

Nude awakening

What's the most fun you can have in London with your clothes off? No, not that! **Gareth May** tackles some more wholesome naked activities and finds out why more and more Londoners are getting into nudism. Photography **Jonathan Perugia**



It's Sunday afternoon and I'm climbing some tiled stairs to an indoor swimming pool. Bar the £5 entrance fee I'm clutching in my hand I have nothing on my person – not even a pair of trunks. But far from being an accidental, 'whoops-I-knew-I-was-supposed-to-be-wearing-something' lapse in concentration, I am in fact dressed entirely appropriately. That is to say, completely and utterly in the buff.

I'm not quite prepared for what greets me at

the top of the stairs, though. Behind a welcome desk, three unclothed men stand side by side, hands on hips, like a trio of butchers presiding over a depleted sausage counter.

Besides the obvious manhood yardstick and fear of inappropriate arousal, I'm most concerned about where I should put my hands. Down by my sides? Crossed? Gripping an elbow with one while smoothing my beard with the other, like some kind of naked wise man? The 'teapot'?

Under starters orders Lining up for a skinny dip. Bottom: the London Naked Bike Ride. Previous page: Gareth tries out naked yoga



I'm consumed by awkwardness right up until the moment I slip into the water, and then... Oh my. That's a bit of all right. Far from being an introvert's worst nightmare, swimming naked in the middle of the city is a liberating, near-heavenly experience.

'Swimming in a costume is a bit like washing your feet with your socks on,' Colin, a member of Naturist London tells me afterwards. 'It's fundamentally not a very sensible activity.'

Colin is one of a community of volunteers organising naturist activities in the capital. Their biggest draw is this weekly Sunday Swim, held at the University of London's Energybase gym, and open to any adult, male or female, with a fiver and an appetite for removing their pants.

Some folk chat about the weekend, while others swim regular laps. The trio of gents who greeted me stand arms-folded as beads of moisture map constellations across their shoulders. The whole vibe is Friday night down the local with my dad. Only wet and nude. It's such a friendly atmosphere that the question I end up asking myself isn't 'why?' but 'why not?'

The number of people who share this enthusiasm is growing, in London, anyway, with naked events popping up all over the capital. In May, London hosted the UK's first ever Nude Body Painting party. Last weekend cyclists risked getting something caught in their spokes on the London leg of the World Naked Bike Ride. Looking ahead, Streak for Tigers returns to London Zoo in August, at which over 300 disrobed daredevils will bomb around, mooning the baboons.

I'm not yet sure whether I'm an ardent naturist, casual nudist or extrovert monkey flasher, but my naked swim is helping me begin to understand the philosophy of taking one's kit off. Nudism is not, Colin tells me, 'anything goes'. His swimming club 'isn't about exhibitionism, it's about wanting to swim naked' and the feeling in the pool certainly explains the attraction.

Afterwards, if not exactly eager to dive starters

into the Serpentine, I'm certainly refreshed, relaxed and intrigued. In the pool, beneath the waterline, no one can really tell you're naked, so I'm curious to see how I feel in a more, quite literally, ballsy environment.

Altogether Yoga takes place every Monday and Thursday at Islington's Liverpool Road Studios. The all-male class is one of several nudist yoga sessions available in the capital (unisex and female-only classes are available through Naked

Yoga London). Having never spilled so much as a drop of sweat on a yoga mat before, I'm as much in the dark as in the nude. All I know is that I'm about to be bent into positions you'd hesitate to try with a pipe cleaner, all the while trying to avert my eyes from the obvious. However, after several 'cat' and 'child' poses I'm sweating so much I couldn't care less about being naked. All I can think about is making it through alive (on a side note, if you want to get up close and personal

with your scrotum, assuming you have a scrotum of course, do some naked yoga: it's remarkable).

Afterwards, fully clothed and in the pub, yoga instructor Nickles is the second person in as many days to tell me that London is leading the way in British naturism. 'The economic conditions have created a culture that is more competitive and less secure,' he says. 'So people need to escape more,



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and "me time" is all the more important.' He also sees a message hidden among the folds of flesh. 'Modern media encourages us to assess our physicality in relation to idealised body forms. One of the key messages of yoga is about accepting yourself, and if you can't be comfortable in your own naked body there's no hope of that.'

So, nudity also has a message, and nowhere is it more brazen than at the World Naked Bike Ride. It was developed by American Conrad Schmidt in the US in 2003, and the first London leg took place the following year – with just 63 participants. This year a few hundred campaigners, naturists, bucket-list-tickers and students doing it for a dare cycled from six starting points to a big fleshy get together in Hyde Park, with several hundred more spectators turning up to gawp at them along the route.

'It's a protest and a celebration,' organiser and sustainability activist John Cossham told me before the event last Saturday. 'It's a protest against our insane appetite for oil, and especially the damaging effect of car culture on people. But it's also a celebration of bicycles and the diverse bodies which power them.'

But the ride is more than a bawdy publicity stunt. The lack of protective layers expresses the vulnerability many cyclists already feel on the city streets. As Cossham said, 'I'm as good as naked if a car bangs into me.' It's a feeling of shared humanity which is common to all naked events. Just being nude together – be it swimming, yoga or biking – is an incredible leveller. 'Fat, thin, tall, short,' Cossham told me. 'You can't tell who's an MP and who's an alcoholic bum.'

I've learned a lot from stripping in this city. I now know that nudity's a great ice-breaker, and that naturists are an incredibly friendly bunch. Most importantly – having just gone arse-to-arse with a complete stranger in a yoga pose I assume is called 'Test the Newb' – I've learned to let it all hang out.

For more information on **naturist London**, including the Sunday Swim, see www.naturistlondon.org.uk. For **Altogether Yoga** visit www.altogetheryoga.com.