

THE most bizarre thing I noticed minutes after entering a room full of naked people was not the guy with 20 piercings in his dick, or the Goth chick with her pubic hair trimmed into a downward pointing arrow, or even the old man sitting just to my right, reading the Sunday Times while his parched scrotum dangled free over the chair's edge. No. What struck me as unusual was the smell.

Clothes, I realised then, cover not only the sight of us, but also the odour. When nudity is communal our natural scents celebrate their freedom in raptures of glossy musks, dull yeasts and washed onions.

My excitement at this revelation evoked in me the same ache for the aroma of human skin as Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*. I wanted to kill every beautiful person in the room and diffuse them into untainted lust.

The occasion was a lunch for 110 naturists at a restaurant deep in the hills of Muldersdrift, away from the prying eyes of "textiles" (the term for people who wear clothes). Wolfgang Weinrich, president of the International Naturist Federation, was on a visit from his headquarters in Belgium; other guests included tour operators from Holland and Germany who specialise in holiday packages for naturists. Globally, the nude tourism industry is worth \$450 million a year.

Dress code was sneakers and sunglasses. And a towel to sit on — so your bum sweat doesn't sully the chairs.

I concede that I didn't have the balls to go naked; in fact, I wore a sarong around my bottom half to conceal them. A willingness to be naked among strangers is very dependent on the suggestions of the setting and how much you've had to drink: I was not on a beach or in the desert, I was in a restaurant; and I was totally sober.

At my table were David and Megan, a couple in their early 50s — he a psychiatrist and she a university lecturer.

They'd just come straight from church, arriving at the restaurant in the appropriate dress before disappearing into the bathrooms and emerging naked as Adam and Eve. David and Megan have been naturists for almost three years.

"Being naked strips you of all your defences and leaves you with nothing left to hide behind," David said. "What it does is it totally disseminates you from your normal life and all the baggage that it carries."

Megan is blonde, with sharp eyes

Don't look down

For naturists, stripping down to a Sunday lunch with fellow nudes is the ultimate escape from everyday life.

Oliver Roberts went along as a textile



HANGING OUT: Oliver Roberts, left, hides behind his shades; naturists view nature in its fullest glory



Picture: NICHOLAS DE VILLERS

and momentous breasts that pressed and rebounded triumphantly off the table ledge as she scooped salad off her plate.

"It might seem strange for us to say that we are Christian, but I don't see anything immoral with being in an environment like this. It's about feeling free and natural; there is nothing sexual about it."

Heading to lunch I felt a protruding anxiety about the possibility of visual arousal. Public erections when you are clothed are bad

enough, but to become the bearer of one and have nothing but a serviette to cover it with, you would never live it down. The relieving paradox of communal nudity is that, despite the paradisiacal allusions of being surrounded by women bearing themselves in unfettered displays of wobbles and jiggles, there is not even a vague sensation of sensual stimulation. The human form is far more enticing when it's presented as a mystery waiting to be unravell'd. The power of nudity,

then, is determined by its context.

"The appeal of naturism is that it relieves you of your identity and creates instant equality," said Mike, a 42-year-old architect. "Clothes are a way of defining yourself to others before they even begin speaking to you. Being naked like this, conversing with strangers, brings us all down to the same level because there's a vulnerability to it. It's deeply humanising."

It's true that it's almost impossible to gauge someone's character when

they are starkers. Your only clues are hairstyles, shoes, piercings and tattoos. Thus, in a setting like this, genuine impressions are formed by talking to people. Instead of depending on synthetics to back up your personality, you have to try harder.

"I think the world would be a much gentler place if we were all naked," said Nick, a board member at a major petrol firm. "It's far easier to connect with another person when you're both naked because, although the physical boundaries



BOTTOMS UP: Naturists trying everything to get the barman's attention

are increased, the personal and emotional ones become diluted.”

Certainly, the physical spaces between bodies at the lunch were noticeably pronounced. Though I am in doubt as to whether this gap is born out of consideration for each other's bareness, or the grief of accidentally brushing your penis against another man's leg as you stand at the bar (I saw this happen).

At any get-together there are always people who spoil things. In the case of a nude lunch, the *bêtes noir* are swingers. They come to events like this to scout out potential partners. I was pointed to a clique of them — their nudity somehow carried an element of greed — and told that their presence is discouraged and, though their behaviour is monitored (they've been known to disappear for trysts in the parking lot), there is little that can be done to prevent them from attending.

Compared to countries like Germany and Holland naturism in South Africa is still very small. The South African Naturist Federation (Sanfed) only has about 200 members, but, according to Paul, who co-owns local naturist tourism agency Kalypso Tours and is a member of Sanfed, this figure represents only 10% of the actual amount of naturists in the country.

“Sanfed is trying to grow naturism

through events such as this one,” he said. “The aim is to present naturism as something of an everyday occurrence so that people who are considering becoming a naturist can come to days like this and not feel fearful about trying it out.”

Most naturists are aged 50-plus. The reason for this, according to Paul, is that people have grown to be more comfortable with themselves and their bodies at this age and are also seeking a weekend's indulgence that goes far beyond putting your feet up and reading a book.

“A lot of naturists are professionals,” he said. “Naturism presents them with the ultimate escape because it's totally detached from ordinary life.”

Naturism in South Africa relies on word of mouth for its interest. Generally, Sanfed members will invite friends to an event or hear about it from a friend of a friend. Sanfed also has a group on Facebook. From next year, it is hoping to organise lunches like this every six weeks.

What was most endearing about being surrounded by casual adult nudity was the way in which everyone's flaws — droopy breasts, wrinkly willies and strange sproutings of hair were offered as celebrations. The sins of the flesh, it seems, can be overcome.

For more go to www.sanfed.co.za

Public erections are bad enough, but to be the bearer of one here wouldn't be lived down

TELL US: Do you think naturism makes us more, or less, intimate? Email your comments to lifestyle@sundaytimes.co.za or visit www.thetimes.co.za to take part in an online discussion