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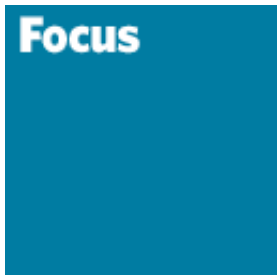
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Focus: Sex tourism in Jamaica

Sex, sand and sugar mummies in a Caribbean beach fantasy

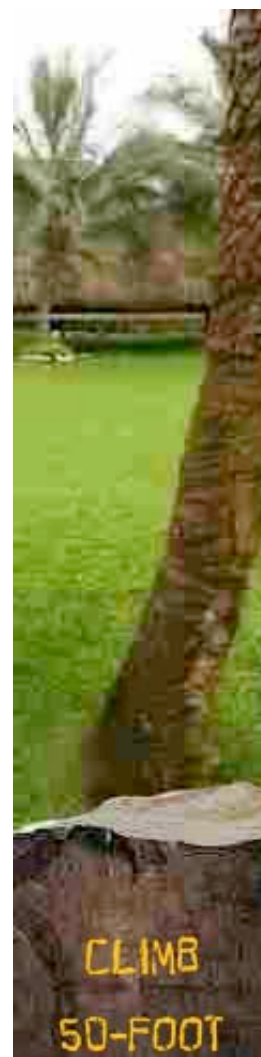
A controversial new West End play will explore sex tourism in Jamaica, where lonely women flock for flings with young black men. But are these holiday romances sleazy or simply harmless?

Lorna Martin at Negril Beach
Sunday July 23, 2006
[The Observer](#)

'We're businessmen,' says Leroy proudly. 'We sell ganja, coke and good lovin'.' His grin spreads to his eyes as he touches fists with his friend Sean. It's a traditional male Jamaican greeting expressing good wishes, friendship and respect. Sean responds, bumping his closed fist atop Leroy's. 'Respect man, to the businessmen.'

It's 10am on Jamaica's breathtaking Negril beach. Bleached white sand, swaying palms and crystalline Caribbean waters stretch into the distance for seven miles. It looks endless and, on a first impression, this could be paradise. But Negril is not as dreamlike as it looks. It is no longer visited primarily for sun, sea and sand. Instead it is the destination of choice for an increasing number of British female sex tourists. An estimated 80,000 single women, from teenagers to grandmothers, flock to the island every year and use the services of around 200 men known as 'rent a dreads', 'rastitutes' or 'the Foreign Service' who make this resort their headquarters.

Female sex tourism is nothing new. It was reported in the late 1840s when an Englishwoman went to Rome to



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THE LATE 1970S, when an Englishwoman went to Rome to take a lover. But in recent years it has grown in popularity. These days the women who participate are more likely to be single professionals than bored Shirley Valentine housewives. With females staying single longer and rising divorce rates, these holidays are expected to explode in popularity in the years ahead. Consequently they are the subject of a sudden flurry of books, films and plays examining the motivations of women who travel for sex, love and affection.

Earlier this month *Heading South*, a thought-provoking French film about a single 55-year-old sex tourist in Seventies Haiti, opened to rave reviews. Starring Charlotte Rampling, it tells the story of a disenchanted English professor who finds a new, more rewarding passion in the bodies of young black men which, she discovers, can be bought for sums trifling to the affluent. In the film Rampling's character Ellen observes: 'If you're over 40 and not as dumb as a fashion model, the only guys who are interested are natural-born losers or husbands whose wives are cheating on them.'

At the beginning of next month the Royal Court theatre in London, never afraid of controversy, will go nearer the knuckle than ever when it stages *Sugar Mummies*. Lynda Bellingham, the Oxo Mum who became the wholesome face of family values in TV commercials, plays one of four middle-aged women who visit Jamaica to sample male prostitutes. There is lots and lots of sex.

Before it has even opened, the play has ignited a heated debate about the rights and wrongs of female sex tourism: is it harmless fun, a mutually beneficial business transaction? Or is it exploitation and, if so, who is the victim and who is the perpetrator - the women who fall for declarations of true love or the mostly poor, underemployed men who make them? What makes it different from male sex tourism, which is normally seen as sleazy and abhorrent? And is it, as many critics argue, perpetuating the racist myth of the hyper-sexual black man?

The gigolos working on Negril beach offer a simple explanation for their role in what is commonly, though euphemistically, called 'romance tourism'.

'For us it's a fun and easy way to make money,' says Leroy. 'For her, she gets some real good lovin'. All the English ladies who come here complain about the men back home. They say they are cold and selfish, mechanical and uncomplimentary. We know how to make



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a lady feel good.'

His friend explains that there is no welfare state in Jamaica. Staff who work in the hotels, which charge guests from about £120 a night, earn between £40 and £50 a week. The hard-working and high-earning but lonely western women who come to the island seem like millionaires. 'We are all poor in Jamaica. What we do is more fun and more money than working in a hotel.'

It can be extremely lucrative, but the idea that the men charge a certain price for a set service simply doesn't happen. There seems to be a mutual but tacitly agreed deception at the heart of the gigolo-client relationship. Payment is rarely mentioned because this would shatter the illusion that she is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen and he has fallen desperately in love with her. Instead, after charming the women and offering to be their guide, the gigolos set about, sometimes in subtle ways, extracting as much money as possible.

Leroy and Sean, who are both 22, spot two large white women who look around fortyish. They saunter towards them, taking in any obvious weaknesses.

'Good morning, beautiful ladies. Welcome to Jamaica,' says Leroy, offering his fist to one of the women. 'Respect,' adds Sean, as he gazes deep into the pale blue eyes of her friend.

In the distance you can hear other beach boys advertising some of their more conventional wares: 'Coconut, pineapple, mangoes, bananas, Marlboros.' Hand-painted signs, invariably in the bright green, red and yellow colours of the country's flag, invite tourists to stop for breakfast of ackee fruit and salt fish. Other stalls sell aloe vera massages, hair braiding, handmade jewellery and carvings. Even in the morning, it is possible to detect the unmistakable smell of marijuana wafting in the faint breeze.

The women awkwardly offer their fists in response and introduce themselves. They arrived the previous evening from Miami. It is their first morning on the beach.

'You are gorgeous,' Leroy tells one of them, whose attractiveness isn't immediately apparent. 'What part of heaven did you fall from?'

A policeman wanders past, observing but not intervening. Later he tells me it is usually the women who complain on the rare occasions that the force does

apprehend hustlers.

She grins at her friend, clearly flattered but not completely fooled. 'Beautiful ladies, some of the men here will hassle you and rip you off,' he warns, appearing genuinely concerned for their wellbeing. 'You need someone to look after you. To show you around. Take you to the waterfalls, the Blue Mountains and the caves and the best parties.' He smiles coquettishly.

The two women look at each other like nervous schoolgirls and giggle. They say they think they are a bit too old for the men.

'No, you ageless,' Leroy continues, shaking his head. 'We are real men. In Jamaica, real men like the cat, not the kitten. And real men like real women. Mature and intelligent and beautiful women like you.'

To some people, their well-rehearsed chat-up lines might sound corny, a bit nauseating, somewhat transparent. But for plenty of women the words are just what they have been longing to hear. They agree to meet later that night at the reggae party on the beach.

When I ask Leroy what he does if he's not attracted to a woman, he responds matter of factly: 'Close my eyes and pretend it's Beyoncé.'

Not far from them, strolling along the water's edge are Jackie, a 38-year-old single woman who works in London as an advertising manager, and Andrew, 24. Jackie is short with dark hair and a plain but attractive face. She met Andrew, tall and slender but solidly built, during a holiday to the island with two girlfriends last December. She has returned to spend a week with him. Only one close friend knows she is here.

'I'd heard about these guys who trawl the beach and I wondered what kind of stupid woman would fall for that kind of thing,' Jackie says. 'At first when Andrew approached me, I dismissed him. I hadn't come here looking for any kind of relationship. I came to get over one.'

'But he persisted. He wooed and charmed me. He was funny and very complimentary. I was with my friends and I was a bit worried that they would disapprove. But I thought, "what the hell, you only live once". And I suppose there was a bit of me that wanted to do something slightly adventurous.'

Like many of the women here, Jackie is offended by any suggestion that she is merely a sex tourist and that Andrew is, in effect, a prostitute.

'I see nothing immoral about it. I regard it more as a temporary love affair. He tells me all the things I want to hear, and I guess in return I pay for everything - meals, accommodation, transport, tours - and buy him gifts. But that is because I have much more money than he does. It is mutually beneficial,' she insists.

'When he tells me I'm the most beautiful woman he has ever seen and that he loves my body, I know it might not be absolutely true, but it's nice to hear. The affection, attention, intimacy and compliments are equally, if not more, important to me than the sexual aspect of the relationship.'

Jackie said Andrew raised the money issue the morning after they had first slept together. He told her he could not afford to pay his rent and needed to get his car repaired. She has been sending cash to him every month ever since.

Set on Negril beach, *Sugar Mummies* explores the pleasures and perils of female sex tourism. Playwright Tanika Gupta, who spent two weeks in Jamaica researching the subject, has focused on a group of British and American women seeking sun, sea, sand and uninhibited sex with good-looking strangers.

During her visit, she identified four types of female sex tourist. The 'Ibiza-type' are young, frisky and just looking for a good time. 'Many of them were sexy, beautiful, young and slim,' says Gupta. 'But because they didn't have that much money, the guys weren't interested.' The second group are in their mid- to late-30s and desperate for a baby, perhaps a cute brown one. She saw many simply looking for love, and finally what she called the 'grandmother-type': white-haired, sixty-something women walking along the beach hand in hand with fit, handsome young men.

'After about five minutes on the beach, I felt like Naomi Campbell,' Gupta says. 'No matter what you look like or what size you are, they have the patter to make you feel as if you are a supermodel. You see women melting in front of these guys and I can completely understand why.'

Although the playwright is not critical of the women who engage in sex tourism, ultimately she found herself

increasingly disheartened by what she saw.

'A lot of the women talked about how big the men are and how they can go all night. I was shocked at the way they objectified the black male body. But what I found most depressing was that the whole thing is not real. So many of the women think they have found real love. It's all very delusional. At first I thought it was all about white women exploiting black men. But it's not. It's very mutual. The guys are just as exploitative and you come away thinking this is such a sad, sick world that we live in.'

Steamy, raunchy and often very funny, *Sugar Mummies* is the first play to explore the issue since *Shirley Valentine*, which was made into a film. Bellingham plays Maggie, a habitual sex tourist in her 50s. Ultimately she is a broken, tragic woman who says: 'Marriage is a compromise... you have kids, you nurture them, teach them, love them. They grow up and leave you. And then your man leaves you too.' In a disturbing scene, she ties up her 17-year-old would-be lover, Antonio, after he fails to perform for her physically.

The play is tough on the sex tourists, says Gupta. 'But what I hoped to achieve was an exploration of why these women feel so invisible in the West that they feel they have to go and pay for affirmation. It uses humour because there is something highly amusing about the fact that there are fifty-something women who believe these beautiful 18-year-old men have fallen in love with them at first sight.'

Others see such deals as an inevitable function of the global distribution of wealth and even a sign of growing equality between the sexes. Jeannette Belliveau, 51, a former sex tourist who is now happily remarried, has just written a book, *Romance on the Road*, about the steady stream of lonely women heading from the West to developing countries.

Belliveau became an 'accidental sex pilgrim' after the break-up of her first marriage to a 'difficult, complex Englishman'. In the book she recounts a decade of flings, some lasting one night, others several years long, with men from the Caribbean, Brazil and Greece. She said that she wrote her book partly to counter the negative views put forward by the small number of academics who have studied the subject.

She also wanted to 'normalise' the experience, which she

says for many British and American women creates unnecessary feelings of shame, anxiety and secrecy.

'There is the view that these women are guilty of hypocrisy and that they are exploiting poor men. This is nonsense. Sex between two adults that doesn't harm either partner is without question a good thing. I learnt so much from it. It healed me after a painful divorce.

'When I was younger I was so idealistic about sex, thinking it was best allied to love. But I learnt that this is not always the case and I began to realise that the notion of a perfect kindred spirit was for starry-eyed youth.'

She believes female sex tourism is increasing because of shortages of suitable men, the hassles of the dating game back home and due to many professional women living in sexual exile, with fragmented social connections.

'Back home in the West, many strong-minded, feisty women tend to intimidate guys - they focus on their careers and neglect their personal lives - but many black men seem to like and loudly express an appreciation for headstrong, independent, bantering and financially sound women. It does not take a great sex siren in these places to draw men like a magnet.'

She is critical of those who regard it as prostitution or a hangover from slavery. 'It seems to me that these critics are implicitly saying, oddly like members of the National Front, that women shouldn't date or fall in love outside their race, nationality or economic group. Casual travel sex by women, whether they are 20 or 60, is in everybody's best interests. I don't see it as exploitation. I see it as adults having fun.'

It is Friday night and the party is at Alfred's Ocean Palace, a grandly named beach bar in Negril. The sky is black and clear with just a light scattering of stars. In the unlit bar area people sip rum or Red Stripe beer and share joints. A live reggae band is on stage and the sandy dance floor is bustling with dreadlocks and dope smokers. Pale, plump, clumsy women do their best not to look ridiculous next to the raw, natural and explicit moves of the Jamaicans.

Two English women, both in their late 30s, have been coming here two to three times a year since 2002. They have each had several Jamaican lovers. For them, it is harmless fun, but they have seen another side to it.

'Our friend came with us last year and fell head over heels,' says Anna, a nurse from Essex, who is standing arm in arm with Rodney, a good-looking 19-year-old. 'We warned her that the guy was a hustler, but she didn't believe us and said we were just jealous. They slept together, and then he started asking for money. For nearly a year, she sent him cash for rent, for a passport, for everything. When she missed a month, he phoned asking where his money was. When she said she couldn't afford it, he told her she'd have to find herself another beach boy. She was heartbroken.'

Anna goes to the bar and I ask Rodney if he loves her. He smiles. 'I have a lot of special friends,' he says. He pulls out his wallet and shows me photographs of five women. His 'special friends' are from Britain, America and Germany, with two from Canada. I ask who his favourite is and why.

'Connie,' he says with a dreamy-eyed grin, pointing to a white-haired but attractive American woman in her early 50s. 'She's got a lot of money. She pays for me to go to college, and when I'm finished she's going to take me to live in America with her. That is what we all want. To live in America or Britain.'

On-screen: The female sex tourist

· Shirley Valentine

Willy Russell's play Shirley Valentine made the name synonymous with middle-aged lonely hearts travelling to foreign shores in search of romance or sex.

Shirley was an ordinary housewife who, as she prepared egg and chips for her husband, ruminated on her life. The play was first staged in 1986 as a one-woman show, then appeared in the West End in 1988 before being adapted into a screenplay for a 1989 film starring Pauline Collins and Tom Conti.

Shirley decides to break the monotony of her life by fulfilling a dream of flying to Greece. Leaving her husband a note to explain where she has gone and a large number of frozen meals she just took off.

· How Stella got her groove back

After Terry McMillan's novel How Stella got her groove back was made into a Hollywood film, there was a quantifiable increase in trips to Jamaica by single women seeking young foreign boyfriends.

The film, in which Stella, played by Angela Bassett, a divorced, highly successful 40-something stockbroker, takes a holiday to the island. She encounters a young islander called Winston. His pursuit of her turns into a steamy romance that forces Stella to take stock of her life and seek a balance between her desire for love and the responsibilities of motherhood.

· **Heading south**

Heading South is a new French film starring Charlotte Rampling about sex tourism in Seventies Haiti. Rampling spends every summer at a private resort, where beautiful young black men are available to the female clientele. In the Guardian, film reviewer Peter Bradshaw said it was difficult to avoid the feeling that it was an evasive way of representing the power relations of prostitution.

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