

## Sexpo ticket sales rise to R50m

Sep 27 2015 16:35  
Yolandi Groenewald  
**City Press**



*Thanks in part to EL James' Fifty Shades of Grey erotic novel series, bondage was again a big hit this year. Picture: Cornel van Heerden*

Johannesburg - Sex definitely still sells, and South Africa's black diamonds are starting to get involved in the success of South Africa's most famous adult fair, the annual Sexpo.

With slightly fewer than 200 000 people expected to attend the show over the period from Thursday to today, Sexpo's ticket sales for the Johannesburg event alone could exceed R50m.

Arthur Calamaras, South Africa's Sexpo franchise owner, said Heritage Day on Thursday had delivered exceptional numbers for the Sexpo, with more than 50 000 people paying the fair at the Gallagher Convention Centre a visit.

About 8 000 people went through the gates in the first three hours.

Sexpo, now in its ninth year, is a four-day event held in South Africa's three biggest cities. It has grown by about 20% every year since it began.

Sexpo's roots are in Australia, where it has grown into a multimillion-rand business. It started quietly in Melbourne in 1995, but has since matured into an international franchise of titillating entertainment.

Each exhibition costs an average of R16m to produce. Even in lean times, the average Sexpo attracts between 40 000 to 60 000 visitors a day. Organisers say its success can be attributed to the so-called lipstick economy, where people are finding joy in smaller luxuries.

Calamaras was coy about just how much money Sexpo made.

"While the show brings in millions, South Africa's Sexpo is heavily subsidised by the international franchise," he said.

“It takes a lot of money to produce such an amazing experience. The stalls bring in about a third of the revenue. Yes, we do make money, but we pay a lot to do so.”

According to the numbers, women spend more money at Sexpo than men.

“The women arrive in packs – massive groups of them – and they’ll look at everything and buy the most,” said Calamaras.

Lounges where handsome male strippers entertained women for hours on end were bursting at the seams. And women were spending at least R1 000 each at the stalls, some of the stall owners claimed.

A noticeable proportion of Thursday’s tickets were bought by black women, added Calamaras.

“Our black market is growing rapidly and this is definitely a shifting trend from last year.”

This year’s Sexpo theme was the Rio Carnival, and quite a lot of the exotic dancers were Brazilian and African.

Average-sized vibrators sold well in the stalls, as did little vibrating eggs and couple-oriented vibrators.

This year, tickets started from R150 for students and went up to R280 for general access, which included VIP access and a goodie bag. You could also find a Groupon deal for Sexpo going for R220.

“We went for a general-access VIP ticket this year because, in the past, people felt excluded. This year, we didn’t want to exclude anyone, and most of the lounges have open entry,” said Calamaras.

The only lounges where patrons had to pay extra were the Teazers lounge (R80) and the popular Red Light Rio (R90), where hourlong fantasy shows teased and thrilled audiences.

Crowds were not deterred by the need to pay to access Red Light Rio, and there were long queues at the entrance.

“People have been queuing from morning to evening to get in at Red Light Rio,” said Calamaras.

“They spend around three to six hours inside. It’s the hottest ticket at the show.”

Private lounges at the show included the Teazers Men’s VIP Lounge, the Teaze-Hers Ladies Lounge, the Kinx Bondage Lounge, the Pharaohs Swingers Lounge and the Show Stoppers LGBTI Lounge. Typically, waitresses and strippers inside the lounges also made a pretty penny, Calamaras said.

“I have talked to girls who say they make more at the Sexpo lounges in four days than they do in a month at their regular job,” he said.

Bondage, thanks mostly to EL James’ Fifty Shades of Grey erotic novel series and the movie release earlier this year, remained a firm favourite among the fans.

About 800m<sup>2</sup> of floor space at the show was sold to bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism vendors and exhibitors. Different Strokes was one of the most popular stalls at the show – it offered whips, nipple clamps and fetish wear.

Several vendors offered adventurous patrons a chance to become better acquainted with bondage, and proved to be very popular.

Typically, a stall cost about R2 000/m<sup>2</sup> to rent, Calamaras said. Big exhibitors paid more than R100 000 for their stalls.

Primary sponsors Penthouse, Topco, the Film and Publication Board and Adult World all had a significant presence.

Topco also donated a free sex toy to the VIP goodie bag.

Sex toy company California Exotica also took up a lot of space this year – the up-market adult retail and sensuality store doubled the space it used last year, said Calamaras.

**Sweaty or not, South Africans soak up the sexy vibes**

Teams of sweaty young men shimmy their semi-lithe bodies at alarmed women walking into the now monumental Sexpo at Gallagher Estate in Midrand. It might be an unexpected welcome, but absolutely nothing could prepare you for the crowds of thousands lining up to get a look at “South Africa’s premier health, lifestyle and sexuality exhibition”.

My friend and I swanned past the queue that stretched easily 1km down the road and around the corner in the searing 32°C heat. We hadn’t bought tickets online for the extravaganza, while those shuffling slowly towards the gates apparently had.

If there was ever any doubt that the demand for all things sexual is insatiable, this put it to bed. And apart from the evidently devoutly religious, the aspiring visitors were from all walks of life and all parts of town.

Young black couples, old white couples, middle-aged gay couples and everyone in between picked up, at the entrance, their goody bags of movies and sex toys - I got a bashful blue bath toy - before entering into the cavernous market.

It is a carnival: music, shouting entertainers, lighting and stages, and a growing crowd of people checking out an endless array of sex toys and lining up for erotic shows behind black curtains.

You can even enter a competition for a date with a porn star. Booths with helpful assistants educated the likes of the Dlamini and the Van der Merwe about what the dominatrix and her customer were really doing at the end of their street.

Meanwhile, a beautiful man towed a cart steadily up and down the aisles, and erotic models lined up to get their pictures taken with visitors.

Photographs and videos appeared to be welcome, except for at a booth where a middle-aged woman was being tied up with thick ropes by a middle-aged man demonstrating the ways of bondage.

We didn’t get to see the variety of shows that have been advertised high and wide on main roads throughout Johannesburg, but the enthusiasm for these was palpable by the number of people hanging around the entrances and checking out start times.

But the expo didn’t only cater for the sexually adventurous. The usual toys (some admittedly in jaw-dropping sizes) took up a lot of floor space, along with lingerie and massage machines. – Tina Weavind

---