

Leave everything behind (including your clothes)

Overseas report

The weather too cold for regular naturist pursuits and Alton Towers closed and offering discount rates for large groups at their hotels, 470 members of British Naturism welcome Jo Caird for a mini-break with a difference

Sitting at a table under an umbrella, a book in one hand, a coffee in the other. The laughter of overexcited children splashing about in the pool in front of me echoing against the tiles. Relaxed couples strolling about and chatting, enjoying the warm temperature, glad to be away for the weekend. Occasionally a scream from the waterslide running above my head. Everyone naked. Including me.

There are between 14000 and 15000 paid-up members of British Naturism (BN), the organisation that supports naturists and promotes social nudity in the UK. They enjoy getting together and taking their clothes off, whether on holiday abroad or at home. We all know the stereotype: old couples playing pétanque in the buff; long grey hair; saggy boobs and wrinkly bums; socks and sandals perhaps. But is there more to it?

BN says yes. It's about getting an

organisation, whatever they are, needs to get new blood, and the younger the better...What we're offering is an experience.'

The usual student travel choices involve either 'discovering yourself' on the tourist trail of a developing country or drinking too much and getting sunburnt in Ibiza. Can naturism offer an interesting alternative to all those clichéd travel plans, a way of taking advantage of what the UK has to offer in terms of camping, swimming and sports activities? Here I am, at the second annual BN Alton Towers naturist weekend to find out.

The November weather is far from ideal and wandering naked around a cheesy theme park hotel is not really what naturism is all about. But this weekend is an extra to the seasonally-restricted naturist calendar, one last chance to be naked and meet up with friends before next spring. Perhaps not

ment even tackier than it sounds, complete with lifts that play the horn-pipe and wall-to-wall carpet designed to look like the sea swirling over sand and decking) closed to other visitors and became the exclusive property of BN. Nudity was welcome all weekend until midday on Sunday, when the hotel reopened to the public.

A fully-clothed South African gave me a wry smile as he handed me my room key, thereby adding another anomaly to the weekend: all the hotel staff were fully dressed, although apparently they were given the opportunity to join in once their shifts were finished. So having found my room I undressed, decked myself out in as many towels as I could find and ventured up to the bar and lounge area of the hotel. There I was introduced to Debbie and Joel, BN's Youth Representatives. Much to my surprise, they and about half the YBN (which includes all BN member between the

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all-over tan, the 'bliss' of swimming in the nude, and meeting up with a group of people who judge you for who you are, not for what you look like or what clothes you wear. They organise events across the country throughout the spring and summer, at campsites, swimming pools and Sun Clubs where couples, families, groups of friends and single people can get together in a safe, relaxed environment. BN is aware of the negative (and often humorous) reputation of naturism, but is eager to attract a younger crowd. Andrew Welch, BN's Commercial Manager sums it up when he says, 'every

the best moment for someone to try naturism for the first time, but given that by the time the UK has warmed up, the academic year will have finished and there will be no more issues of *London Student*, it seemed sensible to take advantage of the opportunity to spend some time with 470 British naturists - and in particular the 40 or so active members of the youth group Young British Naturists (YBN) - and experience naturism for myself.

The weekend began at 6pm on Friday evening, the moment when the Splash Landings Hotel (an establish-

ages of 16 and 30) gathered in the bar were fully clothed. Desperately tucking and wrapping my towels around me while attempting not to drop my pint, I asked Debbie, who was brought up in naturism, for an explanation. She told me that she likes dressing up and putting on makeup for a night out and that although she has never doubted naturism as a pastime, she feels no obligation to be naked 100% of the time. The predominant feeling among the 'YBNers' I spoke to is that nudity should be context-based and is an entirely personal choice; while plenty of them went naked in



Members of BN enjoy the naked pub quiz at Flambo's Feast restaurant

the evening over the weekend, just as many were dressed. David, an engineer, summed up the general attitude: 'why would you be naked in the pub?' Reassured that no one would judge me for not being naked - as well as a reluctance to queue up at a hot carvery buffet in the buff - I dressed for dinner.

As in the bar the YBN had an area reserved for them at dinner, with Debbie and Joel superintending the socialising. As the families and older couples retired for the night, the group dwindled until just me and three 'YBNers' remained: Paul and Mike were both naked; Phil was fully clothed. Perhaps unsurprisingly our idle chit-chat quickly became a personal and frequently opinionated conversation about naturism.

The friends know each other through their membership of YBN (although at 32 years-old, Mike is now older than the official age limit of the group), having attended naturist events in the past. They all find the idea of congregating at Splash Landings for a naked weekend indoors a little silly but have come along because it is a rare opportunity to meet up - they live far enough away from each other that socialising outside of BN events involves a lot of planning and expense. Each says that if the

she wasn't the slightest bit concerned when it slipped down. She and her younger brother chatted to their parents and grandparents in an utterly unselfconscious way; they seemed more at ease with each other than many other non-naturist families you see on holiday together.

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others hadn't been going, he would have stayed away. Although they have all been naturists for years, each is still 'in the closet' in some respect, whether at work or to friends and family. Paul is not in the least ashamed of his hobby but fears being judged negatively by those around him: 'can

are a completely normal group of guys, for whom naturism is about enjoying nice weather and the company of one's friends. They are bemused by the 'old school, hardcore naturists who 'want to be naked in absolutely every situation, 100% of the time' but have very little to do with them. Mike's

Desperately tucking my towels around me while attempting not to drop my pint of lager

you imagine what would happen if my colleagues in the city found out?' Mike explains that his family eventually guessed when they recognised the name of a famous French naturist resort on a bumper sticker on his car; a secondary school teacher, he feels that it is probably wise to keep his interest a secret from his adolescent pupils.

They, like most of the young people I met over the course of the weekend,

view I found echoed throughout the weekend: 'it's a personal choice and it's dependent on context'.

By the pool the next morning I met Helen, experiencing naturism for the first time at the age of 24. She was there with her boyfriend Ben, who has been a naturist since he was 16. Helen explains that Ben never put any pressure on her to try naturism, but that she 'wanted to give it a go because he was really into it'. Very few of the non-

naturists I have told about this weekend share Helen's open-mindedness. Her 'I've got to try something. If you don't like it you never have to do it again' attitude reveals self-confidence that is rare in a society that judges its women on what they look like. Helen

International Naturist Federation (INF) Youth Spring Meeting 2008 in the Netherlands.

Over the course of the weekend there were various activities on offer: naked tai chi, pub quiz, life drawing, bingo and disco. What struck me

Reluctance to queue up at a hot carvery buffet in the buff

acknowledges this and admits that she doesn't know if she would be able 'to rally up any of [her] female friends because 'it's a body image thing'.

Her comment is backed up by the fact that there is a notable minority of single (i.e. not accompanied by partners) women in the YBN group. Andrew Welch acknowledges that there is a gender discrepancy in BN as a whole and that it is in fact, 'a global problem'. He has no explanation for this other than a suggestion that perhaps women are simply more prone to body image issues than men. He says however that 'the majority of women that come into naturism for the first time do seem to enjoy it'.

He does not mention the possibility that a woman might feel sexually threatened in a naturist environment. This idea occurred to me before arriving at Splash Landings, and I did notice the lack of young women in the group, but at no point was I made to feel uncomfortable. The whole atmosphere was remarkably non-sexual, even in the bar in the evenings. The men I spoke to mentioned relationships and flings with women they have met at naturist events but there is no sleaziness to their stories and their behaviour on the weekend itself was impeccable. Naked, I was just another body; it was while wearing clothes in the evening that I received stares.

It was the social aspect more than the fear of being seen naked by others that Helen was initially nervous about: 'It's like your worst nightmare isn't it? Meeting a load of new people, but you're naked!'. She describes how on the first evening she (and many of those around her) kept their clothes on, so she was able to socialise without worrying about the nudity element, while at the same time getting 'acclimatised' to the new situation. Helen regards her experience as an entirely positive one.

'We have this cultural perception of what we should be doing and I think you need to let that go and actually do it for yourself. It's liberating because you're not being judged on what you wear; you're judged by who you are.' Helen is now planning to attend the

about all these planned activities was how contrived it all seemed. But then, looking at the demographic of those taking part this is hardly surprising: many middle-aged (and older), middle England couples enjoy these types of activities so it stands to reason that the naturist population will enjoy them too. The members of YBN behaved as one would expect of any other young people in this situation: they avoided the activities, hung out by the pool all day and split off into their own little groups during the pub quiz and disco, where they got drunk and chuckled at the oldies doing the naked Time Warp.

Naturism may not be for everyone but it's difficult to argue with the logic that it's nice to wear nothing on holiday in a hot place. How different is going topless from being entirely naked anyway? If global warming ever grants our fair isles summer again why not swallow your fear and head off to a Sun Club or a naturist beach to experience a social situation unconcerned with appearances. You might just have a good time.

TRAVEL INFO

For more information visit www.british-naturism.org.uk. Student membership is £15 per year, as opposed to the usual £27 adult price.

There are lots of naturist places close to London if you're interested in giving it a try, most of which offer free introductory visits for non-naturists. Diogenes Sun Club, South Bucks, www.diogenessunclub.co.uk, The Naturist Foundation, Orpington, www.naturistfoundation.org, Oakwood Sun Club, Romford, www.oakwoodsun.co.uk; The White House, Caterham, www.whitehouseclub.demon.co.uk; The Sun-folk Society, St Albans, www.sun-folk.org.uk; Watford Naturist Swimming Club; www.wnsc.org.uk

There are several naturist beaches accessible from London too, at Brighton, Fairlight Cove near Hastings, and Leysdown.

Each issue this column features a different study or work abroad experience, direct from London students currently on their year away. From Paris to Panama City, from Berlin to Beijing, they tell you what it means to live in a different culture, whether far away or close to home. In this issue, Roshni Shah reports on life in Leuven, Belgium, where she is studying at the University of Leuven.

In true paradoxical style, Belgium is known as Europe's capital yet is widely believed to be its most boring country - so what compelled me to study here for a year?

The locals are friendly and happy to speak to you in your own language, the students are some of the most affable you will meet, and your "kot"-mates will undoubtedly surprise you by defying the age old myth that the Belgians are reserved.

Having studied in the library or lounged in the bagel bar with friends, seen the sights and eaten a few chocolates, waffles and pancakes in Leuven, you are not far from the train station and could be anywhere in Belgium within two hours. The country has many attractions, including the tourist hotspot Bruges, and the beautiful Ardennes, home to caves and forests. The train network on the continent means that you can even be 'abroad' within a few hours, which leaves you no choice but to take advantage.

Leuven is a true Belgian city. In the daytime, experience its grand historical buildings, cobbled streets, waffle stands, coffee shops and abundance of students on bikes. The nightlife offers beautiful lights, a variety of beers, a myriad of bars, hidden away clubs, late night food, and the knowledge that you will always bump into funny and inebriated friends (sometimes still on bikes). Its size means that you may get bored, but there is always something on offer. One of its biggest attractions is the Stella Artois factory, which, given that the population is predominantly composed of students, seems remarkably well placed. This small city even boasted the MarkRock music festival this summer.

Leuven's biggest and best claim, hot chocolate aside, is its university, being one of the oldest and most reputable in Europe. It can only be a good thing when you want to leave your year abroad with an enhanced education and cultured experience.



Leuven University Library



Members of British Naturism in the Cariba Creek Waterpark at Alton Towers Splash Landings Hotel