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## Minnesota's Avatan nudist club sets skinny-dipping record

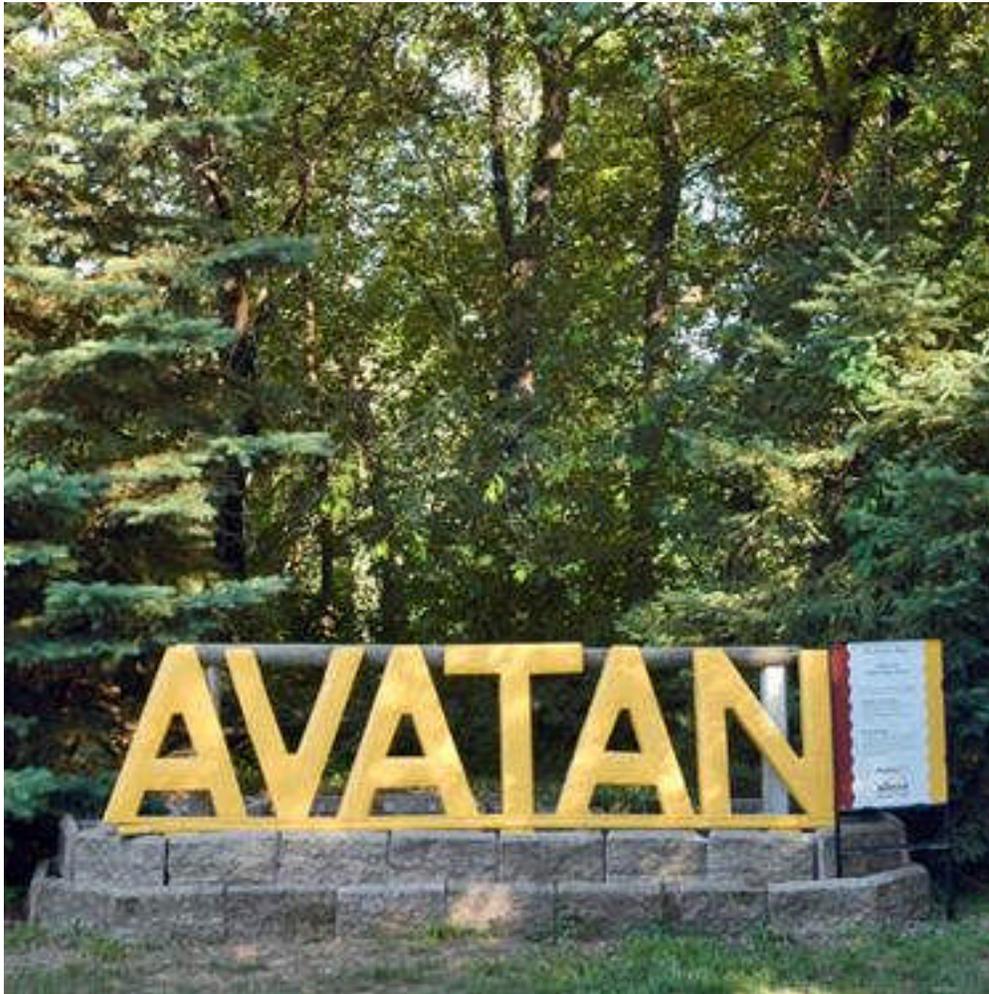
Erotic Specialist Patrick Strait makes history with 222 naked

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**IT'S A SATURDAY AFTERNOON IN JULY**, and I'm standing in a pool with 222 other people, all of us completely naked.

Behind me floats a married couple clearly older than my parents. About three feet in front of me there's a little boy, maybe five years old at most, and he's bare-assed as well. Oh, and wandering around the outside of the pool, counting the number of people in the water, is a real-life priest—and he's completely nude except for a pair of Crocs.

I'm standing in the middle of history as Minnesota's largest nudist club, Avatan, sets the world record for the biggest group skinny-dip.

Located in East Bethel (the **Las Vegas** of the Midwest, as I like to call it), Avatan has long been the premier destination for nudists in Minnesota. For over 50 years, this 40-acre, family-friendly campground has allowed men, women, and children of all ages to enjoy a fun, stress-free getaway from their clothes. Kind of like **Disney World**, but with genitals instead of Goofy.

While I'd love to say something really journalistic like, "This ain't your daddy's campground," the truth of the matter is that it kind of is your daddy's campground, if your dad does everything nude. The folks I met throughout the day were the same sweet, fun-loving people you'd encounter at any other wooded campground in Minnesota—they just also happened to be doing it *au natural*.

In fact, Avatan is about the most family-oriented place I've ever been. And I've been to Chuck-E-Cheese. A lot.

Now then, about that world record.

**MYDAY STARTED OFF AROUND NOON.** I was standing in my bathroom, rubbing suntan lotion all over myself, focusing primarily on the parts that had never seen the sun. After spending 20 to 30 minutes lathering up my sensitive regions—for the sake of safety, of course—I was out the door.

A couple of days earlier, I had done some research online, trying to picture what this place would be like. From the club's website—the surprisingly safe-for-work [www.avatan.com](http://www.avatan.com)—I knew I should expect to see a wide range of ages and body types, but I still couldn't quite figure out what 200+ skinny-dippers would look like. I had always equated nudism with the '70s and the whole hippie free-love thing, and I couldn't quite grasp how that would translate to today—less hair, maybe?

To better prepare myself, I spent the evening before watching the movie *Cocoon*, paying close attention to the swimming-pool scenes.

Avatan's address is in a rural area, and as I drove down the country road, I couldn't find the club to save my life. I went back and forth down this same road five times, looking for a billboard, to no avail. (Later I would learn that the lack of signage and advertising around the club is no accident; it's to keep the riffraff out.)

After a good 15 minutes of searching, I called the club and got directions. Soon after I pulled into the driveway, I came upon a couple of guys directing traffic. They were wearing orange, reflective vests, flip-flops, and nothing else.

*Good thing they're wearing the vests, I thought. Otherwise I might not have noticed the naked dudes standing in the road.*

They waved me in and directed me to a parking spot next to a campsite. I parked my car, hopped out, and saw a younger guy sitting in a lawn chair wearing just a cowboy hat and work boots, smoking a cigarette and enjoying a **Coors Light** (the Unofficial Beer of Nude World Records). He welcomed me and pointed me to the registration table to sign in.

On a normal day, new guests must first take a tour of the grounds with a host couple, who explain the rules of the club and answer any questions. But there were only 30 minutes until the record-setting event, so I was told the tour could wait until afterward.

I wandered down to the climate-controlled pool and glanced out at a sea of naked bodies bobbing up and down in the water, soaking in the sun, waiting to make history. I put down my beach bag and towel and took a deep breath, trying to decide my next move.

While I would love to say I was totally ready to rock out right from the get-go, I have to admit I was a bit apprehensive at first. Prior to this, I'd only been nude in front of one person at a time, unless you count the shower in gym class, and even then I was the guy who usually wore a bathing suit (my childhood is sad). So I decided to stay clothed for at least a few minutes to get the lay of the land.

At Avatan, nudity isn't required, so no one said a word to me about sporting my floral-print swimsuit and T-shirt. I figured I wouldn't be the only shy one, that I would likely see other first-timers wandering around at least partially clothed, wondering what the hell they'd gotten themselves into.

But I didn't. In fact, after about five minutes, I realized I was the only person at the pool who was wearing clothes. I stuck out in the crowd because I *wasn't* naked.

*Screw it, I thought. I'm here; let's do this.*

So I took it off. All of it. And it was totally not a big deal. After a few minutes I actually forgot that everyone was naked. Young people and old people. Heavy people and skinny people. Tall people and short people. It really didn't matter. No one was eyeing each other, and there were no judgments being laid down on anyone. All were free to be themselves.

I hopped in the pool just as the approved witness (the priest) was getting ready to start his head count.

This would be the first time that anyone attempted to set a record for largest group skinny-dip, so it was a total lock that everyone standing in that pool with me would be a part of the record.

Avatan is part of a larger network of nudist clubs called the [Adult Association for Nude Recreation \(AANR\)](#), composed of roughly 270 nudist clubs and resorts across the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and beyond. All of them would be participating in the simultaneous skinny-dip.

When the dust settled, the official count at Avatan was 223 people skinny-dipping in unison, doing our part to set the record. While there is still no confirmed total for the participants, the record-holders will likely number well over 1,000 strong (and naked).

As I floated there alone in the middle of the pool, trying not to stare for too long at any one person, an older guy standing next to me gave me a nod.

"First time skinny-dipping?" he asked.

Not sure what gave me away—the confused look on my face or the fact that I was cupping my manhood with both hands (okay, fine, one hand). I smiled and nodded back. "What about you? Are you a regular?"

"No, it's my first time here, but I've gone skinny-dipping other places in the cities."

"Oh really? I didn't realize that there were other places like this outside of East Bethel. Where else have you gone skinny-dipping?"

"Oh, just the normal places, like Cedar and Twin Lakes," he said.

"Wait, you can skinny-dip there? When was this?" I asked, wondering why I had never seen any nude action during my weekend jogs.

"Well you can't *officially*," he answered, giving me a half-smile before dipping underwater.

**ONCE THE OFFICIAL COUNT** had been taken, it was time for the photos to be snapped for the *Guinness Book*. The first were done by the official Avatan photographer, who assured everyone that the images would remain confidential.

"Okay, everybody," the organizer yelled into his megaphone, "this next shot is going to be used in *City Pages*, so if you don't want anyone to see your face, you can turn around and face the back of the pool."

All of a sudden there was a feeling of unease from some of the people in the pool, primarily first-time guests of the club. On the edge of the pool, a younger couple looked at each other and it was obvious that the woman was not so thrilled about being in a newspaper.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked. "This is going to be in *City Pages*? Goddammit!"

Her husband rubbed her shoulders and did his best to calm her down, assuring her that no one was going to see her face. "It's fine; we'll just face the back of the pool and no one will know who we are."

A few other people joined in the decision to shy away from the camera, but the majority of the swimmers were more than happy to smile, wave, and celebrate the attention. After a few pictures, the organizer thanked everyone for participating and released the crowd to enjoy the rest of the afternoon.

"We just set a world record, everybody!" he shouted as the crowd cheered.

I hopped out, grabbed my towel—it's a rule at Avatan that visitors must carry one at all times to sit on—and headed off to get a full tour of the grounds. I met up with our photographer, who actually seemed just as comfortable in his skin as the regulars. (As a side note: I'm guessing we were the first two employees in *City Pages* history to meet each other for the first time naked. At least I hope so.)

We wandered over to the check-in table, where I met the host couple, Dave and Jane. (I quickly learned that in the interest of anonymity, the club uses only first names and last initials for all members. It kind of reminded me of the movie *Fight Club*, except everyone was naked and no one got beat up.)

The couple looked to be in their early 60s, and reminded me a little bit of my grandparents. Our conversation was laid-back, and they were quick to break the ice by telling us about their entry into

the world of nudism (they got their first taste during a 13-month vacation in Europe 10 years ago and have been hooked ever since).

After our quick introduction, Dave and Jane took us on a tour of the grounds, answering all of our questions and explaining the history of the club.

Avatan was founded back in the early '60s, when East Bethel was even more sparsely developed than it is today. Each year, more and more people came for the club's secluded grounds, welcoming atmosphere, and family-friendly culture. Today, the club counts 250 members. While civilization has continued to encroach on them over the years—an elementary school opened just a few miles from the grounds—the camp has managed to maintain a generally positive relationship with the community.

Most of the trappings at Avatan are more luxurious than what you'd see at your average clothing-required campground. Lavish mobile homes sit at the ends of brick walkways, with wood-carved street signs bearing names such as "Running Bare Lane," "Streaker Street," and "**Northern Exposure**" (props to **Joel Fleischman**). In addition, the club makes it a point to add new amenities each year, with a pool, hot tub, and beach volleyball courts already part of the landscape.

During the tour, I learned about some of the organization's policies, designed to preserve the safety and integrity of the club. For example, only a set number of single men can be a part of the organization—roughly 10 percent. Also, if you join the club with your wife/girlfriend/baby mama, you must visit as a couple (Avatan is definitely *not* down with O.P.P).

"If a married man were to visit us today and say that he wants to become a single member because his wife isn't comfortable with the idea of being naked, then we would tell him no," Jane explained. "Our feelings are that if your significant other isn't comfortable with being here then you should be respectful of their wishes and stay home. We're not here to break up relationships or anything like that."

**ONCE THE TOUR WAS COMPLETE,** I set off to chat with a few of the club's members in order to get a better understanding of how they found out about this oasis of nakedness in East Bethel.

The first person I went looking for was Bob, a married father in his mid-60s who has been a part of Avatan for about 10 years and organized the skinny-dipping record attempt. Someone told me that Bob was over by the pool, and that I should just shout his name to find him. After yelling at a few innocent passersby, I finally tracked him down. He was sporting a T-shirt but no pants (coincidentally, my preferred look when lounging around my apartment). We talked for a few minutes, and Bob made it clear that he was concerned that the camp be portrayed accurately.

"We are not a sexual place, and I want to make it clear that this isn't some swinger camp," he said. "Families are the core of our membership and we place everyone's comfort and safety above all else."

Once I assured him that I was simply there to learn about what life is like at the club, he warmed up and began discussing his own entrée into the world of nudism. He and his wife first became nudists during a trip to Florida, where they found a beach that allowed skinny-dipping. They

shucked off their clothes, hopped in the water, and never looked back. Today, Bob is a part of the membership committee that votes to approve new members and handles potential problems.

"To be honest, any issues we've had were usually with guests or with people that managed to sneak in," he said. "It's not anything terrible, just people asking dumb questions and not respecting what this place is about. You can always tell if someone belongs here or not based on the types of questions they ask you, that's how we can tell if they should be here."

I smiled and nodded in agreement, as if to say, "Exactly! Who wants nosy outsiders asking stupid questions, right?"

Then I immediately crossed off the next two questions on my list: "How come no one is wearing fanny packs? And where do you keep your wallet and keys?"

A few minutes later, Bob introduced me to Jenny, a 31-year-old mother of three who had visited the club for the first time just three weeks prior. She was a stark contrast to many of the other members I had met, both in age and appearance, sporting a yellow sarong and orange horseshoe-shaped lip ring. She's also Bob's next-door neighbor. Bob and his wife invited her out to the club and told her to bring her kids and her fiancé along. While she had visited the club alone a few weeks ago, today was the first time her kids had come with her.

"They're having a great time," she said. "My oldest was a little apprehensive at first, but now that she's here and sees what it's all about, I think she'll be ready to come back again a lot more."

Jenny admits she was skeptical at the beginning. "When I first came here, I wore my bathing suit during the tour and for the first few minutes that I was at the pool," she said. "But once I realized how much I stuck out because I *was* wearing clothes, the bathing suit came off and I started enjoying myself. The people are just so welcoming and friendly, and they make you realize that it's okay to be yourself and not worry about what anyone thinks."

The most colorful character that afternoon was Dave V., the former president of the board at Avatan, who was in his mid-60s and cultivating a sweet handlebar mustache and a full-body bronze (no tan lines for Dave!). Dave V. first visited the club back in the 1970s.

"We've had everyone from doctors to lawyers to teachers join the club," he said. "We've got people who are very wealthy and people who can barely afford to pay their annual dues. But they make it work, because this is their vacation. This is where they enjoy spending time during the summer. Here, no one judges you based on your background, economic status, or profession; you're just another member who enjoys nudism, and we're happy to have you."

While some of the club's members, like Bob and Jenny, told me they were comfortable with people knowing they were nudists, Dave V. explained that others aren't so open.

"Some of our members have friends, family, or co-workers that they aren't comfortable discussing this place with," he shrugged. "Everyone here understands that, and it is another reason why we don't use last names. I know that I personally have chosen not to tell certain people that I come here, not because I'm embarrassed, but because I don't think it's their business what I do."

Thanks to the club's secluded location, Avatan's members don't find themselves bothered too often, Dave V. continued.

"Thank God for the prudishness of the average Minnesotan."

**AFTER ABOUT FOUR HOURS** of unclothed freedom, I finally decided to call it a day. I said goodbye to my newfound nude friends, who were all heading back to their campsites to freshen up before the evening's festivities (a pig roast and slideshow featuring highlights from some of the club's recent activities).

I've never felt so strange putting my clothes back on as I did at that moment, which just goes to show how quickly a new visitor can become comfortable in the nude environment.

Walking back to my car, I actually felt awkward, realizing that I stood out among the other visitors due to the fact that I was dressed. But everyone was still friendly and said goodbye.

As I pulled out of my parking spot, the naked Coors Light cowboy from earlier walked by, smoking a cigarette.

"Be sure to come back any time!" he shouted as I pulled away.

*Maybe I will, naked Coors Light cowboy, I thought to myself. Maybe I will.*