

THE ZEIT GIST

Confessions of a hostess

Former employee recalls a year spent at Roppongi spot where Blackman once plied her trade

By IVY EMERSON

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Teaching English in Taiwan wasn't always as easy as ABC, so days would often unwind drinking with the betel-nut-chewing, red-gob-hawking locals.

We would sit on dirty plastic stools around a wobbly table on the sidewalk, downtown in one of the world's most polluted cities. The air was usually hazardous to breathe, and rats and cockroaches scurried about everywhere. I wanted to drink and soak up a bit of the culture, and the locals wanted to "gambei" (cheers) with a foreign lady.

Then one day a couple of friends said to me, "You could get paid to do that," comparing it to their old jobs as hostesses in a seedy Tokyo nightclub district. Only the glitz and glamour of Roppongi sounded a tad more upscale as they prattled on with three years worth of titillating tales about a razzle-dazzle lifestyle of fine dining, exquisite gifts and excessive partying.

I was 23 then and wasted no time packing my bags, my head abuzz with anticipation.



NIGHTCLUBS ADVERTISE foreign talent in the Roppongi district of Tokyo. IVY EMERSON PHOTO

Before arriving I did a quick Web search for "Tokyo hostess" to find out what the job entailed. However, just about all that popped up were numerous reports on the grim story of a British woman, Lucie Blackman, who had allegedly been drugged, raped, murdered and dismembered by a hostess club customer.

As horrific as the tale was, I wasn't the least discouraged to try my hand at the trade and the only thing that worried me was the likelihood of my mother also finding out about Blackman's fate and then worrying about my safety.

Little did I know that I would end up working at the same spot as she had before her grisly demise.

So, undaunted, I set off for Tokyo with the phone number of a hostess who had been living it up in Roppongi for eight years tucked in my pocket.

I went to her shoe-box apartment, which was crammed with four bunk beds for the hostesses who shared the room, just after 8 p.m. — the usual time she woke up. She dolled me up in her slinky black top, tight miniskirt and high-heel shoes, and sent me off to an international club she recommended.

My heart was beating so hard as I walked along Roppongi's neon-lit, action-packed main drag that I thought everyone I passed knew it was my first night in town. My head was swimming with images of future evenings spent lingering around a packed club, with the music pumping, sipping Martini or Champagne, and chitchatting with anyone who came in, trying to make connections. Basically, I thought I'd be getting paid to look pretty and act the social butterfly.

Some clubs are probably very much like that. This one, however, was about 100 times smaller and less glamorous than I'd expected. The club was empty when I arrived for my "interview," which consisted of answering a few general questions and then being looked up and down once over by the manager, who then gave the nod of approval. The club had a tiny bar at one end and green sofas stretching the length of the room down to a big TV screen for karaoke.

It was the first place I visited, but I thought it had a comfortable vibe, my instincts told me the staff members were trustworthy and the pay was about the same as teaching full-time. So I held onto the hope that it could get really rocking in

there. Who knows, I thought, maybe some hot guys even patronized the joint.

The other hostesses came from a wide range of countries. They had different histories, different lifestyles and different dreams, but they were all there for the same reason: to make money.

It didn't take long for me to find out that the club I was working at was the same place as Blackman had worked. It had formerly been called Casablanca, but closed down for a while after the gruesome incident, and then reopened under a new name.

Just as finding Blackman's story on the Internet hadn't frightened or phased me, nor did the knowledge that I was working at the same club as she had. And none of the other girls seemed worried either.

The manager warned us not to get into cars with customers, but we all still strove to get as many "dohan" (dinners with customers before heading to the club together) as we could, because they bumped up our salaries.

All in all, the customers were nothing to be afraid of, and I think every hostess there would have agreed that they felt the same.

Most customers were regulars who would go through periods of liking different girls. And since the more customers you have, the more you get paid, the girls were usually pretty possessive of them. If anything, it was the girls you had to be careful of. You certainly wouldn't want to step on anyone's toes by attracting one of their customers since could mean taking an extra few hundred dollars off another girl's paycheck.

About half the men were decent. The other half just wanted to talk "sukebe" (dirty), try to rub their hand up your leg, or poke the occasional boner into you while you were dancing.

Slow dancing was probably the worse part of the job. Night after night, pressed up against a different lonely, horny old man, turning slowly to a poor karaoke version of Eric Clapton. It wasn't all the glitz and glamour I'd dreamt it to be.

Alternatively, long nights were spent waiting for the door to open, compulsively checking the clock every 30 seconds.

The 12 to 15 girls sat all gussied up in a tiny section of the club nicknamed The Doggy Box. A bunch of bitches waiting for a bone.

A few girls were staples in the place, but most came and went on three-month tourist visas, stopping off while on a backpack tour of Asia to earn some quick, hard cash to keep them traveling for a few more months. They were all nice enough, but after hours of being cooped up in the box together, just about every ounce of conversation had been sucked dry.

Yet although the quiet nights crawled by in The Doggy Box, it was still often preferable to sitting at a customer's table, spending the night lighting boxes worth of their cigarettes, pretending to have fun and getting drunk just to bear it.

Some nights I'd meet up to 10 different men. Each introduction meant having the same boring conversation once again. Where do you come from? When did you come to Japan? Do you like Japanese food? Do you like Japanese men? Do you have a boyfriend? Oh, you're Canadian; can I ask you to sing Celine Dion?

The same questions, answers and karaoke songs, for three to eight hours a night, six nights a week.

The house musician was great and the popcorn was delicious, but the only changes from day to day were my growing waistline and shrinking social life. All my friends were hostesses and customers, and all our conversations revolved around work. It had become my life from the moment I moved here. The most mundane and trivial events filled my conversations.

Finally I quit out of fear that I'd die of boredom. Sure, there were a few crazies here or there who kept the job somewhat entertaining, but I'd never meet those ones outside of the job.

I know you never really can tell who could be a rapist or murderer, but in the 300-some nights I worked as a hostess, I never felt endangered or heard any even slightly scary stories from other girls. I probably felt less threatened than someone would working an equally boring night shift at a convenience store in America.

As shocking as the Blackman case is, the murder in March of another Briton, Lindsay Ann Hawker, a Nova instructor in Chiba Prefecture, also goes to show that anyone — regardless of

their profession — can fall victim to violence.

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