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MONTREAL -- In winter, a tourist woman's fancy lustily turns to thoughts of sex.

By the thousands they descend on the Caribbean every year, women driven by one urge: to spend a week or two sleeping with local "beach boys" and paying them back in drinks, meals, gifts, and cash.

And it is Quebec women — with reputations as financially generous and uninhibited — who are among the best established in the island flesh trade.

Sex tourists, they're called. Or as some prefer it, "romance travellers" looking for "love" and a little tenderness in the tropics.

This is the season — building to a travel peak in February and March — when business in Jamaica, Barbados and the Dominican Republic heats up.

Unlike most years, though, this winter's parade comes with a heap of advance media publicity. In 2006, there was lots:

On the screen and DVD, two movies dealt with the subject: *Vers le sud*, a French film based on stories by Quebec author Dany Laferriere, starring Charlotte Rampling as a British sex-seeker in late-1970s Haiti; and *Rent-a-Rasta*, a 45-minute U.S. documentary about women who flock to Jamaica in search of the "big bamboo" and the young Rastafarians who cater to them.

On the stage, there was *Sugar Mummies*, a much-reviewed play in London's Royal Court Theatre last August that starred Montreal-born Lynda Bellingham as a mid-life hedonist in Negril, the Jamaican sun resort.

On radio in December, female sex tourism was the topic of a long segment on the national CBC morning show, *The Current*.

And in print, there's a provocative new autobiographical book called *Romance on the Road*, by Jeannette Belliveau, a Baltimore travel writer of Acadian origin who was a sex tourist herself.

All the coverage begged an essential question: Is sex tourism by women any better or worse than sex tourism by men?

Does it just represent a new twist on exploitation of the Third World poor — in other words, prostitution with the roles reversed, the woman paying the man? Or is it simply a case of women exercising their right to

choose what to do with their bodies?

There is no single correct answer, just points of view coloured by politics and morality. Scholars agree on one thing, though: female sex tourism is common enough and big enough to merit serious academic attention.

By some estimates, 600,000 Western women have engaged in travel sex sometime over the last 25 years — many of them as repeat customers, returning to the tropics every winter for some sun and some action.

"Seeing it in operation, it's quite a phenomenon — there's a whole system," said Kamala Kempadoo, a global sex-trade expert who teaches at York University in Toronto. Of Guyanese descent, she did field work on female sex tourism in Negril in 2000 and 2001.

"It's not just women on the beach, it's the nightlife. You go to a party and see couple after couple of older, quite substantial — I mean overweight — white women with very young, very lithe black men," Kempadoo said.

"It's quite a curious thing."

The root of it isn't just carnal. The women want a companion, too, someone to show them around, romance them, make them feel special and needed — something they don't feel at home.

But the names the men and women are known by colloquially belie the true nature of the transaction, some research suggests: It's sex for hire, where black men's flesh is tied — at least temporarily — to white women's pursestrings.

The men go by many monikers. In Jamaica and other former British colonies, they're called rent-a-gents, rent-a-Rastas, rent-a-tutes, the Foreign Service. In the Dominican Republic, they're sanky pankys (a play on 'hanky panky').

The tourist women get nicknames, too. British ones go by "Shirley Valentine" (from the 1989 hit movie of the same name, about a Liverpool housewife finding liberation in Greece). In Bermuda, they're "longtails" or "yellowtails."

In Jamaica, the name depends on the woman's colour: "Milk bottles" if they're white, newly arrived and, to put it crudely, "in need of filling" (as one Negril man put it to British writer Julie Bindel in 2003).

If they're black, the women are called Stellas (from the popular 1998 film *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, about a black San Francisco stock broker on holiday in Jamaica).

Canadians have made it into the slang lexicon, too. In Barbados, female sex tourism has been dubbed "Canadian secretary syndrome."

In Martinique, locals refer to incoming flights of Air Canada as "Air Coucoune" — French for "Air Pussy."

Little wonder. Canadian women in search of sex have been coming to the Caribbean for years.

"You guys were the pioneers," said Belliveau, who sells her 410-page book through her publishing website.

"Pretty much the first group (of female sex tourists) in the Caribbean after the takeoff of jet travel (in the 60s) was French-Quebecois women in Barbados," Belliveau said. "They had a tremendously high reputation among

the local beach boys. They were fun loving and generous and a real great time."

It's still true, added Belliveau, 52, an ex-journalist and divorcee who spent much of her 20s and 30s travelling the world and — as she freely admits — having sex wherever she went. (She's now remarried — to an African-American man.)

"Canadian women are mostly in Barbados now, which is somewhat upmarket; Jamaica is poorer," Belliveau said. "And the Dominican is slowly getting the reputation of having men that are very eager to be the world's best lovers. In the French islands, the men are more suave and gallant and won't accept payment."

But sex with the locals isn't without drawbacks or controversy.

The most obvious is money: according to a couple of studies in Jamaica, it can cost \$20 to \$30 for an hour of sex, or \$150 for a full night that includes oral sex (usually seen as demeaning by the island men). Second, some tourist women have reported that Caribbean lovers are over-rated, dulled by drink or dope; others can be chauvinistic, domineering, even violent.

Then there's the issue of the social impact of the sex trade. It affects ordinary tourists, who complain of harassment. It affects young mothers, who complain of the men not being around to provide for their children. Island women can also act hostile toward white vacationers, seeing them as home wreckers.

And of course there's the health risk.

Half a million people have HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean, where the rates of infection are second-only to sub-Saharan Africa: 3.8 per cent of the adult population in Haiti, 3.3 per cent in the Bahamas, 2.6 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago, 1.5 per cent in Jamaica and Barbados, and 1.1 per cent in the Dominican Republic, according to estimates by UNAIDS and the World Health Organization.

Those rates are exponentially higher than in Canada (0.3 per cent) or the U.S. (0.6 per cent). Even so, female Caribbean sex tourists aren't especially preoccupied by the risk. Though most insist on condoms at first, after a few encounters they no longer do, studies show.

Is there any difference between female sex tourists and the more common type, men who travel to have sex? Foreign men on the prowl are a common sight all over the developing world, especially in southeast Asia, North Africa, Mexico and Brazil. Women, less so. How come?

People who have been part of the crowd — Belliveau, for example — point to a definite gender gap in sex tourism. Women travel for romance, men for prostitutes, they say. And unlike men, female sex tourists usually steer clear of teenagers and other child prostitutes — a huge difference.

In sex tourism, female pedophilia is "virtually unknown," Belliveau said. "There is nothing parallel to the situation where a male pedophile pays a greedy Thai or Dominican family enough money to buy a moped and in exchange gets a 12-year-old virgin."

There are rare exceptions — in Cuba, for example.

"You can go as young as you want in Cuba," one woman tourist in Jamaica told Tanika Gupta, author of *Sugar Mummies*, who was down there doing research for the play. She related the anecdote in an interview last July in *The Independent*, the London daily newspaper.

Whoever they sleep with, men and women who travel for sex aren't all that dissimilar, some academics argue. It's what they do that counts, not how they go about it.

In an article last August in *Le Monde diplomatique*, French anthropologist Franck Michel argued that global tourism and the sex trade have "turned the world into a gigantic theme park" for both men and women from developed countries. Eager to reap the "strong sensations" of sex provided by the poor of the south, they become masters of slaves — at least for the time of their visit.

"The new popularity of female sexual tourism shows that women are walking in men's footsteps, repeating the same representations of power, dominance and exploitation," Michel wrote.

Whether the master is male or female hardly makes a difference, other scholars agree.

"People say that because it's not hard-core prostitution, women having sex with the locals is acceptable," said Kempadoo, the York sociologist.

"But they're actually so similar in their practices, that I don't think one is more acceptable than the other."

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