



Reclining nude

How far would you go for the perfect tan?
Christa D'Souza prepares to bare all

someone who used to put bits of tin foil up her nostrils in the Seventies want to go brown in even more places than before? Why wouldn't someone who always loves going one further than anybody else, be the absolute first to strip off, to jump at the chance, once she's home, of crowing over her real, live look-ma-no-lines tan?

It certainly feels like something everybody should try properly at least once in their lifetime. To know what it is like to roll around in the sand like a breaded escalope and then plunge with naked abandon into the sea to wash it all off; to know what it's like not to have a welt at the back of one's neck from hoiking up a halter top too tight; to engage with the elements without the artifice of clothes; to be *real*, as the great disco queen Cheryl Lynn once put it.

I've done it before, of course. I was born in 1960 and I come from at least partially bohemian stock. There was the time my other half, myself, and my first born (who is now 12 and gags if he so much as catches me in my underwear) spent a week away from everyone in an isolated villa in Italy and the three of us never once put our clothes on while out in the sun. Then there was the girls-only trip I did to Greece last summer where, it's true, I ended up being the first person – actually, the only person – who took all her

Two o'clock in the afternoon. Not a cloud in the sky. Here I am on my ultra-private terrace by my ultra-private pool at Maia Resort in the Seychelles. It is the perfect, perfect setting for doing what I've always wanted to do for an entire holiday but have never quite dared pull off, which is to go sunbathing completely nude...

And so it is I am lying here on a teak sun-lounger, stark naked save a pair of sunglasses, allowing the rays to penetrate places that haven't been properly penetrated for at least 40 years. All of which would be marvellous, lovely, Edenic even, were it not for the constant low-level worry that Redana, our private butler, whose job it is to anticipate our every need, might have unobtrusively slipped in. On the bikini goes. Off it goes. Back on again it goes. Then off again.

I know that Redana must have seen it all before having butted at the Maia almost since it opened: the over-enthusiastic Brazilians, the sunburnt willies, the nonchalantly akimbo legs. Indeed, nude sunbathing by one's own poolside is positively encouraged here. But still. The idea of letting it all hang out while this devout Balinese father-of-two lays the table



Christa D'Souza's favourites

Clarins SOS Sunburn Soother, £24

La Prairie Cellular Protective Body Emulsion SPF 30 for Body, £80

Yon-Ka After Sun Milk, £27.50

Decléor Sun Expert Soothing After Sun Milk for Body, £23

Sisley SPF 15 Body Cream, £78

Invisible Zinc Face + Body Sunscreen, £18, at Selfridges

for lunch or silently sweeps the floor of sand feels wrong. And so the tiresome little process continues right through to the end of the day. On. Off. On. Off. Oh dear. Those Blakean fantasies of recapturing my childhood, of being at one with nature, of getting that clean sweep of a tan that doesn't get all over the sheets, elude me once again.

Nude sunbathing, or "air bathing" as Benjamin Franklin, a keen naturist, liked to call it. For an old tanorexic like myself, it seems like not much of a leap. Why wouldn't

clothes off by the pool. But, boy, did the news of my signature, stalwartly Seventies-style bush travel when we got back to London.

Those were old, old friends, whom I don't mind being teased by. What about on the beach, in front of strangers? Or, worse, in front of people you only slightly know? Or, worse still, people you only slightly know and are themselves in bathing suits? I did this once as a challenge in Turkey back in the Eighties and I still get hot with shame thinking about it, jauntily trying to scale down a cliff to the >

VOGUE BEAUTY



Yves Saint Laurent
La Laque in No 142, £16

Estée Lauder Bronze Goddess
eyeshadow in Aqua Flash, £15

Revlon Nail
Enamel in
Fuchsia Fever, £6

NARS Due
Eyeshadow in
Burn It Blue, £23

Clarins Crystal Balm
in Coral, £15.50

Dior Crystal
Gloss £19.50

Ruby & Millie Face
Gloss in Fire, £12.50

Beach
make-up

beach and getting stuck halfway with my bare bottom out for everyone to see.

See, in truth, I'm a prude. Why else would I have kept my pants on in the communal baths at boarding school? Why else would I still, to this day, prefer to go into another room to get dressed and undressed? As for sleeping nude – is that not a tacit invitation for one's other half to jump one's bones? I suppose what I need is a gentle, more sympathetic way in, and lo, such a situation presents itself: a spoiling, grown-ups-only week in the Caribbean with my friend Belle Robinson. Belle, lucky thing, has a terrace at her villa specifically designed for said purpose; that is, strictly off limits to the male folk or indeed anyone other than her close and "preferably not in too tip-top shape" female friends. Heaven. I can't wait. It's the perfect opportunity to get my kit off once again. From now on I'm officially in nude training. Where, though, to start?

The Harley Street office of Dr Marko Lens, one of London's best "derms", to see if it's, er, safe. OK, I'm going to admit it here, I'm a little laissez-faire on the sunscreen front – if you're the sort who coated yourself in Bergasol in the Seventies, you generally are, and besides, didn't I read somewhere in the *Mail* that all our kids are going to get rickets owing to the amount of SPF 250+ we slather on them the moment the sun comes out? (Let's not stop at sunscreen, by the way. I hardly ever wear sunglasses. Or a hat. Well, I figure, there is little point in shutting the stable door if the horse has already got out.)

Lens, an expert on skin cancer and himself as pale as veal, answers my question by way of a question. How old am I? I tell him. "Hmm," he says thoughtfully, "you have the skin of someone much older. OK. Nude sunbathing. Do I approve? Of course not. Look, the reason we have more skin cancer than we did is because we are exposing more of ourselves to the sun for longer periods of time than ever before. If you are asking me would there be a correlation between naked sunbathing and more skin cancer in the pubic and vulval regions, well, what do you think?"

Ewww. I *knew* there'd be a time to defend that Seventies-style bush of mine, and that time is now. Look, I can see how a Brazilian or maybe a Hollywood might appear rather girlish and Balthus-like in theory. But as a girlfriend who went on a romantic holiday to the Maldives (topiarised thus) confirmed, in practice the look is more Readers' Wives.

Pubic fashions: this is a subject that greatly interests Clare Peters, the hot waxer's hot waxer at Richard Ward's hair and beauty metrospa. For Peters, asking a client to take their knickers off and clasp their knees to their chest is all in a day's work. She knows what she's talking about; she's seen it all before. So when she says that, even under the circumstances, the situation has to be "tamed" somewhat, I listen. A Hollywood or even a Brazilian might be a little overt, she agrees,

"Some see nudity as exhibitionism. I see it more as a leveller"

but how about something called a Cool Britannia ("The Brazilian with a touch of British reserve," as it is described in the Richard Ward brochure) and maybe even, if I'm game, the top bit shaped like a little heart? After she's finished we both have a look in the mirror. It really does look awfully... minimal. Should I rent a merkin for the first few days?

Oh, get over it. Look at my friend Belle. She doesn't even *own* a bikini. If she goes to the beach, she'll take a sarong. "I like the feeling of freedom rather than restriction," she writes back matter-of-factly when I email her on the subject. "The hippie in me likes the feel of the elements on my skin, the water on my body. Swimwear for me falls into the same category as underwear and tights – it feels constricting. I guess you either get it or you don't."

And the tan-lines dilemma? (Because I do love a tan line.) "Me too," says Belle. "On 20-year-olds with cherry pips they look adorable, very David Hamilton. But on a woman of a certain age with not so little

bosoms? Personally I think a monochrome of brown is more flattering than a 'patchwork' effect, which on older skin, to me, just looks cheap." Painter and ex-model Emma Woollard, who sunbathed naked *en famille* as a child, and whose sister Timna, the trompe-l'oeil artist, used to body-paint her for art-school projects, agrees. "Bikinis make me feel self-conscious, inhibited, suffocated even," she says, "whereas being nude makes me feel invisible. Some people see that as exhibitionism, but I don't. I see it more as a leveller." I suppose I'll have to rely on my watch strap or a plaster for a tan tattoo effect. (Chanel, take note. Could you do a daisy-chain tan tattoo for next season?)

Twenty-four hours to go and I'm having a little practice run, as it were, in the privacy of our spare bedroom. One thing I know I can't do is eat (or drink alcohol) and be nude. No wonder that painting *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* always disturbed me slightly. Chewing gum, if I'm in the buff, that's the limit for me.

Another thing I'm going to have to make a concerted effort to halt is this automatic boob-clutching habit of mine. Why do so many of us do this? Is it the female equivalent of the footballer's testicle clamp? Or is it our brains not so subconsciously trying to emulate the "corrective" properties of a bikini top? Oh, but come on. If one is nude, one is nude, surely? Be out and be proud! Proclaim, as Katherine Mansfield did, how "idiotic civilisation is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?"

Right. Suitcase packed. Without the 50 bikinis I usually bring (49 of which I never wear) it ought to be a lot lighter, but of course it is not. Nature abhors a vacuum, and in the same way that I got awfully interested in make-up and handbags when I was pregnant, my wheelie is bursting with nail varnishes, sarongs, sunglasses and hats. Essie Chinchilly nail polish, a caramel tan and turquoise earrings? Like I said, who says you can't get "dressed" when you're naked? Who says you can't play fancy dress when you're not wearing any clothes?

I've got the one bikini just in case I get desperate. But actually, I think I'll be fine. Mirrored Ray-Bans, a *Grey Gardens*/Margo-style towel turban and a trim, heart-shaped bush. I swear to God I could walk out on that terrace and nobody will know it is me. ■