

"Red Light District Opens Its Doors"

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Amsterdam, Netherlands -- Dutch prostitutes gave the public a peek behind the curtains of Amsterdam's famed 'Red Light District' on Saturday hoping to stave off an attempt by city politicians to stop lingerie-clad women from advertising themselves in neon-lit windows.

Thousands of tourists and Dutch visitors took up the offer by the district's sex clubs and topless bars to step in for a free drink and a look around to counteract the establishments' seedy reputation.

Women allowed visitors into the cubicles where they conduct their business to explain hygiene regulations and the alarm system used when a prostitute encounters a difficult customer.

"The Red Light district has received a lot of negative publicity recently," said organizer Mariska Majoor, an ex-prostitute who runs the district's Prostitution Information Center. "We want to show the World that is safe out here."

The open house came in response to proposals by the head of Amsterdam's Labor Party (the city's largest party) to discourage women from marketing themselves in windows.

The intimately lit rooms were sparse with just a bed, a bedside table, and a shower.

A young woman showing a room to a group of 5 men said customers are immediately offered condoms and asked if they want to shower before their 15-minute session which normally costs \$60.

"You would not expect to find something like this in conservative Cambridge," British Leigh Shaw-Taylor said after wandering past sex clubs and shops selling sex toys.

In a book released a few months ago, Labor party leader Lodewijk Asscher urged the authorities to crack down on window prostitution saying that it fostered crime and attracted pimps, drug addicts, and human traffickers.

"You must draw a line between tolerance and disinterest," Asscher wrote on his web blog. "Tolerance means legalizing prostitution. But then you must also be ready to combat the problems associated with it."

Local authorities already have closed down the red-light district in the eastern town of Arnhem.

The open house was supported by the information center, Amsterdam's Sex Museum, and the Salvation Army which is active in the area.

Majoor said not all the sex workers were happy about opening their business premises to gawking photograph-taking tourists.

"I completely understand their anger," she said. She hoped that the women would see the intention was no to "humiliate but rather promote their work".

Prostitution in Amsterdam boomed during the city's 17th century Golden Age when women catered to sailors from merchant ships in what was then the World's richest port city.

The area in the city center became a major tourist draw in the 20th century. The Dutch government legalized prostitution in 200 with an eye to making it easier to tax and regulate.