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Fruity Pleasures

For one brief day she was a sensual,
alluring woman wrapped up in mangoes.



THE OLD MAN LOUNGING ON THE SIDEWALK SLOWLY nodded his head and mumbled “*tamam*” (meaning “good” in Arabic) when he saw me. Other men heartedly called out “Sudanese” and waved their arms in approval, while passing women met their eyes with mine and gently smiled. Walking through the streets of the eastern Sudanese town of Kassala, I was creating quite a stir in my traditional Sudanese outfit.

As I struggled with the the billowing fabric, I felt like a royal fool. I never intended to wear the damn thing when I spied it in the shop, I just wanted to look at it. After having admired for the past week the colorful cloth that a Sudanese woman wears wrapped around herself, called a “top,” I wanted to check one out up close.

The vast array of blinding colors and patterns was overwhelming. But as I meandered through the town’s market, I was immediately drawn to the plump, juicy-looking mangoes that virtually danced on a vivid blue-and aqua-colored wrap. Slowly I ran my fingers over the soft fabric as I envisioned myself walking tall and proud, as Sudanese women appear to me. They looked feminine, sexy, and exotic, and after now wearing the same grotty t-shirt and army-green pants for the past five days, I desperately needed a pick-me-up. So when the male shop owner wanted to swathe me in the mangoes, I figured why not. The only problem was he didn’t know how.

By now neighboring shopkeepers and curious male passersby had stopped to watch this white woman trying to maneuver the mounds of mangoes. The shop owner had since given up, and so we all stood there, stupidly staring at each other and not knowing what to do. Boldly, a man from the bemused crowd stepped forward. Plucking the fabric from my fingers, he clumsily proceeded to envelop me in it, while the others cheered on and called out instructions. He proudly stood back to admire his work, but within an instant, the mangoes rolled down my body and the fabric lay limp on the sidewalk.

Relatively few women were on the streets, but soon enough an elderly woman in a traffic-stopping red-and-yellow wrap walked by. Not giving up on me, the men called out for assistance, but with a scowl on her face, she continued on, not even glancing in our direction. Soon enough a girl no older than fourteen came by. Like many young women, she wore only a long skirt and shapeless blouse, with a simple scarf around her head.

But she knew how to tie a Sudanese top, and with her fingers moving deftly over and around my body, she instantly enshrouded me in the fabric. With one last tug, she nodded and walked away. There was no time to ask how she did it.

After paying the shop owner the 3,000 dinars (\$12) for the wrap, I went to take it off, much to the protests of the crowd. I needed to go back to the hotel and didn't want to walk through the streets enwrapped in my mango top. While I try to respect customs and traditions by wearing modest clothing that covers my arms and legs, I am not a big fan of adopting the local look. I often think back to the Japanese tourist I saw running all over Yemen decked out in a traditional red-and-white Arab headcloth, even though he wore an Adidas t-shirt and a pair of Levi's as well. But here in Sudan, they seemed to like—no, love—seeing me in a Sudanese top, so I opted to leave it on as I returned to the hotel, where the plan was to pack it away. I did quickly lift the veil to take off my beige baseball cap underneath, though. No reason for me to look even more like a fool, I figured.

During the ten-minute walk towards the hotel, dozens of men called out to me. "They like me, they really like me," I thought, as I suddenly stood a tad taller and added a slight wiggle to my walk. And for those ten minutes, I was a sexy and mysterious woman. Even if my sport sandals did kind of ruin the look.

Sauntering by the sidewalk stand where I had enjoyed a tea earlier that day, I decided to stop and visit with Habiba, my new friend who serves up tea every morning to the neighboring merchants and anyone else who passes. Upon seeing me sporting my new look, she gleefully clapped her hands and declared me to be Sudanese.

Soon enough, the same nearby shopkeepers who had surrounded me earlier that morning when I had my tea, flocked around and showered me with praise. Hearing that I am unmarried, they proclaimed now that I was a Sudanese woman, I was to marry a Sudanese man. They even had someone in mind, but seeing that he had only a few remaining bottom teeth as a result of years of chewing snuff, I graciously declined. A girl has got to have some standards, even if she is thirty-two years old and still single.

And so for the rest of the day I strolled—no, glided—through the town market while dressed in my Sudanese top. Men clapped and called out to me, but who could blame them? For that brief day I was a sensual, alluring woman wrapped up in mangoes.



Kelly Sobczak traded in her job at the French Government Tourist Office and her mice-infested New York City apartment for an eighteen-month solo trip around the world (well, halfway around). And she hasn't looked back since.