

Traveling while black: I was constantly mistaken for a prostitute in Buenos Aires

Opinion



by Ama Yawson | October 31, 2013 at 9:00 AM Filed in: Living, Opinion, Travel and Leisure



Sex workers wait for customers in a gang infested neighborhood on July 18, 2012 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

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“**P**uta! cuanto?” — or “Whore, how much?” — were the words that were hurled at me almost every day during my five month study-abroad stay in [Buenos Aires, Argentina](#). I was astounded!

When I decided to study abroad in Argentina I knew that I would not see many black people there. I had studied enough about Latin America's "embranquecimiento," or "whitening" campaigns, to know that even though many Latin American countries tried to dilute their African populations by recruiting European settlers and encouraging intermarriage, Argentina was deemed to be the only country that had "succeeded."

But what I did not know before I arrived in Buenos Aires in 2001 was that many of the few black women in Buenos Aires had been trafficked from countries such as Brazil, Colombia and the Dominican Republic for the purpose of prostitution. Contrary to popular belief in the U.S., those countries have sizeable populations of women who look like non-mixed black women. As a result, many Argentines would assume that I, too, was prostitute by virtue of my skin tone and gender.

Moreover, due to the immutable aspects of color and gender, there was nothing that I could do to stop it. My large book bag did not challenge their assumptions. I tried to wear looser clothes. At one point, I started wearing an Islamic style hijab. But to no avail.

The street calls continued.

Dealing with race and gender discrimination

The constant jeers and approaches made me feel inherently uncomfortable and unsafe there. Of course, I had my regular tourist and student moments like the rest of the people with whom I studied abroad. We all marveled at the [beautiful architecture in Palermo Viejo](#). We enjoyed phenomenal operas at the [Teatro Colo'n](#). I felt the weight of history as I watched women demonstrating at the Plaza de Mayo about their sons and daughters who were "desaparecidos," or "disappeared," during brutal military dictatorships. I enjoyed watching and dancing the tango in [La Boca](#). Moreover, my courses such as *The Social Imagery of Peronism* at the Universidad de Buenos Aires were intellectually engaging and enriching.

But, unlike my study-abroad mates, I experienced consistent street harassment. I did not even experience the normal interactions of being regarded as an American tourist. Despite my "gringa" accent, most Argentines refused to believe that I was American. When I asked one of students that I tutored in English why I did not look American he told me that when he thinks of an American girl he thinks of a slightly overweight blond woman – not me, a dark-skinned black woman with braids. Even a Nigerian man that I would see in the Internet cafe would give me dirty looks until he peeked at my screen and realized that I was writing in English. He exclaimed, "You're not a Dominican streetwalker!"

While most of my study abroad-mates tried to immerse themselves in Buenos Aires life by dating Argentines and spending the entire semester in Buenos Aires, I took a different approach. I travelled back to the States for Easter break and savored every moment of

being back in New York. I would have gone home more, if money were no object. Jorge, an Afro-Uruguayan, was the only man that I dated, and visiting his family in [Montevideo](#) was one of the highlights of my study abroad experience.

Processing the prostitution affair

Do I regret my trip? Certainly not. My host mother Carmen and host brother Tito were wonderful and showed me all the kindness and love that a student could ask for. Jorge was a great guy who I thought about a lot after my trip. My study-abroad mates were great, and I value my connections with them. Even to this day, I crave the delicious empanadas, milanesas, pasta and noquis that I [ate in Buenos Aires](#). Most importantly, the experience bolstered my interest in economic development in countries like the Dominican Republic, Colombia and Brazil because I believe that economic opportunity and raising awareness are the best weapons against sex trafficking.

Would I go back? Probably not. My time in Buenos Aires has made me forever vigilant about doing race and gender-based research before I travel. Since my trip, I have heard from white women who were perceived as prostitutes in the Middle East because of the “Natasha” sex trade in trafficked Eastern European women to the Middle East. I have learned of African-American women who have suffered severe street harassment in Spain and Italy where Nigerian and Ghanaian women are frequently trafficked for prostitution.

Traveling is wonderful, and a life enriching experience all people should enjoy. But for women, especially women of color, you do need to research how you will be treated before you take the leap. Clearly, global travel is not an equal opportunity endeavor.

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