

Plunge in at the deep end

By Ruth Ostrow

"UMMM. I'm staying in room 102," I say to the hotel guard by the pool, looking hopeful, as the sun burns down.

"There is no room 102, ma'am."

"I've lost my key. Maybe it's 1102."

"The rooms only go to 100, ma'am."

"Ummm," I stutter, red in the face. "Nice day, isn't it?"

This is one of those awkward situations. I am the Winona Ryder of swimming pools. The scene is Bali three years ago and I've been sprung doing what I love to do best, sneaking into luxury swimming pools in luxury hotels I'm not staying at, and jumping in. I'm a poolcrasher, and I'm proud.

Since arriving in Bali, I had triumphed over at least 15 luxury pools, getting past reception by walking through the lobby wearing bathers and a sarong, picking up a discarded hotel towel and swinging it over my shoulder.

When I was young I was deeply moved by a film called *The Swimmer* with Burt Lancaster, where he bullies his way into the homes of all his old friends and swims across their pools as he is making his way home after a lengthy absence. The film had a gentle nobility to it, as Lancaster examines his life through the eyes of the people whose pools he crosses.

I'm not that deep. I just dislike an elitist system that keeps the very best swimming pools for the richest. Thus, in rebellion, and with great stealth and courage, I have swum like Lancaster across Athens, Tel Aviv and resort areas in Puerto Rico, the Cook Islands and Phuket, targeting hotels to the outskirts and beyond.

In my youth, I swum across southern Europe until I was halted on the French Riviera by an irate hotel manager. It was humiliating, demeaning. But I got back on the horse and went on to conquer Nice for all the downtrodden backpackers of the world.

Then one day it stopped. As an esteemed member of society I could no longer afford to take risks. Didn't need the thrill. But in Bali - without warning - I suddenly found myself in a self-challenge to the death. And though I did get caught, I haven't regretted it for one moment. Because it got me thinking.

As children we set ourselves all sorts of marvellous, irrational challenges like not stepping on the pavement lines. As teenagers we are wonderfully reckless with our cars and our bodies. It's a mark of our freedom. But as adults we rein ourselves in, we stop being counter-culture, give up the rebellion - too much to lose. And we become good, well-behaved and law-abiding. Which is where rigor mortis of the spirit sets in.

Not everyone buckles down. A brave friend told me that as an adult he set himself the outrageous and profoundly stupid challenge of seeing how long he could survive in his home town without having to return to his house once. In other words, how long could he spin yarns and seduce people he met in bars and restaurants into taking him in, before he ran out of luck.

Days went by, and weeks. Families took him into their homes, women to their beds; he stayed in grand hotels, flea-bitten caravans and suburban houses, made close friends, closer enemies, and heard many great stories. His total of not going home at all: six months.

Though people reading this may be horrified at his behaviour and mine, it's the human spirit that triumphs in these wickedly wonderful situations, when we're operating outside of the box, away from rules and regulations. And as long as none are harmed, then playing dare games can keep our hearts alive.

One fortysomething friend is exploring how long he can survive in society without being forced to wear shoes, while many people have admitted setting challenges around sexuality - often to help egg them on during a drought.

One female explained: "At uni, a friend and I were being too fussy with men so we made a competition to get us moving. We point-rated our encounters with the opposite sex. A kiss equalled 1 point, sex equalled 10 points, and we rated everything else in between. The one of us who earned the most points by the end of the month won a pizza. We met some truly lovely men this way."

It's part of our great Aussie tradition to challenge ourselves and our mates, to drink each other under the table, to challenge elitism and authority, to have a go and have a laugh. And perhaps that's where my rebellious poolside manner comes from.

At any rate I do believe a bit of anarchy and game-playing is essential to the human spirit. And it is precisely when we get older that we most need to remember our larrikin roots, to take risks and set liberating challenges: to play spin the bottle or truth or dare with friends, go bungy-jumping, or sneak into first class.

Call me childish. But I know it's the naughty things in life that keep us young of heart.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 25 MAY 2002