

On a Ferry Between Gibraltar & Tangier

By Skip Rozin

Special to The Washington Post

It was on the ferry from Gibraltar to Tangier that I first saw her. She was leaning against the railing, at the side of an adoring ship's officer. Her long blonde hair flowed against her milky skin in the warm Mediterranean breeze. When at one point she put the side of her index finger to her face, gently moving away her hair, my heart took one of those little skip beats.

For most of the 2½-hour crossing I watched her. I told myself I was just waiting for the officer to leave, that I would saunter by and say something clever. I even practiced. But when he finally did excuse himself, bowing slightly just before we made port, my knees felt weak and whatever words I had

rehearsed caught in my dry throat.

It was hopeless. She had to be vacationing royalty, from Luxembourg or Monaco. I was fresh out of college, working my way around the continent in a mid-60s version of "Innocents Abroad." England. Paris, typing for an expatriate writing of her relationship with Thomas Wolfe. By June I was tending bar on the Costa del Sol; Tangier was a breather before the madness of the summer season set in.

Clearly, we were not a match.

See FERRY, E11, Col. 1

■ *On Peter Island there's a lonely dirt road that jackknifes down a steep hill and delivers you to a beach where you truly can make love in the sand with only the sky as witness. Page E3.*

Ferry

FERRY, From E1

She was met at the dock by a black Rolls. I pushed her out of mind and headed for the Medina, the old section of Tangier, and a hotel recommended only for Arabs and adventuresome Americans. My directions led me along a twisting web of steep streets to where \$1 bought a room and use of a closet-size toilet, the floor fitted with a porcelain hole positioned between textured footprints.

During the day I played tourist, browsing among the terraces by Rue d'Angleterre—all that remains of the old markets—and the Mellah, the Jewish quarter. At the Librairie des Colonnnes I bought a copy of "The Naked Lunch"; this was, after all, William Burroughs territory.

At night I drank sweet mint tea at the Dancing Boy, a Moroccan café thick with smoke from kif pipes, and walked down by the harbor to listen to old jazz records at the Fat Black Pussy Cat.

But no matter how I tried, I could not drive her from my mind. Her

long, fine hair; her pale skin. And mostly, that look in her eyes that said she had been everywhere, heard every line—yet, somehow, remained unhardened. I was haunted.

After two days, I caught a morning ferry back to Gibraltar.

And there she was, leaning against the same railing. I took this as a sign, walked up to her and asked how she liked Tangier. I was halfway into my speech before realizing she might not understand a word I was saying. What if she spoke no English?

It proved not to be a problem. She was from Little Rock, Ark.—her tour, a prize won in a beauty contest. She had noticed me during the first crossing, she said, and wondered why I did not rescue her from the ship's officer. I mourned what might have been.

As the image of Gibraltar grew larger and larger over the starboard bow, I turned to what could still be. Did we have that evening? No—she would leave at 5:30 for Málaga, 85 miles up the coast. I proposed a detour, two or three blissful days on

the way to Málaga, but alas there was a reception that very evening, and a late flight to Paris.

Gloom began to settle over us as we approached the dock, but I fought it. I asked if the afternoon were free. "The group is having lunch," she said, "then hitting the duty-free shops till bus time." Done!

My MG was parked near the dock; I lowered the top while she explained that she would miss lunch. Then we were off.

Our destination was Algeciras, just across the bay from Gibraltar, and a little restaurant south of town called La Playa.

As we sped along the narrow road that skirted the bay, we simultaneously and without discussion entered into a conspiracy of suspended reality. Suddenly there had been no time lost and was no pressure of deadlines. There was no 5:30 bus to Málaga, no late flight to Paris.

La Playa was at that time a simple, one-story restaurant on Gestares Beach, its white walls and tile roof creating the appearance from the road of just another Spanish house. It has, since the tourist boom on the Costa del Sol, become Club de Gestares, a social and sport club. But the reason for club or restaurant has not changed: that setting. The mile-long strip of perfect beach along the Bahía de Algeciras offers

the best view of the Rock on the entire continent.

Gibraltar is an odd presence, an ominous mountain rising from the water at the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula. It is virtually always covered by a thick, gray cloud—something about the humid Mediterranean air condensing on the cold, stony surface.

The cloud looked particularly thick that afternoon, obliterating any trace of the 1,400-foot summit. The dark cloud and the dark rock, massed there amidst all that sunshine and brightness, gave the scene a mystical look.

We walked through the main part of the restaurant, past the few tables that were occupied so early, and went out to the patio. We selected a table close to the beach, ordered white wine and prawns, and launched into our plans for the week. That evening we would drive up the coast to Torre Blanca, to visit the small beach bar where I worked. It would be an amusing and different glimpse of Spain for her.

We would go sightseeing in the region. We would drive to Mijas, the tiny village high in the mountains overlooking the coast; go dancing in Torremolinos, then the only spot that hinted at the jet-set style that was to come; explore Granada and the Alhambra.

The restaurant began to fill with

customers, but we saw none of them. We ordered more wine, and grilled swordfish. We watched some fishermen on the beach, readying their equipment for a night's work on the water, and talked of going to Seville that Sunday to catch El Corobés, then Spain's hottest matador.

After coffee and flan we ordered glasses of Carlos I, removed our shoes and walked out onto the fine, white sand. The view of Gibraltar from there is near perfect. It is the profile we have become familiar with through insurance ads, but with a sense of scale, the texture of granite and that strange play of dark shadow across the glistening bay.

On a large, flat rock at the water's edge we sat and sipped our cognac, and continued our planning. Maybe it would be best to sell the MG, buy a sloop and sail away. To

Ibiza and Mallorca. Then to Barcelona, or maybe go straight to St. Tropez and Cannes.

As we talked, a gust of wind blew at her hair, forcing a few strands across her face. In the slightest of gestures she took her hand and brushed the loose hair away, just as she had done that first day. I leaned over and kissed her.

At 4:30 we returned to the restaurant as if summoned by a bell. Forty minutes later, after a ride without conversation, we were at the bus, standing by the door as the other passengers took one last picture, smoked one last cigarette. Then, suddenly, they were all aboard. And waiting.

"Next year," she said, smiling.

"Next year," I said, "in Algeciras."

And she was gone.

Skip Rozin coauthored the book "Garvey" with Steve Garvey.