



COWICHAN

Full Disclosure

Baring it **all** at Cobble Hill's **Sol Sante** nudist club



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ANNA KEMP

STANDING NAKED in a shower beside a man I had just met felt a little weird at first. Don't get me wrong, I am a West Coast girl and nudity isn't really a big deal for me. I go to clothing-optional beaches, I skinny-dip when I can and I even once biked around downtown in my birthday suit for the annual World Naked Bike Ride. However, visiting Sol Sante, a nudist club in Cobble Hill, was something new for me.

Being nude at a beach or at a bike event is a moment in time with distinct boundaries. Being a nudist, however, is a lifestyle where day-to-day activities, from lying in the sun to washing the dishes, are done in the buff. Joining a club introduces you to others who want to do the same.

I had no idea what to expect, however, when I drove through Sol Sante's gates. Though the club owns 175 acres close to Victoria and has been around since the 1950s, I'd never heard of it.

Club members use only a portion of Sol Sante's sizeable property and keep it well-maintained. With mountain views and huge trees, grassy fields are mowed and gravel roads graded. Cabins and trailers have been spruced up with patios, retaining walls and flowering shrubs. As I followed one of the club's golf carts to my guest trailer I didn't glimpse any nudity. Granted, it was a chilly day, but I kept alert for bare skin, wondering when I would be expected to strip off. I was prepared, but trepidatious.

Club directors, Joe and Phyllis, took turns showing me the club and introducing me to others. Right away, Joe made Sol Sante's anonymity rules clear: "A number of people don't want it known they are members of a nudist organization. Up here we go by first names only."

Joe works in a fairly visible job and prefers to keep his nudism private. Phyllis, however, is retired and



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forthright. "If I wasn't proud I wouldn't be here," she says.

Now in her 70s, Phyllis became a nudist eight years ago after deciding to tackle things that challenged her. She first tried bungee-jumping and snorkelling, then accompanied some friends to a nudist resort in Palm Springs. She loved it. When she returned home she joined Sol Sante and never looked back.

"I love the sun. I think I was always a closet nudist," she says, adding that becoming a nudist has helped her self-esteem.

"I grew up with a mother who hid her body all her life and made me do the same thing. I have found so much love and acceptance here . . . They don't judge you by your body but by what is in your heart."

Phyllis' trailer sits on one of the club's 65 lots. Members can purchase the right to occupy a lot, but the land itself belongs to the club. Club rules only permit lot owners to live there full time from April to October. Some are snowbirds who come up to Sol Sante for the summer. Many live nearby and come in for holidays and weekends or just the day. Phyllis has a house in Duncan, but plans to spend most of the season up at the club. Visitors are welcome and can rent guest trailers or bring their own RVs or tents.

"If you want to become a member you are on probation for a year, to see if you fit in with everyone, and if you are willing

to participate," says Joe. "We are a social club but we do everything ourselves."

Says Phyllis: "Some people think we must be a bunch of swingers or voyeurs, but they couldn't be further from the truth. We're very careful not to let people like that in. Everyone who joins has a criminal record check."

As Phyllis drove me around in her golf cart the first day almost everyone we met was clothed and hard at work — clearing fallen branches, building porches, pulling weeds — not only on their own lots but in the common areas as well. The club runs on a volunteer basis. Nine elected directors organize the various aspects of operating the club and the work is done by the members.

"We never have problems getting volunteers," explains Phyllis, the current membership director. "When we advertise a work party, we all work together and co-operate."

During my visit, the club began restoring an old wooden building sinking on its foundations. In the morning, some 15 people dug around the base of the building and poured cement to stabilize the foundation. While they laboured, a couple of women prepared a communal barbecue lunch.

The nudity began in the afternoon when people filtered down

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to the clubhouse to use the outdoor hot tub. I followed into the change room and took off my clothes, hanging them up on a row of hooks. It felt like the change room of a public pool. The co-ed shower surprised me, but after the initial discomfort of wondering where to look as I chatted, I felt fine.

After the hot tub came the potluck, usually a weekly event at the club. I chose to put my clothes back on, but a few wandered through the clubhouse naked or wrapped

Members feel

more comfortable

being naked at Sol

Sante than on a

beach in their

bathing suits.

in a towel or sarong. Everyone covered up waist down for dinner — club rules.

Other club events include life-drawing classes, dances and sporting events. I was invited to the August long weekend salmon barbecue at least 15 times.

“We have an incredible amount of fun together,” says Phyllis. “It’s like joining a huge family.”

Albeit an older family: most of the members are 50 plus; many are retirees. On this weekend I was the youngest

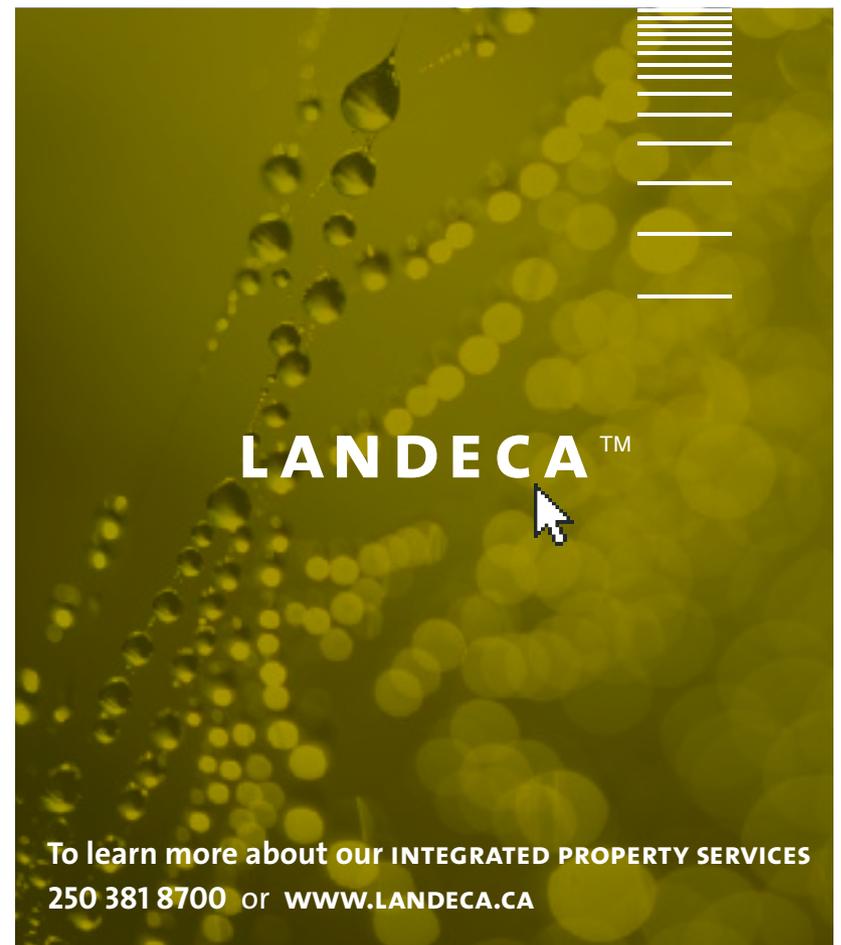
visitor by a good 15 years. Although some families with children come up in the summer and many members bring their grandchildren, the club hopes to attract more younger people.

“When I first joined there were a lot more children and we used to plan children’s activities,” says Phyllis. “Now the children are grown up and just visit, or don’t come at all.”

I visited Sol Sante with one primary question: Why are people nudists? I asked everyone I could and the answers varied. People spoke about feeling free, about loving the sun and about being close to nature. For one European couple, nudism wasn’t an issue at all; for others, becoming a nudist was a difficult process of overcoming social conventions.

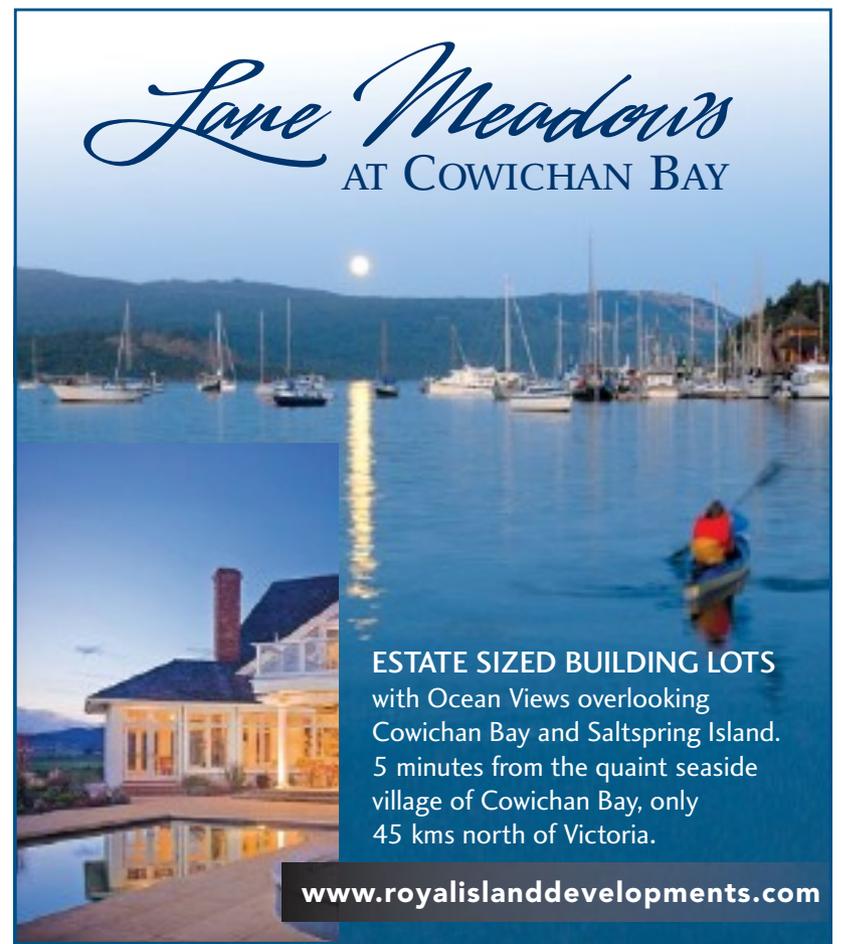
Many said what attracts them to nudism is the feeling of acceptance and equality. They felt more comfortable being naked at Sol Sante than they did on a beach in their bathing suits.

For me, the nudity in the end made less of an impression than the strong sense of community this group has built. Everyone spoke with pride in their club and commitment to making it a safe, welcoming and fun place to let it all hang out. I may not be ready to call myself a nudist, but as the weather warms up, I suspect Sol Sante might see a little more of me. **VB**



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