

A BEER WITH... CHELSEA HAYWOOD

MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA

The Canadian model turned author talks about working as a Tokyo hostess

Words: Andrew Westbrook

What inspired you to go and work in a Tokyo hostess club?

The idea sort of fell out of the sky. I was modelling at the time and looking to find something else creative that I could apply myself to. I'd met lots of girls who'd hosted before and it was probably inspired the most by curiosity and that no one had documented that adventure before. A lot of backpackers go and do this; a lot of people around south-east Asia, they're staying in a hostel, they hear from someone else about it and they're suddenly like: "What do you mean, you just went to Tokyo and had conversations in a club and got paid exorbitant amounts of money?". It's like an easy fund to continue travelling.

So what exactly is hostessing?

It's a conversation club, an establishment where Japanese men go to drink. You are there to engage them in conversation with your personality. That's it, that's your commodity. You don't speak about anything salacious, you talk about hobbies, travel, your own country.

You had powerful men with seemingly endless supplies of cash showing you around Japan. Sounds pretty good?

Yeah it was. You're 20-years-old, your only asset to them is that you speak English. These men are millionaires and billionaires, they're musicians and artists and film people. You show up and throw yourself in there and experience the lifestyles. It's very surreal.

"These men are millionaires and billionaires, they're musicians and artists. It's very surreal"

And there seemed to be a lot of drugs knocking around...

Oh yes, because alcohol's used as a mechanism to cope, drugs are everywhere.



Also because these types of men, working six, seven days a week, 14-hour days, a lot of them definitely use drugs themselves. That's where it can be very destructive.

Did the story of Lucie Blackman [a British hostess raped and murdered in 2000] ever make you scared of the work?

Certainly when I discovered that I was working at the same club that she worked at. That was very chilling. I almost decided to leave, but ultimately you have to realise it was an isolated case. It's not indicative of that subculture whatsoever. I was in the same situations that she was in. I accompanied men in their chauffeured cars, I went to dinner, I did the exact same things she did. She would have been sitting there at those tables. She probably met a lot of the same customers, and there's nothing to say that that couldn't happen to me. The risk factor was there.

Some of the men come over as being quite lonely. Did you ever feel sorry for them?

I got along very well with most of the customers. There was the odd one I was apathetic towards, but most of them are alpha males; they're very successful, very ambitious, quite wealthy and extremely interesting and surprisingly have a fantastic sense of humour, which I never supposed before I went to Japan. You just think of the business suits and self-discipline but they're a cracker.

You went to Tokyo with your husband Matt. The job must have been pretty hard on your relationship?

I think for the most part I was quite honest about what I was doing. He may beg to differ, ha. I hardly saw Matt. You sleep in the same bed, but all my Sundays were taken up by going on day-trips with the customers. We didn't see too much of each other. I would tell him about who I saw that day, what went on, things that had transpired, but I would never have put myself in that situation had it not been for the greater project [of writing the book].

Do you think your relationship's now stronger because of that?

It got a bit of a bashing. I don't think you can subject a relationship to that scenario. Perhaps we were quite naive. I met him when I was 17 and we were married three months later. By Tokyo we had been married three years. When you're travelling and uprooting yourselves all the time you have quite a close relationship. But it did have a destructive impact.

So was it worth it?

Yes. And I would do it again. I think it was important to portray the Japanese men as individuals and people because it's very easy to stereotype.

90-Day Geisha is out now, published by Random House. Reviewed on p40.