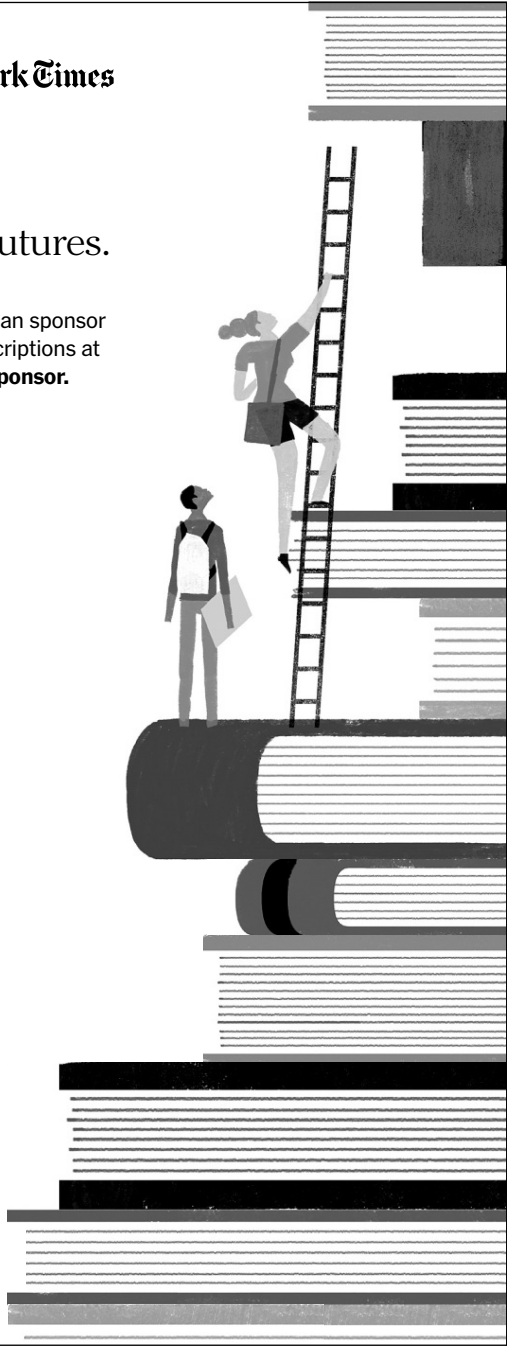


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Inside the Times

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY



LENA MUCHA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Prerow, Germany's most storied nudist beach, where clothing has been optional since the 1950s.

Should I Take Off My Clothes?

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

BERLIN — What you wear as a reporter matters. You want to blend in. When you interview the prime minister, you might wear a suit. When you interview rioting youths, you definitely don't.

But what do you wear — or not wear — when you're reporting a story on nudists?

I was still pondering this question when I arrived for my first appointment at a nudist camp south of Berlin. To my great relief, the guy who gave me a tour, a retired diplomat from former communist East Germany, was fully dressed. (He later admitted that he had put on clothes because I was a reporter from a United States publication. "I know Americans are a little prudish," he said with sympathy.)

Things briefly got awkward when my guide introduced me to a fellow nudist, who was sweeping outside his cabin naked and promptly offered us a cup of instant coffee. I had never shaken hands, let alone had a cup of coffee, with a naked stranger before. When I interviewed him, I kept my eyes firmly fixed on his face.

My dilemma then came to a head in Prerow on the Baltic coast, Germany's most storied nudist beach.

After interviewing a few nude swimmers while still fully dressed myself, I spotted a large family — grandparents, parents and children — running into the water together. They were perfect. Three generations. Naked in the sea.

I really wanted that photograph. But it felt creepy to shout at them from the shore, fully dressed: "Excuse me, um, can we take a picture of your naked children?"

There was only one way to do this.

I stripped, dove in, swam over to the family and explained to them what we were doing. Would they be open to being photographed?

"No problem," said Astrid Lorenz, 39, who comes to this beach every year with her two children and her parents. And then she asked me, "Are you a regular here, too?"

I had done it. I was blending in.

From that moment on, I found a new level of openness in the people I interviewed. Nudism, I discovered, was not just a quirky lifestyle choice. For many people from the former Communist East, it is

among the cherished traditions that have faded somewhat since the Berlin Wall fell. Nudism had been a mini-rebellion against a Communist dictatorship, and it also represented the egalitarianism that now makes some Easterners nostalgic.

"There wasn't the social jealousy there is today, because no one was rich and nurses and engineers were paid the same," said Thomas Bandelow, a 40-year-old teacher swimming farther down the beach. "In an economy of scarcity, everyone is equal."

In other words, everyone had to line up for the bananas in East Germany. But everyone could afford them.

Nudity, too, is a leveler. And it, too, was changed by reunification.

In her childhood, Ms. Lorenz recalled, everyone in Prerow was naked. Now it is evenly divided between those "in textile," to use nudist jargon, and those in the buff.

Gert Ramthun, an 80-year-old retired boxer, concurred: "Westerners are just more uptight."

I grew up in West Germany. I even remember the headlines about the "panty wars" in the years after the Berlin Wall fell: When West Germans started flocking east to the Baltic Sea beaches where nudism was the norm, several tense incidents apparently developed.

Western newspapers reported about "the naked terror against trunks and bikinis," explaining how Westerners in clothes who dared to trespass onto nudist territory were "force-stripped" and had their cameras taken.

We laughed at the time. But after my encounters with more than a dozen nudists, I am a little more skeptical about those accounts. Most nudists I met love the sense of community and equality that collective nudity appears to create.

One story in particular struck me: Christian Utecht, the president of the Association of Free Body Culture for Berlin and Brandenburg, told me that when his father-in-law died and his mother-in-law fell into a deep depression, Mr. Utecht persuaded her to go to his nudist camp.

"She took a lot of convincing because she worried about showing her body, which is an aged body," Mr. Utecht recalled. "But she has never been alone since."

Read the story at nytimes.com/world.

On This Day in History

A MEMORABLE HEADLINE FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

PUBLIC GETS BIG ARMY FOOD STOCKS; WHIPPING CREAM IS FREED OF BANS

September 2, 1945. The banner headline on The New York Times's front page trumpeted President Truman's declaration of V-J Day, on which the Japanese formally surrendered to Allied forces, ending World War II. But a smaller front-page story celebrated how the news would affect the home front: with increased supplies of butter, canned salmon and ice cream, which no longer needed to be reserved for soldiers' use.

Subscribers can browse the complete Times archives through 2002 at timesmachine.nytimes.com.

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