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By **ANN MARIE MCQUEEN**

E-MAIL TO A FRIEND PRINT PAGE WRITE US LETTER TO THE EDITOR

We were not on the dance floor for five minutes when a pair of tall, shirtless, impossibly gorgeous and buff hunks appeared before us.

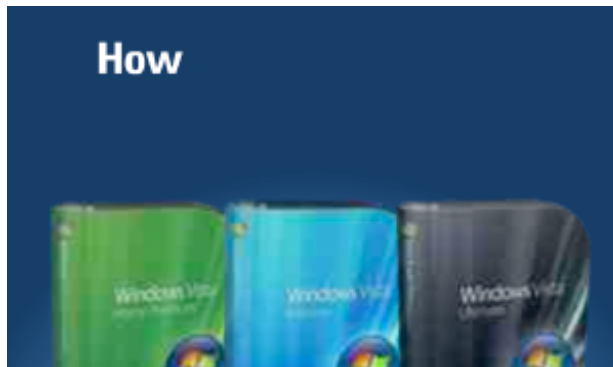
It happened a year ago on my first-ever visit to one of the Dominican Republic's all-inclusive resorts. My friend and I looked at each other, wondering what to do. They weren't hitting on us, exactly. But, even through the rum and the pounding music, we could tell they were offering themselves up for the taking. We shook our heads no, and the men moved on.

'SKANKIES'

Later we learned they were what are called " skankies." Also known as beach boys, they are poor and exist by having week-long relationships with visiting Western women. Men offer sex and companionship, and in return women give them clothes, food, gifts and even cash.

It's called sex tourism, and whether formally or informally, by accident or design, it happens all the time.

It's the kind of activity highlighted in the 2005 Charlotte Rampling film Vers le Sud (Heading South). A recent documentary, Rent -A-Rasta, tackles the Jamaican industry. Years ago erry McMillan popularized the notion of taking a much-younger exotic male lover in her



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book How Stella Got Her Groove Back, and women flocked to Jamaica to follow her example.



Maryland writer Jeannette Belliveau had 12 years of travel romances between her first and second marriages. It's a world she chronicles personally, and researched exhaustively, in her book Romance on the Road : Travelling Women Who Love Foreign Men.

" Women stumble on it and it's a big shock," she says. "Look at this sexual playground for women. A nd then there's a whole lot of other women who walked through the open door a long time ago. "

Short of a meal of grouper and beer she bought during a three-day fling with a lobster fisherman in the Bahamas, Belliveau never paid for the often-spontaneous, mostly nostrings sex she indulged in. But as her research shows, many women do. And they have been since the 1960 s, particularly Europeans and Canadians from Quebec, who Belliveau says long ago targeted Barbados for more than fun in the sun.

Some are calculating, women who know exactly what they want and keep returning for it.

"They behave much the same as men do, " says Belliveau. " I want to pay for a relationship, because I want you to go away at the end of it.' "

NOT ONLY THE LONELY

Others are lonely, unable to find a relationship back home. Not only are they more open to adventure and less fearful of being judged away from their own world, foreign men tend not to care about looks or body shape, or be intimidated by a woman's career success, the way the men back home may be. Others are j ust opportunists, revelling in the fantasy of a world where they can have any man they want.

Belliveau's research suggests between 1980 and 2005 some 600, 000 Western women have participated.

Cambridge University sociology professor Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, in a 2001 paper called Dollars Are a Girls' Best Friend? quoted a beach survey of 75 women in the Dominican and Jamaica. It found almost one-third of them had sexual relationships with local men on their holiday.

Melanie Claude, a University of Ottawa masters' student who has done extensive work in the area of sex tourism, says in the Dominican, a hotspot for this kind of activity, women account for a largertan- average 20% of the sex tourism industry.

And even if no gifts or cash are exchanged for sex, the local men will still find ways to be compensated for their efforts, says Claude. They may bring their new girlfriend to restaurants and excursion sites where their friends work, overcharging her and splitting the difference.

Critics say the notion of " sex romance" is anything but a harmless exchange that benefits both parties, and just as damaging as more overt forms of sex tourism where men pay women for sex. Kam Williams, reviewing Rent -A-Rasta for BlackNews.com recently, criticized women who visit Jamaica for pleasure because many of the " beach boys" they frequent have wives and families of their own.

" Sex tourism is not merely the harmless indulgence of horny white women gone wild," he wrote, " but a burgeoning trend which continues to wreak havoc on a Caribbean culture and a family culture already in crisis. "

Last year in her paper Female Sex Tourism: A Contradiction in Terms?, S anchez Taylor argued when Western women use their economic power to get what they

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want from poor local men who need their money, it's exploitation, plain and simple.

When you take gender out of it, she writes, " female tourists' sexual encounters with local men in poor and developing countries do not look so very different from male tourists' sexual local women."

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