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THE NAKED TRUTH

Darryl and Ronnie Jones will spend this weekend as they do most weekends—without a stitch of clothing. For this nudist couple, nothing could be more natural than *au naturel*, but for most of us it's kind of strange. So who's weirder, them or us? **PAGE 12**

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nudist (n) a person who engages in the practice of going naked wherever possible.

But why? What's the point? **Steve Pennells** gets his kit off and discovers that Perth's naturists are an ageing band of body image idealists battling society's hang-ups.

A NATURAL STATE

YOU MUST BE THE MAN I'M LOOKING FOR," Helen Black says, striding confidently through the carpark of the Sunseekers Nudist Club wearing nothing but a pair of pink ugg boots and a smile. An autumn chill has kept most club members either indoors or in a more conventional state of dress, but Black is nude bar the boots. "The trick is to get out of bed and start the day naked," she says by way of a tip. "If you do that, your body is conditioned to the temperature. But if you get dressed in the morning and take your clothes off later, you'll be cold." She leads the way through the carpark, past two neat rows of chalets and across a grassed area which opens up into the camp's main recreation ground — clubhouse on the left, a swimming pool in the distance and that obligatory nudist requirement, a volleyball court with its own beach sand.

As the clouds gather overhead and block out the last bit of sun, Black drapes a pink shawl across her shoulders which is so thin its purpose is more decoration than modesty. But then modesty doesn't really have a place in these 5ha of sprawling bushland just out of Perth, where people have been getting their kit off since 1962.

"Everything you see on this club ground has been built by the members," Black says, walking through the grounds and waving at a group of dimpled, shameless bodies lounging by the barbecue area. "The double-storey clubhouse, the chalets, duplexes, tennis court, the pool, everything has been built by the members."

The club is wary of strangers — especially media — after an unfortunate open day a few years ago where faces were filmed and shown on TV without permission.

"We've got judges, lawyers and TV personalities and they just can't afford for everyone to know, because being a nudist has got a stigma attached to it," Black says. As she settles in her cabin a few minutes later, she decides to mount a pre-emptive strike against a perception that hasn't been aired but, to an outsider at least, is the proverbial elephant in the nudist resort: "And this is strictly a family club!"

But surely the shedding of ambitions and the abundance of flesh would lead to, well, the inevitable? Black sighs. "You tell people you belong to a nudist club and straight away they're thinking sex parties, swingers, all that sort of stuff. That is why a lot of people don't tell other people that they are nudists because straight away they'll get stigmatised and people will think they're into that kind of stuff."

"The nudist movement has moved so far back from that that it's not funny. You get caught doing anything like that in the club grounds and you'll be thrown out." Black's frustration is one felt by



WANT TO BANK NAKED? SHOP NAKED? DINE NAKED?

In her office at the University of Sydney, Dr Ruth Barcan has for years wrestled with philosophy, religion, literature, popular culture and personal experience to analyse the nudity/clothing dialectic, the metaphorical uses of nakedness and the make-up of anti-nude attitudes. But she struggles to explain why Australians remain so shy about looking at each other in the flesh. The most likely explanation, she says, lies in what was happening here when nudism swept through Europe.

"At the time of Australia's nation-building there was a distancing for most people from the European fine art tradition," she says. "Europeans have got that through education and through it being part of the fine art repertoire of the country. There is at least a stock of meanings there that associate nudity with something other than sex — with idealism, with heroism, with truth, with authenticity and all those sorts of things. But we are more distant from that kind of tradition."

"Another possibility is that clothing was such an important part of the colonial project. All the impetus was about 'clothing the natives'. Nakedness was perhaps a sign of savagery. And the real decades for the emergence of nudism in Europe were the 1920s and 1930s. It came out of so many things. It came out of sexology. It came out of eugenics. It came out of socialism. But it was also a very explicitly anti-urban kind of movement."

"It was borne in part by a lament of the losses brought about by modernity — that we'd become distanced from nature, that life in the cities was unhealthy and polluted, that there was so much smog in the air. So it was in part a modern movement because early nudists literally thought there would be a nudist revolution and a nudist future. And it thought that this was rational and reasonable and that science proved it right."

"But on the other hand it was also anti-modern in that it was a critique of city life and there was this sort of mythic call back to a natural past. So at the very time when that is all going on, this is a time in Australia where we're still building the cities. So a call back to nature made less sense in a place where cities were hardly overcrowded at that point or smog-ridden or full of millions of people."

It is Sunday afternoon and eight middle-aged friends have gathered under the patio of a Greenmount home, sans clothing, and are halfway through their second bottle of wine. It's not ideal but the Apollo Nudist Club has been meeting here out of necessity for the past few weeks. Their last venue was sold by its owners and a bigger building in Wattleup used for club events (rented from the Club Oz swingers' club but Apollo members insist their use was above board), was doused in petrol and set on fire in February last year, destroying half the complex.

Now they are meeting in club president Brian Hall's backyard, with a tarpaulin shielding the neighbours from the naked gathering.

"Australia does need to get out of the Victorian era and give us more freedom," Hall says. "There is nothing wrong with nudity. It's the way you were born. Why should we have to hide behind high fences? That's what we're forced to do — hide. And I can't see why." His wife and the club's secretary, Michelle, pours another glass of wine and asks rhetorically: "How many of the nudists do we know that literally hide? They won't even tell their families." Around the table, the group takes turns listing personal examples of how they had been misunderstood or vilified for being naturists.

"We had best friends and one night the wife said, 'ah it was beautiful last night, around midnight, and we got into the pool naked and just lay there,'" says one of the group, Sally.



"I told her that we were nudists. They never spoke to us again. Now work that out. They think it's a front for a swingers' group."

"We live in a lifestyle village. And one woman there told me she showers with the door locked so her husband can't come in and see her. I really can't understand it."

The problem is emblematic of the challenge facing naturists. Ask them why they enjoy going naked and the responses are about feeling natural, enjoying the environment and mixing with people of all backgrounds. But persuading the wider world that naturism is not about sex and gawping is not easy.

"I think there has probably been an intermingling of that," Spruik concedes later, when asking about the common perception that nudism is linked to swinging.

"My personal belief is that people who are swingers are more likely to be nudists but people who are nudists aren't necessarily likely to be swingers. If you're comfortable going nude with a group of people you're having sex with then going nude socially is not such a big step. It's a step back if anything."

"But our attitude is to try to desexualise nudity and the clubs have strict rules. Too many people don't see the difference between sex and nudity, unfortunately."

It was a warm day in February 2000 when Les Cook decided to test the limits of Perth's moral boundaries by taking a naked woman on a tour of the city. He recruited a stripper, drove her across town and photographed her as she filled the car with petrol, strolled along the South Perth foreshore and took in the sights of Burswood.

He wasn't just prepared to be arrested, he expected it. But the only response he got was the amused or bemused reaction of onlookers.

"It was all done light-heartedly," Cook recalls. "It was done in a natural situation. A girl was just going for a walk. It wasn't provocative. I wanted to prove a point ... that it's not as big a deal as people make out."

"And you know what? No one complained."

Similarly, the Apollo Nudist Club's regular river cruises, winery tours and houseboat excursions have failed to raise more than the occasional eyebrow. "We did a full weekend up in York — wine tours, wine tasting and the whole event was nude," says Hall, "even the bus tour around town. It was brilliant. We're going to do it again this year."

"We've been doing the boat cruise on the river for years. We've actually had the river police cruising alongside and waving at us."

"One time, when I got back to work, one of the blokes said to me 'I was fishing on the weekend and this boatload of nude people came through ... you wouldn't believe it'."

"And I said, 'yes, I would. I was one of them!'"



But where there is innocent nudity, can gynophilia be far behind? From the heads that bob up in the sand dunes of Swanbourne beach to the rubber-neckers who loiter with cameras at the Nude Olympics, naturists are battling the sad fact that naked bodies are going to attract people interested in something other than free body culture.

For Black, one of the biggest battles is trying to force a separation of nudity from sex in the country's mindset.

She has been known to argue with newsagents (with occasional success) that naturist magazines should be displayed on shelves next to hobby magazines, not Playboy and Penthouse.

For Hall, the fact that the censor's warning rating for films bundles "sex and nudity" together is a sign of the uphill battle. "The danger of not separating sex from nudity is precisely the kind of moral panic that we're seeing at the moment," Barcan says.

"I mean, it's a great impoverishment of our bodies to think that they have only one meaning when stripped of clothes. And I think

THE DECLINE OF NUDISM

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that leads to moral panic and it leads to us really missing the point on serious questions like body image. And I think one very important context in which the increasing fear about nudity needs to be seen is that example of the generalised shame and fear of the body. And as that increases then the fear of nudity increases."

She says rising hysteria over Australia's supposed "obesity epidemic" may have contributed to our compulsion to cover up. A Mission

Australia survey, published last December, found people aged 11 to 24 were more worried about their body image than any other issue.

"We think we're becoming more liberal as a society but in fact, hating your body isn't a sign of liberalisation," Barcan says. "On the one hand we've become much more open and much more liberal in certain kinds of ways but in another way, we're quite a body-hating society because we see such a narrow range of body ideals paraded relentlessly day after day in the media."

"I suppose the things that shocks me most is the modesty of schoolkids and that the modesty is bound up so often with a dislike of their own bodies ... the fear of nakedness."

"Maybe they grow out of it but I was quite shocked by it. And I'm often shocked in my students when you teach courses on the body. It's quite evident that so few of them, especially the women, like their bodies. That I found disturbing."

"That's certainly clear about nudism. It defines itself against the culture of the body beautiful."

"Naturists in Australia imagine their practice as a lifestyle, as a relaxation practice, more than anything else. So that's the way

Clockwise from left Members of the Apollo Nudist Club share a spa. Picture: Steve Fennells

Sunseekers Nudist Club president Helen Black talks to a club member by the pool in the group's Hovea grounds. Picture: Steve Fennells

Apollo members on a naked winery tour through York and the Avon Valley. Picture: Sara Paton

liberalism has played out in nudism. It's sort of laissez-faire.

"And that makes it clear that it isn't about the body beautiful because the body ain't beautiful when it's bending down doing ordinary everyday tasks in the kitchen or going tenpin bowling. If you're going to show off your body, that's not the way to do it."

Since Adam and Eve covered themselves with foliage, shame has surrounded the naked body. Most of Perth's nudists remain closeted and the clubs are fiercely protective of their membership lists. Jones says he is frustrated more naturists aren't prepared to stand up and identify themselves to break the stigma surrounding the lifestyle.

"If only all children could grow up in a nudist environment, the outlook and the way they behave in the world out there today would be a lot different because they don't have to worry about all that sexual stigma and all that build-up about how all the girls have to be skinny and look like skeletons. It is just about being yourself."

Back in Greenmount, the Apollo members have eased into the spa for warmth. It is a bubbling mix of paaty bodies with each flaw displayed for all to see and summarily ignored.

"People who want something else from these clubs ... we can suss them out and won't let them join," Michelle Hall says, "but most don't come back when they realise that there's nothing going on here." Another member, Fred, laughs at the thought of anything untoward. "We're just a bunch of boring old farts sitting around naked and talking rubbish. How much fun can it be?" ■