Nudist resorts are catering to affluent tourist crowd

By Evan Perez

Staff Reporter, The Wall Street Journal
Land O' Lakes, Fla.

When John Mitchell wanted to buy a $56,000, one-bedroom condominium here in 1991, he kept getting turned down for a mortgage. The problem: The condo was in a nudist resort.

But in November, when the 67-year-old nursing-home administrator and his wife, Adrian, traded up to a $135,000, two-bedroom condo, also in a local nudist development, Bank of America quickly approved their mortgage. “Everyone here now knows that we bring a lot of money to this area,” Mr. Mitchell says of his fellow nudists.

Central Florida’s Pasco County, home to six nudist resorts, has become perhaps the nation’s hottest destination for people who would rather be unclothed.

An estimated 100,000 nudists pour into the area each year, most of them sporting at least one personal belonging: a wallet.

These free spirits’ economic clout has made converts of local officials, who used to play down the presence of nudist developments in search of more mainstream visitors.

Some 18% of Americans say they would consider visiting a nude resort; volleyball is big at Paradise Lakes.

Nudists are a tiny but fast-growing niche in the tourism industry. The American Association for Nude Recreation, of Kissimmee, Fla., says it has 50,000 members, up about 20% over the past decade and now at an all-time high. Nudism may not be as widely accepted in the U.S. as in Europe, says Erich Schuttauf, the group’s executive director. But for growing numbers of people, a stay at a clothing-optional resort is becoming just another vacation experience.

The AANR counted 262 clubs and businesses catering to nudists in 2002, compared with 189 in 1983. A 2001 national survey conducted for the group found 19% of Americans have skinny-dipped in mixed company and 18% would consider visiting a clothing-optional resort or nude beach.

None of this has been lost on communities elsewhere in the country, where nudists are trying to win acceptance and local officials are looking for new revenue sources. Palm Springs, Calif., officials, eager to encourage expansion of the pricey Desert Shadows nudist resort, recently relaxed the town’s stringent building restrictions to permit construction of a pedestrian overpass – known locally as the nudist bridge – connecting parts of the resort. Local officials credit the resort with jump-starting the revival of the Uptown neighborhood, a rundown part of town once known for problems with drug dealers and prostitutes.

“We’re very proud of what they’ve done for that part of the community,” says Palm Springs Mayor Will Kleindienst, who has presided over a welcoming ceremony for a group visiting the resort. “They’ve done a lot to increase property values and increase our tax base.” Indeed, having a successful nudist resort in town, the mayor adds, could help draw more business visitors. “It could give our convention business an edge,” he notes.

In rural Paw Paw, W. Va., the Avalon, a nudist resort featuring condominiums and hotel rooms, is expanding its housing subdivision, with undeveloped lots selling for more than $40,000. Phyllis and Patrick Gaffney, owners of the resort, which is located about 2 1/2 hours outside...
Washington, say they have even hosted the local Hampshire County Chamber of Commerce banquet.

The rise of luxury nudist accommodations is actually fueling nudism’s growing popularity, says Joe Lettelleir, a nonnudist, former banker and part-owner of Paradise Lakes, a 77-acre, clothing-optional resort and housing development in Land O’Lakes. He is making plans to open more nudist resorts, starting with a second location north of Atlanta.

“[Desert Shadows has] done a lot to increase property values and increase our tax base.”

- Palm Springs Mayor Will Kleindienst

Unlike the camps of naked hippies who helped pioneer nudism back in the 1960s, the new resorts cater to an affluent – if not well-dressed – crowd. On a recent day at Paradise Lakes, the parking lot was sprinkled with Jaguars, BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes. Mr. Lettelleir says many visitors keep their clothes on at first but soon feel awkward and strip down.

On big weekends, such as the resort’s annual Halloween bash, thousands of out-of-towners drop in to play tennis and volleyball, canoe on the man-made lake, lounge by the pool and dance in the nightclub – all in the nude. Nudists tend to be in their 30s or older, although there are children, teenagers and young adults to be found at most resorts.

Many nudists find in the lifestyle a way to get closer to a natural environment, says Frank Lombino, a part-time school bus driver and Pasco nudist leader, who also runs a diving club called Nautical Nudist. They also find a measure of anonymity in a society obsessed with status, he says. “No one knows who’s the rich doctor or the lawyer once the expensive clothes come off,” he says.

No discussion with a nudist would be complete without an assertion that the lifestyle isn’t about overt sexual behavior. Some resorts prefer couples and limit visits from singles. At Paradise Lakes, officials say they keep an eye out for randy behavior at the nightclub, where suggestive dancing can get out of hand. “We do not tolerate anything sexual,” says Helle Whatley, the resort’s director of sales and hotel operations.

Still, developers have had to work hard to prove that nude tourism is a good business. When Paradise Lakes was first trying to open its doors 20 years ago, area legislators tried several times to pass a state law banning nude recreation. Banks were reluctant to provide money for the project, despite the large deposits from would-be condo owners. Even the U.S. Postal Service balked, for a time refusing to deliver mail to the community.

The county’s nudist leaders, however, mobilized to ease fears and promote their economic might. At one point, the communities organized a $2 bill campaign, with nudist residents paying in $2 bills wherever they went. “It was just a way of showing the merchants [our] strength,” says Chuck Foster, a longtime nudist leader in Pasco County and vice president of Caliente, the nudist development where Mr. Mitchell bought his new condo.

Now, times have changed. “Our nudist resorts have provided a much-needed tourist tax base,” says Pat Mulieri, a county commissioner who represents Land O’Lakes. “The resorts bring in people from out of state and from other countries.”

Paradise Lakes has begun opening its gates once a year for a nude 5K foot race that raises money for charity. Some residents have formed what they call the country’s only nude Lions Club, which raises money for the disabled and works with children in a local high school. Last year the local chamber of commerce gave Paradise Lakes its Business of the Year award.

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Dan Johnson, assistant county administrator in Pasco County, says over time the nudist resorts have come to be seen as just another part of the local business community. As the county has grown, with the spread of Tampa’s northern suburbs, new residents don’t seem to mind that nudists have been here before them.

“It isn’t something we consciously think about now because it’s always been here, it seems,” Mr. Johnson says. “They’re part of the community.”

Write to Evan Perez at evan.perez@wsj.com