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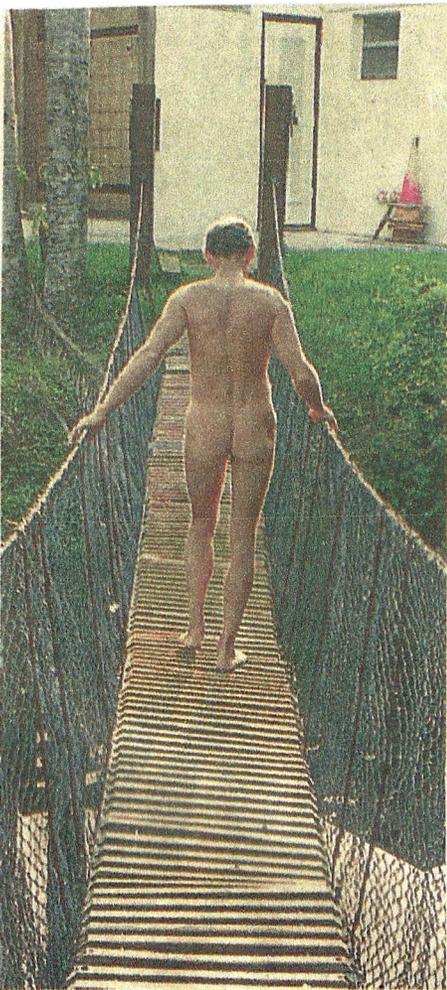
COVER STORY

Just another day in the nude

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NOTICE
THIS IS A NUDIST CLUB.
BE PREPARED TO DISROBE
INSIDE THIS GATE.
WE ARE NOT A CLOTHING
OPTIONAL CLUB.





There I was, riding butt-naked on a golf cart with an equally bare 69-year-old German man named Hugo.

I knew what to expect. The nudists told me they're tired of the mainstream media, who cover them up with black bars like they should be ashamed.

They want people to see them for what they are: families, single people, close friends who do everything we do. They just do it in the buff.

Still, it's an eye-opener.

Minutes before my ride with Hugo, I was standing in the office of Sunsport Gardens Nudist Club, a 40-acre nudist camp out in Loxahatchee. Owner Hugo Forester asked me if I was going to disrobe.

I knew I should. I knew I probably would. I'd been thinking about it (and the 15 pounds I need to lose) for weeks, most intensely during the drive to Sunsport.

"You'll notice no one's looking at you, and you're looking at everyone," Barbara Nutting, the office secretary, told me.

She gave me a towel to sit on (a big one in case I wimped out), and I headed for the bathroom.

You know how you feel when you're on a roller coaster, at the top of the hill? You know you shouldn't have ever gotten on, yet here you are and there's nothing you



can do about it?

That's how I felt.

I finally came out of the bathroom. Nobody seemed to notice.

Clockwise from the Sunsport "NOTICE" sign: Herbert Wells (in shirt) and Vernon Thompson (with newspaper and no shirt) chill out at Sunnier Palms; nude activist T.A. Wyner in front of a Sunnier Palms trailer home; Ken Hendrick crosses a bridge at Sunsport.

COVER STORY

On being a nudist...

Quotes from the nudists

"You can do your laundry all at once."

Hugo Forester, owner of Sunsport.

"It boils down to if you're an asshole with your clothes on, you're an asshole with your clothes off."

Ken Hendrick, moved to Sunsport from his 17-room house in New York with wife Debbie. He found out about nudists accidentally when he was looking up a notary in the phone book.

"Nude is beautiful. Clothes can be sexy."

Kathy Lane, 43-year-old member of Sunnier Palms.

"They accept you for what you have, and what you don't have, if you know what I mean."

35-year-old Tim from Stuart, on his second visit to Sunsport.

"People think all nudists are beautiful. We certainly are not all perfect 10s."

T.A. Wyner, 46, a founder of Sunnier Palms in Fort Pierce.

"I really think the lifestyle keeps people young. It's 99 percent stress-free. You don't have anything to prove to anybody."

Sunsport resident Sue Roberts, a 58-year-old volunteer for the PBC Red Cross.

"It's very hard for someone to intimidate you without their clothes on."

John Martin, nickname "Buff," a 50-year-old engineer at FPL in St. Lucie County. He divides his time between his Jensen Beach home and Sunnier Palms.

COVER STORY

"Won't your kids turn out to be perverts?"

And other questions most people want to know but are too chicken to ask. So we did.

What about erections?

Doesn't happen. Think about it. You're with naked women all day. You eat dinner with them in the buff. It isn't much of a novelty after that. Nude dancing (yes, they have dances every Saturday night) raises a few questions. If men can't control it, they wear shorts.

What do women do "that time of the month?"

They wear shorts.

Isn't it unsanitary?

That's why they carry and sit on towels at all times. Towels at the pool, towels on the bicycle seat, towels in the clubhouse.

Doesn't it hurt to play volleyball and tennis in the nude?

It's a free feeling, they say. You don't sweat as much. And if you do, you just jump in the shower, hassle-free.

What about bugs?

Most bugs don't like naked people. They'd rather hide between your clothes and your skin. If there's nothing to hide under, they go elsewhere.

What do you do when it's cold?

They wear clothes, stupid. Hugo Forester, owner of Sunsport in WPB, says he caves in at 60

degrees. Although the French Canadians, who visits a lot, can stand near-freezing temperatures: "They have no respect for cold," Hugo says.

Are you open sexually with each other?

Grow up. These are nudist colonies. Families camp there. And perverts aren't allowed. They check your driver's license and you need references to get in.

Won't this turn your kids into perverts?

Like your kids aren't running up and down your streets butt-naked even as we speak. Studies show kids actually turn out more normal, less judgmental, and less ashamed of their bodies.

Don't you get sunburn?

Ever heard of suntan lotion? These people have great tans. They call the rest of us bunnies or cotton-tails, referring to our white butts. On the downside, their skin turns to leather after a few years of this.

Do people try to sneak a peek?

Because of the 50 feet of dense vegetation the county requires around Sunsport, it wouldn't be easy. But sometimes planes or helicopters buzz by, Hugo says. Five minutes after he answered that question, a copter flew by, unnecessarily low.

It did get easier. Eventually, I was talking to people. Usually as a reporter, you feel in control of an interview. My brain never did digest the absurdity of what I was doing. I was naked. The person I was talking to was naked. What do you do with your hands? Your eyes?

Those questions seemed silly when I met Toni Anne Wyner, one of the founders of Sunnier Palms in St. Lucie County. I didn't have to get naked there. It was too cold. I must say I was relieved.

T.A. (unfortunate initials for a female nudist) doesn't battle with modesty. Her cause is civil rights. The former Sunsport resident has probably done more for nude rights than anyone in the state.

She's a lifetime nudist known as the woman who wore nothing but the Bill of Rights (she taped copies of the documents to her body) during a protest at MacArthur State Park in northern PBC. (She had a T-shirt over it, she says.)

She has a federal lawsuit going on against MacArthur. During National Nude Weekend in 1988, she wanted to set up an area on the park where people could learn about nudists - petitions, speakers, artwork. She even said she'd do it with her clothes on.

They let her pass out a few pamphlets but not much else. So she sued them, saying they violated her First Amendment rights.

"They'd let any of the save-the-turtle groups do the same thing I wanted to do," she says.

She told me it was legal to be naked in public. I couldn't believe it. I used to go through police reports for a living. I know people get arrested for skinny dipping, for sunbathing nude in their backyard.

"There is no law in Florida that pro-

Sunsport Gardens Nudist Club

Where: West of WPB in Loxahatche. Take Okeechobee Boulevard west about 20 miles. Take a right on D Road until it ends. Take another right on North Road and you'll see Sunsport on the left, about a block down.

Cost: \$300 a year to be a member. To camp: \$20 a day for individuals or \$25 for a couple plus \$6 a night for sites without water or electricity.

Phone: (407) 793-0423.

Sunnier Palms

Where: 8800 Okeechobee Road, Fort Pierce. Take I-95 north to the Fort Pierce exit (State Road 70). Head west, past the Turnpike about a mile. Sunnier Palms is on the right.

Cost: \$175 a year to be a member. Camping ranges from \$9 a day to \$22 a day, depending on whether you're a member.

Phone: (407) 468-8512.

Open house

Sunnier Palms is having an open house from 11 am to 2 pm Sunday, Dec. 12. Everyone will be dressed so you can see what's going on without taking anything off.

hibits nude sunbathing," T.A. says. "But you can still be wrongfully arrested in Florida for nude sunbathing."

She's been arrested twice, both times while she was trying to make her statement at MacArthur.

In the 1970s, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that indecent exposure didn't mean just being nude. There's a difference between innocent nudity and lewd nudity, they said.

"Most people are not aware of that,"

Everyday things you do that look stupid when you're naked

Collected from observations at the two nudist camps in this area:

- Riding a bicycle. Ouch. They do it by strapping a towel to the seat.
- Vacuuming out your car. Ever noticed how many awkward positions you have to get in?
- Borrowing a salad bowl from a neighbor.
- Playing volleyball wearing only a knee brace.
- Working on a computer.
- Getting hot and taking off everything as you trek through the woods.
- Unloading picnic tables from a truck, wearing only a baseball cap and work boots.

says WPB attorney Donnie Murrell, who has handled both of T.A.'s criminal cases. "Most law enforcement officers are not aware of that. Frankly, most judges are not aware of that."

So people still get arrested. People still pay the fines. T.A. and others are trying to change that. In the last few years, people arrested for being naked have filed suit. Nobody who has taken the case to trial has been convicted. If questioned, prosecutors usually drop the charges - like they did in both of T.A.'s cases.

Before you go streaking down U.S. 1, you should know that you can get arrested for disorderly conduct.

"It's not against the law to be nude in the state of Florida and that would include walking down Clematis," Murrell says. "But if you walk down Clematis and people start hooting and hollering, you could get arrested. You probably won't, in most situations, have a problem finding someone in a crowd who's offended by nudity."

I spent three days with nudists and wondered myself by the end why people get offended by nudity. Although I still wasn't comfortable being naked, I wondered why we even bother to wear clothes.

It's obvious why: We're taught to be somewhat ashamed of our bodies. And nobody's happy with what they've got.

It occurred to me that I've never seen so many naked people who weren't perfect. They're overweight. Their breasts sag. Any flesh we see - at least in such great quantities - is flesh of perfect people.

Would we all be so modest if we had perfect bodies?

These people aren't perfect and they aren't judgmental. In a nudist camp, a bum on the corner looks the same as a state senator.

It's stranger than I'd like to admit to talk to someone that you have no way of defining, other than by what they say. Most people at the camps didn't know what the others did for a living or whether they had problems paying rent every month.

"You don't know if it's a \$40 suit or a \$400 suit because there is no suit," T.A. says.

Unfortunately, that's probably too simple for most of us.