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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

Back-to-Nature Movement on Rise in US

By Dan Leeth

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As I plodded through the fiery desert outside Tucson, Arizona, my mind fantasized about only one thing — pleasantly drowning in a vat of 7-Eleven Slurpees. I almost got my wish.

After a day spent hiking the cool highlands of the Santa Catalina Mountains, a searing canyon separated me from my air-conditioned car. The sun bore down with the wrath of Lucifer, scorching the ground and broiling all that walked upon it, including me. Even Satan sought shade.

Then I heard the angelic whisper of water. A tiny stream burred along the canyon floor. Where it reached hard rock, eons of abrasion had scalloped a swimming hole larger than a backyard pool. I wanted to dive straight in, but I had one problem. I carried no swimsuit.

Looking around, I saw nary a prying eye. Nervously, I unbuckled my belt. I'd admired skinny-dippers in "Woodstock" and buff castaways in "The Blue Lagoon," but I never dreamed that I would ever personally enact "The Full Monty" in public. I had succumbed to the Siren's wet kiss.

In one blinding flash, I shed shorts, threw skivvies to the wind and plunged stark-raving naked into the cool liquid. The freedom of the flesh felt refreshing.

Bathing in the raw is nothing new. A recent Roper poll found that 25 percent of the population has swum sans suit in mixed company.

Nudist club rolls jumped 76 percent in the past 10 years, clothes-free travel is a \$400 million a year business.

The American Association for Nude Recreation boasts a membership of 50,000, and the Naturist Society claims more than 27,000 members. In an effort to induce folks to take their privates public,

the two organizations sponsor Nude Recreation Week, an annual celebration held every July. All around the country, sun-loving groups, clubs and resorts observe the event by sponsoring nude beach runs, organizing blood drives, holding art shows where it's the artist who is undraped, or helping to clothe the homeless by asking to keep the shirt off your back. All hoped to show newcomers that nude is not lewd.

Of course, for those who have never peed in public, the most pressing question is, "Where can I go clothed only by the sun?"

The simplest is to become a bare in the woods. People jettison inhibitions and garments beside secluded lakes and streams, while others find wilderness slabs make excellent tanning beds. Backpackers, those who lug a week's worth of food and gear on their backs, are notorious skinny-dippers.

"Will we need swimsuits?" asked a woman on a national Sierra Club backpack outing. When told they were optional, she giggled with glee. "Oh, thank you! I don't want to carry any extra weight."

Besides paring a few ounces of clothing, nudists claim going native feels good. There's something about the merry sensation of sun and breeze caressing exposed skin. No cloth drapes down, no waistbands constrict, and no underwires fight the pull of gravity. What's left is the feeling of being a little bit naughty.

Like innocent tykes dashing naked through the sprinkler, adults can chuck birthdays in their birthday suits. Etiquette, of course, dictates stripping only in private places where the innocent will not be offended.

No one wants to be like David Schoenfeld, an engineer who got caught with his pants down.

He and his wife had been mountain

biking for miles through the back country. They eventually reached a lonely valley laced by a meandering stream. Figuring they were hours from humanity, David stripped for a swim.

"I was wading and saw a few people," he says. "Then there were more and more. Evidently the local forest service was having an annual picnic with their families and kids."

Had it not been for a modest wife retrieving his shorts, the naked truth of his predicament would have been exposed. She saved the Smokies from the bare.

One way to avoid accidentally needing a bail bondsman is to seek spots where nudity is the norm. Clothing-optional beaches stud both coasts, and the Caribbean and Europe are rife with strands of suits-free sand. Inlanders find that rivers, lakes, ponds and hot springs offer de facto sunning sites where undressed is the dress of the day.

"There are people who prefer to be nude solo or in their own back yards," says Nicky Hofftnan, administrative director of the Naturist Society. "Then there are those who are outgoing and want to be with others."

Nudists come in every age and occupation. Their ranks include police officers, attorneys, teachers, preachers, bureaucrats, construction workers and even newspaper journalists. While the uninitiated might expect only those possessing buns of steel would dare bare them, the reality is that most naked jaybirds look more like plucked chickens.

They display the same sags, scars, folds, wrinkles, lumps, cellulite, stretch marks, love handles and beer bellies that clothed people do. Nobody cares.

"Nudity is about body acceptance," Hoffman insists.

With its headquarters in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, the Naturists began in the '70s as a free beach movement whose goal was



to legalize the unclad use of remote places. They have become one of the leading proponents of clothes-free recreation.

“We prefer clothing optional,” says Hoffman. “That’s our credo. Women like it because if they feel comfortable taking off their clothes, they take off their clothes. If it’s a little cool or they are feeling a little uncomfortable, they leave their shirts on.”

Although clothing may be elective, being dressed around the undressed can be disconcerting for some. At least that is what Pam, a Kansas nurse, found out.

The young woman hiked with friends to a wilderness hot springs. The first day, she wore her suit in the water while her friends and dozens of strangers soaked without a stitch. The second morning, she surprised everybody, including herself. Throwing caution aside, Pam streaked into the communal pool wearing nothing but a smile.

“I couldn’t believe how weird it felt being the only one clothed,” she admitted.

Clothing-optional sites allow neophytes the freedom of stripping at their own pace as well as the privacy of being anonymous among strangers. Still, folks can never be assured of not meeting someone they know. A college instructor tells about being uncovered by nude students, and a pinstriped bank officer reveals that he ran nakedly into equally disrobed clients. Talk about full disclosure.

One way to minimize finding exposed acquaintances is to strip on a vacation, at a resort such as Hedonism in Jamaica.

Friendliness is natural when au naturel.

Without the cloak of fabric, pretexts and barriers drop faster than pants.

“Most social interaction happens on the nude beach,” says Hedonism general manager Kevin Levee. “If you’re comfortable enough with yourself to take off your clothes in front of strangers, conversation follows easily.”

Jamaica is a leader in clothing-optional vacation sites. Many resorts follow Hedonism’s lead by providing segregated beaches for the naked and the clad. Some, such as Grand Lido Braco on Jamaica’s

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north shore, even have nude-side guest rooms so the unencumbered can go from bed to breakfast and bar to beach without needing to don bras or briefs.

In addition to seashore resorts, naked entrepreneurs offer nude hiking, camping, canoeing, houseboating and cruising. All provide a chance to travel light. There is nothing to wash, wrinkle or iron, and sopping swimsuits never dampen dainties on the trip home. No wonder nudists say that while it may be the husband who initiates the first visit, it’s the wife who wants to return.

Nowhere is this more true than at nudist parks where clothing is generally not an option, and even bands playing at dances strip to strum.

“Each club has its own rules,” says Carolyn Hawkins, a Florida nudist park

resident. “We have a lake where you can wear a bathing suit if you’re new to nudism, but around the pool and in the hot tub, we require you to be nude at all times.”

Hawkins works as the American Association for Nude Recreation club liaison. The club was founded in 1931, and its mission is to promote, enhance and protect appropriate settings for clothes-free living. It now boasts more than 240 affiliated clubs throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Most lie discretely hidden behind fences and locked gates, designed to foil voyeurs who often roost like buzzards on the cliffs above clothing-optional beaches.

Membership is limited, and singles, especially of the male gender, are restricted, discouraged or banned. Each club has guidelines regarding acceptable behavior and appearance, with some banning body jewelry clipped in the wrong places. Unwanted touching, harassment or sexual contact is strictly forbidden, with inappropriate conduct swiftly punished.

“I feel safer being naked in a nudist camp than fully clothed in a library,” says one single woman.

Hawkins suggests that first timers contact a park in their area and go for a tour. She says to bring towels, lots of sunscreen and maybe insect repellent. It’s not necessary to leave the kids at home since most member clubs are family-oriented.

“My grandson was raised at a resort,” says Hawkins. “We are pretty protective of our kids. He said he couldn’t get away with anything there.” ✨