

Nude recreation camp: No jacket required



Jeff Wheeler, Star Tribune

The satellite dish of Avatan member Kim features a painting she did of a naked Calvin.

At Avatan Nude Recreation Camp in rural East Bethel, everybody knows your name -- and a lot more.

By [PAUL LEVY](#), Star Tribune

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As the Twin Cities' largest nude recreation camp prepared last week to take part in a cross-continent world-record attempt that barely matters -- the largest skinny-dip -- the camp's part-time caretaker bared her soul.

"Nobody here cares what you look like," Frankie Giarrusso said from the Avatan Nude Recreation Camp in northern Anoka County. "You take off your clothes, you take off all your pretentiousness.

"Body acceptance is a major problem women have. Not here. Fat, skinny, well-endowed ... we don't care. You'll find them all here."

At the Avatan Nude Recreation Camp in rural East Bethel you could find, over the years, a county judge, teachers, lawyers, legislators, bus drivers, the oldest living University of Minnesota cheerleader (he's 92), garbage collectors, even journalists. Here they are, all together in the altogether, without batting an eye.

Naturally.

Yet, for a group that isn't bashful, this 250-member nude recreation camp has managed a modest profile for nearly a half-century. Established in 1961 and hidden within 40 wooded acres, Avatan boasts 120 campsites equipped with electricity, water and sewer, plus a heated pool and hot tub, a clubhouse and coed showers. Campers stay in RVs, tents and cabins.

It's not even the oldest nude recreation camp in the immediate area, much less the Twin Cities. Oakwood Club, covering 40 acres in nearby Stacy, Minn., was founded in 1942. There also are at least four formal nudist clubs in Minnesota -- in Minneapolis, Worthington, Blaine and Isanti.

"Born nude, stay nude," reads a T-shirt that sits uselessly on a chair.

A sign at Avatan offers this camp philosophy: "No shirt, no shoes, no pants, no problem."

"We're not about sex," said Ira Hauptman, 64, sitting by the pool with his wife, Deb, 60. "You couldn't find a healthier family atmosphere."

Couples abound here, but so do families. Kids have grown up at the camp, which opens in April and closes in October. Families this year have come from as far away as Texas and Canada. Some are here seven days a week, others on weekends only.

"Most people who work stay home until the weekends, when they come here," said Giarrusso, a veteran of nude recreation camps in Arizona and Texas. "For those people, it's like living in two very different worlds. Believe me, this world is a lot more comfortable."

Last Saturday's well coordinated 2 p.m. jump into the pool by nudist clubs and nude recreation camps not only allowed them to leap into the Guinness Book of World Records, but offered outsiders a rare glimpse at a world that hides nothing but reveals just as little.

Many residents wear their identity like veils of secrecy. In some cases, all you can assume is what religion they aren't. Few will allow their faces -- much less anything else -- to be photographed. Identities are guarded for fear that employers, customers and relatives might not understand.

One man even asked that his occupation not be listed for fear of being exposed. He and his wife found how awkward nudity can be to members of the outside world when they

got married by the Avatan pool -- the one area of the camp where clothing is not an option. Although an exception was made that day to accommodate the newlyweds, some invited guests declined to attend the wedding. Others wore -- or didn't -- the uniform of the day.

Membership to Avatan is by invitation only, but this gated community is not for everybody. Before you pay the \$1,000 annual campground fee, there's an intense screening process.

If you're married, you're expected to bring your spouse. Members disdain and instantly recognize oglers -- curiosity-seekers who have no intention of joining but show up to catch a glimpse of the clientele. Cameras must be approved. Avatan recently invited members of the Anoka County Sheriff's Department to the campground for lunch, thanking the authorities for years of protection.

The journey here is different for everyone. Some have discovered Avatan through Explore Minnesota, advertisements in the Star Tribune or via the Internet. Others come to Avatan through the American Association for Nude Recreation, a Florida-based organization that serves 213,000 individual members and 260 affiliated clubs, resorts, bed and breakfasts and RV campgrounds.

Don Kelly, 65, who wears glasses and a hearing aid but little else here, admits he loved sneaking away to skinny-dip or sunning at a nude beach in Nebraska long before he discovered Avatan.

As a journalist working for a newspaper in Texas, Ira Hauptman says he once covered the Miss Naked New Mexico pageant. He says his parents were closet nudists. But it was his wife, Deb, who persuaded him to join Avatan with her 11 years ago. Still, nobody's accusing her of wearing the pants in the family.

"This is not a dating service, not a haven for pedophiles," Giarrusso said. "We want to make sure this is the place you want to be and that we want you here.

"You won't find a place less pretentious than this. We are who we are, and we're comfortable with that. We couldn't be more open."

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