



ONE BIZARRE CRUISE ...OR IS IT?

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"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION," a voice booms from overhead speakers. "This is Hennie, your cruise director. I thank all of you for keeping your clothes *on*. In a few short minutes, I will announce when we are three miles at sea and you can uncover your, ahem, fun."

A group of us standing near lifeboats begins chuckling. A smiley attendant who had been directing our attention to a life preserver's whistle concedes to our laughter. Next to me, a woman wears a skirt so gauzy I can see what she asked of her waxer. The men hang out in Speedos, keycard-heavy lanyards hanging over their bare chests. It's not even time to be naked and already I'm feeling overdressed.

So much so, seconds drift by before I realize my lungs are still twitching in a fit of schoolgirl giggles. A dam walling back my nerves has broken. Eyebrows begin to raise in my direction, but a bell signaling the end of the safety lesson saves me. It's time for dinner — an event we must dress for.

In theory, being naked is easy. It's simply stopping one everyday act. For weeks, I told myself this before boarding the Bare Necessities chartered cruise. We left Fort Lauderdale, Florida, bound for Cozumel and beyond, less than an hour ago. I'm not the type you'd peg for this sort of thing. I turn toward the lockers when undressing in the gym. Recently, at a sweat-lodge ceremony where tradition begs nudity, I decided a sports bra and shorts wouldn't keep me from an epiphany.

And yet, I leapt at this chance to become a nudist for 10 days. Curiosity is my gateway drug: I must know why 2,800 guests pay for what is nightmare fodder for so many. Are these people exhibitionists? Swingers? Or simply hippie types who just don't like the touch, the feel, of cotton?

The cruise is clothing-optional, meaning I won't be brig-bound for wearing a coverup. Still, it's abundantly clear that unless I go au naturel, I'll most definitely stand out.

Over gazpacho-glazed red snapper, I meet Gerald and Betty, a 70-something couple who, like most everyone on board, are on a first-name-only basis. Just two of their children know the true naturist, er, nature of this cruise — but for safety reasons all know its dates and destinations.

"Oh, I hope they don't search the Internet," Betty says,



Who does this sort of thing? That very question landed the curious author on this Bare Necessities cruise. Her findings? You'd be surprised.

fearing they would learn of our cruise's defining feature. The kids are also in the dark about Cypress Cove, the Orlando-area nudist resort. The couple have been members for decades yet bristle at calling themselves nudists, not comfortable with all that the term implies.

"We go to the resort every day," Betty says in a tone I imagine she uses when telling her grandchildren to grease a cookie sheet. "We'd move there, but with the grandkids ..." She trails off. "Our kids are religious. They wouldn't approve."

"But at our age, you've got to have some fun," Gerry counters, flashing a grin that's both conspiratorial and innocent.

Later that night I stroll the lido deck, reminding myself why I'm here. *It's time*, I think as I pad to the pool on the ship's stern. I slip out of my dress and underthings, neatly folding them on a table while mentally preparing to edge, naked in the moonlight, past the other bathers in the hot tub. It's akin to shuffling down a plane's center aisle, painfully aware of every inch of bum or waist, except this time it's my naked bits



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— certainly enough to make a 13-year-old boy's head spin, one reason why no guests under the age of 18 are allowed.

Other than that, there aren't many rules. One is hygienic: You must always place something between yourself and the ship (a towel goes atop every bar stool or lounge). Another keeps this community private: No cameras allowed on the lido deck. To enforce this, the Bare Necessities staff keeps close tabs on cameras and anything else capable of recording, or posting, or making any of this public.

So I spend the day participating. I sunbathe topless. I occasionally shimmy out of my bottoms, though I don't dare walk around. But mostly, I just observe. I mean, really, who are we kidding? Where could the people-watching be better?

And my, how these adults love to frolic. Sure, there's a steady flow of booze, but alcohol is the fire's match, not the logs feeding it. Most of the clan tinkle nothing as they twirl in the pool and sashay up the water slide. Everyone seems to bob to the beat, regardless of what song the DJ is spinning.

IT'S TIME TO STRIP. I'M MID-CONVERSATION WHEN THE majority of folks aboard the catamaran lift shirts overhead and step free from shorts. Only 10 minutes have passed since we boarded this snorkel tour from Cozumel, Mexico. Apparently, we're far enough from shore. Game on.

The average age on board our megaship is 55, but on this active excursion, it's 40 or so. The sight of naked, fit men I would actually talk to at a bar sends a flush across my face that I hope passes for sunburn. Thank goodness for sunglasses.

I peel off my clothes as if it's no big deal and am the last to be escorted down a set of stairs for snorkeling. *Ass soup*, I think, entering the water. Everyone else is staring at the fishes, shining their moons to the heavens. I swim off a few yards for solitude. Turquoise parrotfish scissor their beaks across corals. I feel the sun on my bum and the swishing of sea across my entire body. I have to admit: This is nice.

Afterward, Linda from Colorado asks me to snap her photo. "For your Christmas card, right?" I tease, curious what a 50-something woman will do with a topless vacation picture.

She laughs, sharing that the photo is proof of how far she's come since an ex invited her to a nude resort. Long after that relationship dissolved, she kept going back. As a single woman with a love of travel, she often feels like a third wheel. As a lone traveler myself, I can relate. When she tells me the nudist community is the only one that has welcomed her flying solo, I make a mental note the size of a billboard.

budging by. It's work to pretend this is effortless, but soon I plop into the water, assets hidden by refraction.

And then a panic sets in: I haven't a clue how to engage these people in polite banter. *So, how long have you been a nudist? What inspired you to get that piercing?* Worse, I don't know where to look. My neighbors are so close there's no ignoring them. Several dippers have taken seats on the tub's edge. This makes my natural eyeline seem pervy. I look down until I realize a man nearby is speaking to me.

As we chat about cruises, he never looks at my chest. This relaxes me. I notice how nice it is to have a bare rump in the water. And that we're hours from Florida. No city smog obscures the canopy of stars. A bare sky, a bare ass and a bare agenda — I feel ready for anything. At least, for now.

Clothing-optional cruising does entail some rules. Folks are identified by first names and hometowns only. Cameras are forbidden on the lido deck.

THE NEXT MORNING I MAKE A LAP OF THE SHIP. LESSON number one: "Clothing optional" has many interpretations. Some women simply unbutton their shirts and let wind and fate decide the extent of their nudity. Then there's the "Donald Duck," favored by men ages 60 and above: a T-shirt and nothing else, skinny legs stuffed into white tube socks and white tennis shoes. But mostly, there's a lot of bare boobs





In a bikini, I lie at angles that don't force my belly fat into rolls. But here, we celebrate freedoms far beyond a few days off work.

That afternoon, the catamaran drops us on a section of white beach, ours for the day. The passengers waste no time finding the bar, sunbathing chairs, giant inflatable floating trampoline and climb-up water slide. You'd think it was recess.

I join the Bare Necessities staff around bed-style cabanas. Sunset-colored hammocks hang from wooden palapas. One young woman, wearing only an anklet, twirls around like a fairy. She falls to the ground, extends her limbs and spins angels in the sand. Others wade into the sea to splash about. All of us revel in the sun's warmth on our exposed skin. The act of being naked is starting to feel like something normal.

Back home, around my kayaking buddies, I always wear a long-sleeve rash guard — citing a fear of skin cancer. But that's not my only fear. When situations call for a bikini, I go to great lengths to lie at angles that don't force my belly fat into rolls. I feel anything but at ease in my body. Here, we're celebrating freedoms far beyond just a few days off work.

Then in walks a stranger. An outsider, not part of the group. "Oh, no way!" he shouts. An overstuffed fanny pack hugs his belly. A red trucker cap and sunglasses hide his features. He lifts his handheld camera — capturing as much nudity as he can cram onto his memory card. His eyes stay fixed on us. Those who have noticed him turn away, the spell broken.

"SO ARE YOU A 'WE' YET?" CRAIG FROM NEW YORK STANDS alongside a pingpong table. It's 10 a.m., and he hasn't forgotten last night, when I called him out for referring to nudists as "them" and not "us." He and his wife, Bethann, don't identify with this group, though they readily dance out of their clothes whenever music plays on board, which is often.

"It makes us feel confident," Bethann had told me. A red-head with piercing blue eyes, she struck me as self-assured in any situation. Then again, I only know her here.

"This is our fix for the rest of the year when we don't feel so sexy," Craig had told me. Now he holds a pingpong paddle and motions for me to serve, so I do.

"I'm working on becoming a 'we,'" I tell him. It's the truth: I want very much to become part of this club. I think of all the things I have done naked: letting the gals out for a Mardi Gras parade around the ship, hiking nude through a forest in Costa Rica, enjoying the ship's pools and hot tubs in the buff. ... Still, the germaphobe in me can't bring myself to swoosh down the water slide sans bikini bottoms. Every neurosis has limits.

Playing pingpong in the wind has its limits too. The breeze keeps blowing my sarong off. When in Rome.



Not everyone is naked on a nude cruise. In fact, many of this cruise's passengers don't consider themselves nudists at all.

We eventually make our way back to the main pool's nonstop party. Bethann has saved us seats amid the crowd. There aren't many cliques within it, except perhaps for the hot-tub women. I suspect the four perfectly tanned, 40-something gals cheered in high school, and that they currently share the same hairdresser. Their favorite move on the ship is brazenly parading along the narrow walkway beside the elevated hot tub.

One deck up, next to the DJ, the ship's activity leader mimes dance steps. As he guides the crowd through "Macarena" and other hits, the hot-tub women up the ante. They shake their booties ever harder, catcalling up to him.

A few songs later, a conga line erupts, and the count of naked ladies dancing totals nine — no, now 11.

"Can you believe this?" I ask Craig.

"Sure, why not?" A true New Yorker, Craig is surprised by very little. "Besides, everyone here is already nude. How much more unselfconscious can you get?"

Good point. When surrounded by their people, these fun folks don't know what it is to feel silly. As if I needed further proof, "Y.M.C.A." sounds from the speakers. In seconds, every butt is out of every chair. These people can't seem to stop laughing. As I stand naked to join them, I realize neither can I. ● **NUDE CRUISES AND RESORTS:** islands.com/travel-nude

