



“Until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.” —Anatole France



Bauer

ON THE BEACH

BY KEVIN MCFADDEN

He was on to us before we even opened the door. We were greeted with our typical and desired rush of jumping yellow fur. We had left our 5 year old yellow Lab Bauer cooped up at home with a sitter, while my wife and I enjoyed a few days down Wildwood. He could smell something different on us. He buried his nose in our pants and shoes. It was almost like he could smell the salt air, feel the sand, sense our laid back attitudes that only a few days by the ocean can give. The only complaint from our trip was that we couldn’t take him along. During the second day of our visit, we wandered north, past the boards, to where the beach narrows then widens after 2nd Avenue. When we got there, we were greeted by dogs playing on the sand. We missed our guy; we doted over every dog we ran into on the beach. We had finally found the perfect place to take Bau for his first trip to the beach.

The night before the trip, we realized that we were total nerds. How can we have to pack so much stuff for just one dog? His bag was overflowing with towels, treats, toys of all sorts, balls, bowls, brush, etc. The morning of, we excitedly woke up, piled in the SUV and started our 2 hour trek down.

This would be the hardest part. Bauer doesn’t lie down in the car at all. He sits and leans by the passenger side door. He will only stick his head out the window when we’re driving slow or stopped. We tried rolling the window down a few times on Rt. 42, but he wasn’t a big fan of going 70 miles an hour. I’ve never seen his ears flap like that, nor his eyelids.

We stopped at the Frank Farley rest stop which has an area for dogs. Playtime was on for a bit, then back in the car; Wildwood or bust. Taking the same roads I took 20 years earlier, our discussion revolved around what we thought his reaction would be. He’s never been on a beach before, nor ever seen or heard the ocean. How would he react to the new feeling of sand on his paws? As excited as we were to see his reaction, we were also worried. This would be the biggest, unfenced area he’d even been in off the leash (or OTL as we’ve shortened it to). I think every dog owner’s worst nightmare is to see a wagging tail and two rear paws happily rocketing off over the horizon.

Upon finally reaching the 2nd Ave. beach in North Wildwood, his head perked up. He couldn’t see the beach over the dunes or the seawall. His nose smelled the ocean air; his ears heard the waves’ crash for the very first time. We went to the corner, and lead him up the steps. Somewhere in the background, I swear I could hear Ride of the Valkyries as the ocean opened up to Bau. An anxious look to us was followed by him pulling us on the



leash to get to the beach. As we stepped onto the beach, Bauer had an odd prance as he stepped on the damp sand. We put our bag down, and nervously looked at each other. It was time, quite literally, to release the hound. My wife Tara slowly bent over to unhook his leash. Over the ocean, we both heard the loud click that signified Bauer was on his own. What would he do? For a second he looked up at us.

He took off in wide circles around us, happily romping in his newfound freedom. We took a new squeaky ball and heaved it down the beach. He took off after it, returned it to us then looked around. He wasn’t nervous or scared, and neither were we. We played fetch with him on the beach; or at least his version of fetch. He’s not so much of a Labrador retriever as he is Labrador chaser. Soon, he tired of fetch and started to explore. Our attention turned to the ocean.

Bauer is a bit odd around water. He really likes the water, once you get him into it. He has no problem running into the dirtiest creek or stream he can find. He will approach a pool nervously and I have to nudge him to get him in. I think it’s because dogs must fear any illusion of actually getting clean. Once he gets in, he’s fine and you can’t get him out.

I love the ocean, and would love to see Bauer enjoy it too. We encourage him to enter, but we’ve made a severe shoobie error. Neither of us actually thought to bring down flip flops. He’s happy to follow us down to the water’s edge. As the tide approaches, we slowly back off not to get our sneakers wet. As we retreat, so does Bau. D’oh! We’ve taught him to be scared of the ocean. Optimistic tosses of his favorite squeaky are of no enticement.

Out of the blue, he looks down. The sand invites a bad habit. One paw digs then the other. Another second as both paws take brief bursts digging in the sand. His head jerks up as he looks to us expecting to be scolded. “No, it’s OK, Bau,” Tara says, “you can dig all you want at the beach.” Thus he commences the digging. Mad digging. Mad, primordial digging. Bauer’s front paws become a blur as sand rapidly flies out from



beneath his belly. Just to rub it in, he will only dig near the towel, making sure to cover it in sand. I never knew dogs could snicker till now.

After plenty of time running OTL, we decided to leash him and stroll down the beach. Bauer happily walked by our side, constantly distracted by all the new sights, smells and sounds. He was great when numerous people came up to pet him. He was able to greet fellow beach dogs like he was a local. A few times, Bauer would test his bravery by edging down to the water, but the tide would always win. Looking back, I suppose this is a best case scenario, because the last thing I’d want to see is him swimming away and me having to chase him in my sweatpants and hoodie. Total shoobie move.

Like his namesake Jack Bauer, our Bauer had boundless energy. We spent hours on the beach this day, surely walking more than the

five mile length. We ate boardwalk pizza hanging out the back of the SUV as Bauer recharged. We returned to the beach, where Bauer would uncannily pick a certain spot to dig and find a shell. If only he could do this with precious metals. We had one last hurrah OTL on the northern part of the island.

The time came to pack up and head home. Bauer was finally beat, as evidenced by him barely being able to jump up into the backseat. He was one tired pup on the ride home. Still refusing to lie down, he’d rest his chin on the ledge where the window meets the door. Occasionally, his eyes would close. Yea, I think he had a good time. I know my wife and I had a great time. The few halcyon summers I spent in Wildwood played an extremely important part in my youth. I’m glad I got to share it with them. And I am glad that we were able to hopefully give Bauer the same sort of experience.



Kevin, Tara & Bauer McFadden at 2nd St. Beach