moment of spontaneous creation, Denny says he drew a labyrinth outline "way too big. It had voids in it and I asked some of my groomers and rakers to fill them in" with freestanding elements. "These were real artists," he says, who came up with amazingly accurate sand depictions of jellyfish, birds, even Celtic knots. Freestanding elements have now become part of the routine.

It's part of what he calls a "morphing situation," another example of which are the "Dream Field" patterns he started making last September when he spontaneously connected several adjacent labyrinths.

No matter how elaborate these creations, however, all face what might be called the sand castle dilemma – they are intentionally built to be washed away. Which is part of their emotional appeal, of course. They're like a metaphor of our existence, brief but beautiful. Or as Denny puts it, "They illustrate the impermanence of life."

As noted, his sessions bring out many appreciative participants and onlookers – more than 100 people



Several completed sand labyrinths are viewed from the Face Rock overlook along Beach Loop Drive in Bandon.

showed up at last Saturday. In several instances, he says people "not expecting to meet me" have wandered into one of his Saturday sessions "and ended up spending another night in town so they can help me on Sunday. That's good for the tourist industry here, and it's good to give Bandon another attraction."

He recently taped a session with Oregon Field Guide that will air in the fall. He's also launched a business called Sacred Journeys, "teaching about the use of labyrinths as a meditative tool for transformation and healing," he says.

His favorite spot is below Face Rock viewpoint along Beach Loop Drive in Bandon, although now that the Coquille Point stairs have been reopened, he hopes to do some drawings on that beach.

Denny will be on the Bandon beaches throughout April, with highlights including an Easter Sunday session and a double-header day on April 29 when he'll do a drawing at an early-morning low tide and another in the evening. He plans to head up the North Coast for several summer events. As always, the public is invited to watch or join the fun.

View his schedule on Facebook at Circles in the Sand as well as on the website www.onepath.us.

(Columnist Tom Baake publishes three regional guidebooks available at local bookstores, visitor centers and at www.scod.com/guidebooks.)



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