

theage.com.au

THE AGE

 [Print this article](#) |  [Close this window](#)

The naked truth

February 3, 2008

IN THE lush summers of his youth, Werner Jacob spent weekends sunning on the beach or tramping through forests wearing only walking boots and mosquito repellent. The wind blew across his body and the sun tanned his pale hide as he swam or played petanque in many of the nudist areas that once stretched the breadth of his East German homeland and were officially marked in his school atlas, for ease of reference.

Advertisement

"Coming out of winter you are waiting for the sunshine to come so you can warm yourself, like animals lying in the sun," he says now. "The only reason you dress up is because you are cold or you are trying to hide something. Once you take your clothes off, everybody's equal."

Jacob, president of the Nudist Association of Victoria, has fond memories of those childhood summers spent naked in the former East Germany, where naturism was officially sanctioned and popular under communist rule. And it seems there are other German citizens with nostalgia for those bare, halcyon days. A German travel agency last week announced it would offer all-nude flights for passengers wanting nothing to come between themselves and the white-sand beaches of the Baltic Sea holiday island of Usedom. Passengers on the private jet tours are allowed to undress once inside the plane, while the pilot and flight attendants remain in uniform.

The story turned the heads of readers of *The Age* online, where it recorded 76,500 hits on Wednesday, making it the day's second-most popular article .

But that's where our fascination with baring all seems to come to a blushing halt — indeed, it's hard to imagine a plane-load of nude passengers flying above the sweeping plains of this coy, sunburnt country.

This month marks the 52nd anniversary of Jacob's arrival in Australia, where life is not nearly so carefree for the clothes-free. Legalised public nudity is restricted to about 20 secluded beaches along with 50-odd private clubs, resorts and bed and breakfasts. In Queensland, public nudity is outlawed altogether, while in Victoria there are only six nudist clubs and four nude beaches — two of which are under threat of being stripped of their "clothing optional" status.

Nudism may well be Australia's last public taboo. Barring rare shows, such as that chill Sunday morning in 2001 when 4500 Melburnians undressed for American photographer Spencer Tunick, most of us seem content to remain under cover. Despite the gradual loosening of controls over social concerns such as alcohol, gambling and even fashion, anti-nudism has prevailed almost untouched into the 21st century — a curiosity that puzzles both historians and commentators.

While much of Europe and parts of the United States are increasingly happy to see people go naked in public, Australia remains defiantly dressed up. So why are we so shy about looking at each other in the flesh?

The Australian Nudist Federation has only about 2000 members, a quarter of its stocks in the 1960s. President Lindsay Parkyns says Australians are becoming increasingly prudish about nudity. "Back in the '60s and early '70s, it was the done thing to go nude as part of the hippie cult of freedom," he says. "Now we have grown out of kilter with the majority of the rest of the world. In the US, there are two major nudist organisations, each with 40,000 to 50,000 members. France has got nude cities where everyone is nude all year round. But in Australia we seem to be going in the other direction."

Parkyns, speaking on the phone while relaxing in the pool at his nude bed and breakfast in Bowraville, on NSW's mid-north coast, says nudism is in danger of dying out altogether in Australia because of a lack of young participants. The average age of an Australian nudist is between 55 and 80. Parkyns, who turns 60 this month, spends most days nude, except to don a hat and boots when using a brushcutter on his five-hectare property.

He says many people mistakenly associate nudism with titillation and perverts. "Nudists aren't there to have a perv, they're there to enjoy other people's company," he says. "I'm more interested in the person rather than the way they look — and that's how most nudists look at life."

Fears over public "indecent" have long prevailed in Australia. Richard White, from the department of history at the University of Sydney, says a strong puritanical streak in the 19th century stunted the development of a relaxed beach culture in Australia.

Through last century, while beach-goers regularly flouted controls on topless bathing or the cut of swimming costumes, few challenged regulations against nudity. "No matter how skimpy the bikini or the Speedos, those opposed to it see a nude body as confrontational," White says.

He says a tradition of nudism or nature worship tends to grow in countries that don't have much sun, such as Germany, France and parts of the US. "They're really focused on getting sun when it's available. That's not a problem in Australia, where too much sun is actually a problem," he says.

Australia has added no new "clothing optional" beaches since the 1980s. Many approved sites have had to fight for their right to remain nude in recent years — primarily against developers interested in previously remote water-view areas.

In July 2006, Wyndham City Council asked the Victorian Government to strip Campbell's Cove Beach from the Nudity Act as part of a planned \$1.7 million redevelopment. The council's chief executive Ian Robins argues the move would "encourage greater use of the area by the members of the general public". He also suggests the beach is rarely used by nudists.

At Point Impossible Beach, west of Melbourne, the Surf Coast Council sought a similar ban after people were found engaging in sexual activity in nearby protected sand dunes. Police have since increased patrols of the beachfront and new signs clearly identify "clothing optional" areas.

The local council, whose jurisdiction also covers the nearby "clothing optional" Southside Beach, will review its opposition to nude bathing in April. But Mayor Dean Webster says the bad behaviour on the dunes in fact came from people perverting at the nudists, whom he says are typically the best-behaved people on the beach. "If people want to be nude and free in the right areas, good on them," he says.

Webster has travelled and worked in Europe, where "as soon as you get on the beach you can drop all in most places". He recalls skinny-dipping as a boy in the creeks and dams near his parents' Lismore beef farm, but says Australians remain a "bit prudish" about showing their skin.

"I just think we've been brought up a little bit conservative," he says. "We're a young country and still reasonably conservative but we're evolving. In 10 years' time I don't think nudity will be an issue."

Social analyst Hugh Mackay says Australia has always been a "wowsers" society, and this was exacerbated during the past decade under the Howard government. "We've got this very long tradition of a wowsers morality in our attitude to nudity, to drinking, to sex and gambling," he says.

But while community concerns have gradually relaxed on many fronts, he admits he is bemused that attitudes towards nudism have held fast. "In most areas apart from nudity, those things have loosened up," he says.

"There is still a strong streak of opposition to gambling but that horse has bolted. We are very much more adventurous in fashion than we used to be. But the only carryover from our wowsers past seems to be in this area of nudity."

Historian John Hirst says Australian men were quite happy to swim nude in segregated bathhouses during the Victorian era, which is typically associated with great conservatism. "There hasn't been a very conservative morality controlling Australian society," he says. "We've relaxed restrictions on so many things but not on nudity. It's a puzzle."

Indeed, there are reports of early settlement soldiers swimming nude at beaches before the government banned all sea bathing in the 1830s. Later, men and women were allowed to swim together but only in neck-to-knee costumes, or otherwise they entered the water by horsedrawn bathing boxes to avoid being seen.

Today, 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.

A psychologist and lecturer at the University of Canberra, Dr Vivienne Lewis, says the majority of adults and children are unhappy with the way they look and do not want to expose their bodies. "You've got about 60% of women who don't like the way their bodies look at all and probably about 40% of men.

"There is a lot of stigma attached to being overweight or obese, and if you are in that category you are far less likely to want to show off your body because you know people are looking at you."

Werner Jacobs, 72, says doctors have described his body as "an especially good specimen". "I can still see my toes quite easily," he says. But he says once everyone takes off their clothes we will all be equal — fat or thin, short or tall.

He is more worried by the sight of Australia's brutal sun, which snaps at his naked skin much more than that of the relatively mild summers he experienced growing up in East Germany. "You've got a horrible sun, it really burns the cinders out of you," he says. "It is tough being a nudist in Australia, you've got to be really dedicated."

AUSTRALIA'S BEST NUDE BEACHES

■ Alexandria Bay, Noosa, Queensland. White-sand beach near national parkland populated by koalas. Close to boutiques, restaurants and cafes.

■ Samurai Beach, Port Stephens, NSW. Surf beach at the end of a 4WD track. Boasts Australia's only officially sanctioned nude campsite.

■ Cable Beach, Broome, Western Australia. Wide open beach for people who want plenty of space to strip off.

■ Maslins Beach, Adelaide, South Australia. First legal nude beach in Australia, at the foot of sandstone cliffs.

■ Point Impossible Beach, Torquay, Victoria. Dune-backed beach recommended for nude surfing.

SOURCE: THE BLUE LIST, LONELY PLANET AND TOURISM AUSTRALIA

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/02/02/1201801098926.html>