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FIRST PERSON

# My naked summer — how I stripped off and got into naturism

It all started with a skinny-dip in the sea during the heatwave. Then a nude ramble in the countryside. So what happened when Jane Mulkerrins got her kit off?



Jane Mulkerrins on a naked ramble and naked camping

ROBERT WILSON FOR THE TIMES MAGAZINE

Jane Mulkerrins

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**I**t's a blazing July afternoon – hot, but with a robust breeze – and I'm seven miles into a 12-mile hike along the South Downs Way, with views across the scorched hills beyond Bognor Regis to the Isle of Wight. I'm also naked but for a backpack, tennis visor and trainers. And I'm in good – if entirely male – company; today's naked hike is made up of me and 20 late (to very late) middle-aged men. These are the first men who have seen me naked in months (like the country, I have been experiencing a prolonged dry spell). Yet, improbably, as I'm ambling

along it has almost slipped my mind that we're all completely starkers. Until, that is, we come across a cyclist, runner or dog-walker, and I feel myself blush beneath my visor.

Chances are, they've seen it all before, since a rapidly increasing number of Britons are shedding their inhibitions along with their trousers. An estimated 1.3 million now regularly get their kit off in public, with numbers rising measurably in the past few years, thanks in part to hotter, longer summers and the lockdowns, which uncoupled workers from their wardrobes, reunited them with the joys of the great outdoors and forced a greater focus on mental and physical wellbeing – which naturism's proponents claim to be its biggest benefits.

More than 15,000 people attended organised naturist events across the UK last year, while in the first lockdown in 2020, the association British Naturism saw the fastest growth in new members since its inception in 1964. Businesses are now cottoning on to the power of the so-called “buff pound” too – lidos are offering naked swims, holiday resorts and travel companies are marketing clothing-optional trips, and restaurants are running naked dining nights. There has even been a rash (sorry) of naked festivals across the UK this summer.

I don't hate my body so much that I have to have sex with the lights off, but a natural-born naturist I am not. However, since I do fancy a proper, all-over, teak tan, and as Britain is sizzling like southern Spain, what better, hotter time to test out the reported glories of stripping off for the summer?



Jane Mulkerrins enjoys her walk with Nat Ram across the South Downs near Amberley in West Sussex

## Naked hiking

My naked summer has handily coincided with a stint housesitting for my best friend in Brighton – and the south coast, I happily discover, is a hotbed of public nakedness right now. I sign up for a walk with Nat Ram – a naturist group who walk every week, May to September – that starts at a pub near the village of Amberley, a couple of trains and a short cycle away.

John, the club secretary, who has let me tag along today, greets me as I clamber sweatily off my bike. “You might lose a few pounds this afternoon,” he chirps. He is referring to the high temperatures, but it’s not really the thing any woman wants to hear when she’s about to take her clothes off. Clumsy comments aside though, they seem like a good bunch, sipping on real ale outside the country boozier, comparing which A-roads they took to get here.

We set off down country lanes. I have no idea when the disrobing will happen. As we approach a field, Frank, whom I’ve already clocked as a bit of a free spirit, whips off his clothes, including his shoes, leaving just his Crocodile Dundee hat. The rest of the party demurely wait until we’re beyond the gate to get into what they call “our uniform”. Aside from noticing the enviable all-over tans, I strictly adhere to the first rule of naturism: look everyone in the eye, and try not to let your gaze wander below the neck.

I am advised to carry something – a sarong, or similar – to wrap around myself when we need to cross roads or in case we pass any “textiles” (naturist code for The Clothed) who seem like they might be offended. I realise that I don’t know what the rules on naked hiking even are.

Nigel, an architect and longtime naturist, explains that his hobby is and always has been legal, so long as there is no intent to cause alarm, distress or harassment, and there is no sexual offence being committed. Cyclists and dog-walkers all pass us cheerfully, and not a single hiker reaches for his shorts. The only time we cover up is in crossing the thundering A29.

We stop for lunch at Great Bottom (of course we do), where my hiking mates whip out their Tupperware and sprawl, legs apart and testicles untrammelled, under the huge oak tree. I clamp my legs together and sit primly with my knees up, never more aware of my womanhood as I tear into my falafel wrap.





Nat Ram ramblers on a hike in West Sussex

I ask, for about the 15th time, why there are no other women here. Women do come sometimes, they insist. They'd like it to be a more mixed group, but then they say things like, "Don't try to understand women," and I think: maybe that's part of the reason. But they really couldn't be a less threatening or testosterone-charged lot.

Greg, a retired Anglican priest and former hospital chaplain, chuckles about what his old congregations would make of his new hobby (spoiler: they wouldn't have taken it well). Bill joined the group during lockdown after losing his partner to Covid; he's also a member of the Christian Naturist Fellowship. David, a banker in his late forties, has been trying various naturist activities for a few years, since he developed the autoimmune disease vitiligo. "I'm inviting you to have a look," he tells me, cheerily, and I warily glance left to see he is motioning for me to examine his penis, which indeed has patchy pigmentation. "Oh," I say. "Right. Yes. That is vitiligo." Going naked was, he says, about refusing to hide away or give into shame. "Once you've got over the self-consciousness, you think: 'What was all the fuss about?' " he says.

He's right. I'm really not worrying about what my body looks like to anyone here. And it does feel good, this sunny walk without sweaty T-shirts or chafing shorts. It feels free – in more ways than just the obvious. "Naturism is a great leveller," observes Nigel. Without clothes, you don't know anyone's job, income or status, he points out. When we finally arrive back at the field, I'm almost reluctant to put my clothes back on.

## Skinny-dipping

Swimming has always made more sense to me naked. Unless you're scuba diving or swimming the Channel, why would you want to wear clothes, when the visceral sensation of water on skin is so pleasurable? Skinny-dipping is also the ideal gateway for the hesitant – when you're underwater, nobody can see your bits.

On a late balmy Sunday afternoon, I cycle 22 miles along the coast to Arundel for an organised skinny-dip in the town's lido, which sits in the shadow of Arundel Castle. Part of the Great British Skinny Dip, a series of naked swims at pools across the country, I'd been envisaging some sort of south coast version of a Las Vegas pool party.

It's not that. There is a neat, well-kept 18-metre pool, colourfully painted wooden changing booths, and around 40 naked sorts enjoying the last of the afternoon sun on plastic loungers. There's a tinny speaker playing Kate Bush, and a small barbecue is being fired up. It's a little more low-key than the Las Vegas pool parties I've been to. Also unlike Vegas, at 44 I appear to be again the youngest here, and again it's overwhelmingly male.

In the water though, I am relieved finally to find a few other women. Julia, 49, has begun swimming naked this year at her local, unofficial nudist beach in Shoreham. "There's a playfulness in it that strips away all the programming and all the inhibitions that have built up over my life, and it leaves me feeling freer and more comfortable with myself," she says. "It also feels like a protest against all that programming." She can't, however, persuade any of her female friends to join her, and, like me, has found naturism dramatically male-dominated so far.

It makes sense, we muse as we bob about – women's bodies have been objectified and scrutinised and criticised for millennia, whereas men have historically been judged on their deeds and words. Stands to reason that they're happier letting it all hang out under an oak tree than we are.

It is rapidly becoming evident to me that while its numbers might be going up, if it really wants to capture a younger, more female market, naturism needs a rebrand.

Sitting by the pool in the evening sun is Fiona, who until recently ran Max's Garden, a naturist retreat near Pulborough, with her husband Michael, who now operate Naked Travels, a holiday company organising naturist trips. "It feels very stuck in the past. Naturism needs dragging into the 21st century," she says. "And it's got to come out of the closet and stop feeling like some sort of secret society," says Michael.

In spite of what I've seen so far, there are more women participating in naturist activities year on year, says Fiona, but many do it quietly, and are coming at it from a different angle. "They are much more about body positivity and being in tune with the environment," she says. And what younger nudists are interested in, says Michael, "is not 'naturism' – they don't like the connotations – but doing things 'clothes-free'".

Even Andrew Welch of British Naturism agrees. "You go swimming naked, you're a naturist. That's the dictionary definition of what we do. But the label can be a bit of a barrier," he says, conjuring up ideas of "nut cutlets and grey-haired old men with beards playing volleyball in the rain".

I also realise that organised, sanctioned fun is not really my speed. I meet some lovely people at the Arundel pool, but I prefer a bit of spontaneity with my skinny-dip.

On a scorching 32C Saturday afternoon, I pedal to Brighton's renowned nudist beach. I've been down here a few times already on weekdays, when it's quieter, but today it is a total scene. Men, women, old, young, thin, fat, white, brown (and very brown, and mahogany), it is a seething mass of naked bodies, and it feels radical. You rarely get to see so many real naked bodies en masse, with all their imperfections, all the sagging, wrinkling, scars, bellies, boobs and bums.

I instantly feel ten thousand times more confident about my own, and stride proudly naked into the water. OK, yes, I am still wearing my neoprene swimming boots, but you try walking out of the water and up a pebbly beach confidently, naked and barefoot.

One morning on the beach, my friend Melissa takes a set of naked shots of me, shouting encouraging affirmations as I frolic in the buff. I feel like Beyoncé. Later, when she AirDrops me 330 photos of my own backside, I feel less like Beyoncé.



Being naked in public is one thing; seeing hundreds of images of myself naked is another matter entirely.



Naked tennis

ROBERT WILSON FOR THE TIMES MAGAZINE

## Naked camping

My winning streak with the weather couldn't last. The day I am due to visit Apollo Sun Club, a naturist club in deepest Sussex, storms are sweeping the South East.

By the time I arrive, the rain has relented, but it's not exactly balmy. Nonetheless, members are merrily wandering around without a stitch on.

Built in the Fifties, the sweet, slightly twee Apollo has 30 cabins, owned by members, plus a camping site, pool, sauna, clubhouse and children's play area. Trevor, who looks after the camping, has kindly pitched a tent for me, where after a tour of the site, I get undressed. I realise there's a fundamental flaw in the design of the human body: no pockets. Maybe this is one of the reasons why naturism is so liberating: you can't have your phone on you. Maybe this is also why young people are so reluctant to join in.

There's a communal dinner tonight – paella for 20. At a long table, with wine and beer flowing, it feels like a warm, convivial French campsite. And to my relief, owing to the nip in the air, almost everyone has put their clothes on. The members are all incredibly welcoming, but I'm not sure I'm ready for naked dining with strangers just yet.

Sleeping starkers in the tent is a little less blissful than I'd hoped. The roar of the A23 beyond the fence isn't quite the soothing white noise I've been assured it becomes. In the morning, with a wet mist hanging over the site, I head to the shower block (mixed, communal) in as many clothes as I can find (not many). Everyone else is wandering through the mist in their birthday suit.

## Naked yoga

This, I think, should be a doddle, [as I've done it before](#) – admittedly only in a one-on-one situation, on a Zoom, and I found even that pretty excruciating. So it's testament to how far I have come in a few weeks that on a Sunday morning, I stroll confidently into the naked yoga class near Amersham.

Fiona, the teacher today, is clothed, but the rest of the class – three men, three women and me, aged from teens to sixties – is starkers but for the odd compression sock.

I could pretend that I worried about waxing before class, but I didn't – I'm probush and proud. I do, however, harbour concerns about working my angles. On the hike, I could eat my lunch with knees up and legs clamped together, but I've no idea how to do Sukhasana – sitting cross-legged – without giving Fiona a gynaecological eyeful. I wonder if perhaps she has devised a special practice to minimise major flashing. As we get going, it appears she has not. But within minutes I've forgotten that she can probably see my internal organs as I'm focusing on my breathing, admiring my improving tan, and feeling grateful not to have a T-shirt flapping about.

I feel a bit silly the first time I do downward dog, but soon get over it as I intuit that there are some serious yogis here. The seven of us are arranged in a shallow horseshoe shape, which means we can't see much of what each other is doing – by design. The only time I actively look around is when I become aware that one of my classmates in my peripheral vision is killing it. Sue, for example (grey-haired, lean, fifties), has been holding Bakasana, or crow pose, for what feels like half an hour, and Steve to my left (tall, forties, making audible yoga breathing sounds a lot) is not far behind her. Clearly, in this class, the yoga comes first, the nudity second.

I'm pretty useless, as usual, at the yoga, but I am thrilled by how little I now care about the naked bit. If I were going to take up yoga on the reg (I'm not), I'd seriously consider finding a clothes-free class.





Naked boules

## Naked members' clubs

Buried deep in the leafy Buckinghamshire countryside, with its gin and Jags and polo shirts, behind high hedges and access-code-operated gates, Diogenes Sun Club near Chalfont St Peter bills itself as the UK's premier family-friendly naturist club.

For a modest £260 a year (even less at Apollo, which costs £150 per year), members can enjoy the indoor and outdoor pools, tennis courts, boules, classes – including the yoga I sampled – a sauna, six acres of gardens, and a large three-storey clubhouse with games rooms, dining rooms and conservatories. Most local members just come for the day, but there is a campsite where both members and visitors can pitch tents or park motorhomes.

Today, the naked and tanned are milling around, in couples, families and solo, reading, swimming, sunbathing and playing air hockey nude. One woman is crocheting on the lawn, and Graham is raking the boules court ahead of the



afternoon's "mêlée". So middle-class and sedate is the context that it feels slightly surreal – a naked utopia slap-bang in the middle of conservative commuter belt.

After lunch, the boules mêlée – highly competitive with couples changing partners for every match – gets going. I spent a lot of time around pétanque courts on campsites growing up, but I'm no match for these quietly deadly septuagenarians.

Sadly though, since everyone is caught up in the mêlée, I can't find anyone to play me at miniten – a tennis-like game created by naturists in the 1930s, when clubs often lacked enough land to build full-sized tennis courts, and which instead of tennis racquets uses wooden bats known as thugs. Ever since Rupert Campbell-Black – Jilly Cooper's priapic antihero in *Riders*, and my longtime literary pin-up – introduced me to the notion of naked tennis, it's seemed like a lark. In reality, I'm terrible at tennis, so it's probably a mercy for all that I don't try to play a new version of it for the first time naked.

There's tea at 3.30pm, with a cracking coffee and walnut cake. It's all incredibly wholesome – a far cry from the swinging-adjacent image that persists of it in some quarters – but the democratic, cooperative structure of these traditional clubs is holding naturism back, according to Michael and Fiona. All members share ownership, and must participate in the club's upkeep, which is off-putting to prospective new members, they believe. "They come to the club and they have to cut the grass or paint the shower block," says Fiona. "Younger people just want to pay their money and not have to worry about doing the bins."

Naturism, I fear, is missing a trick. There are fortunes to be made in the Goopified luxury wellness industry, which would doubtless embrace naturism, and punters who would pay handsomely for high-end, clothes-free experiences. A naked Soho Farmhouse-style set-up, with bars and spas and celebrity sightings, would be a massive hit. Even I would probably want to join that.

Sadly, in late August, my friends return home from holiday, and I have to put my clothes on and head back to London.

While I doubt I'll ever consider myself a naturist, I will be seeking out nudist beaches from now on. I do feel better about my body – and even about the pictures of it – than I did before I started, and my general sense of confidence and happiness has been boosted.

I never did manage to eradicate my tan lines or achieve teak cheeks... but there's always next summer.

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