

The naked truth

Naturism may be having a moment, but for many 1970s fans, the joys of baring all never went away...

by LUISA METCALFE



Prepare to bust out your SPF, grab your towel and get naked, because taking off your clothes is in again. But forget Gwyneth Paltrow-like poses in your birthday suit on Instagram to celebrate turning 50; this isn't about exhibitionism or showing off a gym-toned body. Instead, we're returning to a simpler time of feeling the sun on our backs, the grass under our feet and water on our skin. Yes, naturism is back.

Around 1.3 million people enjoy 'social nudity' (although British Naturism, the UK official naturists' organisation, puts the number as high as 6.75 million). And celebrities such as Esther Rantzen, Ulrika Jonsson and Kate Humble have extolled the virtues of spending time in the nude.

The pandemic appears to have driven up numbers, as workers – stuck at home with no fears of any unannounced visitors – got into the habit of wandering around starkers. During the first lockdown in 2020, British Naturism, founded in 1964, saw a dramatic growth in new members. Now businesses have got in on the act with lidos offering naked swims and restaurants putting nude dining nights on the menu.

The resurgence echoes the era when naturism first emerged after the First World War and flu pandemic, when people wanted to feel free and explore new ways of living, argues Annebella Pollen, author of naturist history *Nudism in a Cold Climate*.

And while it may appear that naturism is a hot new trend, many mid- and late-lifers have been enjoying it since the Seventies and Eighties. In fact, when it comes to being comfortable in their own skin, the Saga generation is frequently ahead of the curve. 'When you strip off your clothes, you strip off your cares,' says Andrew Welch, 57, spokesperson for British Naturism.

Retired teacher Vivienne Heenan and her husband Duncan, a former company director, both 74, who live in the West Midlands, met at university in 1967 and quickly fell into their clothing-free lifestyle. 'Neither of us suffered from the body shame that is passed off as "modesty", so nudity between us was normal and unremarkable from early on,' says Duncan. 'To us,

our bodies are what we live in, not status symbols or shameful things to be hidden.

'Over the years, we have acquired the lumps, bumps, scars and blemishes life brings, but they have been accepted because we know what real people look like, and that the Hollywood images so many people aspire to are largely artifice.'

The couple, who first visited a naturist beach on the Isle of Wight, and later naturist beaches in the South of France, say they were following their instincts and it was once they met other naturists that they discovered their lifestyle had a name.

'We found we preferred the ambience of shared values, which made for a more community feeling than on "textile" [the term used by naturists to describe people who prefer to wear clothes] beaches; plus there were the practical advantages, especially with young children, of no wet costumes, no ludicrous towel dances, and much easier sand management,' says Duncan.

In the early Eighties, stripping off on beaches or in saunas may have been *de rigueur* on the Continent, but in Britain, a confused 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' attitude to anything nudity-related prevailed. So people kept their clothes on in public but didn't blink an eye over naked torsos splashed on page three.

Fortunately, Duncan and Vivienne didn't feel judged by their peers. 'People's reactions ranged

from polite interest to indifference but none disapproved, and a few people admitted to at least trying it themselves,' says Duncan. 'We were very central to local society, being involved with youth groups, our children's schools, church and our jobs. Though we were not evangelical about it, we didn't keep our naturism secret.'

With its roots in the early 20th century, naturism was initially an antidote to the era's restrictive clothes – tight collars and studs, corsets, laced shoes. It was practised largely privately among like-minded people in small groups with names such as 'Sun Ray club' and 'New Health Society'. Naturism even had a royal moment when King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson skinny dipped off Croatia's island of Rab.

'In the early days leading up to the 1960s, it was very private,' explains Welch. 'People didn't even give their real names at naturist clubs. It was in the Seventies and Eighties when

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☹️ topless sunbathing became a thing. But there was an erroneous connection between nudity and sex. People would think that if you're on a campsite and you have no clothes on, something raunchy was going on. But that's not the case.'

In 1978, the UK's first officially naked beach was declared in Hastings; the following year the BBC made *Let's Go Naked*, a documentary on the thriving naturist community; and in 1980, Brighton beach set aside a stretch for nudity.

During the Nineties and pre-recession 2000s, naturism retreated from the headlines but the lifestyle continued to grow. 'Since 2004 it's been legal to be nude on all beaches,' says Welch.

The Crown Prosecution Service outlines that naturists can be naked outside designated nude beaches, for instance, 'in the absence of any sexual context and in relation to nudity where the person has no intention to cause alarm or distress'. (However,

many naturists prefer the company of their community, not to mention the more egalitarian experience of being one of many unclothed people rather than the only one.)

In 2010, Vivienne was ordained as an Anglican priest and declared she was a naturist during her selection process. 'We discovered several members of the congregation who were regular users of our local naturist beach,' adds Duncan. Soon after, the couple joined the Christian Naturist Fellowship, where members, who include clergy, can discuss their faith in a clothing-free environment.

Younger people may be discovering the joys of naturism, but the Heenans are contented

veterans of the movement. 'It has given us a lot of pleasure and kept us and our kids clear of the body phobias and hang-ups that seem to cause so many people grief,' says Duncan.

Today, one of the attractions of naturism is as an escape from a selfie-obsessed society in which social media filters are used so widely, and where beauty icons are heavily airbrushed. 'As a naturist you accept yourself for what you are,' says retired nurse Suzanne Piper, 74, who has

been a naturist since 1976. 'I've had several operations for polycystic ovarian syndrome but I'm not bothered about my scars.'

So, if you're curious about naturism, how do you get started? The easiest way is to visit a naturist beach. 'Once you get into a naturist environment, you realise that everybody is normal, you're not walking around in a field of supermodels and no one's judging you,' says Welch.

There are a few guidelines:

'You must swim naked in swimming pools,' adds Welch. 'It's to do with the philosophy, but also hygiene – you're not bringing in dirt or traces of laundry detergent. Lastly, if it's bad behaviour when you have your clothes on, it's bad behaviour with your clothes off. You don't stare at people on the tube, or make comments about people's boobs or bums, and you don't do that in a naturist place either,' he says. 'We laugh when people ask about the rules as there really aren't any. Just be nice and be normal.'

But the true appeal lies in the experience itself, he says: 'It's the joy of the sense of wonderment and feeling of not having clothes and we can all benefit from that.' ☘️

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LET IT ALL HANG OUT

Six of the UK's best naturist spots and activities

*** Nudefest** This week-long festival (3-9 July, Thorney Lakes, Somerset) has naked fitness, music acts and discos. nudefest.co.uk

*** Studland Beach** A 1km stretch of Studland Bay,

Dorset, is set aside for naturists.

*** Morfa Dyffryn** One kilometre of this long sandy beach on the west coast of Wales is clothing-free.

*** Naked Heart Walks** Annual fundraising walks

for the British Heart Foundation. shop.bn.org.uk/pages/bhf

*** The Great British Skinny Dip** Thousands of people strip off for swims in pools, lakes and the sea around the UK to raise money for the British

Heart Foundation. greatbritishskinnydip.co.uk

*** Clover Spa & Hotel** Britain's only naturist spa, near Birmingham, has treatments, a sauna, steam room, hot tub and café. cloverspa.co.uk