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Being a Hostess

Samantha Culp

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An American woman goes undercover to play to the crowd of salarymen in a Tokyo hostess bar. Through a haze of karaoke, booze and silly conversation, life become one endless night.

"Ow!" That was the sound of me slamming my knee against a futuristic Japanese toilet. Hard. Changing into a cocktail dress in a women's bathroom stall of the Shibuya Seibu department store is no easy task, especially when it's already 7pm and you're due in Ginza in 30 minutes.

I winced but kept dressing - my mandatory nude stockings would hide any bruise. Finally clad in slinky black polyester, I emerged to a bank of mirrors - glossy lipstick (not too dark), colored eye-shadow (not too bright), hair brushed out smooth and long (any form of band or clip strictly prohibited). Then out of the dimly lit restroom into the clamor and neon of Tokyo, the rush-hour subway packed with businessmen and office women hurrying home from work while I was on my way to mine.



Bright lights, weird city

In the beginning, I didn't know how conspicuous I was, a blonde gaijin (foreigner) in evening wear and heels on the Ginza line. Later I realized most people probably knew exactly where I was going - to an institution designed for the total relaxation of overworked salarymen. To a place where fantasy is as good as (or better than) reality. To the cheaper, modern-day version of a geisha house. To a hostess bar.

"And what exactly is a hostess bar?" This question was usually accompanied by raised eyebrows. The easy answer: A hostess bar is a place where businessmen pay to have attractive young women pour their drinks, light their cigarettes, and engage in charming conversation with them.

"That's all?" the same eyebrows, raised even higher, seem to ask.

Yes. And sometimes no.

We'll get back to that.

Suffice to say that in Japan at least, the birthplace of the "hostess bar" in its pure form, there are enough establishments offering only alcohol and chit-chat to attract even "respectable" girls to the industry. Even girls who don't really need the money. Even college-educated Western girls. Even a girl like me.

In the late 1970s, many hostess bars began to employ young Western women, from out-of-work French models and American English teachers looking for extra spending yen to German

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backpackers saving up for a summer in Thailand. Throughout the Bubble years, the word spread: If you were a reasonably attractive Western woman, you could make upwards of US\$40 (HK\$312) an hour just drinking and talking - you didn't even have to speak Japanese.

I had first heard tales of Japan's foreign hostess bars in high school, and decided then and there that someday I had to try it. The money was appealing, but more than that, it was the weird glamor of the phenomenon. For a teenage girl already obsessed with Japanese culture (and Asia in general), the idea of being paid to wear pretty clothes and coquettishly entertain high-powered salarymen seemed too good to be true - not such a far cry from the iconic geisha of ukiyo-e prints and Mizoguchi films. So when I recently had the chance to spend a month in Tokyo and see for myself what the lofty geisha tradition had come to, I jumped at it.

Little did I know that I had picked one of the worst possible times to become a hostess. The hostess bar had appeared in urban centers like Tokyo and Osaka after World War II as an evolution of the geisha okiya for the needs of the "economic miracle" salaryman. For many decades, the industry of the "budget geisha" had nowhere to go but up. But once the Bubble burst, it entered a slow but steady decline.

With the party over, businessmen were less willing to spend so much on seemingly so little, which led to lower salaries in the clubs, and most of the fair-weather hostesses from Western countries headed elsewhere. They were increasingly replaced by a wave of Eastern European and Southeast Asian women who, out of desperation, were willing to work for less and perhaps, do more to keep their jobs. And now, just a few days before I landed at Narita airport, a new problem had developed.

"You didn't know? Just last week, they raided so many clubs, many girls got fired. So now it's going to be hard," said Rene, the Austrian "agent" I had met outside of a Roppongi restaurant called Cafe Almond after finding his number in a hostess ad. Talent scouts such as Rene serve as a liaison between the clubs and the girls, receiving a commission from the club for each successful match-up (never, he repeatedly emphasized, "touching a penny" of the hostess' money). He was a tall, shaggy-haired man in his forties, and had tried to bond with me via his Mickey Mouse sweatshirt a moment before, pointing at it and intoning "America! America!" in a funny voice. Now he was explaining how the recent government crackdown on illegal trafficking of women had sent ripples through all of Japan's nightlife quarters.

Though mainly directed at keeping Filipinas and Thai women from being forced into prostitution, the new laws also resulted in free-for-all raids on any place that women might be working without proper visas - particularly Roppongi hostess bars. On a single night, more than 50 girls had been caught in a sweep at the legendary club One Eyed Jack's. Rene was pessimistic about my timing and lack of visa. "You're American though, that's good, so many Americans are leaving."

So he took me on a tour of the clubs which spanned the spectrum of class and comfort. In the Westernized playground of Roppongi, the bars were typically geared toward a younger, party-hearty clientele. One Eyed Jack's was clearly nostalgic for the heady Bubble days of expense accounts and cocaine, and opened on to a strip bar called Private Eyes across the hallway. Faded snapshots of visitors such as Richard Branson and Jackie Chan hung in the entrance. The passing of the golden years was underlined by the cavernous disco beyond, now vacant of hostesses except for those with, of all things, marriage visas.

Club Greengrass was a much smaller, darker space brimming with blonds who mostly lay around waiting for customers or sang lackluster karaoke. I later found out that Greengrass was once called Casablanca and had been where Lucie Blackman met her murderer. Blackman had quit her job as a British Airways flight attendant in 2000 to pursue better money as a Tokyo hostess. She had been at Casablanca only a few months when she disappeared on a dinner date (or dohan) with a customer. After a prolonged and controversial investigation, the 21-year-old's dismembered remains were eventually found in a seaside cave, and businessman Joji Obara was arrested for her drugging, rape and death. The resulting trial, still continuing, rocked the nation as it revealed the unspoken dangers - and societal stigma - that foreign hostesses face.

Though hostess work anywhere carries these risks, at least in upscale Ginza the atmosphere was more refined. Venus Palace was all white leather booths and velvet paintings, run by a beautiful African mama-san, who first described her love for red wine and then explained the harsh rules of the club (mandatory leafletting on the sidewalk, escalating fines for each minute of lateness). Her "girls" were squeezed together at one table, watching pop music videos projected on the wall while enduring the awkward wait for a customer.

The last stop on Rene's circuit was Century Club, a relative oasis of good taste in a skewed aesthetic universe. Heavy brass door handle, subdued burgundy banquettes, low glass tables and fewer sequins per yard in the hostess' wardrobe than in previous clubs. A petite Japanese woman in a Chanel shift dress seemed to be in charge, but I later discovered the mama-san was someone else. In Century Club, as in the others, I was asked to fill out an application form and in the space

Opinion

Black cat, white cat, it's who wins the race

The western press paints all off-color kettles black, a disservice to mixed-blood politicians, actresses, race drivers and golfers

devoted to visa status, I wrote "getting a working visa soon." That seemed to satisfy them here as well, and I had my fourth job offer as the bartender asked me, "Can you start Tuesday?"

That was the last I saw of Rene, but I checked out one more place on my own before deciding - a tiny, upstairs lounge in Akasaka (one Tokyo district where geisha can still be seen) run by a woman named Tanaka. She met me at the station and led me to the linoleum-floored space, insisting all the way that though yakuza or mafia were rumored to be most established in Akasaka, her club did no business with gangsters. That must have been true - judging by the empty tables this late in the evening, it appeared that they didn't do much business with anyone.

So on Tuesday, I showed up at Century Club. I arrived early, expecting to get dressed in the hostess' dressing room. Big mistake or, rather, a little one, as the "dressing room" consisted of a meter-wide hallway and glorified closet that 18 grown women were attempting to use at once. I struggled into my zebra chiffon dress amid a storm of flying bras, flashing compact mirrors, and criss-crossing conversations in at least six languages. My new colleagues were from Russia, the Philippines, Israel, Canada, Australia, Romania, Peru and America respectively. While at a table with customers, hostesses were not allowed "private conversation," and any language besides Japanese or English was strictly forbidden during business hours, so many tried to maximize their opportunity to gossip before timecards were punched.

This was one of many rules I was soon to learn, but I already knew that we had to be in our seats near the bar by 7.30pm or else be fined. Oh, the endless fines. So I clocked in and took my place. One of the tuxedoed waiters came by and gave me the briefest job training I have ever received.

"When you sit with the customer, you say: Nomimono yoroshii desu ka? (Would you like to buy me a drink?) If he has bottle, you take ice like this, pour whiskey like this, then water, stir together. When he goes to toilet, you get hot towel for him," Yamamoto-san explained. He then disappeared to attend to other business. Luckily, some of the other girls shared their hostess know-how before customers began trailing in.

Nika, a fellow Californian who had come to study Japanese after graduating from Stanford, helped me write my name in on temporary business cards. "What's your hostess name?" she asked. I hadn't thought of one and figured I'd just use my real name. Transliterated into Japanese, I thus became "Samansa." I was better off than one French-Canadian girl who went by the name Layla.

Sandra, a curly-haired Romanian who taught English to toddlers by day gave me an insight into the arcane dress code restrictions: "It's because of the shacho, what he thinks looks nice."

I hadn't yet realized that the shacho, the boss of the whole place, was the little balding man cooking away in the tiny kitchen beyond the hostess' dressing room. He fancied himself something of a gourmet chef and would prepare all the club's overpriced food (napkin-sized pizza for 4,000 yen or US\$33.80) himself. It seems he fancied himself something of a taste-maker as well.

"He doesn't like mules, so we can only wear shoes with closed heel or straps. He doesn't like dark lipstick, so we can't use it."

And the prohibition against any form of hair clip? "He thinks that pinned-back hair is a symbol of oral sex. Like a mama-san in some country inn." Sandra pantomimed a haggard woman pulling her hair back and about to give her customer some service beyond the bounds of a bed for the night. It was unclear if this was a widespread cliché in Japanese culture, or in the lurid imagination of just one man, but better not to wear a ponytail. We wouldn't want to give the wrong impression. Girls were supposedly fired from Century Club for having sexual relations with customers (or at least having them discovered).

The other sure way to get fired was to not have enough dohans or dinner dates.

Stefanie, a red-haired Canadian, gave me an overview of the Byzantine pay structure. "You could write a book on this bloody system," she sighed. She had figured it out well enough to keep an apartment in Bangkok that she visited in her free time. Starting pay was 3,000 yen per hour, with a 2,000 yen bonus for each customer request - either a returnee or just some guy who likes your looks while passing by the hostess' seating area. Not bad. But to make real money, a hostess needed real customers, and for that she needed dohan. The dohan was set up through the club - the customer paid 25,000 yen for the privilege of taking the hostess to dinner at some fancy restaurant, footing the bill there and then escorting her to the club for work. After two dohans he was "her" customer, and then each time he came to the club, she got a cut of whatever he spent at his table. This is known as uriage and with that factored in, her "hourly wage" could go up to 4,500 yen and beyond. And then there were the tips, gifts, shopping sprees and weekend trips that a girl might be offered.

So how did one procure this kind of adoring customer? What did they really expect for paying 8,000 yen per hour just to sit with you? I never got a complete debriefing on this as, one by one, my tutors were called to duty by Yamamoto or Yamasaki: "Nika-san! Jennifa-san!"

I just sat, fidgeted with my little red purse and was beginning to feel a bit like the unchosen puppy

at the pet store, until finally - "Samansa-san!"

And then it was showtime.

I don't really remember my first customer which either shows how nervous I was or just testifies to how formulaic the whole thing becomes. Either Hiroshi, the towering, tousle-headed manager, or one of the waiters, would lead me over to a table, and announce me to those already seated. I would bungle a small bow and my few lines of conversational Japanese, exchange meishi or business cards with everyone and sit down next to "my" designated guy to be his temporary blind date.

Sometimes there would already be girls there tending to him. The club tries to keep a high ratio of hostesses to male customers, the better to make him feel like a king with two or three girls vying to refill his drink the fastest and laugh the hardest at his jokes. If other hostesses were present, I would take a beat to assess the existing dynamic ("my" guy might already be the official customer of another girl after all, the staff often forgot to clarify this), and then try to fit into it, playing charming younger sister to the hostess whose customer it was, or funny friend of the customer's obvious favorite. If the customer was new and hadn't "clicked" with one particular girl, it was open season for his affections. Eyelashes got battier, giggles got breathier, humorous entendres doubled (or tripled). I remained an amateur in this type of contest, and was often relieved that other hostesses were doing most of the work. But if I was the only hostess assigned, it was all up to me.

First, conversation. Since my Japanese is limited to about 10 phrases and many customers didn't speak English, this was often difficult. I'd start with simple things ("What's your name?" "What kind of job do you do?"), but if even these were too hard, I'd have to switch to a more absurdist track. "I love Japanese food," I'd say in some of the worst-case scenarios, slowly and accompanied by the international sign-language for eating, and then proceed to list all the Japanese foods I could think of. Sometimes it was a long, excruciating monologue met with only slight grunts or nods and I'd wrack my brain trying to come up with extra sub-categories of sashimi. At other times the customer would gamely play along, suggesting food words as if to ask if I had eaten them, or offering his own favorites. I sometimes substituted animals, countries or Japanese film directors for food-nouns, with similar results. The stereotype of Japanese politesse seemed to hold true for many of these good sports, but for the glummer types who would smoke in silence, I would just talk and talk, pour whiskey and smile, unsure if they could actually understand but hoping at least they'd feel they were getting their money's worth.

Thankfully, most of the customers did speak at least some English, and the waiters usually tried to seat according to language ability (or at least rotate us out when it was clear that some distinguished Hitachi executive was getting sick of the "Do you like dog? Inu? Cat? Neko?" shtick). A few were highly educated abroad, and it was always a shock to readjust from pidgin English when speaking to a Harvard MBA. Others spoke English enthusiastically if not particularly well, but when the alcohol was flowing, we could pretend to understand each other and still have a good time.

Drinking is a huge part of the hostess world, and of Japanese business culture itself. In a country where a staggering percentage of the male populace staggers home each night, "alcoholism" is hard to define. Hostess bars have an important role to play in this culture that requires obligatory drinking with colleagues after work, and getting wasted with partners to seal a business deal. Drinking comes to signify trust, relaxation and a certain absolution from any adult responsibility. When inebriated, society dictates, men are not accountable for their actions, whether those entail attempting to squeeze a hostess' thigh, or puking and then passing out on a subway platform. I'd often pass one of these unfortunate souls, unconscious next to his briefcase on a staircase or sidewalk, on my way home from work at night and wonder about his family, his life, the joy or sadness he had recently found in the bottle. I'd wish someone who cared about him would come and pick him up off the floor. Of course, earlier in the evening, it was part of my job to put him there.

A glass case near the Century Club's coat check held hundreds of bottles of Johnnie Walker Red and Blue Label belonging to regular customers. When one of them arrived, the waiters would bring his bottle to the table and the hostesses would attempt to pour it all so he would have to purchase another. Hostesses didn't drink the whiskey - on special occasions a customer would charge a bottle of expensive champagne or wine, but usually just ordered standard, tiny cocktails for the girls. Hostess glasses are miniaturized in size so as to maximize the actual number of 1,000 yen screwdrivers or gin and tonics the customer will order for her (and lessen her intoxication). Clubs like One Eyed Jack's offered "drinkbacks," which meant a hostess would get 500 yen for every drink she'd bought. With a direct profit from each cup drained, girls in the drink-back system were more likely to get wrecked (or to resort to substances that kept them drinking past the point of wreckage - cocaine and "ice" were well-known bathroom pastimes at such clubs). In the more old-fashioned uriage system, there was little incentive to binge-drink, for which I was thankful. That didn't mean it was easy to stay sober. Though I would sip my Lilliputian servings slowly, the rounds kept

coming. And even when I wasn't tipsy, being surrounded exclusively by red-faced, slurring, stumbling people made me feel as if I was.

This is certainly another reason why my nights (and days) as a hostess began to blur together: The hours of light banter and hard liquor, the clocking out at midnight and running to catch the last train (or being requested to stay late, which meant anywhere from 2am-6am) stopping at konbini or all-night convenience stores to load up on high-calorie snacks before making my way through the silent streets of Kagurazaka to my six-mat room, sleeping until one or two in the afternoon, then heading to a cafe or aimlessly shopping in the afternoon.

By 6pm I needed to think about getting ready for work (after my one attempt at the dressing room, the department store quick-change was born), then back to Ginza, back to the banquette until beckoned, the familiar ballet of head-bows and business cards, the quickly-predictable dialogues ("Where do you come from?" "How long have you been in Japan?"), the rotating from table to table, the repetition of introduction dialogues, the karaoke and dancing, the random discussions of Baltimore as a tourist destination or whatever else was linguistically possible, more karaoke, more conversation, cheeks that ache from smiling so long, the good nights to customers, extorting promises from them to return, going home to send them cute e-mails ("Thanks for the wonderful evening!"). Then, passing out, only to start the whole thing over again.

By day, the club felt like a dream. By night, the normal world seemed just as unreal. I saw so little daylight I might as well have been a vampire who instead of blood fed on white wine and the fake love of salarymen.

Those salarymen blended together as well, more so because I met so many of them rather than that they were all the same. In fact, they differed greatly, despite how fiercely Japanese corporate culture rewards conformity. Looking carefully at the variants of age, job title, income, English ability, interests, sense of humor, taste in karaoke, family life, happiness level, Century Club had a fairly diverse crowd. The majority in their 50s and 60s, wealthy, married with children, not very conversant in English, and were in the middle of pretty conventional lives (college, company and later on death). For this older generation, I soon learned that my name formed an instant topic of conversation. The "Samansa" would have barely left my lips when they would invariably respond: "Ahh, okasama majo!" and laugh to themselves. After some investigation, I discovered that okasama majo translated to "witch wife," and was the Japanese title of that popular 1950s American TV series Bewitched. Unfortunately, even in laborious English, this topic was quickly exhausted.

The younger generation (maybe 30s or 40s) who were brought along to Century Club by their office superiors (though they would have much rather been elsewhere), sometimes surprised by being actually interesting. I once spent a few hours talking to a guy who was a huge fan of indie film director Jim Jarmusch. We felt amazed to have found each other. Another evening I got to chat with a metal-head and sing Deep Purple's Highway Star with him on the karaoke machine. These younger men returned infrequently and would never become regular customers, firstly because it was too expensive to go on their own, and secondly because they had much better places to be (a Judas Priest concert, for instance).

As it turned out, I wasn't at Century Club long enough to get any of my own customers, but the closest to one was Maeda-san. He was probably in his late 60s but might have been 70 (the second time he came to the club to request me, one of the hostesses said "Your old man is here"). He was in remarkably good shape and stood nearly two meters, especially tall for a Japanese man of his generation. I was sat with him one night and for some reason we hit it off. He told me about growing up during the war, about his love for Elvis, about local Tokyo politics. When waiters would swing by to rotate another girl in, he would wave them away. He came back a few times and had asked me on a dohan but was unexpectedly called away on business to Osaka. I had to leave before he returned. He was smart and funny, with flashes of something deeper. Though he peppered his jokes with intentionally silly sexual innuendo and liked to hold my hand when drunk or singing karaoke, he was a true gentleman. Because of his age, it felt more like I was doing a community service than being exploited. With the 50-year-old who tried to grab my behind on the dance-floor, however, it just felt like I was being groped.

As mentioned before, alcohol has the magical power of melting linguistic barriers (He says "What?"; you say "What?"; you both collapse into laughter). It also melts inhibition like an ice-cube and can make the hands of shy men start to wander. Some customers will joke about it as they're trying to touch your knee. "Oh, bad hands!" they'll laughingly exclaim, as if they had a mind of their own.

Hostesses have various methods to deal with "bad hands." The simplest is a humorous scolding as one might give a child who has just broken into the cookie jar; "naughty boy!" and playfully slapping the hand away. Most ingenious is the strategic hand-hold, which essentially is to clasp one or both of your customer's hands before he can clasp anything of yours. I employed both when needed, which wasn't that often, actually, and I came to see the "bad hands" as an occupational hazard but usually pretty harmless.

In the case of one 40-something drunk in a cowboy hat, however, who guffawed as he "pretended" to strangle me for a few seconds (the sensation of no air is still with me), the physical contact had a distinctly darker cast. He and his creepy friend were asked to leave the club quickly after that, but not quick enough for my liking. (I do wonder if other men like Joji Obara still haunt these clubs.) But for most, the customers seemed to enjoy the process of trying to touch just as much as - or perhaps more than - actually touching.

It was their job to try to touch us, our job to not let them. It was all a part of the game, the knowing laughter, the glow of mischief, the moment they nearly crossed the line just to make us draw it again. In many ways the hostess bar recreated the atmosphere of childhood, a space devoted to pure play and indulgence, but with the boundaries that allowed it to be pleasurable. The fact that the female manager of such a club is called mama-san is no coincidence. Taking care to mark the limits of the customers' desire relieved them of the responsibility to control it. And sometimes the touching just revealed the basic, fragile humanity of these men. By the end of the night, as Roy, the Ghanaian keyboard player and singer, would be finishing his set with "Georgia on My Mind" or "Across the Universe," the dance-floor would be filled with hostesses hugged close to their hammered dance partners, and it seemed less that the customers were copping feels than they were just clutching on to something so as not to fall down drunk.

After all, hostess bar customers weren't really looking for a lap dance or a peep show, they could have easily gotten those elsewhere and for far cheaper.

The question remains why were they here? What were they looking for?

Yes, they wanted the fantasy of sex, but also they wanted the fantasy of romance. Of the perfect girlfriend, who is always ready for drinking, flirtation and fun, but who disappears at the end of the night, no strings attached. They wanted a world apart from the daily cares of the working world, where they could be simultaneously be children and kings of the castle. Especially in the post-Bubble era, where most businessmen were not as powerful or as rich as they had trained to be, they wanted a place where they could still command awe and respect, if only by spending 2,000 yen on a dish of cookies or impressing their subordinates with their (middling) English skills.

This was definitely part of the allure of the "foreign" hostess bar as opposed to a Japanese one, and the appeal of the exotic seemed to outweigh the difficulties of language.

Though they could have been chatting in their native tongue with adorable Japanese girls who were just as eager to please and had more cultural training in being hospitable, they were in Century Club, trying to understand the dirty jokes of some blond Israeli just out of the army. Just as the nighttime hours were set apart from daylight cares, the international girls at Century were set apart from the rest of Japan, and made them feel as if they were on a brief vacation. They had escaped their own history, their own lives, their own realities. And maybe they needed the blank canvas of a foreign face to put all the stuff they had no other place to put.

One particular man sticks out in my memory, who came in often and each time told me the same utterly slurred, barely comprehensible stories about his college career at the University of Illinois in the 1980s. The tales all revolved around drinking, and as he was telling them he'd proceed to get drunker and drunker himself, more gregarious with each sip, until at the climax of one yarn he'd be practically shouting, frantic with laughter, and would give the punch-line (about some fraternity party puking accident): "And he said, 'Boy, what a way to use a piece of plastic!'" At this he would double-up with laughter at this same old joke and I would follow suit.

At first I thought it was just bizarre, but after repeated visits, I began to feel quite sad for him. Those four college years in the Mid-West had been the best time of his life, and they were long over. And he wanted to convey to me how special it had been, and recapture for a moment those same feelings. Perhaps because I was an American and might understand, but more because I was just somebody who was being paid to listen, however many times he chose to relive that story.

In a country with the highest number of suicides per capita in the world, so much is turned inwards and the moment a neutral outlet is provided, it all cascades out. A hostess is simultaneously therapist and confessor, cheerleader and comedienne, actress and English tutor, bartender and babysitter. She is a reincarnation of lost loves and past obsessions, of some foreign girl they had once had a crush on. She was some spark that lit up their monotonous sometimes lonely days, making them feel again the passions of their youth against the slow twilight of their lives.

Even without getting into these deeper motivations, it's not hard to imagine what brings men to a bar to drink and flirt with pretty young women. But what brings the women themselves? What do the hostesses want? How do they feel about their job? This question is less explored. Of course, hostesses are there to make money, they're not volunteers. But it's slightly more complex than that.

When I first arrived, I found that hostesses were already organized into cliques based on nationality and language, as well as some instinctive sense of different motives - the girls who were there mainly for fun, and the girls who desperately needed the money. I was immediately lumped in with

the North Americans, Israelis and the lone Aussie, who were here on some adventure or another, not on a long-term mission to feed families back home. This discrepancy in overall goal found expression in other differences. For instance, hostesses from Russia, the Philippines and other developing countries were usually fluent in Japanese. This was necessary for girls who didn't otherwise speak English, such as the Russians, but I didn't understand how it was possible until I discovered that they often had hosted in the suburban sticks of Japan until they had perfected their Nihongo, then moved to Tokyo to cash in. It gave them the competitive edge over native-English speakers who were sometimes younger and prettier, but who would eventually return to their lives in London, Sydney or Chicago. They were in it for the long haul, and whatever that might entail.

Though usually the mama-san of a club was an older woman, often a former hostess who would manage the relationships of hostesses and clients like an expert maitre d', in Century Club the mama was a 30-something Russian woman named Katya. Tall, blond, striking and utterly fluent in Japanese, Katya didn't do much to help the rest of us out, but certainly managed her own affairs to gain the most clients and earn the most income of anyone in the club. I have to say, she was good. Dressed in sleek designer frocks with a tiny Gucci bag dangling from her wrist, she gazed adoringly at every customer while still making each feel as if he was the only man in the room, always ready to show her heartfelt interest in whatever boring topic was being discussed. Still, there were other theories about the reason for her popularity. A few hostesses claimed they knew beyond a doubt she slept with some of her customers. The same was alleged of other Russian and Filipina women, and I think it's likely that a portion of the hostesses at Century Club were going above, and below, the call of duty. I doubt these were cash transactions, more likely an extension of the virtual-girlfriend relationship that would be supplemented with trips, tips, gifts and continued patronage of the club.

I personally never experienced the legendary "secret handshake," wherein a customer shakes the hostess' hand and moves his middle finger to ask if sex is a possibility; if the girl does it back, the answer is yes. Other hostesses I knew were asked this coded question, and replied no by keeping their hand still. But for those who needed to make their limited years of being a young, alluring hostess to be as profitable as possible, they'd move their middle finger and eventually make fantasy into reality. Indeed, they were nurturing their own fantasies as well, of the big pay-day, of the customer who might just decide to set her up for life or at least buy her a house, college education or a bar of her own. As this was not unknown to happen in the Bubble decade, the hope is still there. And in the meantime, however physical they chose to make it, being a hostess was probably preferable to whatever kind of work they would be doing back in the Ukraine or Mindanao.

For the girls who didn't really need the money, their motivations were not as obvious as cold hard cash. Many were just passing through, but others stayed in the business for a year or more and for what? According to Nika, who had been at Century for more than a year already - "You just get sucked into it. All of a sudden you've already been here a year and you figure why not stay a bit longer?" - hostessing pays better than English teaching or most other forms of work a foreigner can do in Asia. Some girls came to Japan to study Japanese, and found that hostessing was possibly the best way to become fluent in the language. "Every night you're asked the same questions, you practice the same stories and jokes, and the customers are happy to teach you new things," one girl explained, adding that studying Japanese was one of the few things a hostess was permitted to do while waiting for customers.

And despite the endemic boredom, the "bad hands," and the tacky club decor, it was a glamorous job. Getting paid to dress up, drink wine, and feel special for a few hours was rather exciting, and the attention itself can become addictive. You don't need to be gorgeous or talented, even a moderately cute brunette can become a star in this secret world. If a hostess is the average man's geisha, the hostess life is the average girl's dream of being a supermodel. But for a hostess with other options, this faux-stardom eventually gets old, and it's time to move on.

Eventually, as I was one of the privileged hostesses with other opportunities waiting for me, I had to leave Century Club. I needed to be back in Hong Kong to work, and truth be told just a few weeks of this strange life had gone a long way. The alcohol, the nocturnal schedule and the peculiarities of the job itself were distorting. A half- dozen courtships happen in a single night, romance blossoms into commitment in a few weeks, a career can unfold in a month or two. At the same time, all seems frozen, as one endless night broken briefly by daylight and meals. The same itty-bitty cups of wine keep arriving, the same songs are sung on the karaoke system, the same relationship is played out over and over again by different actors, slight variations on an age-old theme. But changes did occur, some indicative of the larger shifting tides in Japanese culture and economy.

For one thing, the clothing rules became even more specific, and hostesses were banned from wearing black dresses to work. "It looks like you are at funeral party, we don't want to make customers feel like a funeral party," Yamasaki-san explained. Girls continued to come and go, and

because a few girls were fired right around the time I left, I thought it would be easy to make my exit. Not so, in fact I had to feign a family emergency to resign and still get my paycheck (something I'm not proud of, but deception was a part of the job). After I departed, a few hostesses at Century kept me apprised of new developments, one of which was the hostess industry's minor brush with grassroots labor politics.

Because of a few slow weeks at the till, the management decided to open the club later on Mondays and Tuesdays, effectively cutting an hour off of each hostess' salary. The girls were only informed of the 9pm start when they arrived for work one Monday at 7.30pm, and so they congregated in a coffee shop across the street to wait and to air their endless grievances about unfair and dishonest working policies. Eventually a few hostesses decided to hold a mini- strike in protest. "None of us are going in at nine - are you in?" a girl from one table asked the others. They sat and smoked menthol cigarettes as 9pm came and went, and at 10.30, Hiroshi the manager came to negotiate. Though their attempt to "organize" was impassioned at first, eventually their zeal was quashed by failure (Mondays and Tuesdays would keep the new opening time) and punishment (all hostesses in the club were fined for disrupting work). The club held all the power. They could have easily fired everyone and re- staffed, with only minimal losses. After all, there will always be another hostess waiting to take your place.

These cut-backs seem to signify the financial constraints that are ever tightening on the hostess industry. With the disappearance of the corporate expense account, how many customers could (or would) spend 100,000 yen on an evening of whiskey and flirtation? And will this shrinking number sustain the thousands of women ready to serve them? Just as the true geisha is gradually fading into history, her less-refined niece the hostess may be facing a similar fate. Is this the end of an era? Probably not anytime soon.

"It isn't as profitable as during the Bubble days, but I don't imagine them disappearing unless the Nikkei goes to s***," said Mia, a smart, Japanese- speaking American hostess who in three months had made about US\$10,000, not to mention gifts including a new computer, a Louis Vuitton watch and a weekend trip to Singapore.

All in all, I didn't make a very good hostess. I dropped ice cubes when refilling someone's glass, I sometimes forgot to get oshiburi (warm hand towels) for men returning from the bathroom, and I never mastered the delicate art of wheedling for expensive champagne and snacks. But more than that, I wasn't very good because I always felt like I was doing something wrong or dishonest. I felt bad lying to men about my lack of a boyfriend, my plans to stay in Japan long-term, my very interest in them. A good hostess doesn't mind the dishonesty, and sees it as part of the rules of engagement that even the customers understand. Which is true - the men are only as fooled as they choose to be by a hostess' smile, flattery, and gushy e-mails.

It's almost like a movie, the suspension of disbelief, the knowledge that it's not exactly real but just enough verisimilitude to let you hope. This surreal world could perhaps only exist in Japan, where the realms of childhood, dreams and the virtual are still so deeply valued. The hostess bar is a trap-door for everyone involved; for a time, the businessmen can escape the lives that were chosen for them, the developing-world hostesses can escape certain poverty, and the good-time sojourners can escape feeling ordinary. They may not share the same dream, but they are dreaming it together.

This story ran earlier in the Weekend Standard, Hong Kong

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