

# YOU'VE NEVER BEEN TO PORTLAND UNTIL YOU'VE BEEN TO ONE OF ITS STRIP CLUBS. HERE'S WHY

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Photo: [ghoguma film](#)

THERE IS ONE ELEMENT THAT MOST PORTLAND TOUR GUIDES (and often painfully-accurate episodes of *Portlandia*) tend to downplay about our city: strip clubs.

Sure, you might have heard in passing that we have the [most strip clubs per capita](#) in the states, probably right after hearing that we have more breweries than any city in the world. But that if that is all you know about these clubs (and maybe, if you come from the more puritanical parts of America, it is all that you care to know), then you are missing out on the most unique, artistic and progressive cultural amenities that this city has to offer.

# LEGALLY, PORTLAND IS THE ONLY PLACE IN AMERICA WHERE THIS CAN HAPPEN

The explanation for why we have so many strip clubs ([estimated 50-60 in the city](#)) is the oft-cited Section 8 of Article 1 in Oregon's State Constitution, which states that, "no law shall be passed restraining the free expression of opinion, or restricting the right to speak, write, or print freely on any subject whatever..." Thanks to the ambiguity of that "any subject whatsoever" part, Oregon's constitution has been used to protect full nudity at strip clubs as a form of free speech since 1982 following the Oregon Supreme Court *State v. Robertson* decision.

After that victory for nude establishments, opponents attempted to go after strip clubs through zoning restrictions (a la Rudy Giuliani in New York) that would push such venues to the city limits. This might have worked had it not been for the League Of Oregon Cities, which ensured that, "[adult businesses may be zoned and regulated, however, but only the same as other commercial enterprises.](#)"

Add legal protection to the list of other things that separate Portland's clubs from what you can find in Houston, San Francisco or New York—including world-class pole dancing, cheap or no cover charges, stage-audience interactions, lap dances, gambling, openness to female patrons, a full bar and a food menu ([as all Oregon bars are required to have](#)) — and you have a citywide experience that can be found nowhere else in the nation.

But does that mean you really should visit these strip clubs? I mean, New York has a lot of Dunkin Donuts, but most visitors looking to engage in the city's culture tend to avoid those dens of corpulent vice and insufficiently caffeinated rats. Is it really necessary to see some Portland boobs to better understand the culture of this city? Well, yes.

## PORTLAND: CITY OF ROSES (AND NAKED PERFORMANCE ART)

Unlike the dress code burdened “gentleman’s” clubs in Las Vegas that send a car to pick you up at your hotel room for free ([unless you are a woman, in which case you might not be allowed in without a man on your arm](#)), Portland’s clubs cater to a more laid back, blue-collar attitude.

Popular spots like the intimate Lucky Devil Lounge, or the “[stripperaoke](#)” hosting Devil’s Point, or Mary’s Club, where the dancers select their music from a jukebox that hangs precipitously over the stage (the vision of a Quentin Tarantino wet dream), all exude a similar ethos: “this is a bar, and in this bar we have live performers. And those performers tend to be naked. Also we serve pretty decent food sometimes.”

This casual atmosphere shouldn’t lead you to believe that the women on stage are laid-back about their performance, however. According to a quick Yelp search, there are six dancing studios that offer pole-dancing classed in Portland, only a few less than in Las Vegas. This suggests at least two things: that this skill is finally finding broader, non-stripper appeal as one of the most challenging physical workouts there is, and that the performers in Portland spend a lot of time practicing.

The Kit Kat Club is a downtown venue located right next-door to Voodoo Donuts, one of Portland’s most reputable tourist destinations. At the Kit Kat, pole skills of the highest caliber are on display every night of the week (pairs well with their in-house waffle shack).

One of its dancers, “Orchid,” has worked as a stripper in Portland for 10 years and seen the city’s interest in stripping as performance art grow as the city became trendier. “We have so many different opportunities for people to go see plays and musicals,” she told me over the phone, referring in particular to Portland’s Center For The Arts. “So the artistic performance aspect (in strip clubs) is just an additional draw for Portlanders. They want something different, something a little bit more titillating- a little bit more adult in nature.”

Like any performance art, stripping is something that survives by keeping the audience engaged in the show.

Perhaps this is why the Kit Kat Club requires every dancer to do a “feature” set, one that typically involves a character-based act with

accompanying music. Orchid has a nun routine that involves a whiskey bottle, a porn magazine, smoking and a squirt gun filled with “holy water” that she blesses the audience with. Another duo has a creepy evil-twin sister act. One dancer sings Lana Del Rey covers to a reverent crowd. Applause usually follows each performer as they exit the stage.

Maybe you are thinking, “but I would never, ever enter a room where women are treated as objects whose time can be bought at insultingly low prices,” forgetting, for a moment, the gender pay gap in the US and the all-too-casual sexism in your office/on your neighborhood streets. Well, many would heartily disagree with that stereotype of the industry.

## **SALONS OF A NEW WAVE OF FEMINISM**

Elle Stanger is a stripper, author, mother, wife and activist who recently co-organized Portland’s third annual Slutwalk. She also writes about her experiences as a sex worker, often challenging the stereotypes of her profession being made up of primarily victims who have no other alternative.

In a recent article that Stanger submitted to the United Nations Population Fund for World Sexual Health Day, tellingly titled *I’m A Sex Worker And I Experience More Harassment As A Civilian*, she wrote about the ways she is treated as a stripper inside a club versus as a woman on the street:

“When I compare civilian life to the interactions with hundreds of intoxicated strangers in a highly stigmatized industry, my amount of negative experiences in the strip club pale in comparison...”

“The fact is: women are treated as objects throughout the world. The other fact is: people are surprised when they learn that a stripper is often treated better by her patrons than by some strangers at a bus stop.”

The article was the winning entry for the 2015 Sexual Health Writing Competition.

Stanger explained over the phone what she feels makes the atmosphere of Portland's clubs different from those in other cities, "the environment tends to be very positive and female friendly," adding, "I love it when I have female clients tell me that they feel liberated watching me interact with the crowd and watching me dance. They feel that it is representative of feminism because I'm owning my sexuality."

In a very fourth-wave sex positive manner, Portland's strip clubs are interesting lenses through which we can observe the timeline of feminism. Here are arguably the most objectifying, patriarchal venues that exist legally, and yet they also allow some women to express their sexuality without the same fear of harassment that they experience on the street.

As Orchid put it, "being on stage and sharing my passion for dance with people while being naked kind of gives, at least the women in the audience, a feeling of, "hey, it's okay to be naked. The girl on this stage is having a great time and I'm enjoying watching her and there's nothing wrong with what she is doing... Sharing my sexuality with a wide audience base is something I feel very fortunate to do."

Of course, not every audience would respond so positively to a woman exposing herself to a room of men, but according to Stanger, "the culture here just has a pretty good grasp of what female sexuality can be, if it is truly allowed to be empowered."

## **WHY THEY'RE WORTH THE TRIP**

Portland, Oregon's sudden rise to stardom on the USA's list of hip, urban centers makes a lot of sense when you consider what is cool these days. It's brimming with microbreweries, beautiful parks, farm-to-table food carts, donuts crusted with bacon, a panorama of mountain views and that guy who dresses like Darth Vader and rides around on a unicycle while playing the bagpipes.

The thing is, San Francisco has a big park and a foodie scene, Denver has mountain views, San Diego has microbrews, Austin is weird, and you can bet your ass that there is someone in New York doing something far more disturbing than playing bagpipes on a unicycle.

Venues like the Kit Kat Club are places that celebrate Portland's individuality and its creative spirit in a way that other cities cannot, or simply refuse to, emulate. They allow a 25 year old to wax-nostalgia for a time when American cities were cheap, vivacious and open to radical interpretations of the word "art." Their profitable appreciation of the human form is the manifestation of a favorite Walter Benjamin quote, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

Most importantly these clubs represent Portland's cultural stance on female sexuality: that it should not be subject to patriarchal judgment, but that it, in fact, can and should be celebrated with profound and ebullient joy.

So next time you find yourself in the City of Roses, wondering what makes Portland truly unique, you might want to consider heading to the nearest downtown strip joint, ordering a microbrew and a garden salad, and watch a performer do something that would be impossible to encounter anywhere else in America. 🍷