

# Dressing the Part

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Abby is taking me shopping for my Feria dress today. Feria, Seville's spring festival, is a week-long party that follows the solemn parades and rites of Easter week. Our Spanish host "mom," Nieves, is happy to introduce Abby and me to the best of Seville, but we can't experience Feria looking like American tourists. Not Nieves' girls! To get into the casetas, the large tents in which live music plays while people dance, eat fabulous food and drink the night away, we must dress the part of Spanish ladies – and that means wearing flamenco dresses.

The flamenco dress is the only folk costume that changes over time with trends in fashion, according to Nieves. Many Spanish women wouldn't dream of being seen at Feria in anything but the latest style. These examples of haute couture can cost thousands of euros, depending on the designer and material. I have no hope of keeping up with the trendsetters. I'm the kind of traveler who spends her money on museums and trains, not clothes (as anyone who has seen my typical travel uniform, a lightweight flowered shirt and pants that unzip at the knees to become shorts, can tell you).

Fortunately, Nieves knows a secondhand store that sells used flamenco dresses. She

took Abby shopping there a few weeks before my arrival. The result, a pretty black-and-red flounced costume, covers the family room couch awaiting the attentive touch of Nieves' iron.

With her heavy teaching schedule, Nieves is now too busy to help me find a dress of my own. So this morning at breakfast, she asks Abby to escort me back to the store they visited.

Poor Abby. We're both students at Spanish-language schools here in Seville, and we both rent rooms in Nieves' apartment, but that's the end of what we share in common. She's just out of college; I'm 15 years older. Nothing could be less interesting to my young roommate than taking an ignorant middle-aged woman shopping. But, as a favor to Nieves, Abby reluctantly accepts this burden.

I can tell she is already regretting the arrangement when I arrive outside our apartment house a few minutes before the scheduled time to find Abby already tapping her foot. She strides off toward the bus station with me following in her wake. I didn't



know we were taking a bus (I usually walk everywhere). As I cobble together bus fare from the change in my purse, her youthful impatience increases.

"Hope I remember the stop," she says once we board. If we were in such a hurry, why didn't she ask Nieves for directions? But one hallmark of young Abby is the supreme confidence only possessed by the 21-year-olds of the world. She soon spies a place that looks familiar and we hop off the bus.

Within 10 steps Abby is urging me to hurry, my 36-year-old legs moving too slowly for her. We search up one street that looks promising, then down another, then up still another, and soon it is clear we are nowhere near where we need to be.

Abby calls Nieves on her cell phone; not for help, exactly, but to get the final piece of information we need to complete this chore. Nieves advises us to ask passersby for the Red Cross Hospital, which is near the dress store. We do, and are directed, "Go that way as far as you can see, then ask the next person."

Six blocks and one very impatient Abby later we see the hospital, but ... no store! She stops a woman walking past, who explains the store closed for siesta at 1:30. It is 1:34. With a wordless look, Abby makes it clear that my ancient legs are to blame for our tardiness. As the store will be closed until 5 p.m., it is no use waiting around.

Then I tell her my problem: I don't have bus fare back. "What were you going to buy the dress with?" she asks logically. When she hears about the 50-euro note in my purse, she explains with elaborate patience that the store would not be able to change this large a bill. What was I thinking, anyway?

I tell her I will come back to the store later, now that I have my bearings. "I don't know how to say this," she begins, though clearly she will find a way, "but I can't come with you then. You don't speak Spanish as well as I do, and they won't treat you well if you come alone."

She is eager to get on the next bus and, smarting from the insult to my language skills, I am as eager to be rid of her company. So I walk back home while she rides. Along

the way it comes to me that I am definitely going back to the store – alone – this very afternoon. There is nothing I

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like better than a challenge, and Abby's comment threw the gauntlet down.

After siesta I take a bus back to the store, having changed my large bill for something smaller. Abby is not the only one who can navigate the stores of Seville, I tell myself. Fueled by pride (not unmixed with bull-headed stubbornness), I stride confidently straight into the darkened secondhand store.

Dusty men's suits and women's dresses line the long central aisle. In the dark recesses at the back, a man sits at a counter talking to an ancient crone dressed in black. One of the elderly lady's two lapdogs comes forward to investigate me, but neither the man nor the woman takes note of my presence. Being used to Spanish retail courtesy by now, I ignore them right back without taking offense. That constant

question of the American department store, "Are ya finding everything all right?" will never be asked here, and that's OK with me.

The used flamenco dresses are easy to spot despite the gloom. They drape from a tall rack like a row of brightly colored chrysanthemums sprinkled with polka dots. I am not fond of these dots. What Spaniards see as little moons, I see as clown getup. But I pull forward a few dresses that look like possibilities; one purple and white, one red and green.

Then another dress catches my eye. Pale green floral with pink, yellow and blue flowers, it seems old-fashioned yet lovely compared to the rest, like a breath of spring in a winter hothouse – and not a polka dot to be seen. I pull this one forward, too.

The crone in her mourning dress and pearls has made her goodbyes to the store's owner and is walking slowly down the aisle toward me, accompanied by her dogs. As she passes, she comments quietly in Spanish about how pretty the dresses are.

Acting on a whim, I motion to the green floral and ask her in Spanish what she thinks. Belatedly, I wonder whether she can see that far. But the ancient woman seems as delighted as a 16-year-old girl to help me shop. Leaning on an elegant walking stick, she hobbles closer to peer at the dresses I pulled forward from the rack. She touches them one by one with gnarled

fingers. After examining each one carefully, she says that the green floral gown I favor is clearly the best.

We exchange smiles across the decades. Then she turns to the owner and draws herself up haughtily. "How much for this one?" she demands in a hard voice. He rises from his chair and, bowing to both of us, replies, "Diez euros."

I happen to know this is two euros less than Abby paid for her dress, but I look at the crone with raised eyebrows, asking her advice. "Buen precio," she whispers conspiratorially. Good price. Nodding in agreement, I thank her as the shopkeeper lifts the dress down for me to try on.

In the dressing room, I strip off my khaki shorts and well-worn shirt and drop them in a pile. The heavy dress settles over my head and billows out around me like a ball gown, the ruffles falling from just below my waist to the floor. No longer dressed like a peasant, now I look like a princess wading through a rose garden. The dress is a bit too small for me, but Nieves told me these dresses are built with extra fabric along the side seams so they can be adjusted for women of different sizes. She already offered to alter a dress for me, should I find one.

Feeling as if I am floating on air with all the ruffles stirring around my bare legs, I walk out of the dressing room hoping to show the old lady how well she chose, but she is gone. Still, the shopkeeper beams as

I twirl for him. I return to the dressing room and take off the dress, reluctantly resuming my everyday clothes. My serviceable travel gear suddenly seems thoroughly plain.

At the desk, the shopkeeper folds my Feria dress and slips it into a large bag for carrying. I walk down the street feeling entirely blessed by the day. How beautiful I felt wearing the dress is part of it; the other part is the delicious vindication of paying two euros less than Abby did – and pulling off the deed on my own.

Back at the apartment, though, my catty feelings fade as both Abby and Nieves fawn over my purchase. The three of us women, celebrating a shopping victory, are enacting what feels like an ancient feminine ritual. Content with her own fine dress, Abby is not jealous of mine. In fact, with this proof that I actually can navigate the world on my own with some success, she seems to be revising previous estimates of my irremediable dorkiness, fortunately in my

favor.

Nieves says that now all I need is a necklace, bracelets, earrings and flowers for my hair, plus bobby pins and hair gel to get it to stay in place when pulled back. As it turns out, these necessary accoutrements will cost four times as much as my gown. But to walk through Feria having dressed the part will be worth the price.

