

Introduction

In 1998 I found myself standing fully clothed amid a herd of one hundred sweaty, shirtless and, in too many cases, bottomless men at a dumpy nudist campground in the wilds of Pasco County. Many were videotaping every jiggle and crevice of the Miss Nude Florida contestant on a makeshift stage. What a shot she was giving them. There in the bright, hot Florida sun, skin gleaming with oil, the nubile woman doubled over, rear to the crowd, showing everything but her uterus.

I'm no prude. I was a casino-beat newspaper reporter in Las Vegas for five years. I was the script researcher for the motion-picture flop *Showgirls* and combed the seediest of strip clubs searching for a dancer who wanted to be on a casino stage. But I was a little stunned, not to mention creeped out, by the tongue-lolling amateur pornographers. I had naively thought this was a nudist community in the purist sense, which is why I showed up to write about the contest for Tampa's alternative newspaper, then called the *Weekly Planet*. On paper at least, I found the event absurdly ironic given that nudism is touted to be about accepting your body as it is, thin or fat, smooth or wrinkled. Not that

I had ever visited a nudist environ, but I had envisioned nudists more as scrawny men with graying hippie beards (of which there were some) and patchouli-lathered women with sagging breasts (of which there were none), kind of a throwback to the 1960s communes, the type of people who would neither enter a beautiful-body contest nor, if they did, win one.

Yet I was here, less than an hour from Disney World's Cinderella Castle and family-friendly beaches where children ride SpongeBob SquarePants® boogie boards, watching young women giving vaginal displays in broad daylight to a horde of horny nude men. Vegas suddenly seemed tame.

Such were my early days in exploring the subcultures, the fringe, of Florida. I spent three years writing for that alternative paper, interviewing everyone from a madam to a retired circus clown. In the ten years that followed, I freelanced, which means, if one is to survive, taking on diverse assignments. I retraced the paths of 9-11 terrorists for *Newsweek*, chased hurricanes for the *New York Times*, and yes, wrote buttery travel stories for state tourism guides. Along the way I delighted in meeting oddball characters—a biker/hoarder with sixty thousand comic books crammed into his tiny house, the Little League mom who brings pet monkeys to her son's games, the retiree who drives his Corvette eighty miles once a week to dance around in women's lingerie at an Ybor City nightclub. I came to realize Florida's uniqueness has less to do with its theme parks and beaches and more to do with the unconventional lifestyles of those who live here.

The idea for this book came from the accumulation of my experiences. Beyond sensational daily headlines, I want to introduce you to unique lifestyles and guide you through places and events that you will never read about in *Travel & Leisure*.

My use of the term "fringe" is not pejorative. These outside-the-norm lifestyles are the decoration of Florida. On a map, the state even looks like a fat piece of fringe dangling from the United States, dividing the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, and unraveling into the Caribbean.

I spent more than two years traversing America's slice of fringe for this book. I interviewed sideshow folks, people with pet lions, and Spiritualists who communicate with the dead. I rode through Florida muck on a 13-foot-tall swamp buggy and attended taboo events the

descriptions of which will no doubt make my parents cringe. I also read almost every book and article I could find on the subjects in this book. Given the underground nature of some, I mined unconventional resources such as chat rooms and online forums, many of which required me to register. My e-mail spam filters went into overdrive.

The result of my reporting and research is this collection of ten vignettes, snapshots of the state's more iconic fringe lifestyles. They span a variety of subjects. Not every chapter's subject is sexual; in fact, most are G-rated. There is even one on Florida's unusual religious tourist attractions.

Given the wealth of fringe in Florida, this book is certainly not a compendium of all. There are countless other subcultures and new ones spawning all the time. By necessity, I established some parameters to determine what to include, or rather what to omit. Each subculture described in this book is distinct in some significant way from its cousins in other states. The lifestyles either originated in Florida or dwarf ones elsewhere in size or prominence. For instance, San Francisco and Boston are hot spots for fetishists who dress up like horses, but Florida is home to the International Pony Play Championships.

Although the chapters touch on seemingly disparate topics, the Floridians throughout this book have much in common. In some cases their interests cross and even morph. They fully immerse in their lifestyle and are not mere hobbyists. Most weren't born in Florida and didn't pursue their fringe with gusto, if at all, until after moving to the Sunshine State.

This brings up the question I've asked and have been asked throughout this project: Why Florida? Why do inhibitions seem to disappear at the state line?

The simplest answer is the state's sunny and mild year-round weather invites it. After all, it's pretty hard to be a full-time nudist or year-round biker in snowy Montana.

The full answer, though, is much more complex and elusive. Florida's diverse population, tourism propaganda, and the predisposition of its residents may all play roles.

Consider that more than two-thirds of Floridians weren't born here. We came by U-Haul trucks, arriving packed like Life Savers on transatlantic jumbo jets, riding flimsy wooden rafts across the powerful Gulf Stream, and sneaking across the Mexican border in the dark of night.

We hail from Yankeeville, the Heartland, the Bible Belt, south of the border and the equator, the Far East, the Wild West, and about every country you can and can't pronounce.

Many move to Florida hoping to start a new life and become whatever they thought they couldn't be in the cloudier place they are from. Such dreams are fed by media and tourism hucksters who for nearly a century have portrayed the state as a magical paradise. Today Florida is the world's top tourism destination. More than 87 million people visit each year to play, and another 19 million live here to do the same.

Most transplants were seduced by Florida tourism promotions before settling here, myself included. Television images of Florida's white sand beaches and Cypress Gardens water-skiers planted a kernel in my mind that the state was one big playground. That anything was possible.

Like many, I got my first taste of that paradise on a childhood vacation, the longest my family of five had ever ventured. Loaded in a Ford tank, we wheeled down from north Alabama to Panama City Beach, what many call the Redneck Riviera, a term I still embrace like a drunk uncle.

I had never seen the ocean before, and I rode the waves on a blow-up raft until my fingers pickled. Lathered in coconut-scented Hawaiian Tropic, I got the worst sunburn of my life. I built sandcastles with new friends. My typically straight-laced dad's spirits rose with every swig of a Budweiser, which he occasionally put down to play with us kids in the Gulf. My mom actually put on a bathing suit for maybe the second time in her life.

I learned to swim that summer in the pool of a motel with multicolored doors across the street from the Miracle Mile Amusement Park with a roller coaster that I thought was a hundred stories high. You could say that vacation eventually led me here. Years later, burned out from chasing daily news deadlines, I joined the ranks of hundreds of thousands who move here each year to start a new life.

Though I'm not a biker, furry, nudist, sideshow performer, or any of the other lifestyles touched on in this book, I'm a voyeur of the unusual, which is a category of fringe in itself. This brings me to the most elusive factor in "Why Florida?" Did Florida make me fringe, or was I drawn here because I already was a little gonzo? I say the latter, but many I spoke with couldn't answer that question about themselves,

much less speculate about their fellow fringers. To a fringe voyeur, this conundrum only adds to Florida's mystique. I have no plans to move.

Being a Florida native, my husband, James, can't help but have a little fringe in his veins, too, although he is more reserved than I. He is a multimedia designer, a blend of artist and techno geek, and was my sidekick, sometimes begrudgingly, on some explorations for this book.

While he had trepidations about what I might experience, I began the project with some fear that I would find little that would surprise me. I was wrong. Though rarely shocked, I discovered how much I didn't know about my sunny state and, more important, about humanity in general. However weird or different a person's lifestyle may seem, whatever furry costume they wear, exotic pet they bed with, spirit they worship, or skin they expose, these activities do not wholly define them. Things are not always as they appear. People who dare to pursue an offbeat passion can be quite conventional in other aspects of their lives. I greatly thank all those in this book who expanded this insight. I applaud them for embracing the fringe. And I thank the universe for Florida, a state where fantasies can come true.