

THE VANISHING NUDIST: LIVING THE NAKED LIFE IN CALIFORNIA'S DESERT

by Max Hartshorne - June 23, 2005

BENJAMIN GLASSER PHOTO



PHOTO COURTESY OF AANR



Soaking au naturel at Berkshire Vista in Western Massachusetts.



Tennis in the buff is a popular nudist resort pastime.



The desert winds were blowing hard in early May at De Anza Springs in Jacumba, Calif., just three miles shy of the Mexican border. The 600-acre property borders a 100,000-acre state park, and is surrounded by volcanic mountains and miles and miles of view. I'd packed light, since this is a clothing optional resort.

Growing up in the Northeast, I'm used to being cold most of the year. I thought the California desert would be balmy in early May. The wind and chill here took me by surprise. I put what I'd brought with me -- some socks, toiletries, a fleece jacket, three pair of shoes and three big bottles of sunscreen -- in the hotel room bureau. Then I grabbed my coat and a pair of Texas, and I walked out -- my first half-assed attempt at being a nudist.

There was just a little sun, but it was tempered by the persistent chilly winds. I walked the desolate compound, which was not quite ready yet for the Memorial Day holiday, and checked out a number of parked RVs. The areas around many of the RVs were neatly decorated; a few had signs, such as "Bobby and Linda's Bare Buns Getaway" and "Clara's Place."

No one, clothed or otherwise, was around. Later that night, I went to a poker game. The players wore bathrobes.

The next day dawned clear and sunny, and the wind finally let up. The warm weather gave me a chance to sample the naked life. I didn't put on anything for the next two days.

It is incredibly liberating -- an experience like no other. Not having pockets to carry around a cell phone or my keys was a pleasant change. It made life seem simpler, less tied down to my material world.

Dave Landman, who owns De Anza Springs with his wife, Helen, has the chiseled good looks and easy smile of somebody who used to be in the movies. He told me if I heard a knock on the hotel room door, not to answer it, it would probably be a Mexican looking for water on his way over the border.

The fence that separates the two countries isn't tall enough to stop anyone. It has a gap about three feet high at the bottom. But there are many sensors and other electronic devices, so it wouldn't take long to draw the attention of the Border Patrol. When they are not chasing illegals at the border, Landman said, some of these officers enjoy coming to De Anza Springs. The resort is set on 600 acres, with indoor and an outdoor pools and a hot tub where most people congregate. There are lots of activities, and just about everyone takes part. About 100 of the people here live full time at the resort in their motor homes and RVs, and another 75 to 100 come out most weekends.

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There are more than 44,000 dues-paying members of the American Association for Nude Recreation, (AANR), a lobbying group based in Kissimmee, Fla. Thousands more may enjoy nudity at home or skinny dipping at a local nude swimming hole, but the people who vacation every weekend at De Anza and at the more than 100 other naturist clubs across the United States represent the true devotees.



Nudist resorts offer visitors a break from the "textiled" world.

De Anza Springs Resort is located in Jacumba, Calif., a little more than an hour east of San Diego. Four nights in the hotel rooms or in one of their rental RVs with all meals cost about \$340 plus airfare. To find out more about Nude Recreation visit <http://www.aanr.org/> or <http://www.deanzasprings.com/> 619-766-4301.

The Berkshire Vista Resort in Hancock, Mass. offers many of the same amenities as De Anza Springs. Call 413-738-5154 or visit <http://www.berkshirevista.com/>.

Connecticut Resorts:

Solair Recreation League

65 Ide Perrin Road
Woodstock, CT 06281
(860) 928-9174
<http://solairri.com/>

Sun Ridge Resort

131 Calvin French Rd.
Sterling, Connecticut
(860) 779-1512 <http://www.sunridge1.com/ebar>

Landman has strong feelings about nudity. He said he'd much rather leave his kids with nudists than at a YMCA or church camp. Others echo his belief that nudists are among the most trustworthy and God-fearing people you're likely to meet. Nudists, they say, suffer a stereotype because Americans usually equate nudity with sex. That simply is not the case, they insist. Sex with strangers isn't a part of nudist resorts, though, of course, you can find such activity at other "alternative adult" resorts, which are a universe away from a place like De Anza Springs.

The staff at De Anza is trained to spot the signs of potential molesters and their subset, who are known in nudist parlance as "creepy old guys," or COGs.

"We ask them to leave," said Landman. "If someone is looking a little too long, or leering, or making another person uncomfortable, then we step in." He's only had to throw out about six of visitors since he opened the resort seven years ago, and so far none have kicked up a fuss. "The staff has been trained by people who know about the tendencies, people who study child molester behavior have provided clues, tip offs," he explained. "These types don't last more than 15 minutes here. We know what to do and we act."

Nudism, he said, should not be confused with "adult alternative," which is a huge sector of the travel business. That's sex tourism, or swinger travel, where people "swap" sexual partners and recreational sex is the theme. None of this takes place at AANR member clubs, who agree to keep the atmosphere free of sexual vibes. The only sign of sexy comes at the Saturday night dance, when the guests put on (some) clothing.

"Not all nudists are swingers, but some swingers are nudists," Landman explained.

These nudists are an active bunch, with a zeal for games like bingo, water volleyball, tennis and card games of all sorts. In various states of undress, they mingle and play.

You see parts of people's bodies that you usually don't see. There are magazines, I guess, that purport to show the readers "real women" or "old women" or "one-legged women," but you never really know what bodies can look like until you observe life in a nudist resort.

People have scars in every which place, and some people's legs are all tangled up, and others have tremendous gouges in their skin. Many have such huge barrel rolls of fat that their privates are nearly hidden in the fleshy abundance. One man at the resort was missing both of his arms.

The mixture of svelte and fat and in-between is fascinating. I found myself distracted as we played water volleyball, watching the various people coming and going to the shower.

Bonnie is a large woman of about 50. I chatted with her at a birthday party for the 85-year old "senior" nudist of the resort. She said that women are much different than men in regard to their willingness to get naked. "Men, they'll do it at the drop of a hat," she said, wearing a T-shirt. "But women are more reserved, and more conscious of their bodies. They won't get naked nearly as quickly as men will. They like to have something on, somewhere, either on top or down below."

At night, things become sexier when the lingerie and spicy outfits come out, since it has always been true that a little bit of revealing clothing is much sexier than the whole thing open and on display.

A band called Sneaky Feet set up and at about eight began playing familiar '80s rock tunes. A couple walked in sporting leather chaps, black bikinis and leather vests. A woman came in wearing a long-sleeved fleece and only pale white chaps, with nothing underneath. The near-nakedness was dazzling and as the night wore on, less and less clothing remained on the dancers. One man wore only a belt around his waist and his shoes. At my table a woman wore a fishnet body stocking with very large holes, and a windbreaker to offer a bit of modesty. A glamorous couple came into the room in flashing boots, cowboy hats and nothing else.

I met an interesting couple, Joe and Jeana, one morning at the clubhouse. They are regular hikers and every day they head out into the desert for miles of walking with a friend's boxer named Sparkle. They've had a place here for three years, their house is up in a corner of the park, and they have been lifelong nudists. They raised their daughter, who is now a deacon in her Texas church, as a nudist. Their kids come to visit them here and go to their own local nude resorts but don't live as nudists. All their family photos, including those of their daughter and their son-in-law, were shot in the nude.

During the hike, we came upon a diamondback rattlesnake, sunning himself on a rock. Fortunately, Sparkle didn't try to rouse it. We walked through desert trails that were much more green than in previous years, owing to the more than 20 inches of rain that had fallen in San Diego this spring. We followed railroad tracks and eventually came upon another hiker wearing clothes. He didn't seem at all fazed to see us and we kept on our way. After the hike, I visited the couple in their comfortable modular home at the back of the park. Every family photo on display was nude -- their daughter nude with a motorcycle, their nude son-in-law and their other nude daughter. Jeana said that she wanted to get photos of her grandsons in the nude, but her daughter was afraid to have them developed at a local CVS. So they sent her a digital camera.

The photos brought home the point that to Joe and Jeana, nude is normal. Nude is what makes them comfortable and whole. Jeana said they cannot wait until they get here and are able to get naked and go outside (though one time Joe was doing some work on his house in the buff, and the neighbors called the cops). Some times their friends say they want to go out to the casino when they come up on Friday nights. But Jeana always says, "No, we want to stay here and not have to put on clothes."

I thought about the average age of any nudist here -- about 55. So where are tomorrow's nudists going to come from? That's a challenge that the AANR is facing right now, and the numbers don't look promising. Nudists are not creating enough new nudists to sustain a active and vibrant scene into the future.

In a few decades, it seems likely that there will be far fewer people to rent these RV parks and sit by these pools. Young people, in my experience, don't even want to hear about their parents being naked, let alone see it. When I tried to recount my trip to De Anza Springs to my 24-year-old daughter, I got the obligatory waving hand saying, "No, no, no details, dad."

Landman said the hard part of getting more people to join their group is the "Bowling Alone" syndrome -- people these days are not big joiners. With today's soccer mom, kids-taking-lessons lifestyle, fewer and fewer families with children are joining nudist resorts.

Still, Landman tries with some success to get younger people out to the club. One promising sign is a younger nudist, Brian, who now lives at the club. He has brought a younger crowd with him since he runs a club that offers a variety of nude excursions like whale watches, trips to other clubs, and dances.

It will be interesting to come back to De Anza Springs in 25 years and see whether people in the year 2030 are still interested in nude recreation. It is not guaranteed that there'll be many left, so if you think you'd like to experience a nudist resort, the time to go is now.

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