



REVIEW

Romance tourism or female sex tourism? ☆



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Summary *Background:* Love, sex and the female traveller: romance tourism or female sex tourism? The phenomenon of women travelling in search of relationships with local men in developing countries has been studied for the last 20 years. However, it appears little known in travel medicine.

Methods: Relevant literature was found through PubMed, Science Direct, ProQuest and Google Scholar. The reference lists of selected articles identified further sources.

Results: Historical records of women travellers to far-away countries abound. Then, as now, women not only searched for the erotic 'other' but made romance and sex the purpose of their trip. Today, increasing numbers of women travel to destinations in developing countries where sex with local men is the main attraction. This pastime raises concerns not only for the women themselves but for the local men involved as well as their sex partners and the local communities.

Conclusions: Although more research is necessary, comparing the criteria that describe men travelling for sex and relationships and women travelling for sex and relationships appears to suggest that there is very little difference between the two, regardless of what the pursuit is called. Women looking for sex with local men are sex tourists, too. Recognition of this fact needs to influence the pre and post travel care of female travellers.

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“At the airport, Angel hugs me. I leave him my money, my flashlight, my day pack, not much, but things he can use. I put my address and phone number in the pack. In the plane, I stare out the window, the sharp peaks of the Andes like knives that could cut into the silver belly of our plane. I dream that I return home pregnant, don’t tell anyone, just let the life grow inside of me, and then push and pull into this world a half-wild child. Tiny, brown, a small fish in a wide river, a dolphin child, a piranha like his father” [1]

Background

Travel medicine is slowly moving away from focussing exclusively on specific (tropical) infections and other travel ailments, to embracing the ‘bigger picture’, the complex context in which these medical problems occur. This context includes areas as diverse as human behaviour, education theory, impacts and implications of travel, history, culture and religion, typically the realm of experts in other disciplines. Travel medicine is more than just medical problems; ignoring fundamental interrelationships within such contexts could lead to fragmented care.

One such example is sex tourism. Although numerous medical papers exist on sexually transmitted infections (STIs), STIs and travel, and STIs and sex tourism, few discuss the complex phenomenon itself. Yet, understanding the big picture avoids that travel health care is reduced to an automated ‘prevention and treatment’ activity. In order to provide high quality care, an awareness of the theoretical concept of sex tourism [2,3] is essential including its historical background, its exploitation of politico-economic, gender, race and age [4,5], its legal and human rights implications. Similarly, theoretical discourses on typologies of sex tourists [6,7], popular destinations, and physical, psychological and social impacts on local individuals and communities are important for health care practice. Simplified, sex tourism is: organized holidays for men where sex with local women (men, children) is the main objective. Men travel to Thailand or Cuba, among other locations, to have sex. Sex tourism is a male pursuit. Or is it?

Twenty years ago, the congregation of western women on a number of Caribbean islands piqued the interest of researchers. These women were not there to enjoy beach, music or culture. They were there to sample another natural resource, the local men’s ability to make their holidays in the sun so much more memorable. In fact, so many women turned up, it was obvious that a tourism industry existed of which many elsewhere were completely unaware. Pruitt and LaFont’s [8] study became the first landmark publication with numerous others to follow.

This paper deals with women who travel for the purpose of, in expectation of, or are open to romantic or sexual encounters with local men in developing countries. This [my] definition excludes women who meet a local man in his home country, fall in love, perhaps get married and start a family in the same way this would happen at home, notwithstanding some sensationalist biographies, such as *The White Masai* [9,10]. It also excludes those women who never intended to have sex during their travels but ended up having unplanned casual sex with locals. Excluded are

female students [11] and volunteers/voluntourists who enter relationships in an attempt to associate themselves with international or political activism [12], as well as lesbian travellers seeking local lesbian contacts. The purpose of this article is to introduce the phenomenon of women travelling in pursuit of relationships with local men, and to explore its implications for travel health advice. A literature search via PubMed, Science Direct, ProQuest and Google Scholar identified articles around the concepts of romance tourism, female sex tourism and sexually transmitted infections/diseases in women travellers. Of several thousand hits, less than 300 were pertinent to this article and were screened further for their usefulness. Their reference lists identified additional sources, including books and book chapters. Content alerts captured more papers as they were published. First, a short overview on the history of women’s travel shall set the scene.

History of women travellers

Historical accounts of travel and exploration typically give attention to men. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that historical accounts on sex and travel emerged prolifically during the era of the Grand Tour in the 18th and 19th century where young but sadly unsophisticated Englishmen followed discerning itineraries of cultural and sexual attractions and so improved their knowledge and skills in both areas. Littlewood’s [13] *Sultry Climates* provides fascinating accounts of this era. With the limelight on men, women quietly travelled, independently or accompanied, way before the Grand Tour – and had a Grand Tour of their own.

A number of well-known women travellers stand out for their contributions to botany, zoology, anthropology, archaeology, or geography. Their own writings and the biographies, correspondence, poems or diaries edited by others make for compelling reading. A few remarkable examples are introduced here. Freya Stark (1893–1993), a formidable explorer and travel writer [14], was the first (white) female visitor in a number of areas in Arabia, Persia and Afghanistan. Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), a travel writer and political personality in the Middle East, was involved in the creation of modern Iraq. Of both, no romantic or sexual adventures appear to be known, though their accounts need to be viewed through the lens of their time, and including such personal information may not have been seemly. Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969) was probably the first to visit Lhasa at a time when Tibet was closed to foreigners. She studied and published on Eastern religions, spiritualism and philosophy, though much of her life and travels are shrouded in mystery. She travelled with a young monk, sharing a tent with him, whom she later adopted as her son. What exactly happened in the tent may be subject to speculation. Mary Kingsley (1862–1900) rose to fame with her adventurous travels to West Africa (then the ‘white man’s grave’) [15]. Critical of colonialism and questioning the benefit of missionaries, she was a firm spinster who, nevertheless, marvelled at the magnificent African male body. Again, her supremely detailed travel descriptions do not include any hints on romantic or sexual adventures. There were literally hundreds of others who

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