

THE QUEEN OF



Mujer Leyendo (Woman Reading)
Fernando Botero, 1998
Oil on canvas, 19.75" x 14.50"
Museo Botero, Medellín, D. C.
Colección Banco de la República
Bogota, Colombia

It isn't easy being fat in our society, even though a growing percentage of Albertans are overweight. Ask any of us if we feel comfortable in a bathing suit. Bet I can guess the answer. Exposing ourselves is humiliating and takes nerves of steel. I went years without wearing a bathing suit in public, which is why I was shocked to realize last March that I was walking on a beach in what was essentially a two-piece bathing suit.

I had been snorkeling, you see, wearing a t-shirt over a black sports bra and a stur-

dy bathing suit bottom. When I got out of the water, the t-shirt felt clammy and cold so I did what an ordinary slim woman would do: I took it off. I walked back to our room like that. It felt so good to be stripped down in public, and nobody batted an eye. And I'm no pretty-but-plump 26-year-old with a body image problem; I am a 350-pound, 56-year-old woman with no illusions about her appearance.

I experienced this liberation on a Caribbean beach in Mexico at the Freedom Paradise Resort, billed as the world's only size-friendly vacation club. My own personal freedom was inspired by the presence of the Queen of Paradise. She's there with her partner, obviously the King of Paradise, in a large mural in the hotel's open-air lobby. You notice her immediately.

The mural looks like it's loosely based on "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," a painting by 19th century French impressionist Georges Seurat depicting a handful of modestly clad people relaxing on the banks of the River Seine. Freedom Paradise's mural features one splendid large couple on a picnic blanket in the shade, surrounded by the detritus of their al fresco repast. Her majesty wears a blue dress with a low neckline that clings to her curves, her enormous knees and shins facing the viewer. His majesty reclines behind her; I think she's using his knees to brace herself. Behind them are blue hills as round and full as their bodies.

PARADISE

BY BILLIE SAVAGE

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Everyone who comes to Freedom Paradise is entranced by the king and queen. They may not think of them as royalty, but they definitely stop, look twice and smile. I figured if this large couple was welcome, then so was I.

Whether you are mildly overweight, stout, portly or of truly outstanding girth, this mural tells you that you are safe here, that this place was made for you. The pain of fitting into our judgmental society has been removed. You don't have to prove anything here—your only task is to enjoy yourself. What a wonderfully seductive idea.

I am not a “resort” person. I do not want to be “organized,” to spend two weeks being pampered at a five-star resort in the company of 1,800 other guests on some foreign beach. But I do love travel, and I am an aging, obese woman, so travel is not easy. My husband Ross is no Brad Pitt, either. Although he does have great legs, he's managed to approach the 300-pound mark a few times in recent years and is at least as shy of public exposure as I am. Both of us, however, love water. And swimming. And Mexico. We decided to check out Freedom Paradise.

I had one major hesitation. I was afraid Freedom Paradise might be a BBW kind of place. Beautiful Big Women is an in-your-face fat acceptance organization, complete with dating services, clothing outlets and Las Vegas conventions. I've met BBW people

and they intimidate me: 400-pound women strutting about in teeny bikini tops and thongs. Yes, thongs. They militantly defend their rights, and they're right, of course—it just makes me queasy. At BBW conventions there's a lively trade in sex toys, tattoos and body piercing, but I'm an old-fashioned married woman and was worried about BBW encounters at Freedom Paradise. Thankfully, it isn't that type of place. (I don't think the king and queen would have approved.)

Resort staff enthusiastically encouraged guests to participate as much as possible. People like me were brave enough to snorkel and scuba dive, to learn how to swim, to play beach volleyball. Although I've long had an interest in Mesoamerican archaeology, I never imagined visiting a Mayan ruin. I knew Yucatan was full of ruins; I just thought the heat would kill me. Emboldened by the security of having Freedom Paradise to come “home” to, we arranged for a taxi.

Jesús was our cabbie, and he was just as hospitable as the hotel staff. He got me safely into and out of some of the area's most famous ruins, including some still being hacked out of the jungle. He showed us his home and introduced us to his family. He taught us Mayan words and kept us stocked with bottles of ice-cold water. Jesús even took turns with Ross pushing my rented wheelchair along kilometres of jungle trails at an ecological theme park. He helped me step outside of my comfort

zone and forget my self-consciousness.

One of the true pleasures of Freedom Paradise was its unpredictability. One night, for instance, we went for dinner but there was no food in the dining room. There were no signs explaining anything; there was nobody around. We heard music and followed the sound. Dinner, we discovered, would be a beach barbecue, although the enthusiastic chefs were battling both the darkness and gale-force winds. They struggled and failed to rig a light in a tree as sparks and embers flew in all directions. They needed extra hands at the grill, which meant there was no bartender, which meant guests were soon pouring their own drinks.

Serviettes sailed away, chairs blew over in the wind, one guest's shirt was burned and Ross had to use his flashlight to help people see exactly what they were eating. At most resorts, the barbecue would have been declared a hopeless failure. But our laughter drowned out the music. And then the king and queen stole away for a midnight swim.

BILLIE SAVAGE lives in Mirror, Alberta, but spends many of her summers in northern Alberta fire lookout towers. Her writing has appeared in *Geist*.