

The naked attraction

Do you regard rambling in the nude as freedom at its finest, a walking nightmare, or a bit of both? To those who do it, there is nothing quite so liberating...



ONE OF THE most common recurring dreams people have is of being naked in a public place. Ask a psychologist why you're having this dream and they might tell you it's to do with feeling vulnerable, anxious or worried about how others perceive you.

For most, it's an uncomfortable dream. But some walkers make public nudity a reality, and their experiences of it couldn't be more contrary. "You feel like you're on top of the world. You're just there with the sun on your skin, the wind on your skin – you've got to try it to totally appreciate it."

Peter Whiston is the chairman of Naturist Ramblers, a group of like-minded souls who walk regularly throughout southern England. "I've always enjoyed walking, and did the Pennine Way not long after it first opened about 50 years ago. When you get up onto the high hills, with the views, it's absolutely stunning. I've also always felt totally at ease without clothes on. Being naked is second nature to me... first nature, almost."

For Peter, who lives in Bromley, south-east London, it seemed natural to put these two passions together. "I joined a naturist club and they had extensive grounds with woods, and it was just fun to walk through the woods naked."

"Then I saw an advertisement for naturist walks, and one was fairly local, so I tried it."

This was in the late 1990s and Peter had joined the SOC Singles Outdoor Club, from which Naturist Ramblers was eventually born as a separate entity. From the start, Peter felt totally at ease walking with the group. "It's so much nicer to be *at nature with nature*. It's a bit like swimming without a costume. When you put a swimming costume back on, it just feels like the wrong thing to do. And it's the same when walking without clothes on. You're doing something that is totally natural, getting healthy exercise, chatting away to like-minded people. Then having to put your clothes on again at the end of the walk is a complete pain."

Even in winter, I ask? "I'm a fair weather walker, so I only do the warmer walks, but the club do walks all through the year. If you get a sunny day, even in winter, people might strip off for a period. It's alright so long as you don't stop walking!

"We carry waterproofs and warm clothes, of course. We *are* responsible ramblers. The last thing we want is to be calling the emergency services."

Peter has particular affection for the South Downs Way, and when we chatted, he had recently returned from a group trip to Five Lords, west of Eastbourne, in perfect summer conditions. However, the national trail hasn't always been as accessible as it is today for naturist walkers.

In 2018 the College of Policing published new guidelines on policing nudity in public places, where it states: *'In the lawful situation where there is an absence of any sexual context in relation to nudity and where the person does not intend the behaviour to be, and is not aware that it may be disorderly, it will not be appropriate to take any police action.'*

Prior to this, the rules about being naked in public had been unclear, but the new guidelines changed everything for Peter and his friends. "It opened up a lot more walks that we were now happy to do. Take the South Downs Way – it's jaw-droppingly wonderful with magnificent views. But, of course, you get quite a few people on it and prior

Above: The group Naturist Ramblers arranges walks to beautiful places all through the year.

Below left: Peter Whiston describes naked walking as total escapism.

Below right: Fiona Discombe says inhibitions are soon forgotten once you get started.





to 2018 we didn't do it too much, as we knew we were going to have to keep covering up.

"But now we do large swathes of the South Downs Way and, quite frankly, we couldn't give a monkeys if we meet people because we just say 'good afternoon', and walk past in all our splendour. We give them a cheerful smile and 99 times out of 100 we get a cheerful smile back."

I ask Peter whether he has encountered anyone who has been openly unhappy about his nudity in the British countryside. "Not for many, many years, and not since the clarification in 2018," he replies. A long time ago the group encountered landowners who wanted them to either cover up or get off their land. "But the vast majority of people who go walking are open minded enough to not be bothered by it really."

The group itself has its own guidelines to help keep potential problems at bay, such as covering up when passing people's homes, when walking on roads, and when passing children.

If someone is uncomfortable when passing naked ramblers, Peter's advice is simply to look away. "You're walking *past* someone, not *with* them. It's not much more than a fleeting glance and if you really don't like what we're doing then look away."

It appears we're likely to see more naked walkers in the countryside over the coming years. An Ipsos poll suggests 14% of people in Britain describe themselves as naturists, compared to just 2% in 2001. Naturist Ramblers alone has more than 200 members – a figure that is consistently rising.

And though the group is mostly men, there are female members too. Fiona Discombe joined Naturist Ramblers with her husband Michael around four years ago. The couple have been avid naturists since a trip to the Greek islands in 1994.

"When you're walking naked, you experience all the elements on your body," says Fiona, who runs a naked travel company with Michael (*nakedtravels.net*). "If you're walking on the beach, for instance,

and you go into the sea then come out again, you get that sort of lovely tingly sensation – it's an exhilarating feeling. You get the sense of being free and not restricted by anything – it's great for your health and mental wellbeing."

Fiona admits that some women might feel it would be difficult to join a male-dominated naturist walking group, especially if they're on their own. But she says there are ways to make it easier.

"I would say the best thing would be to go with someone like myself or – if you can – find a woman who's quite up for doing it, go along with them, and just explain to the group that you're a little bit nervous, so they're aware of how you're feeling."

"Also, you could visit a naturist environment first, so you can gauge whether you want to go that step further. You can meet people and tell them you're thinking about going for a walk, but that you don't want to go on your own as a woman, and ask if there's anyone who can go with you."

Fiona says that, once women start the walks, they tend to get used to things very quickly. "I've been with a few ladies that have come for the first time, and afterwards they've said they don't know what they were worried about. Once they start walking and talking, they forget all those inhibitions. At the end, most women are like, 'that was so cool – I want to come and do another one'."

Peter Whiston says the group is open for everyone to give it a try. "No one is under any obligation to strip off. If you don't like it, then that's fair enough. But a common reaction every time we go on one of these walks is that it's like going on holiday for a day. It's that sort of buzz. It's total escapism, doing something you wouldn't normally do, freedom, getting out into the countryside, with like-minded people. It's just a very, very pleasant day out." **CW**

● If you want to give naked walking a go, visit naturistramblers.co.uk or bn.org.uk

The group normally organises weekday walks, as they're more likely to get the countryside all to themselves.