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CROSS-CULTURAL ROMANCE

Can romance survive cultural boundaries? Helen Jones asks mixed nationality couples about their relationships

Exotic attraction

From Melanie Griffith to Norman Foster, foreigners are well known for falling in love with Spaniards. Some of us say it's the lust for life that first attracted us to our Spanish partners, and many Spaniards cite admiration for their foreign partners' independence. And then there are those who just fall for that nice, friendly, very good looking person who happens to be from Spain.

They're all valid reasons for forming an international partnership, but what about the consequences of not going out with the boy or girl next door?

The honeymoon period in a *guiiri*-Spanish relationship, which inevitably includes romantic walks in the Retiro, starchy-eyed tapas in La Latina and several V.O. snogging sessions at the Ideal often coincides with the foreign partner's honeymoon period in their relationship with Spain. You love going out until 7am, smoky bars are positively continental, and the noise of central Madrid is just "hustle and bustle".

In it for the long term

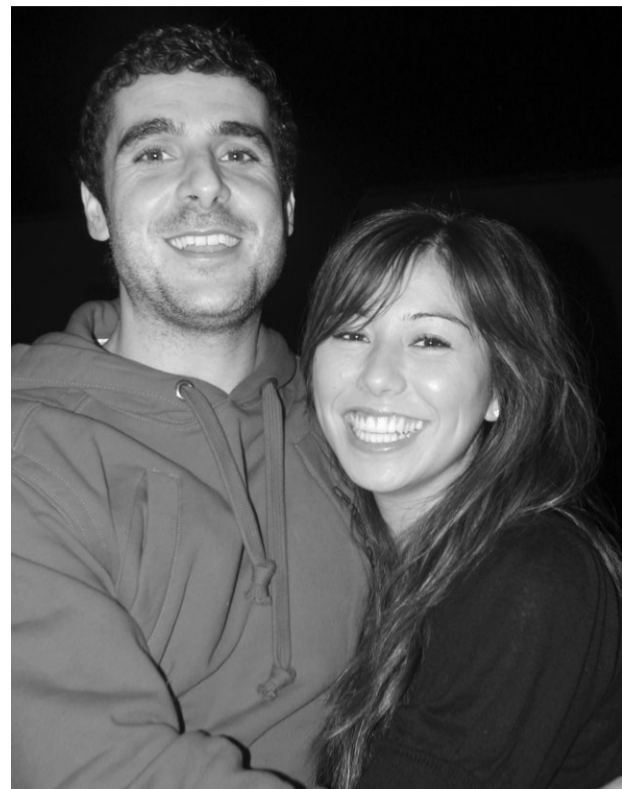
So what happens when things get a little more permanent, in terms of both relationships?

"Expatriates become enamoured with Spain, but then, as with any relationship, difficulties set in," says David Hugener, a Madrid-based psychotherapist, who suggests that the question that foreigners must ask is whether, "In the long run, do they feel they can adapt to the situation?"

The first stage of adaptation can come when partners decide to commit. If the couple has spent the beginning of the relationship in their respective countries, the time will eventually come to change job, country and language, for love.

Robert, from Malmö, is planning on settling in Madrid with his Spanish girlfriend Silvia in 2008. He's concerned about Silvia's not very Scandinavian habit of "waking up late, and working until late". However she says that there are benefits: "Working in Madrid and learning Spanish will be very good for his career."

Robert should get advice from Tom, who's been in Madrid for 10 years after meeting his Spanish *media naranja* Sara in his home town of Bournemouth. "It was one of those 'at first sight' moments," he remembers. He moved to Madrid shortly afterwards. "I came over to see her and fell in love with the city." And it was a good move, he says: "Meeting Sara has given my life some sort of direction; it all sort of fell into place."



Rafa and Mary

Photos: Helen Jones

Mary and her Spanish boyfriend Rafa moved in together in 2007. "He speaks perfect English and I don't speak Spanish — yet — so we speak purely in English," says Mary. "His parents, however, don't speak English so communication is extremely limited."

So how do you nurture relationships when verbal communication, one of the first things you ever learn, is frustratingly out of your reach? Peter, originally from Boston, doesn't always need words with his wife Yolanda. "We have always found a way to make ourselves understood. Sometimes a simple look speaks more than a spoken phrase."

It also helps that Spaniards, in general, are pretty good at saying what they feel, or at least that's Peter's experience. "I have found Spanish people to be good communicators because they are very direct, often to the point of being blunt, but [this is] often tempered with a wonderful sense of humour." And this has its advantages. "I know exactly what my wife believes and how she feels about things at all times," says Peter. "There's no guessing involved and this makes a relationship more stable and less conflictive."

Moving countries

So what changes when suddenly the Spaniard becomes the foreigner? Spaniards abroad are loud and proud and even more so in their relationships. "The relationship doesn't change, it just gets better as all the things you love them for when in Spain flower into surreal points of honour," says Rob, married to madrileña Esther for 16 years. They moved back to the UK in 2000. "My British cat and dog only respond to Spanish commands, and we still dine at 10pm before watching a dubbed DVD."

Of course, many predictable things in your relationship would happen if you and your partner had been brought up on the same street. "Do we really have to go to your mother's for lunch?", "What can I get her for her birthday?" and "When will we get to spend more time alone?" are questions that everyone asks and the *guiiri*-Spaniard combination is no exception. Perhaps, for a mixed nationality couple, the answers are a little easier to find, as actually being in the same place and understanding each other are already big achievements that, in the end, make everything else pale in comparison.



Peter, Yolanda and baby Diego

Lost in translation?

Even if you've lived in Spain before meeting your partner, commitment can often mean doing things you hadn't previously considered part of your *guiiri* lifestyle. You tell each other increasingly serious things in a language that isn't yours, and you also have to communicate with the family. London-born

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