

## Bare It and Grin

Living the naked dream

By ANNA KEMP

**M**ost people have had some version of “The Naked Dream.” You know the one. You’re going about your normal business, shopping at the mall or praying in church, when suddenly, you look down and realize you’re bare as the day you were born.

As a teenager growing up in Victoria, I went through a period of having these “naked dreams,” and in every one I found myself down at the Inner Harbour, absolutely starkers. So, last Saturday when I rode my bicycle past that exact location, awake and entirely unclothed, it felt surreal—to say the least.

The main difference between my teen-aged nightmares of exposure and this weekend’s real-life nudity was that I wasn’t alone; 75 other bold cyclists in various states of dishabille were with me. We were celebrating World Naked Bike Ride day (WNBR).

The day is an annual event organized and supported by a variety of groups in at least 22 countries. While *Ciclonudista* (cycling-nudist) groups in Spain have been biking bare for over 10 years, WNBR as an international movement was created by Vancouverite Conrad Schmidt in 2004.

According to the WNBR website, the unclad events intend to highlight the dangers posed by traffic to cyclists and pedestrians, communicate a body-positive message, and protest “the indecent exposure of people and the planet to cars and the pollution they create.” But asking around before and during the event, I discovered that people came to cycle *au naturel* for a variety of reasons.

One older gent, who clearly spent a lot of time in the gym and tanning salon, just loved the opportunity to parade his well-honed body. Another young fellow spent much of the ride shouting “Meat is Murder” and “Israel out of Palestine,” promoting causes which he seemed to feel that riding in the nuddy might advance.

Rebecca McMackin, the enthusiastic young woman who has co-ordinated Victoria’s naked ride for the last three years, told me that while most riders would agree with WNBR’s stated aims, the real reason people come out is for fun.

Judging from this year’s crowd, I’d say she was right. People dressed up their state-of-undress with body paint, capes, feathers and fairy wings. One guy on a super-tall bicycle wore only a hula skirt made out of inner tubes. Others sported lacy panties, and one young man wore a mesh onion sack. The whole mood of the event was flamboyant and fun.

For myself, the decision to participate in World Naked Bike Ride Day was more of a personal challenge—to prove to myself I could do it, something like doing a bungee jump or skydiving, but without having to pay any money.

At first, the idea of streaking through downtown on my bicycle sounded like a lark, but as the date of the ride approached, I became progressively more nervous. I’m no stranger to public nudity—I’ve burned my fair-skinned nether regions on a few nude beaches and was even a nude model for art classes many years ago—but being

naked downtown seemed an unimaginable breach of social propriety. I couldn’t shake the thought of running into my employer, or my first grade teacher, or my dad.

But I had committed myself to this, and I intended to follow through. I decided to wear a mask to conceal my identity, not from the other riders, of course, but from the cameras and gawkers I was sure would all be focused on me.

When I arrived at the Parliament Buildings lawn at the designated time, a large crowd had already gathered, and people were disrobing all around. I didn’t let myself stop and think for even a moment. I ignored everyone, leaned my bike against a wall, and put on the mask before I whipped off my clothes. I shoved them smartly into my saddlebags and stood there, naked as a jaybird, letting myself adjust to the new reality.

As I stood, people I knew, as well as others I’d never met, all milled around chatting and posing for photos, looking happy and relaxed. I found that I didn’t feel that strange or exposed after all. In fact, the crowd of onlookers that gathered around us seemed more socially uncomfortable than the people who were dropping their drawers.

Once we started to ride, any lingering sense of unease disappeared completely. I felt confident surrounded by so many others all doing the same thing. It’s amazing how quickly my sense of normality returned. Suddenly, it felt completely appropriate to ride my bicycle buck-naked down

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Douglas Street.

For me, the best part about the event was something I hadn’t even considered before the ride—people’s reactions. As our motley procession rolled down the street, merrily ringing bike bells, hollering and cheering, it was amazing to see how many people burst into gleeful grins at the sight of us. People clapped and laughed and cheered us on. It was like participating in a huge piece of joyous, hilarious performance art.

About halfway through the ride, I stopped caring about who might see me. I pushed the mask off my face and laughed at the thought of being seen by the most serious person I could think of. If they didn’t think the sight of 75 naked cyclists was hilarious, then they would have my sympathy, not my shame.

One fellow on the ride, the one with the super-tall bicycle and the rubber hula skirt, said that going on the naked ride was like diving into an icy lake—the thought of it is daunting, and the initial immersion a shock, but once you get over that, you can’t imagine anything feeling quite so good. **M**

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