

Russian Women Seek Riches Stripping in South Africa

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Women in eastern Europe can often earn more working as strippers abroad than in many professions at home.

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Even while wearing nothing but a black satin bra and matching panties with a red heart on the reverse side, Fiona beams a confident smile.

She struts down a runway above the floor of the club toward the pole gleaming at the end, ready to perform the three-minute dance that every stripper here will do in rotation on the main stage at some point tonight.

Afterward, Fiona redresses herself backstage in a sheer negligee and strolls through the club, chatting up the men scattered around tables sipping beer, until she takes one by the hand and leads him to another section for a private dance.

Fiona, a 28-year-old from Moldova, will pocket 800 rand (\$75) for a 15-minute lap dance

here at Mavericks, the biggest strip club in Cape Town. Even after paying employment fees to the club, her tips can add up to 50,000 to 100,000 rand (\$4,700–\$9,300) a month during the busy tourist season: more than she could ever expect to earn in her home country, she said.

"Why would I stay in Moldova and fight to be able to feed myself when I can work here?" Fiona, who like all the women interviewed for this story goes by a stage name, said in Russian, relaxing on a black couch with several Ukrainian strippers between dances and gesturing to the spotlight stage, where another topless dancer is now twirling.

"My brother is a lawyer in Moldova, he's at the top of his field, and he makes only \$600 a month. In South Africa, I make good money. I can dress up and look beautiful, the managers are fair, and the weather is always gorgeous."

Escaping Eastern Europe

The South African Human Rights Commission said in a June report evaluating work conditions at Mavericks that eight of 10 foreign dancers interviewed at the club came from Eastern Europe and that most were supporting families back home. Moldova in particular — the poorest country in Europe with a per capita GDP last year of \$3,800 — provided the highest number of foreign dancers, the report said.

"There are very few locals" working at the club, said Victory, an American who worked at Mavericks for several months earlier this year. She backed the report's findings, saying the foreign dancers are mostly Eastern Europeans.

"You can find Moldovans, Bulgarians, Romanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Hungarians: There's everything," said Natasha, 33, a retired dancer from Ukraine who worked in South Africa for seven years. Both Natasha and Fiona first came to the country by way of recommendations from friends, though local strip clubs also specifically advertise to attract Eastern European women.

Mavericks, for example, offers a Russian-language recruitment section on its website in addition to English and Spanish. "Are you between 21 and 35 years old, attractive and in great physical shape, able to speak English, outgoing and ready to learn quickly and work hard to earn good money?" the page says. "Then welcome to Mavericks!"

Recruitment through "talent agents" with connections in Europe is another method for bringing Eastern European girls over, Natasha said.

"It used to be mostly Ukrainians [at Mavericks]. They used to have a guy who had a connection with Ukrainian girls, but then he moved to Durban [a city about 1,300 kilometers to the northeast]." Another Cape Town club, House of Rasputin, also recruited numerous Russian women through the Russian owner's connections before the place folded three years ago.

In It for the Money

Mavericks was investigated in 2012 by the country's Human Rights Commission for human

trafficking after accusations by a former dancer and a patron. The commission's report, submitted to the Western Cape's High Court in June, concluded that the dancers were "vulnerable to exploitation" and that the club had committed multiple violations of their rights to human dignity and bodily integrity.

Several Cape Town strip clubs have in recent years been linked to the local mafia, and there are numerous stories about club owners confiscating dancers' passports and charging them exorbitant fees under threat of legal action if a debt is not paid off.

But in the experiences of the women interviewed for this story, signing up to take clothes off for pay had less to do with coercion and false promises than being offered a chance to travel and earn money quickly that wasn't available at home.

"We have a beautiful family, but the situation [in Ukraine] was tough, especially at the end of the '90s when we left," said Natasha, who grew up in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson.

"People were starving. We didn't have shoes to wear to work. When you see an engineer standing out in the market, selling paint or fruit — an educated person — then what's the point of going to university? I wanted something different."

Natasha dropped out of school at 16 and moved to Turkey in search of work, followed several years later by her younger sister, Masha. But after trying to eke out a living in other jobs — Masha danced in a professional troupe, while Natasha worked in shipping management — the sisters said they were still struggling financially.

"It was a step up from Ukraine, but still very hard while we were helping our family," Masha said. "We were surviving again, and yes we had something to eat, but it still wasn't good."

One of their friends was stripping in Europe, and "there was a moment where we decided to join," Natasha said. The pair worked as peep show performers and sex workers in Luxembourg before moving to South Africa to dance in strip clubs at the ages of 22 and 24, later writing a book, "Twisted," about their experiences in Europe under the joint pen name Lola Smirnova.

The sisters detail some of their darkest moments from the sex trade in their book, set in Ukraine, Luxembourg and Turkey. They describe becoming addicted to cocaine and getting drugged and robbed multiple times, culminating in an incident in which one sister was kidnapped, beaten, raped and dumped in a field outside Istanbul.

Though they readily admitted the degradation and dangers of the industry — most apparent in prostitution but found to some extent in stripping as well — the sisters said the downsides were outweighed by the dead-end poverty they saw at home.

"Unless you really have some connections, unless you really believe in magic, it's hard to get a proper job," Masha said. "The choice was, either we stay, struggle and survive, or if you want to try and live properly like you see on TV, you make a plan and do anything you can."

Free, But Not Free

While both sisters praised working conditions at Mavericks, saying the management's strict rules and omnipresent security cameras enforced a stripping-only environment of professionalism, the line between many strip clubs and brothels can be blurred. Young foreign women are especially vulnerable to getting tricked or pressured into doing more than they bargained for, the sisters said.

"Girls don't always know that it's not always going to be just stripping," Masha said. "You're free, but you're not free, because you've got money to make. You can't say no I don't want to do this, especially when it's young girls."

Despite the uncertainty involved in moving to the other side of the globe and the nightmare stories of crime and human trafficking, the dancers say the money is a magnet, and the country of destination doesn't even matter.

"Girls go where it's easier to get a visa," Natasha explained. "There are no romantic stories about 'I want to go to South Africa to go on a safari.' There is always a movement. One country is easiest [to get into] right now, there is a flood of girls, then boom, the laws change, and the current moves elsewhere."

"That's how it was in South Africa 10 years ago. Girls were just flooding the place because your visa was ready in six days. But every year it gets more and more difficult," she said.

Professional Ethics

Natasha and Masha said women from Eastern Europe who go abroad to earn a living as strippers tended to have a strong work ethic and financial motivation.

"Most of them come prepared to work. You don't hire Russians to drink and get f---ed [up]," Masha said. "To make money, that's what they want. Most of the girls have kids and families. They're clean, they love their husbands, and they're just there to get paid."

Stripping itself is a proper skill, Natasha added: a rigorous performance art that, when done well, demands as much precision and strength as any other type of professional dancing.

"It's like working in the theater," she said. "It's a very beautiful kind of art if you do it the proper way."

Still, the sisters admit that the work necessitates a certain degree of moral flexibility and was at times traumatizing.

"Naked is the easy part," Masha said. "The hard part is to approach the client and make him like you and want to buy an expensive product that you sell, which is a private dance."

"You have to break something inside: Not everybody can be a salesperson."

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