

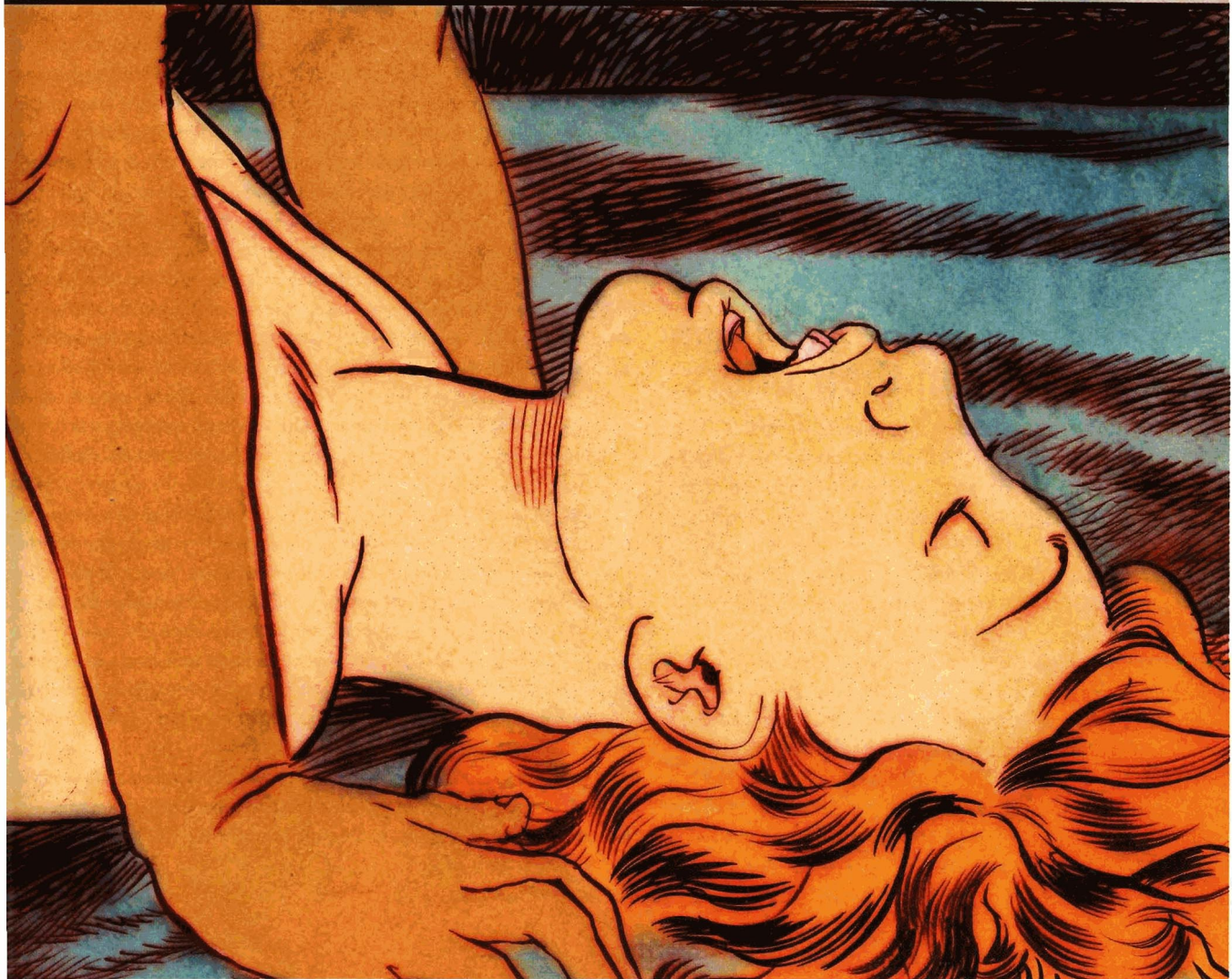
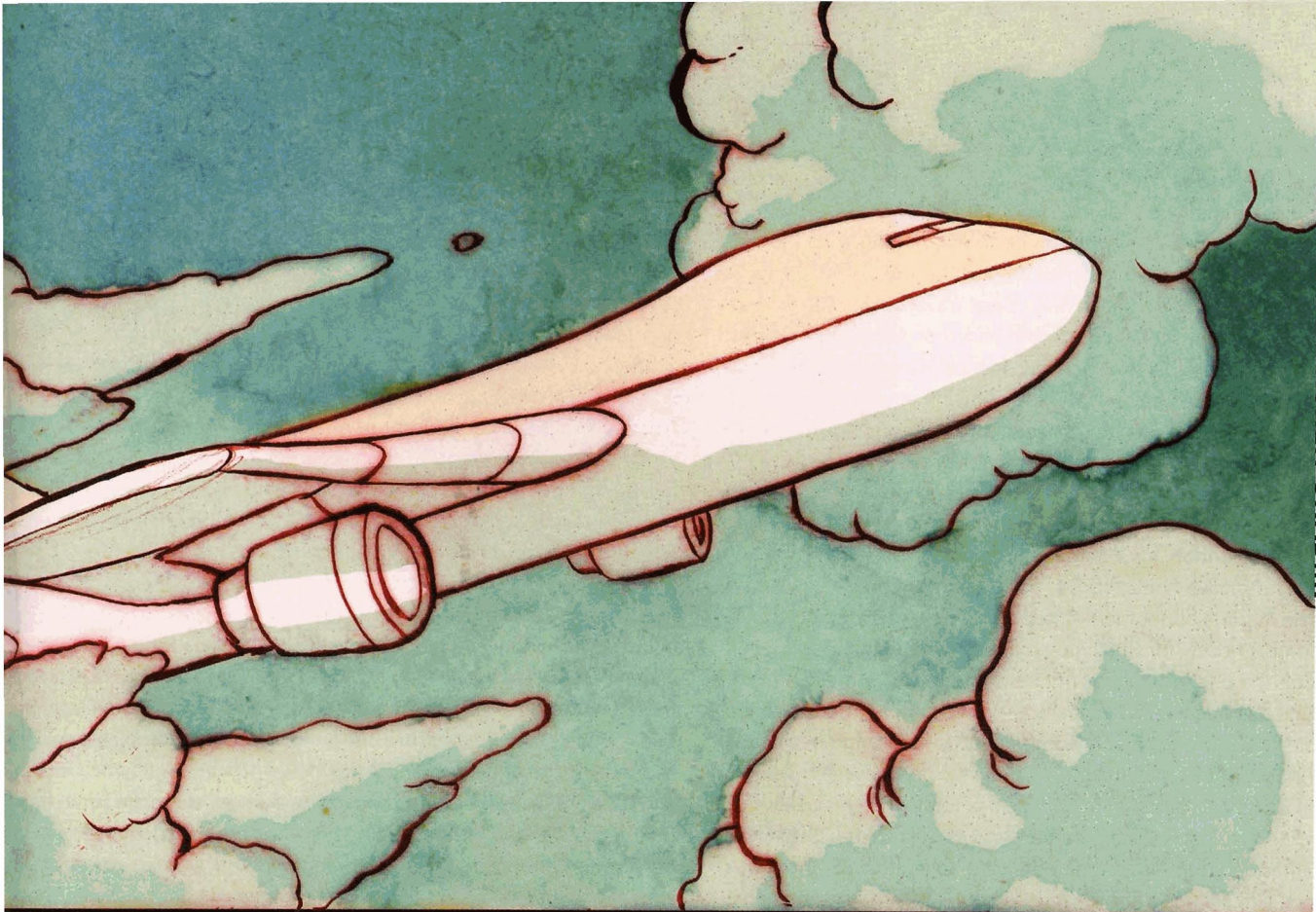
ticket to **RIDE**

**A practice largely shrouded in secrecy, female sex tourists have been flying first class to get foreign ass for decades. Is it exploitation or just a rad vacation?
BY EMILY MCCOMBS**

JEANNETTE BELLIVEAU WAS 27, freshly bruised by divorce, and traveling solo through Athens when she found herself having sex on the beach with a mustachio-ed, half-Greek man, who an hour previously had been a total stranger. Although she had already deflected a deluge of propositions inspired by her Americanness and her short shorts, when this particular man approached her in Syntagma Square and offered her a ride along the coast, she accepted. He drove her to an out-of-the-way beach where they swam nude, and when the thick-chested Greek emerged dripping from the Aegean, the transition to straightforward carnal intercourse seemed natural. Afterward Belliveau was surprised to realize that instead of feeling guilty, she felt empowered: "For me, a Roman-Catholic girl who had always behaved at home," she says, "it was, like, 'If I'm traveling, can I throw out all the rules about being a good girl and just go with the moment and have sex on the beach?'" That epiphany touched off a sexual romp around the planet that spanned 12 years and three continents.

Belliveau isn't the only one sampling from the international-man buffet; female sex tourism, also called sex travel or romance tourism, encompasses women of every class, race, and age, and a whole range of travelers from seasoned veterans of the foreign sex scene to dabblers in

ILLUSTRATION BY KOREN SHADMI



international nookie. While travel guides advise women on how to avoid annoying and excessive attention from local men, it somehow never comes up that some women may want to take them up on their offers. But as Belliveau writes in her book, *Romance on the Road*, approximately 24,000 women around the world—including 8,000 American women—are having casual travel affairs with foreign men each year, a conservative estimate based on telephone surveys. Their passports are most likely to bear stamps from the Caribbean, Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Turkey), Africa (Kenya, Gambia), and Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Thailand), but nearly any destination with a beach and a bevy of attractive men now plays host to jet-set Jezebels. And the encounters between men and women in these situations are often more complicated than the cold transaction of traditional prostitution: in underdeveloped areas of the Caribbean and Africa, attractive “beach boys” sell their attention for meals and gifts, while in parts of Southern Europe, sleeping with tourist women has become a hobby for which no payment is expected.

Though the phenomenon is not new, it is news; for most of history the subject has been veiled in secrecy—a reluctance to publicize their sexual dalliances is one reason women choose to indulge overseas in the first place. But Belliveau and Dr. Joan Phillips, a research fellow from Barbados who has studied female sex tourism there, believe that more women are participating in the trend as pop culture begins to draw increasing attention to the undercover love. In 2005, there was the French film *Heading South (Vers Le Sud)*, which depicted a trio of saucy women trading gifts and cash for the attentions of young black men in Haiti in the 1970s. Last year Tanika Gupta’s play *Sugar Mummies*, set in the female sex tourism hotspot of Negril Beach,

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Jamaica, opened in London, and Belliveau published her book, which has become a bible of sorts for female sex tourists (and which so painstakingly details Belliveau’s encounters with each foxy French sailor and lusty Brazilian that she considered having a censored copy printed for her mother).

As Belliveau writes in her book, some version of female sex tourism has been around at least since the 1840s, when the first Victorian women travelers to Africa, Nepal, and the Middle East began shuffling their Sherpas and trading in pasty Brits for Arab sheiks. Some, like Swiss-born Isabelle Eberhardt, whose account of her travels to North Africa (beginning in 1897) was published as *The Nomad: The Diaries of Isabelle Eberhardt*, used travel and sex to escape the binds of conventional European society. Often dressed as a man, she converted to Islam and spent the latter half of her short life (she was killed in a flash flood in the Arabian desert at 27)

traveling through Arabic society. According to an acquaintance of hers, “She drank more than a legionnaire, smoked more kif than a hashish addict, and made love for the love of making love.”

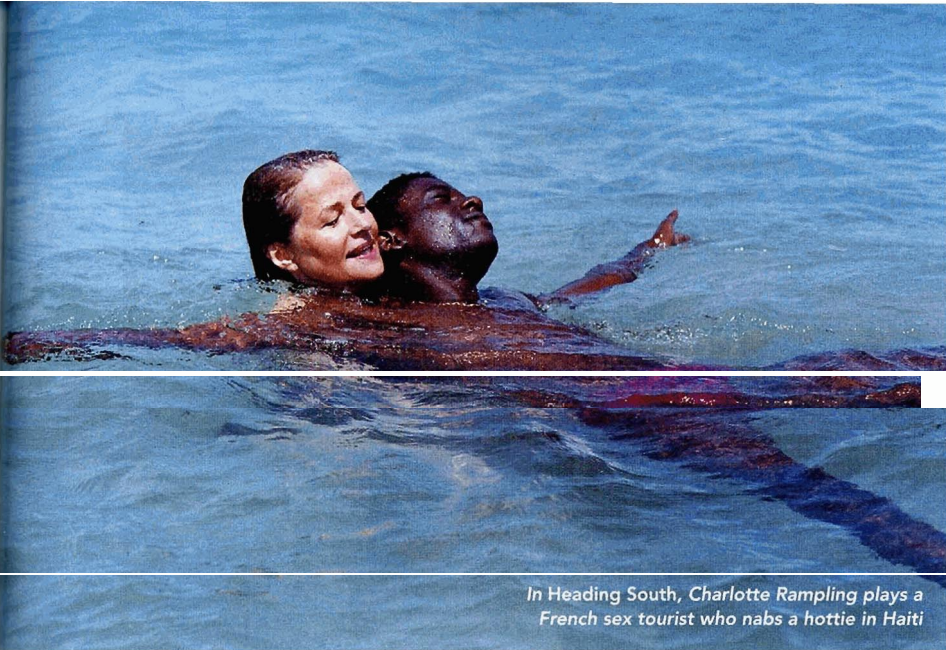
Sex tourism became a more common occurrence in the 1960s, when the jet plane made intercontinental travel efficient and accessible (further evidence of the human propensity to immediately use new technology for the purpose of getting laid). French-Canadian women began traveling to Barbados, and Swedish and Northern European women sought hard bodies in Spain, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Gambia. Outside of North America, the concept of the “holiday romance” was so ubiquitous that travel veterans sometimes gave first-time-visitor friends referrals to local men, recommending a good screw as casually as if it were a hot continental breakfast. Even Asian women began to seek out sex and sun on the beaches of Bali and Thailand in the 1990s. American women finally caught up in 1996 when *Stella Got Her Groove Back*, leading to a quantifiable increase in both black and white female travelers to Jamaica (who apparently weren’t dissuaded when Terry McMillan’s real-life Jamaican husband turned out to be after a one-way ticket to some man-on-man loving). Today there’s even an obscure but growing scene for lesbian sex tourists in parts of Greece and Asia.

Not all of these women set out to be sex tourists; while some hop on a plane with the intention of hooking up, others innocently go on vacation only to discover that being a foreign woman abroad is sometimes the equivalent of being in a crowded bar at last call. They may step off the plane to blatant propositions, as in Greece, where Belliveau says any woman can go from a choir girl to a veteran sex tourist at the snap of her fingers. As 32-year-old Beth from Syracuse, NY, who, despite a boyfriend back home had a one-night stand with a man who waited on her in an upscale shop in Athens, put it, “You’re 6,000 miles away and no one’s really gonna find you out and there’s this hot guy and why not? It’s something you’ll never forget.”

Of course, there are also those seasoned veterans who board the plane clutching a one-way ticket to Sextown. Though Belliveau never compensated her lovers, in underdeveloped parts of the Caribbean and Africa, female travelers are contradicting the age-old gender wisdom that women don’t have to pay for it. These women—known as mummies in Egypt (a reference to their sometimes advanced ages), Shirley Valentines if British, longtails in Bermuda, yellow cabs in Japan, and Stellas (if black) or milk bottles (white and ready for filling) in Jamaica—are paying for it, or at least exchanging meals, clothes, gifts, and plane tickets for it.

According to Dr. Phillips, the transactional nature of the encounter is often couched in a more traditional flirtation that keeps the female participants from having to think of themselves as renting their hunky companions. “It’s not like the traditional prostitution that we know,” says Phillips. Instead of an outright exchange of cash for sex, a woman is more likely to enjoy a week-long courtship in which she treats the beach boy to drinks and dinner, buys him gifts of clothing or electronics, and perhaps gives him the money she has left over at the end of her trip.

The nontraditional prostitutes are known colloquially in Jamaica as rent-a-dreads, beach boys, rastitutes, and the Foreign Service; *kamakia* (fishing harpoons) in Greece; sharks in Costa Rica; Kuta



In *Heading South*, Charlotte Rampling plays a French sex tourist who nabs a hottie in Haiti

cowboys in Bali; bomsas or bumsters in Gambia; and sanky pankies in the Dominican Republic. The young, built, and underemployed men are able to gain economic and social status through their interactions with tourist women. And the women, reacting to mate shortages at home or perhaps feeling sexually invisible in their own countries due to age or body type, get a much-needed ego boost. Sometimes the relationships develop further, with the female johns (janes?) returning every year to spend a week with their foreign "boyfriends," possibly after corresponding through letters and sending cash throughout the year. Both Phillips and Belliveau acknowledge that travel relationships sometimes even culminate in marriage and a ticket to the U.S. Belliveau sees the proliferation of foreign marriages as evidence of the potential for love in sex travel, although it is hard not to wonder if at least some of these women are as deluded about the reality of their relationships as the balding, overweight computer programmer with a nubile, 19-year-old mail-order bride.

Dr. Phillips had previously studied male sex tourism in Thailand when she decided to dig deeper into the major questions surrounding female sex tourism: is it exploitative and to whom? Are idealistic tourists falling for the sweet talk of overseas con artists? Or are tourist thrill-seekers using black men in the same way that some men have historically used black women? After interviewing female tourists in Barbados and the boys who work the beach, she discovered that the answer was more complex than she had expected. "I found that a lot of the beach boys had left school very early, so there wasn't much they could do to actually become upwardly mobile in society. Engaging in relationships with the white tourist women offered them money. It also gave them an opportunity that they wouldn't have within Barbadian society—which was to have sexual relationships with white women—and it gave them some sort of power," she explains. She says many of the beach boys themselves report being attracted to white women, though that attraction can look uglier when directed the opposite way: white women who fetishize the black men they wouldn't necessarily be interested in at home.

And Dr. Phillips also sees little difference between male and female sex tourism, despite the sheen of romance. "It is empowering

for women in the sense that they have the opportunity to do something that men have always done since travel began. But it's empowering because it's not an equal relationship," she says. "They're buying sex from impoverished men. Women can be just as exploitative." And she warns that the commodification of sex brings with it the increased threat of HIV.

Of course, Belliveau's experiences prove that for some men, it's not all about the Benjamins. But the economic inequality can be hard to overlook. Heidi Postelwait, co-author of the political memoir *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures*, was on vacation in Mombasa, Kenya, from her harrowing UN peacekeeper job when she was approached by James, a beach prostitute and Masai tribesman. Curious, she decided to accept his offer of a tour. "Most of the men I know, although they might not admit it, have all been to prostitutes, especially in a place like Africa or Haiti. But I never knew any women that were with prostitutes, so I just wanted to see what this was gonna be like," she explains. In her book she details the experience—four days of smoking pot, discussing Bob Marley, and having sex, culminating in a \$200 payoff—somewhat humorously, but she says she would never repeat the encounter. "Our idea of a male prostitute is like Richard Gere," she says, "and that wasn't what this was at all. This was a really poor African man who lived in a shack and had a miserable life and had to fuck women to make a living. I felt really terrible for him." But she remains open to more traditional kinds of travel romance. "I can't imagine traveling and not having a flirtation at least. Just having a really amazing week with someone is OK with me."

Belliveau acknowledges that some situations can be exploitative but recommends relying on the same sense of ethics you would use at home to make the experience a mutually satisfying one. She emphasizes condom use and advises checking the UN table of HIV rates and avoiding high-rated areas like Sub-Saharan Africa altogether, as well as choosing a partner who works outside of the tourism industry over the sunscreen salesman who may have a new tourist girlfriend every week. She also stresses making safety a priority by being cautious of who you go off with and where. "Be aware. If you've got a good head on your shoulders, you could have an absolutely torrid, unforgettable night of passion with a guy who doesn't mean you any harm," she says. And she feels it's important to remember that your partner may be an anonymous side trip to you, but he's a flesh-and-blood man whose feelings can be hurt.

Despite those reservations, there's something to be said for turning the tables on typical gender roles. Belliveau recalls a feeling she had watching Monday Night Football while her Caribbean tryst bided time on the bed next to her. "I'm sitting on one bed watching it, and on the next bed is this really buff lobster fisherman in Speedo-type underwear just waiting for me," she recalls. "You just feel like how a sultan must feel in a harem: when I'm ready, we'll do something. When I'm not ready, we're gonna wait." ■