

ENCOUNTERS OF ANOTHER COLOR

By Stephanie Griffith

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Junior year abroad, 1980: I am an American in Madrid. More specifically, I am a black American in Galerías Preciados, a downtown department store. I don't shop, however, for very long. In typical tourist fashion I am all over Spain's most cosmopolitan city. I traverse the Retiro, an elegant, formal garden with a lagoon. I make my way to the ancient Plaza Mayor, then stroll along the Rastro, the Orchard Street of Madrid, lined with peddlers of baubles and trifles.

While I observe the city, I am also observed, at every venue, at every moment. In a land where the only blacks are the occasional tourist or African street vendor, I become an instant celebrity. In cafes, on store escalators and while strolling along the narrow, cobblestoned streets of old Madrid, heads cock, necks crane, eyes widen and the pace of life slows whenever I happen by.

At a university reception one afternoon, students and professors make the round of Americans but seem especially eager to shake my hand. It is as good a pretext as any for a closer look. For one hanger-on, however, a simple "How do you do?" does not suffice. "May I touch your hair?" he asks, awe-struck, his eyes set on my Afro. The deed done, he pulls his hand away with a gasp. "Es una maravilla!" he exclaims. My hair was thus pronounced a marvel - a compliment of sorts, although I was left feeling something less than marvelous.

It was the first of a series of encounters with Madrilenos who were astonished to see the likes of me. Throughout the semester, throughout the city, I was an attraction to be scrutinized, the subject of many an agitated conversation whispered behind cupped hands.

A Chinese-American friend once recounted to me her adventures in Ecuador, where her appearance regularly fascinated the people there, although, like many of them, she had broad facial features and gleaming black hair. Another friend told of his experience in

southern India, where one child inquired what type of soap he used that had caused his skin to fade to such a state of whiteness.

But while my friends' visits abroad seem to be punctuated by only an occasional reference to their ethnicity, being black has often set the tone for my travels. People abroad react in a variety of ways to the phenomenon of blackness: they are repulsed, amused, intrigued, even frightened. Rarely are they indifferent.

It is not only in the more exotic, far-flung lands that a black traveler becomes an attraction. In much of Europe, even after generations of black expatriates, soldiers, sojourners and performers, I find I am considered something of a rarity. The attitude toward blacks can seem impressionistic, drawn from random encounters, hearsay and B movies imported from America. At other times, a feigned and somewhat strained indifference will greet the black tourist: The good breeding that many Europeans take pride in as part of their cultural heritage demands that they be discreet, even in their amazement. They have perfected the fine art of satisfying their curiosity on the sly.

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Where there is a total lack of contact with blacks, expressions of curiosity can take a less subtle form. Once, near Oaxaca, Mexico, I was greeted by pointing fingers and a chorus of laughter: I had been sighted by a group of school-children who had never before seen someone black. On another occasion, again in Mexico, an intrigued cafe artist inquired if he might sketch my portrait and then presented me with the likeness. "I don't often have the chance to sketch a black person," he explained.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of traveling is that you can never predict the response you will evoke. I have learned to be impassive, to seem indifferent to such incidents as those described above, to be deliberately ignorant of the commotion that I unwittingly cause. However, my poker face hides chagrin at the knowledge that it is not my actions or my demeanor but the unalterable fact of me that astounds, delights, dismays.

Editors' Picks

My hair is always the subject of greatest interest. A Colombian friend, Rocio, was fascinated by my crinkly, curly Afro. She went so far as to devise a theory about its gravity-defying properties. Each strand was so light and fine, she hypothesized, that the only reason my hair did not float away like a balloon was that each hair was attached to my scalp by its root. To disprove her theory, I presented her with the evidence: One strand of my hair contrasted with one of hers showed that mine was thicker and heavier than she had imagined possible.

Skin color itself often draws no comment at all, perhaps because it seems rather self-evident. Peter, however, a physics student at a West German university, was eager to determine what made my skin so much darker than his. With logic characteristic of his metier, he surmised that little cells of pigment lay just below the skin's surface. A deeper shade of brown could be achieved, he suggested, by squeezing the skin - he experimented on my arm - in effect, concentrating the melanin. For both Rocio and Peter, the physical reality of blackness was easy to comprehend. Explanations of race prove a bit more unwieldy, however, when I am asked what it is like to be a member of a minority in America or whether all the things one hears about Harlem are true. Still, I am never annoyed by questions about race, except when someone asks where I come from, and am greeted with looks of incredulity when I say that I am American or that I come from New York. "I never think of a New Yorker as being black" is a frequent comment. A wiler one is the question asked by the true skeptics: "Well, then, where do your parents come from?"

Germany, summer 1986: I accept an invitation to visit a friend who lives an hour's drive from Frankfurt. College naivete is far behind me; I am not too surprised to discover that this village is all abuzz that a black woman has arrived. Gossip has it that I am a newly recruited African nun, selected to fill a longstanding vacancy in the local parish. I am amused: That type of sister I certainly am not.

My conversation with a neighbor at her doorstep one day becomes an impromptu town meeting: A small, curious crowd gathers at a respectful distance but easily within earshot. My apologetic host later explains that it is not that I am black that astounds local people but that a black person should come to their little town.

My first visit to Europe taught that I could be alien. On this trip to Germany, the lesson is gradually reversed. After a week of being considered unusual and exotic, I somehow begin to fit into the scenery. Neighbors cease to pull up their shutters as I walk by; children continue their play. Some smiles and even a few good-morning greetings come my way. I have become commonplace. It is a minor triumph for me. But I am aware that this quietude will last only until I arrive at the next stop on my travels, where, once again, I will be the focus of all eyes.

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