

LIFE LESSONS SANS SWIMWEAR

By Susan Ford

In the southwest Arizona desert, tucked between Deming and Silver City, clothing-optional Faywood Hot Springs offers a quirky and memorable destination for road-trippers and adventurers seeking new experiences. Get your swimwear ready—or not—because a soak in the mineral pools of Faywood just may change the way you view body image, social conventions, and even interpersonal communication.

“Clothing optional,” the official-looking sign advised. A left-facing arrow pointed out the dirt path winding through the desert shrubs and cholla cacti down to the fenced-in area below. “Clothing required,” a second sign instructed, its arrow indicating a trail in the opposite direction skirting the crown of the rugged bluff.

After six months on the road, my husband and I had been RVing long enough for me to realize that the strongest memories of the journey involved pushing my comfort zone, seeking to meet and understand others whose lives and experiences differ from mine, and taking on new adventures that were just a tiny bit terrifying. Still, we had just arrived at our very first clothing-optional hot springs, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to casually disrobe in front of a potential audience.

We opted for the fork to the right, and it led us to a secluded cluster of three of Faywood Hot



Springs’ 13 geothermal pools. The steamy, mineral-rich springs burbled up out of the earth at the top of the slope, filling the first soaking pool with its 105-degree water before overflowing down into the waiting 102-degree pool, and finally cooling and cascading

into the tepid 100-degree shallow foot bath.

Nestled into the hillside and shaded by the surrounding trees that gently diffused the midafternoon December sun, the hottest pool beckoned, inviting us to soak away the aches of

A sign for the hot springs at Faywood: choose your own adventure.



The metal sculpture of Kokopelli that guards the Visitors Center

the road. Fifteen minutes later, feeling loose, relaxed, and plenty toasty, we migrated to the warm tub, then finally into the coolest pool where the just-above-body-temperature water enticed us to linger for hours until the setting sun painted the desert a golden peach hue. Gathering our towels, we followed the tweets, chirps, and trills from the adjacent bird sanctuary to a winding trail along the ridgeline, and a park bench perfectly positioned for cuddling up and basking in the glow of the final rays of sunlight.

In the deepening twilight, we meandered back to our RV, winding our way around more pools, mineral showers, guest cabins, the clothing-optional overnight camping area, and a visitors' center guarded by a metal statue of Kokopelli. Signs

teased us, pointing out the paths to the labyrinth and stone chair, but they would have to wait for another day. After a pleasant walk along the trails, we arrived at the main campground where we were enjoying two nights of full hookups.

After dinner, the full moon and vast sky, with its twinkling stars, were too enticing to ignore, so we ventured back out, this time to the bathhouse pools reserved for overnight campground guests rather than day-use visitors. Inside the rectangular stucco enclosure, we passed through shower areas and emerged into an open-air courtyard that housed another set of three pools—these ones of the clothing-optional variety.

I had hoped to find the pools unoccupied so we could enjoy our own private oasis of relaxation

under the stars, but that was not to be. Another couple was already bobbing in the nearest pool, looking very relaxed sans clothing, and I quickly realized that although I could certainly decide to cling to my swimsuit, the most socially appropriate course would be to strip down, as well. I determinately walked to the lounge chair in the corner, where I removed my sandals and set down my robe and towel, all the while fighting the urge to turn, head for the exit, and seek out a more secluded pool for stargazing.

Apparently, I was not alone in my initial discomfort. When I later talked with one of the men who now works at Faywood, he shared that he came from a more traditional background, and it took him two weeks of going to the clothing-optional pools without dressing down before he realized that “everyone else was doing it, and there was nothing to hide or be ashamed of.”

In my case, my body was young and fresh, without the souvenirs of childbearing or very many years of gravity at work. It even managed to approximate a few of the unattainable western standards of beauty. Why, then, did I still feel so self-conscious? Was it purely body image, was it social conventions, or was it perhaps a little bit of both?

If I had grown up in my ancestors' native Finland, I would have participated in the ritual of the co-ed communal sauna au naturel from the time I was a young child. Had I lived in Germany, the relaxed clothing-free mingling of bathhouse culture would have been my norm. In Japan, I would have come of age

with the tradition of peaceful regular nude soaks at the female-only onsen.

Growing up in a conservative area of the United States, the mere idea of public nudity in any setting was a rigid taboo. Nudity and sexuality seemed inextricably linked, so to invite one would be to court the other. In my culture, nudity was either hypersexualized and seductive, or hyper-demonized and condemned. It rarely simply existed organically as part of nature, so I was unpracticed and uncomfortable around it. The very first time I experienced public nudity, I was in my mid-20s and a poor fellow jogging nude down Baker Beach in San Francisco complimented me on my sundress. I awkwardly stuttered, “Nice sunglasses,” in reply, not knowing what else to say, and made a focused attempt to keep my eyes locked on his face rather than darting nervously about in an effort to avoid lingering on his nudity.

Back at the hot springs, the couple already lounging in the hot pool was in their late 70s with all the sags, lumps, and bumps that come with decades of experience. White, crepe-textured skin glowed as they relaxed in moonlight-dappled mineral waters; the husband and wife seemed at peace with their bodies and their souls. The agonizing physical self-consciousness born in adolescence, the competitive pursuit for perfection of young adulthood, and the striving to clutch to youth of middle age had all seemingly resolved, washed away, and coalesced into the fullness of acceptance and self-love



at maturity. It was naked, and raw, and oh so indelibly beautiful.

My own milky skin reflected the soft moonbeams as I sat on the pool's edge and reluctantly shed my bikini, quickly slipping beneath the healing waters until only my face and neck were visible. Attempting to quell my social discomfort and physical uncertainty, I melted into the corner of the tub, listening quietly as the couple struck up a conversation with my husband.

For Americans like me who are unaccustomed to nudity at a public bath, it is a new experience to casually soak in the tub sans attire while engaging in conversation with complete strangers. When all of our pretenses and posturing, and the social conventions of everyday society, are stripped away with our clothing, when we can no longer hide behind that veil of privacy, what effect does this have on the connection we forge with others—and even with ourselves?

Whereas typical conversations are often reduced to small talk about the weather, careers, hometowns, and other safe but

meaningless banter, I found that here, in the shared vulnerability of a clothing-optional soaking pool, they took on a new tone. These interactions were real and genuine, filled with substance born from a place of having nothing to hide physically and so being encouraged to embrace authenticity and emotional openness, as well. It was as if the waters held the secret to fostering connection. I realized that evening that encounters and moments like these, if we dare to embrace them, have the potential to expand our awareness, challenge our preconceptions, and reward us with personal growth and meaningful stories to share.

The next night, my husband and I watched the sun set and the moon rise from the warm caress of the public clothing-optional pools sunken into the rugged desert hillside, and this time, we were both unashamedly nude. **R**

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Faywood offers cabins for visitors without their own rig.