



Going nude on

queensland

the beach is still illegal in this state – but is it time to declare some areas clothing-optional?

Story Benjamin Law

raw

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

in the nude can be difficult. For starters, you need a pen, notepad and dictaphone but, when you're naked, you don't have pockets for any of these things. It's also hard presenting yourself as a hard-hitting professional when your interviewee has just seen your butt and can now see everything else. And on a day like today – white-hot sunshine; barely any clouds – it can be hard to concentrate. Soon enough, you are overwhelmed with a paranoia that you haven't applied enough sunscreen to parts of your body that don't usually see natural daylight, and are therefore – you now realise – susceptible to burning.

On the map, this place is called Alexandria Bay, a secluded beach in the Noosa National Park that locals affectionately know as A-Bay. If you grew up on the Sunshine Coast, you would have heard of A-Bay in the schoolyard – an almost mythical place spoken about in hushed tones and giggles. It was said that the only people who went to A-Bay were weirdos and perverts, who all swam and sunbaked stark naked. As a child, it was an incredible thought: if everyone were nude, you would be able to see everyone's *everything*. Even just the name A-Bay conjured up images of Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins in *The Blue Lagoon*, a place too wild beyond imagining to exist in real life.

Alexandria Bay does, of course, exist. To get there, you must hike through the surrounding ►



national park – a tangle of dense rainforest, humid with heat – across sloping sand and mud tracks that lead to the ocean. After trekking for half an hour, the jungle suddenly opens up to reveal a magnificent, stretching cove, surrounded by bush-covered mountains in a mouthguard formation, neatly cupping the surf.

When you arrive, you feel like an explorer discovering friendly natives. Nearly everyone is naked (bar sunglasses, the odd hat and some singlets) and bodies come in every shape and size: pert bums; smooth bums; furry bums; big boobs; saggy boobs; tiny boobs; six-packs; one-packs. Some bodies are so firm and ridiculously gym-toned, you get the sense they would be totally wasted if these people bothered covering up.

On the day I get there, A-Bay’s weekend crowd is bigger than usual. Many are locals, but hundreds have travelled here for today’s annual Nude Olympics from Brisbane, Toowoomba, and even eight hours from western border town St George. The Nude Olympics are arranged by a statewide naturist organisation called the Adam and Eve Social Group, and helpfully co-promoted by the Queensland arm of the national lobby group Free Beaches Australia (FBA). This year’s

Nude Olympics is the 26th consecutive annual event, which not only makes it Australia’s longest-running but – as its organiser later tells us – “the world’s longest-running beach nudist event, bar none”.

Before today I’d spoken to Tony Gullick, Free Beaches’ social coordinator, whose only question for me was whether I’d join in on the day. “We know you’re coming as a journalist,” he’d said, “but I feel you would feel more comfortable – and make everyone else more comfortable – if you were also in the nude yourself.” I nodded, before telling him that, as a newcomer, I would try to play by the rules.

By the time I get to A-Bay, I’m still wearing a T-shirt and shorts. Now for the moment of truth. Bunches of friendly people, including Dean – today’s organiser – reach forward to shake my hand, all of them naked, except that Dean wears a hat and shirt for sun protection. Standing in a circle, we all chat about what a lovely day it is and I do my best to keep my gaze at eye-level. As new arrivals join the group, saying hello like old friends, they immediately start to undress, all the while continuing to chat. I take this as my cue. My shirt comes off first, then my jeans (I put

my sunglasses back on), and then, finally, I pull off my Y-fronts, tuck them into my backpack and stand up. For the first few minutes I feel hideously exposed, like I’m in one those dreams where you’re among strangers, only to look down and discover you’re ... well, naked.

We discuss the Nude Olympics’ schedule – the shotput event; the sack race – as though nothing has changed. But of course, something *has* changed. We’re naked, first of all. But also, as soon as I took off my briefs, that was the exact point that I joined everyone else here in breaking the law. What we’re doing might be harmless, but because we’re doing it in Queensland – the last mainland Australian state or territory with no legal nude beaches – it is also very, very illegal.

TRAVEL AROUND THE WORLD, AND YOU’LL find designated spaces for culturally sanctioned, communal nudity. Many Asian cultures have public bathhouses (Japan’s *onsen* and *senjo*; Korea’s *jjimjilbang*) where people gather after a long day to scrub themselves hospital-grade clean, before settling in for a steaming group soak. Nude beaches are common in Europe, South America and parts of North America.

Summer 11

Communal nudity is *de rigueur* in German and Dutch spas, Finnish and Russian saunas and Turkish *hamam*. In England, it was common for men to swim in the nude together in rivers and streams, right up until 1860 when the practice was banned.

In Australia, it was considered obscene and illegal to go swimming in the ocean – naked or otherwise – during daylight hours, up until the end of the 1800s. In 1902, groups of young male activists started defying the law by swimming in neck-to-knee costumes at Sydney's Bondi Beach. William Gocher, a local newspaper proprietor and editor, led the protests by advertising his intention to break and challenge the law. Gocher was promptly arrested and charged with indecent behaviour. Eventually the charges were dismissed, with the magistrate concluding community standards had changed.

By the 1930s, Australian men were going topless and women were wearing backless costumes. Bikinis in the '50s caused an outcry. In the '70s, topless and nude bathing became more common across the country. South Australia's Maslin Beach became the country's first legal nude beach in 1975, with then-premier Don Dunstan announcing that "unless people were hurting others in the community, they should be able to be individuals and do their own thing". The Northern Territory followed in 1976 with Casuarina Beach, then NSW, the ACT and Victoria. Western Australia finally caught up in 1984.

Meanwhile, in Queensland, unofficial nude beaches started popping up everywhere. Even now you'll find them on Fraser Island and dotted throughout Far North Queensland. On the Sunshine Coast, there is Coolum's Third Bay and, of course, Noosa's Alexandria Bay. Still, without legally designated nude bathing areas, being naked on any Queensland beach was – and still is – a criminal offence.

Queensland Police confirmed to *Qweekend* that uniformed and plainclothes officers perform regular patrols of beaches as part of their routine duties. Section 9 of the Summary Offences Act 2005 states: "A person in a public place must not wilfully expose his or her genitals, unless the person has a reasonable excuse." Behaviours such as public urination span a grey and murky legal spectrum. And when people engage in what's considered illegal activity, they can get arrested.

In 2005, Kenneth Wenzel – a Sunshine Coast landscape painter – went to his favourite beach in Coolum, Third Bay. It is a stretch of semi-secluded beach where people often sunbake without clothes, and far less difficult to access than A-Bay, especially if you have the legs of an octogenarian. Just after midday, Wenzel lay down in the sun naked. Two plain-clothed men approached Wenzel and another man – who ▶

I started throwing my clothes off at 18 months of age. It's my own natural instinct.



Free agent ...
Coolum nudist
Kenneth Wenzel
spent three years
fighting his arrest.



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Wenzel didn't know – who was also sunbaking nude in the distance. Spotting the clothed men, Wenzel put on a towel to ensure they wouldn't be offended but they approached him anyway, presented Wenzel with police badges and charged him with being a public nuisance.

Wenzel, now 81, is deeply tanned with white, oiled hair, and has the friendly, bright-eyed face of Bob Hawke in his senior years. Wenzel has been a nudist – or a naturist – since he was a kid. He just doesn't like clothes. "It's just natural," he says. "In the summertime, your body cools much easier; you've got that freedom. I started throwing my clothes off at 18 months of age. It's my own natural instinct, really. That's what my body tells me to do."

Wenzel says he doesn't want to cross people's boundaries or make them uncomfortable. Still, even clothed, Wenzel draws attention. His toenails are painted in the colours of a rainbow (a legacy of a great-granddaughter's request to paint them), and on the day I meet him, he wears a bright, shimmery mesh singlet and tiny shorts with a dizzyingly sky-high cut. He doesn't wear shoes. He explains that this isn't a choice; he can't wear shoes because of health problems. He's naked "where and when possible", except



Double standard ... One of the police officers who arrested Wenzel in 2005 was more "disgusted" by his painted toenails.

for when it's cold or "where society doesn't allow it" – in public places, or around other people who aren't naturists. Speak to other nudists and they'll tell you exactly the same thing: none of them wants to expose himself on purpose to provoke people. They do their best to keep their nudity to their homes or designated naturist gatherings.

That day at Coolum's Third Bay, the police officers disagreed with Wenzel's assessment that being naked at this location was okay. Wenzel

said he'd covered himself with his towel when the officers were at least 75 metres away, but they claimed they had seen Wenzel from further away and charged him accordingly. "Well, I'll be defending it," Wenzel said of the charge. Even then, he felt he would win the legal fight. "I was confident the law was wrong and wrongly written," he says. "When someone kicks me in the teeth, I'm going to retaliate."

It would take another three years for the case to be settled.

THE HIKE IN TO ALEXANDRIA BAY MEANS IT'S a beach restricted to people in relatively good health. If you're old or have a physical disability, forget about it. In some ways, A-Bay's inaccessibility makes it an ideal site for a nude beach, and it keeps prying eyes away. In other ways, Alexandria Bay is one of the worst spots imaginable. For starters, people die here.

At the Nude Olympics, just before 10am, everyone assembles for a lifesaving briefing. A handful of lifesavers are gathered around their quad bike, all of them clothed and staring at us naked people. If they think the situation is strange, they don't show it. It helps that they all wear sunglasses. The chief lifesaver here today ▶

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is named Bill, and he speaks to the group through a megaphone. “If it’s your first time here today,” Bill says, “this is considered Australia’s most deadly beach.” There was one period, he adds, where they had six drownings here in the space of 18 months. There are powerful, deadly rips here that will cradle you without warning, and drag even the most seasoned swimmer out to drown in the deep. Alexandria Bay isn’t a part of Surf Lifesaving’s rostered patrol and it’s not a properly designated bathing reserve. Later, I find out the Adam and Eve Social Club has paid Surf Lifesaving \$1000 to have lifeguards patrolling here especially today. Usually, Bill wouldn’t recommend that anyone swims here whatsoever.

“But being lifesavers,” he says, “and being broadminded, we understand people are going to walk through the park and going to want to get in the water.” He says he only asks that if we get into the water, we only go waist-deep. “Yes, we can come and get you. It will be a very unpleasant five minutes for you, not to mention the tirade from me you’re going to get, back at the beach.” Everyone laughs sombrely.

There are other concerns. “An issue we’ve had for *all* time – and you’ve probably all faced it previously – are the wankers in the trees.” A-Bay’s mountainous ridges might offer privacy and isolation, but they also provide an excellent vantage point for people to bring their cameras and start taking photos of people in the nude without their consent. In the past, there have been fights and confrontations between voyeurs and nudists. Some nudists have teaching or government jobs and are afraid of the consequences should their identities be discovered. Most just feel it’s a gross violation of privacy.

“Don’t get into it,” Bill warns us. “Come and see me; I’ll go and talk to them. It’s not worth a punch-up on the beach because someone’s got a camera. At the end of the day, people *can* bring cameras and take photographs of the surf. It is legal.” There are murmurs of dissent in the crowd. “There are fine lines, I do understand,” Bill says, “but let me deal with that.”

As if on cue, someone points up towards the bushes. “Let’s wave to our resident up in the trees now,” someone shouts out, loud enough so the man in the bushes can hopefully hear. We look up, shield our eyes from the sun and spot him immediately – a man with a long-lens digital SLR camera, snapping away at all of us. As soon as I spot him and realise what he’s doing, I feel violated too. I feel like picking up a large rock and pegging it in his direction.

“Apparently we do have some chap up in the tree here,” Bill says into the megaphone, “but again, you’re bigger than that. You enjoy your day; don’t worry about him. He’s probably sitting in about 55 degrees of sun at the moment. He won’t

feel so good. The day’s yours. Enjoy it. But make it a good one for yourselves and it’ll be fine.”

It doesn’t always end up fine, though. After Kenneth Wenzel was charged in 2005, his case was brought before the Maroochydore Magistrates Court in 2006 for a summary trial. During the hearing, the two plainclothes male police officers – Constables Chad McAlister and Chenar Paterson – said they had been offended by Wenzel’s nudity. McAlister added he was also disgusted by Wenzel’s rainbow toenail polish. The magistrate said the prosecution had proved its case and fined Wenzel \$75.

Wenzel appealed. For him, it was never an option to simply shut up and pay the fine and give up, even if the fight would end up costing him more in legal fees. In 2008, the case was heard in the Brisbane District Court. Wenzel’s solicitor, Paul O’Shea, felt confident about grounds for an appeal, and would argue the magistrate at Maroochydore Magistrates Court had offered no definition to the words “wilful” or “exposure”. Wenzel says he went to the Brisbane appeal expecting, and knowing, he would win. He was right. The case was sent back to the Magistrates Court for rehearing. Maroochydore Magistrate Barry Barrett dismissed the charges and awarded Wenzel \$2000 in costs.

What, exactly, did Wenzel get out of the win in the end? “Justice,” he says. “The law is wrongly written.” Now, whenever Wenzel goes to A-Bay or Coolum’s Third Bay to sunbake nude, he says he feels more or less the same amount of vulnerability as before the arrest. Everyone knows about the nudity at A-Bay, and especially after Wenzel’s win, Queensland’s laws about wilful exposure don’t seem to be enforced at either of those sites, according to nudists. Ironically, this makes Wenzel angry – the idea that a wilful exposure law exists, but has double standards that are clearly applied on case-by-case discretion.

“The police, the minister for police, the commissioner of police, the Crime and Misconduct Commission and the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee will do nothing to have the criminal law upheld at Alexandria Bay,” Wenzel says. “Why don’t you get the police in and shut Alexandria Bay and Coolum down? I ask that question. They are *already* nude beaches. All they want is a legal stamp on them.”

FBA faces two questions when lobbying for legal nude beaches. The first is geography: Where do you propose to put them? The second is who to lobby. When approached, responsibility is passed and shifted between local councils and the Queensland Government, making it difficult to know where responsibility lies.

In 2006, FBA Queensland representatives met with then-premier Peter Beattie who, according to FBA, offered tentative support for



I don’t mind what they do, as long as they don’t do it in the street and frighten the horses.

Nudie blues ... Alexandria Bay (right) is a known nude beach, says one nudist. All it needs is “a legal stamp on it!”



the idea. After Wenzel’s 2008 win in court, FBA went on the offensive and prepared a proposal that neither Premier Anna Bligh nor Sunshine Coast Mayor Bob Abbot said they would personally oppose. Judy Spence, police minister at the time, said legalising a clothing-optional beach would require amending the wilful exposure provisions of the Summary Offences Act. “If the council came to me to request it,” Spence said, “then we’re prepared to look at it.”

Free Beaches lodged a formal proposal with the Sunshine Coast Council, suggesting three different options: just north of Stumers Creek at Coolum, Mudjimba, and Marcus Beach. Noosa’s Alexandria Bay wasn’t on the cards, as it was in a national park under state control. (Confusing matters further, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service later said legalising A-Bay as a nude beach was actually a local council decision.) Soon, newspapers were reporting it was imminent: the Sunshine Coast was about to get Queensland’s first legal nude beach.

It all fell apart. Each proposed beach was shot



down by the councillor responsible for that area, and council as a joint body voted against the proposal. Now, much of FBA's anger is directed at the mayor, Bob Abbot. However, Abbot says he's neither for nor against the proposals. "I don't have any issues with it either way," he says. "It's their prerogative, and I don't mind what they do, as long as they don't do it in the street and frighten the horses." He adds that he's seen nude sunbathing before and it certainly doesn't bother him. "But the Sunshine Coast is a fairly conservative area and there is an awful lot of rejection of formalising any nude beach. Council recognised a number of options, did a public consultation and got considerable objection to all of them. It really is a no-win situation there. We're not going to go any further with it."

Councillor Debbie Blumel, whose jurisdiction included the proposed beach at Mudjimba, vocally opposed it, telling reporters her community was not going to stand for it. (Blumel declined to be interviewed for this story.) Councillor Vivien Griffin, who represents the area that includes the

proposed beach near Stumers Creek, also petitioned against it. "For me, it's not in any way a moral issue," Griffin says. "Plenty of beaches in Europe are nude beaches – and in other states as well – and the community copes perfectly well." Griffin says the problem was the proposed location. "It's in a fairly well-used area and it just didn't seem appropriate. I certainly had some strong feedback from the community at the time. It's a dog-walking beach."

State MPs weighed in. Member for Noosa Glen Elmes vocally opposed legalising any nude beach in the region, saying he preferred the current arrangement – that public nudity remain illegal statewide, with authorities turning a blind eye to sites such as A-Bay or Coolum's Third Bay. "If the authorities wanted to police it, they could," he says. "[But] I wouldn't, in any way, encourage them to police it. I take the view that you're just better off letting the practice continue. If it's not a problem, and it's not causing anyone any concern, then I think it's best left the way it is."

Still, Elmes also firmly opposes any move to

legalise nude beaches. His main concern is that once you legalise one, a raft of similar requests will follow. He's also wary that once the issue is properly on the table, someone will inevitably lose out. "One side of the community will insist the law be enforced; the other side of the debate wants to see free beaches. The 'live and let live attitude', I think, is the correct one."

Councillor Russell Green, whose jurisdiction includes A-Bay, says he has no problem with nudity either, especially at A-Bay. An avid surfer and member of Surf Lifesaving, he's surfed around A-Bay since he was a kid, and had always seen people bathing in the nude. However, Green is not going to advocate legalising A-Bay, even if it was proposed, for safety concerns. "Alexandria Bay – and I've grown up in Noosa – is one of our most dangerous swimming beaches," he says. "Unfortunately, there have been a number of fatalities there. I've been personally involved in a number of rescues there. National Parks and Surf Life Saving don't want to encourage people swimming on that beach." ►

None of the politicians admits to ever visiting A-Bay or any other nude beach to see what the fuss was about. Abbot says he'd seen people doing it while walking through the national park and didn't give it much thought. Elmes joked he was afraid of the effect his nudity would have on others, and that it would be unfair for him to inflict that on people. "The thought of me running around after a volleyball on the beach in the 'altogether' is not something that would be welcome on the front page of *The Courier-Mail*," he says, laughing. Green says he's not going to try any time soon, either. "For those of us who have ever surfed, board rash is bad enough on your chest," he says. "I don't think I need board rash anywhere else."

BACK AT THE NUDE OLYMPICS, THE DAY IS

getting on. A stall has been set up with brochures and pamphlets advertising nudist accommodation spots (far more than you'd think), a nude cruise through Moreton Bay scheduled for November, and a nude vineyard tour, wine-tasting and dinner – "Brisbane's first ever nude wine tour!" it proclaims. Despite the name, the Nude Olympics themselves are less about elite sports and more a series of school fete games such as egg-throwing competitions, a shotput event using a small sandbag, and a sack race which, when competed in the nude, involves much bouncing around that is simultaneously amusing and ghastly. In the Over-50s Women category, the participants groan as they line up and climb into their hessian sacks. "We've over 50, you know!" one woman says, demanding a shorter course.

Later, a bunch of women appeals to my vanity ("You've got a nice arse, love!") and I'm roped into competing in the afternoon's male round of the Best Bums competition. It's a strange thing. More than 30 men, young and old, stand shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the ocean with our backs to the crowd. We hold a black tarp at shoulder height to hide our identities while a young woman, recruited as the judge, checks our cheeks for firmness and ripeness. On several occasions, my glutes are pinched and inspected like exotic fruit. Meanwhile, the men continue holding the tarp up while other beachgoers – naked and clothed – walk in front of us, some laughing and pointing, while others stare shamelessly. It is discomfiting to be leered at like this, at least from the front.

"Give them a 20-shotgun salute, boys," someone suggests as people gawk. "As long as you don't stand to attention," another man says.

Everyone laughs and groans at the same time. To my surprise, I am genuinely upset when the tarp is brought down and it's announced another man has won the competition.

Later, I chat to Tim – a well-spoken 38-year-old man with reddish hair – as we watch



We [nudists] just want
the right to exist.



the tug-o'-war event. Tim has recently become FBA Queensland's secretary, though he's been an FBA member since 2003. He started getting into naturism "very tentatively", he says. "It's not like you get a lot of straightforward facts from other people about this lifestyle – where to start, how to get into it, anything like that. If I look back on it now, I didn't really know what naturism was. I also knew that in a lot of places in Australia, it's illegal to be nude."

Including where we are right now, I say. "Exactly right," Tim replies. "It is technically illegal to be nude at this beach, right now." We pause, and watch everyone in the tug-o'-war scream and grunt as they pull on their side of the rope, making deep skid marks in the sand.

Well, this feels illicit all of a sudden, I say, before asking Tim whether he ever feels vulnerable being here on the beach, knowing Queensland law. "Absolutely," he says. "The police don't condone our activities; they basically turn a blind eye to it. But that can change any day of the year. They could turn around and say, 'We know people have been participating in illegal activities; we need to crack down on that'."

There have been other years, Tim adds, where police have come to the Nude Olympics especially, and people have felt threatened and targeted. "Personally, I'm not one for breaking laws," he says. "I'm not an anarchist. The nudist movement isn't about getting out there and being in other people's faces and wanting to make them change. We just want the right to exist."

On April 28, 2008, Kenneth Wenzel listened keenly as Magistrate Barry Barrett was about to deliver his verdict. But before Barrett handed down his ruling, he had one more thing to add,

saying he could not leave this case without raising one final question. "Is this a state," he asked, "that on the one hand allows nudity in large numbers on some beaches? For example, Alexandria Bay, Noosa, and, in particular, the so-called Nude Olympics? Does this state allow that to go unchallenged by police intervention yet, on the other hand, seeks out elderly nude males, partially concealed by vegetation on semi-secluded beaches – for example, Third Bay, Coolum – and lays charges against those individuals for alleged criminal conduct?"

"If the answer is 'yes', and I feel it is, this court shall not be party to such patent victimisation and double standards."

Barrett dismissed the case.

For many people on the Sunshine Coast, the nude beach issue is apparently a big non-story. The nude beaches have been there for years. "If you spoke to a lot of people in the Noosa community, it's not an issue to them," Russell Green says. "They understand it occurs because it has been happening there so long."

Councillor Vivien Griffin says she suspects the legalisation of a nude beach in the region is inevitable. "You would have to think it would be on the cards *sometime* in the future," she says, "given – as I say – other states have resolved this issue. So, I'm really not quite sure why it's not occurred in Queensland." Still, considering she campaigned so heavily against the proposed beach in her district, I ask whether that means the beach will never be in her district, and not while she is a councillor.

"It's about identifying the right place and just making sure the community, as a whole, is aware," Griffin says. "Certainly, Alexandria Bay has operated as a nude beach for decades, very satisfactorily. You have to wonder why it couldn't be resolved as a nude beach."

At Alexandria Bay, it took me a while before I became entirely comfortable with the whole nudity *en masse* thing. I've been happily naked in front of other people before – in change-rooms, in Tokyo's traditional bathhouses – but being naked on the wide expanse of a beach is an entirely different prospect. Those initial handshakes might have felt awkward, but everyone said that as a first-time nudist, it wouldn't take long before I would eventually understand the appeal.

Soon after, I ran into the ocean – partly because it was hot; partly because I wanted to hide under the water – but right after I hit the surf, I felt like a kid again and the world seemed bigger somehow. During dive after dive, my head ducking under the waves and my pale bum – caked with sunscreen and poking out of the water like a blinding double-moon – it felt great. In fact, it felt completely natural. ■