

# GOOD

*A visit to Japan's premier dildo bar, an underground sanctuary where women are free to talk openly—and positively—about sex in an otherwise hush-hush culture*

BY  
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I am surrounded by a sea of dildos: purple ones and black ones, foot-long and pocket-size. Some of them vibrate; some rotate. Some have botanic-looking extensions, like sea anemones and exotic flowers. Some are shaped like rabbits, and others look like teddy bears. I'm inspecting a particularly eerie one with a face molded on its silicone tip when the bartender passes me a small pink device. It heats up and vibrates at different intensities via remote control.

Unless previously informed about Vibe Bar Wild One, in Tokyo's Shibuya ward, one would have difficulty imagining its interior: Hundreds of phalluses line plush velvet booths on the third floor of an unremarkable structure, its location announced by a modest sign. The weathered building, accessed via a dingy alley near the Shibuya railway station, is part of the Dogenzaka neighborhood. The bar hovers above a pachinko parlor, a convenience store and some cheap taverns. Upstairs, a sign at the entrance proudly declares **WOMEN AND COUPLES ONLY**. There is a buzzer, of course.

Opened in 2013, Vibe Bar is a shrine to female pleasure in a country where people aren't having much sex. A 2015 study by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research showed that in Japan, 42 percent of men and 44 percent of women ages 18 to 34 who had never been married were virgins. Are people choosing alternatives to long-term partners? Indeed, Dogenzaka is home to several hostess bars that employ primarily female staffs to serve drinks and carry on intimate and flirty conversations. Strip joints, massage parlors and "soaplands" (a euphemism for *brothels*), all bathed in pink neon, are within walking distance of one another. But most of these cater to men. Vibe Bar, run by a staff of just five women, is the outlier.

"There are a lot of places for men to play, but there aren't that many places for women to talk openly about sex and be relatively safe," says Yuka Izumi, who handles Vibe Bar's events, public relations and bar management. "We thought it would be good to have such a place."

# VIBES ONLY



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Alexandra Hambleton, an assistant professor of Japanese studies specializing in media and gender at Bunkyo Gakuin University in Tokyo, asserts that Japan’s current sexual culture is a reaction to the country’s complicated history with the sex trade. “Female sexuality has long been viewed as something to be used by men. Women are supposed to be shy and coy and be convinced to have sex, as you see in a lot of porn,” she says. “Women are not supposed to be the subject of their own sexuality.”

Historically, the practice of selling an apprentice geisha’s virginity was not unheard of. Additionally, from 1932 to 1945, the Imperial Japanese Army forced women in occupied territories into sexual servitude, and military brothels remained state-sponsored businesses until 1946. After Japan’s surrender in World War II, General Douglas MacArthur, the newly anointed Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, abolished the licensed prostitution system. At the end of the war, however, the Japanese government destroyed many of the relevant documents in hopes of erasing evidence of the women who had died from rape, suicide or sexually transmitted diseases in the preceding years.

What remained was Article 175 of the Penal Code of Japan, a piece of prewar legislation that forbids the distribution of “indecent” materials. As part of an effort to transform an embarrassing and violent sexual history, Article 175’s prohibitions can be extended to sex toys. Under Japanese law, anything that comes into contact with the genitals must be classified as a

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medical device and requires government approval. Adult goods are still sold, but not openly.

It is only now, perhaps in response to sexual deprivation, that women have slowly begun to combat restrictions on their sexual freedom. “I’m past 40, but in my generation it took a lot of courage for a young woman to go to an adult-goods store by herself and buy a sex toy,” Izumi says.

By her estimation, clerks in adult shops are “about 90 percent men,” and most of the products are geared toward men as well. “Even if women come to purchase things and want to ask about the goods, if the employee is male, it’s not likely that he has actually used the goods,” Izumi says. “He won’t know if it feels good or not, and he can’t get to the core of the conversation.”

Businesses like Vibe Bar hope to shrink this longtime void. According to Hambleton, the recent boom in women’s sex toys in Japan, which has a GDP of almost \$5 trillion, is commerce-driven. “The only place anyone is able to explore female sexuality, even in a slightly feminist way, is within the marketplace,” she says. “It’s problematic in that it’s commercialized—but it gives people a space that doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

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Vibe Bar’s front door is locked. This extra layer of security isn’t a mistake. It’s important that women who want to own their sexuality take additional precautions, as many can be “subject to threats,” according to Hambleton.

After ringing the buzzer, I’m admitted to the bar. The first thing I notice is that the foyer’s doorway resembles a giant labia. The walls are decorated with *shunga* murals, or fantastical erotic woodblock illustrations of sensual pleasures featuring kimono-clad couples mid-coitus. An inviting glow radiates from the endless vibrators, which are accompanied by a variety of flavored lubes. Izumi tells me the decor is inspired by a womb. After returning to the beginning and learning about sex, gender, pleasure and yourself, “you open the door and are reborn with a new erotic knowledge,” she says.

“A lot of men here don’t prioritize sex. They work late hours and don’t have that much energy when they finish work. It’s easier to just watch porn and give themselves pleasure than to actually meet up with a woman,” says a woman I’ll call Kim. She has been dating in Japan for 18 years. “Women seem to be more content



with their vibrators than dealing with men, because it seems like men can’t be bothered.” Her observations are backed up by the results of a 2017 Japan Family Planning Association survey, which concluded that 47 percent of married people hadn’t had sex for a month or more. Thirty-five percent of men cited “exhaustion from work”; women’s top response, at 22 percent, was sex is “too much trouble.”

Unlike in the United States, in Japan it is uncommon to speak openly about sex. Sex education, beyond teaching basic biological functions, is not required in public schools. “That’s why people like to go to hostess clubs,” says Rinda (not her real name), who used to work in such bars. “Because somebody will kind of lead the conversation and you’re allowed to talk about sex, whereas in normal life I don’t think you can really do that.”

While the country outside Vibe’s walls continues to struggle with conversations about sex, the bar’s staff of self-educated vibe sommeliers is more than happy to answer questions, give recommendations and talk specs. There’s even a diagram of the female anatomy printed on the menu, alongside a list of cocktails including cassis oolong and Calpis-hai, a yogurt-based soft drink with a shot of shochu.

As for the most popular items at Vibe Bar, Izumi points to silicone cups with rotating attachments for nipple stimulation,

and a vibrator shaped to massage the G-spot. Both products are among the 350 toys on display—toys that customers can touch, examine and even compare notes on with other customers.

Beyond providing customer service, staffers continually present new products. Their varied backgrounds, including an adult-goods-company employee, an S&M queen and a member of the LGBTQ community, inform their expertise. While the bar itself is not a shop—think of it more like a Tesla showroom—once a customer is ready, she can go to one of seven Wild One shops or order products through an online portal under the same ownership. And because the Wild One company, which has been operating since 1991, has so many brick-and-mortar locations in Tokyo, it receives plenty of customer feedback to help it develop new products. For example: “A lot of people in Japan live with their parents, so we get requests for items that are battery controlled and silent,” Izumi says. “If it’s too noisy, they’re afraid it might vibrate to the next room, or if it’s chargeable, they’re afraid their parents might find out.”

Should more of these establishments pop up, Hambleton predicts, women who were once afraid would finally have a way to explore and experiment. “They’d find they weren’t the only people thinking about these things and discover they weren’t the only women who were masturbating. For women who may have grown up not being able to talk openly about their sexuality, that is a powerful discovery.” ■

