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WHAT TO WEAR TO A SEX CLUB? That's my dilemma as I stand in front of my closet looking for something not too brazen, not too demure. I've got a black bustier in here somewhere, but that would send the wrong message.

I'm not out to partake, but to conduct research on what really goes on in one of the dozens of sex clubs that have cropped up across the country over the past few years. A friend of a friend, Angela\*, a 47-year-old high school teacher who's been going to sex clubs for about a year since splitting from her husband, has offered to show me the ropes. "Just wear something pretty," she instructs. I settle on a form-fitting black turtle-neck knit dress. I look somewhat dressed for a business meeting, so I don some black fishnets and knee-high boots for good measure. I'm nervous because I know at some point in the evening my clothes will be coming off. That's because the real action at this club is in the backroom, where you must be naked — or clad in a skimpy towel around your waist — to enter. The backroom is where the sex happens — between



# WELCOME TO

# THE



# CLUB

*Anne Bokma infiltrates a haven for swingers and*

*finds many of the clientele are midlifers just like her*





couples, between women, between groups, between strangers. Stripping down is in the name of journalistic duty, I remind myself as I slip on the fishnets and gird myself for baring all in front of what I imagine will be a bunch of leering men who've had too much to drink.

I'll find out later tonight — actually the minute I enter the doors of O-Zone in Toronto, one of Canada's most popular sex clubs — that I'm dressed all wrong. But I'll also discover that when it comes to sex clubs, I am wrong about a lot.

**PUBLIC SEX WAS ONCE** the preserve of the gay community, with its steamy bathhouses where men could engage in anonymous encounters, but now it has morphed into an equal-opportunity hedonistic playground for the middle-class (and often middle-aged) hetero set. This is due in part to a 2005 Supreme Court of Canada decision that ruled it was no longer a criminal activity for consenting adults to practise open, explicit sex acts within the relatively public confines of a club. Before then, these clubs were deemed “bawdy houses,” with participants subjected to raids and facing the threat of jail time. Now clubs similar to 4-Play in Edmonton, Wicked, Ménage à Quatre and O-Zone in Toronto, Club L'Orage in Montreal and Club E.S.P. in Amherst, N.S., can be found in most major cities in Canada.

These venues cater mostly to swingers, as well as single women. Many of the women are bisexual or “bi-curious.” (Stricter restrictions are placed on how many single men are allowed or on which nights they may attend, since having too many unattached men on the prowl creates a predatory atmosphere that can make the women uncomfortable.) The clubs have dance floors and bars where all the foreplay begins. There are sidelong looks and direct stares as potential partners check each other out, suggestive dancing (stripper poles

and cages are common) and plenty of deep kissing and all-over touching.

Couples are welcome at O-Zone, as are single women. Single men are permitted only on certain nights and usually in limited numbers. You must sign a membership form, which is kept private. After paying the \$10 entrance fee (couples pay \$20 to \$60, depending on the night), I enter the club. The first thing I notice is that the dance floor is packed. The second thing? Everyone is really good-looking. I'm relieved to see many people close to my age — somewhere between 40 and 50. What makes me uncomfortable, however, is how inappropriately I'm dressed. I tug on the turtleneck of my dress as I watch women in corsets, micro-minis, tight leather pants, halter dresses, flimsy lingerie and tube tops move on the dance floor or laugh and flirt at cocktail tables and couches lining the perimeter of the room. They seem sexy and confident, in control. The men, well groomed and decked out in dress pants and shirts, almost fade into the background while the women strut like peacocks.

I grab a drink to steel myself and take in the anything-goes atmosphere. While most people are dancing or talking, there are a few clues this isn't your typical club. I struggle to not lift my eyebrows when I spot a woman, standing with her back to a man who's seated at one of the cocktail tables, hike her skirt, reveal a bare bottom and watch him respond by delivering a forceful but playful wallop. She giggles and wanders off. I see a man casually reach over and cup his hand on a woman's crotch under her short skirt while she talks to another man. She barely registers a beat. My friend Angela introduces me to a few people she knows, and within minutes one of the men in the group has undone a woman's halter top. As her breasts spring free, his wife runs her hands over the woman's nipples. I'm not sure where to look, so I head over to the bar for another drink.

O-Zone is an on-premise club, which means all manner of sexual activity can happen on-site, as opposed to off-premise clubs where you go to whet your appetite but must find another place — a hotel, someone's home or, sometimes, a car — to finish

the meal. O-Zone's backroom doesn't open until 11 p.m. That's when the inhibitions slide off along with the towels and you can indulge in your sexual fantasies on the spot — whether it's making out with your partner while others watch, exploring your “bi-curious” urges, engaging in “soft swap” (everything but intercourse) with another couple or “hard swap” (going all the way), oral sex, having sex on a swing or in a room outfitted to look like a jail cell, or joining an orgiastic free-for-all on beds in the centre of the backroom while others eye the action. There are also couples who are here simply to be turned on, then who leave together, jacked up by the eroticism of the experience. “A lot of couples will tell you the same thing: The best sex they have during such an evening is with each other,” says Terry Gould, an award-winning Vancouver investigative journalist and author of *The Lifestyle: A Look at the Erotic Rites of Swingers*. “They've learned to flirt or have sex with others in order to enhance their own marital lives.”

One rule predominates at the clubs — no means no — and it's strictly enforced. You must wait for an invitation or ask permission before any touching takes place. “If you touch anyone without permission, you're thrown off the premises — thus middle-aged, otherwise conservative wives can dress like Lady Gaga, flaunt themselves on the dance floor with a dozen partners and not worry about some aberrant masher spoiling the fun,” says Gould. “They can express themselves bisexually or heterosexually with men and women of all ages, and then go back to work Monday morning.”

It's sex as recreation, sort of like going to the gym — a full-body workout uncomplicated by emotional entanglements. Or, some might argue, meaningless physical encounters limited by a lack of real intimacy. But these folks aren't looking for someone to share moonlit walks along the beach or spill their secrets to. They want to get their rocks off and they don't want to do it by having an illicit affair. So they go to a sex club instead. It's their answer to the monotony of monogamy, a compromise that allows them to stay married and still have sex with others without the burden of guilt.



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They manage to put the lid on jealousy because they know their partner will be leaving with them at the end of the night — in fact, many agree in advance not to let each other out of their sight for the duration of the evening. “Most of the couples you'll see in sex clubs have been married a long time — 15 to 25 years — and they desire both variety in their sexual partners and companionship with their spouse,” says Vancouver sex therapist David McKenzie. “By swinging and going to sex clubs, they manage to hold these two wild horses in tandem — they are addressing the variety issue and also keeping their relationship intact.” He cautions that this kind of multi-partner play works only in marriages that are very secure. “You have to have total openness and a deep confidence in the loyalty of your partner. Otherwise, it can't work.”

Samantha Martin\*, a 48-year-old Ottawa high school teacher with two teenagers, has been going to sex clubs with her husband, Paul\*, once or twice a month for the past six years and says the excitement they experience on these evenings has unleashed a new vitality that carries over into their domestic lives, especially between the sheets. “When I'm at the club I love the feeling of being desired, and Paul loves the idea of somebody else finding **Continued on page 96**





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## WELCOME TO THE (SEX) CLUB

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me attractive and wanting to have sex with me. It's made us fall in love and in lust again with each other — we are usually on such a high when we get home we can't get enough of each other," she says. "Let's face it, when your sex life is good with your partner, you cut each other a lot more slack and things don't bug you as much because you feel good and you feel happy." She was the one who brought up the idea of going to a sex club when she hit her forties — partly because she was beginning to realize she was bisexual and thought it would be a safe environment to have experiences with other women, and also because there was a midlife now-or-never urgency to her desire to explore new sexual territory. "I wanted to get affirmation of my sexuality and I wanted to feel attractive to others. The time was right — as you get older, you get more confident in who you are and you become more courageous." Paul, who'd always dreamed of having a threesome, didn't need any convincing.

A lot of people equate sex clubs with "a bunch of dirty old men who want to grope you," but Martin insists nothing could be further from the truth. "The men here respect women and are usually more considerate than in regular bars. They tend not to drink much because it may affect their sexual performance and so you never see any fights break out. And since no always means no, you feel safe." She's had about 60 sexual partners over the years and says she doesn't feel a whit of guilt about it. "In a way, it's recreational, yes, but it's also an extension of caring for and loving people. What's wrong with a bunch of consenting adults getting together for a few hours and having physical affection and everybody walking away feeling happy and satisfied?"

Everyone in the sex club scene will tell you that women call the shots, that their desires are paramount. "The night goes the way the woman wants it to go," says Martin. "Whenever I see a man trying to push his wife into this,

it never works. If she's not happy, other potential partners will pick up on that and won't want anything to do with them. If she's doing it just for him, you can tell."

But McKenzie suspects some women may be more reluctant than they let on. "They might feel pressured to keep their husbands happy. They want to keep their marriages intact and don't want their husbands to stray," he suggests. "They could see this as one way to prevent that."

The dearth of single males also tips the balance in favour of the men, who have a broader selection — both attached and single women — to choose from. And despite the liberal attitudes of club goers, swingers can be homophobic when it comes to men, says McKenzie. "They are fine with female-on-female sex, but you'll never see any male-on-male activity."

And then there's the element of secrecy. Plenty of professionals who frequent sex clubs — teachers, doctors, social workers, lawyers and business owners — fear they could face career ruin if they are found out. The clubs try to alleviate these concerns with low-key signage on their doors, keeping membership lists confidential and strictly forbidding cameras.

But what happens if you run into someone you know? The first time Cindy Ancic went to a sex club when she was in her early forties, she encountered a young woman she knew. "I begged her to please not say anything and she didn't. After all, she was there too." Since then, Ancic has come out of the closet: She and her husband, Joe, bought a sex club in Edmonton in 2008 and renamed it 4-Play, and now host about 100 people on Friday and Saturday nights.

Ironically, Ancic says she's too busy running the club to have much sex these days — she's had only three extramarital partners over the past few years. Her husband, on the other hand, has had more than 100.

"It doesn't bother me at all," Ancic insists, "because I always know he's coming home with me." Joe still works as a welder during the week, but she lost her job as a retail district manager

when the club was featured on a local TV show and her boss saw her interviewed. "I'm not in hiding anymore and I'm not ashamed of what we do," says the 51-year-old mother of two. "We are doing this openly and honestly. My husband and I love and honour each other with our minds and our hearts — but our bodies, that's another thing. Everybody needs sex — psychologically and emotionally, you need it to be healthy. We are all sexual creatures, and the moment you make sex dirty and taboo is when things get messed up."

THE CLOCK STRIKES 11, and it's time for me to leave my hang-ups at the door. I follow Angela to the backroom, collecting a minuscule towel along the way and squeezing myself into a tiny locker room with eight other people.

I strip down to my bra and panties, wrap the towel around my waist and debate leaving my bra on. Angela advises against it, suggesting I'll stand out more than I want to. Remembering the turtleneck dress debacle, I take a deep breath and unclasp my bra. I notice another woman has a mastectomy scar but doesn't seem the least bit self-conscious. Her body confidence encourages me to relax and loosen up a little.

Around me, people are buck-naked, not a towel in sight, and I can't help but feel like a prude. One woman has a bunch of condoms in one hand, a bottle of lube in the other and an eager smile on her face. (Condoms are also scattered liberally about and, yes, it appears that everyone uses them.)

We travel down a hallway to an open area — there are three clean white raised mattresses in the centre of the floor, leather loungers scattered about and several semi-private rooms, some with curtains wide open while others are partially closed. It's mostly couples in the private rooms, and they're all having what looks like fairly straight-up sex. One couple is making out on a swing while three or four people stand and watch. In one room I see a couple — he's a handsome, silver-haired gent, definitely over 60,

with what looks like the youngest woman in the place (I later find out she's 25), who could easily pass for a Victoria's Secret model. They already appear to be finishing up.

My friend and her group head to the big beds and sort of...fall into one another. I don't want to stare but, once again, I'm not sure where to look. They become a blur of bodies having all kinds of sex, from oral to doggy style.

The woman with the bottle of lube is astride a man and surveying the room. Her eyes latch onto mine and she crooks her finger, ushering me over. I decline with a polite little wave of my hand. The room is surprisingly quiet — no urgent whisperings and only the occasional low moan.

What I don't feel is...turned on. But I don't feel turned off, either. Maybe it's because I'm in neutral reporter mode, or maybe it's just that since everyone seems so comfortable with themselves I'm not as ill at ease as I thought I'd be. Or it could be because no one is making any obvious advances toward me; a few men make direct eye contact, but I quickly look away. I stay for about 15 minutes and just as I'm about to leave the room, the older man and the Victoria's Secret girl approach me. He asks if I've been here before and I tell him it's my first time. I ask him how an older man like him managed to get such a young, pretty girl. "She's the love of my life," he says, giving her a squeeze as she beams up at him. Then he asks if I'd like to join them. And he doesn't mean for a drink. I demur, say thanks and explain I'm just here to observe tonight. "Are you sure?" he asks. Yes, I'm sure. And then I go put my clothes on and wait for my friend.

Angela is giddy on the drive home — she's had sex with two men and is on a post-coital high. "You know part of me feels like such a slut, but the truth is, I had so much fun," she says before asking in a worried tone: "You don't think badly of me, do you?" I don't hesitate before answering her: "No, I don't. Not one little bit."

As for me, I'm glad I went, but I know I won't be back. **M**

\*Names changed by request

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