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Everybody Hurts: Perfecting the Art of Displeasing the Customer

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Steve is sore all over as he stands at the bar in a Moscow club. He is covered in welts and bruises.

But he loves it.

Half an hour before, Steve, an American businessman, was being led on all fours by a dog leash across the dance floor of the gay club Central Station. With his face tightly wrapped in a PVC mask and his pot belly flopping over a skimpy pair of shorts, he is the willing slave of Madam Venera, who makes him lick her shoes before finishing him off with a severe nipple tweaking.

"I'm hurting like a son of a bitch," Steve said, relaxing with his mask off at the bar after

the show. "I won't be able to sit down for a week."

Sadomasochistic evenings, long a mainstay of the alternative club scene in the West, have begun appearing in Moscow.

Two self-styled madams, Lilia and Lotte, regularly hold S&M nights in major Moscow clubs.

But Lotte, who also runs her own S&M salon, says that Russian sadomasochism is on a somewhat loftier level than the Western variant.

"It's not like in the West," Lotte said in a recent interview in her salon in an apartment in the north of Moscow. "We are different because we're different people. Today there's more people merely interested in it but two or three years ago it was holy ... like a cult, a religion."

Sadomasochism, which has been around for centuries in the West, only began openly emerging in Russia with perestroika.

It existed long before that, but was kept firmly underground. The death of a military commander found dead in the Anglia hotel in St. Petersburg in 1882 was hushed up after he suffered a heart attack during a night of S&M with a whip and two prostitutes.

More recently, one of Russia's most controversial films, the 1998 movie "About Freaks and Men," took as its subject a sadomasochistic photographer in late 19th-century St. Petersburg.

Nowadays, the "cult" of S&M regularly convenes at clubs like Central Stations and Luch.

A recent show at Luch saw various slaves — mostly young men stripped down to their underwear — go up for sale to anyone in the audience of about 15 people. While the comedy serial "Mr. Bean" played on the television screens above the stage, one slave trotted over to a madam — enthroned as queen for the show — who promptly pushed him down and used his mouth as an ashtray.

Most of the slaves went for under 100 rubles ($4.30), but that didn't always bring instant devotion.

One bored slave irritably pulled his leash from his new owner's hands and scurried back to his original madam after about five minutes of kneeling by her side.

"You need to try everything once in your life," said Dima, 25, a S&M regular. "I've tried all directions."

Four hours into the evening, after a cross-dressing competition, some mildly erotic dancing, a cabaret show and shoe-lickings by the slaves, at least onemember of the audience was dozing off.

The queen for the day was tapping her long filtered cigarette with boredom.

"It's much better when you're not queen," she said. "There's more to do."

Things can get more serious though. "Mr. Bean" was switched off for a hard-core S&M porn

video by the end of the evening and another S&M night featured a cage and stocks for anyone interested in taking part.

"It's a different life. They [the punters] want to see a woman as a queen or a goddess. It's a game," said Lilia, who has been practicing S&M for 12 years.

Both madams stress that there is no competition between the two and externally they have little in common.

Madam Lilia is a short, voluptuous woman who once worked as a doctor caring for children in Zambia. With long black hair, an infectious laugh and a look like Herman Munster's wife, she's a jolly — if often weary — host of her salon.

Lotte is a poker-thin blonde with a deep, commanding voice and a manner straight out of Cruella De Vil's handbook in "101 Dalmatians." The word imperious could have been invented for her. Even her dog, which she found on the street and befriended, has chains around his back and quickly comes to attention when she speaks.

Both women are totally devoted to S&M.

"For me it's life first of all, and business second. I gave up my family for the sake of sadomasochism," said Lilia, who said she finds it hard if she goes three days without being somebody's madam. "I need to dominate."

Clearing the long metal chain from the sofa, Lilia sits down in her salon in an apartment in southeast Moscow. Whips, wigs, chains and costumes hang on a rack on the wall, a condom lies on the floor beneath the windowsill and clients continually ring to book a time in the 24-hour salon.

"It's a very difficult business, purely psychological," Lilia said. "You have to be ready for it. Not every woman can pick up a whip and start to beat a man."

And it's a solitary business.

"In order to practice sadomasochism you don't need anyone close to you apart from your servants," Lilia said.

One slave used to come around and clean Lilia's apartment for her but she eventually had to hire a cleaning lady because he was so bad at it.

Up to seven madams, an occasional master and one transsexual work in the salon: They charge several hundred dollars for a couple of hours. The madams say it's not prostitution and that sex is not part of the deal. But they say there are other S&M madams who are just covers for brothels.

"We don't practice sex." Lilia said. "He [the slave] has sex at home. Here we simply play. ... I've never had sex with any of my slaves."

The S&M concept of sexual relations is reminiscent of U.S. President Bill Clinton's: Sexual acts and toys of all sorts are permitted, but intercourse is out of bounds.

"A man can sit next to a naked madam and still have no right to touch," she said. "That's real sadomasochism."

Lotte's shows are by invitation only, while Lilia's nights are open. They are usually advertised in the newspaper Znakomstvo, or Introduction, as well as on a pager service that specializes in sex messages — along with the weather and the latest dollar rate.

You're unlikely to see salon practices in the clubs, and there are some things that cross the line.

Lotte was once asked to deprive a punter of part of his manhood to be then worn around his ankles. Lilia once heard of someone whose fantasy was to be given an injection.

"I think it's not normal. You can be a sadomasochist but to have an injection. What kind of high do you get from that?"

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