

Feb. 1, 2004----

RIVIERA MAYA, MEXICO -- The road is full of questions that inevitably lead to the beauty of travel. This is how I find myself leaning on a bar at the Moonlight disco at the Hidden Beach Resort-Au Naturel Club, the only upscale and not clothing-optional nudist resort in Mexico.

A naked woman walks up to me and asks, "Is this your first naked experience?"

Gee, how can she tell?

I am standing in a corner of the bar that is under a shadow of doubt. About 20 naked couples have finished doing a limbo dance on a cool night along the Caribbean Sea. With the exception of a gentleman from Mexico, I am the only single guy in the disco. At this point, no one knows I am a journalist, but I am the only person in the room still wearing a bathrobe.

It is too cold to be bold.

Besides, I am so shy, I do not limbo with my clothes on. I barely ever go to clothed cocktail parties.

My chipper friends are also mastering "The Macarena." Talk about your Polaroid moments. Cameras are not allowed at Hidden Beach. One dude is playing pool naked. Another guy looks like Jeff "Curb Your Enthusiasm" Garlin. His wife is applying for a job at Hidden Beach. He smiles and takes off his robe to join in a group dance to Marcia Griffith's "Electric Boogie." Nude tourists are more open and they bond faster. I have another shot of tequila.

I am here for you. The nude recreation industry is news. It has blossomed from a \$200 million-a-year operation in 1992 to a \$400 million bouquet, according to the American Association for Nude Recreation. The association has 50,000 members throughout the United States,

"More people are wanting a stress-free atmosphere," says Carolyn Hawkins, a spokeswoman for the association, based in Kissimmee, Fla. "When you shed your clothes, you shed your stress. People dress to impress. At a nude resort, you don't know if you're talking to a waitress, a banker or attorney. You know what the person is from within. Plus, there's nothing I hate more than sand in a bathing suit." Hawkins has practiced nudism since 1981.

I see a trend. When I return home, my best friend's wife, Denise, tells me her book

club is reading The Da Vinci Code, where a premise is that conventional religion and paternalistic systems are put in place to counter older religions that were more focused on celebrating nature, fertility and the goddess idea of a woman's ultimate power in nature. Modern religion is more manmade. The Da Vinci Code is a best seller. People are seeking a return to nature. Can nude book clubs be far behind?

Hidden Beach opened in May 2003.

The adults-only resort made a splash in pop culture when Castaway Travel in Houston chartered a Naked Air flight to open the resort. Around 90 passengers on a Boeing 737 from Miami disrobed at 30,000 feet, landed at Cancun International Airport (about 65 miles north of Hidden Beach), put their clothes on and headed to the resort.

Hidden Beach is next to the El Dorado Resort, a fully clothed, adults-only property. Each resort is beautifully landscaped with mangroves, coconut palm and papaya trees, pink and orange spring morning flowers and white and purple bougainvillea. Seven peacocks wander about the El Dorado property.

Hidden Beach is a five-star resort with 42 rooms. El Dorado is a four-star resort with 133 rooms. The resorts are separated by a dense, 12-foot fence made of a thatched wood material and 24-hour security. The beachfront property is adjacent to the Caribbean Sea.

The El Dorado fronts an environmentally protected area of the sea and every morning at 10:45 guests are invited to stroll out on a pier to feed the angelfish, parrotfish and sea bass. (Clothed Hidden Beach guests feed the fish at 3 p.m. daily.)

The rooms at El Dorado are bigger, but the rooms at Hidden Beach are nuttier. My Hidden Beach room contains bottles of Passport Scotch, Jose Cuervo tequila, Oso Negro vodka and Appleton White Jamaican rum, with upside-down spirit bottle dispensers.

Hidden Beach has a 24-hour hot tub and 18 swim-up suites on the ground floor. Each suite has an in-pool seating area and coffee table. Guests can paddle up a winding river to the C'est la Vie Swim-Up Bar. As I scamper past the bar for my naked beachfront massage, these are the top five things I overhear from guests at the Hidden Beach Swim-Up Bar:

5. "Bottoms up!"
4. "I'm Randy, the Mayan god of nudism."
3. "You never look me in the eye anymore."

2. "Hey, we're in Mexico. Things are always bigger in centimeters!"

And, No. 1. "Check out that Vicente Fox!"

Both resorts are all-inclusive. They are managed by Karisma Hotels & Resorts, based in Miami. Karisma was founded in 2000 by a group of executives formerly with the Allegro Resort Corp., which introduced the luxury all-inclusive resort concept.

The resort was built in 1999 as one operation called the El Dorado. It was divided in early 2003 to create the El Dorado and Hidden Beach. The Hidden Beach main swimming pool, swim-up areas, restaurant and disco are new. This year El Dorado will undergo a \$3 million renovation, which will upgrade it to a five-star resort. When Naked Air returns in May, guests will take over both compounds.

I spend my first night at El Dorado. After I walk around naked in front of a mirror for 10 minutes, I summon up the courage to spend the second night at Hidden Beach. After all, Benjamin Franklin was a nudist, according to the American Association for Nude Recreation. I'm in better shape than that guy.

At both resorts, guests are treated with attentive dignity. I am greeted with a bottle of champagne, fresh towels and a chocolate-coated cherry before checking into each resort. After I settle into my swim-up suite at Hidden Beach, I take off my clothes and open the screen door. Brrrrrr. The water is cold, but there are eight people relaxing in the nearby hot tub. They see the new kid in town, but I don't scare anyone away.

This is a good start.

The screening process is more intense at Hidden Resort. Guests are presented with a set of rules: 1. No photography, 2. Inappropriate behavior between guests and staff is not allowed, 3. Please, no explicit sexual behavior in public areas, 4. Management reserves the right to remove guests without refund for any violations of the above.

During my visit, about 90 percent of the Hidden Beach guests are male and female couples. One Illinois woman tells me she and her husband enjoy au naturel resorts in Indiana and Wisconsin, but sometimes they have to deal with the issue of swingers.

Nearly 260 resorts are affiliated with the American Association for Nude Recreation, and each goes through a rigid screening process. For example, the new Natura Christian nudist club from Naples, Fla., is a provisional AANR organization, meaning they are under a two-year probation period after which they become charter members. Hidden Beach has its own screening process.

Ruben Becerra, 34, is general manager of Hidden Beach and El Dorado.

"Naturalism is a philosophy," he says over a 10-course Mexican dinner at the El Dorado's clothed LaCaretta Restaurant. "To be honest, I haven't practiced it yet," he says. "But when people are into naturalism, the only thing that counts is personality. It is not based on a good body or a bad body, Barbies and Kens. Nudism is not related with sex. Nudism is way of enjoying life. When people arrive at the hotel, within 15 minutes they have 20 friends. That doesn't happen at a regular resort. That's why this segment of travel is growing."

Karisma is looking into other areas of Mexico to expand, but there are no definite plans. Everyone I encounter at Hidden Beach is heterosexual, but Becerra says the resort caters to "all walks of life."

Before my registration, I watch three couples from Texas check in to the Hidden Beach lobby, done in Hacienda-style decor with a high thatched ceiling. The couples are in their mid-40s and they are in a good mood. Mystical music from a female New Age vocalist is playing in the background. One of the guests is a frosted blond woman with a short black dress and black stilettos. She eyes a heavenly painting of a cherub. The little guy is bending over to play a flute. She shouts, "Is he well-endowed?" Everyone laughs. I begin to relax.

One thing I hear about Hidden Beach is that people remove their clothes upon check-in. This is not true. "We have had couples who have done that," Becerra says. "That doesn't mean it is a rule. Some people don't wear clothes for the whole week."

The Hidden Beach staff is clothed. Becerra carefully screened his staff. "Training was my biggest concern," says Becerra, a native of Veracruz, Mexico, who has worked in hotels in the Dominican Republic, Thailand and Tunisia. "We first questioned employees from the El Dorado to see if they would accept working in a natural resort. Out of that profile, we determined who would be suitable." And from that field, employees had to attend weekly orientation programs conducted by consultants who specialized in nude tourism. Specialized nude travel agents and tour operators also assisted the staff. The training was directly supervised by Karisma Hotels and Resorts and Becerra.

Hidden Beach guests can enjoy fine dining at the La Vista Restaurant.

The restaurant is adorned with mural reproductions of 14th century Sandro Botticelli paintings of the Garden of Eden and the Birth of Venus (the goddess of love, but my reference point is the 1970 hit by the Shocking Blue). The restaurant's painted ceiling replicates grapevines. The front of the elegant menu features a Monet nude.

I point out there is no dress code, but Becerra does not like my joke.

It is difficult to imagine a room full of naked people eating lobster and drinking fine

wine. Sure enough, during my visit only one of the 20 or so guests in the restaurant is naked. The outdoor temperature has dropped to 65 degrees, so the majority of guests are in dress shirts or cocktail dresses. On other brisk nights men wear silk shirts without pants and women wear lingerie. I am already out of step and I haven't even begun drinking. I am one of only three people wearing nothing but a bathrobe. I feel like Hugh Hefner.

"Nudity is not something optional here," says Hidden Beach concierge John Aquino. "But when it's cold, most of the time the ladies wear something only for dinner. They don't wear anything for lunch and breakfast." The restaurant staff is always smiling.

The intimate restaurant seats 42. When the hotel is full, there are two separate seatings. I wonder what naked people sit on at the La Vista. Becerra says there is a ratio of 15 to 20 towels per guest at the Naked Resort. If a dining patron is naked, a waiter fetches a rolled-up towel made of 100 percent cotton and places it down on his or her chair. I've heard of pulling out a chair for a lady, but this goes above and beyond the bootie call of duty.

The La Vista features a different ethnic cuisine each night, including French, Italian, Japanese, Mexican and Caribbean. Lobster is served on a daily basis. Specialty meals can be made to order.

Hidden Beach guests always have their hands full.

I spend only one day at Hidden Beach, but I get tired just looking at the activities program, which begins at 10 a.m. and winds down at 11:30 p.m. daily. I pick my favorite activities as if I am spending a week here: SUNDAY (10 a.m.) Reggae stretch class. MONDAY (10 p.m.) "The Sexiest Couple Contest." (Despite having the handicap of being a single, I actually go to this, but the contest never develops.) TUESDAY (4 p.m.) Beer Drinking Contest. WEDNESDAY (6 p.m.) Strip Bingo. THURSDAY (5 p.m.) Nude Tug-O-War. FRIDAY (Noon, aka "The Crazy Moment") -- Speedy Gonzalez; daily sketches presented by the clothed activity staff. SATURDAY (5 p.m.) Darts tournament (be careful).

I find the Hidden Beach tourist to be swankier and more middle-aged than I anticipated. I have only one other nudist resort experience, which was covering a "beauty" pageant at Naked City in Roselawn, Ind. That was rustic. This is regal.

The sands of travel are shifting, no question about it.

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