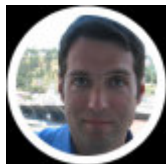




"Sex pats" discover Ukraine's alluring women

Foreigners flock to Kiev in search of wives, girlfriends or just plain sex.



By **David L. Stern** - GlobalPost

Published: June 9, 2009 07:33 ET

Updated: June 9, 2009 19:49 ET

KIEV, Ukraine — In the early summer evenings you see them individually and in groups: foreign men, of all ages and nationalities — ex-Soviet, European, North American, Middle Eastern and African. They sit in the outdoor cafes that adorn Kiev's winding central streets, or patrol about the main Independence Square like guerrilla squads. At night they pack the discos and restaurants and bars.

Some of them study and work here. Others have come to take in the architecture, history and museums of this breathtaking Eastern European capital, or are on their way to a vacation in one of the picturesque outlying towns.

Many, however, have a less exalted purpose in mind: to meet women. And the more the better.

It's called sex tourism, and the practitioners "sex pats" — a play on the word expat or expatriate. The phenomenon is all-too-common throughout the world, including in South America, Asia and Africa.

Now it seems that it has arrived in the former Eastern Bloc with a vengeance.

Riga, Prague and Krakow have been overrun by the planeload, aided by budget airlines like Ireland's RyanAir. The men are lured by perceptions that the pickings are easier than at home, whether because of reported liberal attitudes, a possible preference for foreigners or difficult economic circumstances among the local population. And that thanks to their anonymity, they can behave as boorishly as they want.

Ukraine, where the women pride themselves on their beauty and femininity, has become one of the most popular destinations. ("What country has the most alluring women?" is a favorite and legitimate conversation topic here — pondered by men and women alike. Any answer other than "Ukraine" usually elicits disappointment or even outrage.)

The stag parties that have blighted other Eastern European cities — drunken, rowdy and often British hordes who accost locals and regularly expose themselves — thankfully have not arrived here. But a multitude of other parties have.

For many, the purpose is straightforward enough: find a girlfriend or even a wife. (Western Internet introduction and marriage sites, with names like "Ukrainian Brides," are a worldwide

business that rakes in the millions, if not billions.) This often bleeds into a quest simply for easy sex — often among the marriage agencies, where men abuse the service, trying to meet and bed as many women in their short stay here as possible.

Unsurprisingly, prostitution has by all appearances metasized, and with it a host of other ills. According to the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine, the country has the one of the highest HIV rates in Europe, and for the first time last year, infections through sex exceeded those from drug injection. Human trafficking for the sex trade also remains a chronic tragedy, though no official figures exist to pinpoint whether it is actually rising or remaining constant.

Anna Hutsol of the organization “FEMEN” wants to change all this. For a year, she and her group of activists have carried out a series of eye-catching demonstrations — for example, parading around the city in skimpy and provocative clothing to attract attention, and then handing out fliers to expatriate men, informing them that, among other things, prostitution is illegal in Ukraine.

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“We are certain that the aim of your visit to our country is absolutely decent,” one flier says. “Unfortunately ... your compatriots come to Ukraine to get easy sex using the fact that Ukraine girls are poor, unprotected and naive.”

FEMEN strives to add teeth to laws against prostitution. At the moment, sex workers and pimps pay a fine (although very small), while clients are left alone. The organization would like to see sex tourism defined in the legal code and clients punished as well, and possibly deported from the country. Recent anti-prostitution legislation was introduced at the beginning of the year, but so far has languished, Hutsol said.

Ultimately, FEMEN wants to change how all foreigners regard Ukrainian women, who suffer from an association with the sex trade throughout Europe, as well as how Ukrainian women view themselves.

“The basic problem is that we lack emancipation,” Hutsol said. “Men take care of us economically — men provide everything. Very few women see any kind of independent future.”

On a recent Friday night, Hutsol and her cohorts conducted a major action under Kiev’s central monument. German electronic-music celebrity DJ Hell provided the sounds for a mini rave, while dozens of college students paraded in avant garde fashion from local designers. At the end, a group of protesters, dressed only in bikinis, held up a banner and shouted, “Ukraine is not a bordello!”

Many young women among the hundreds of onlookers supported FEMEN’s message that foreign men should also appreciate Ukrainian culture and history, and that it was insulting when they spent their days simply chasing introductions.

The majority of those questioned, however, said that the foreigners were in general very respectful, and in many cases better behaved than their own male population. Many said that they had foreign friends and boyfriends, and that men would not come here if local women

were not themselves interested in meeting non-Ukrainians.

"We love you all very much," said Yana Pashchits, 19, a student, who was participating in the fashion show. "We want you to come here."

Nevertheless, FEMEN's message was lost on some of the crowd.

Three Danish 30-year-old professionals happened upon the action, just three hours after arriving in Kiev for a long-weekend. "This is what it's all about," pointing to one of their number's T-shirt, which read, bluntly, "I Love Ukrainian Girls," and staring at the half-dressed beauties parading around him. However, when told what the demo was actually for, and that they were in fact being interviewed for a Western publication, they insisted that they had not come just to meet women.

But Rasmus Anderson, a product manager, added, almost as an afterthought: "You have to agree that there are some very pretty girls here."

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