

ORGANIC STYLE, APRIL, 2004

Keeping it Red

Twelve months, five continents, 10 shades of auburn. The lengths one woman went to for her hair.

My husband, Nick, and I had just finished a two-hour morning yoga-and-chanting session in the Indian town of Rishikesh and were sitting in a tea shop alongside the Ganges River, taking a postpractice libation with our yogi. A breeze blew down the gorge, cooling the air and setting off hundreds of bells at the nearby Lakshman Temple. I ought to have been in nirvana, but there was a burr in my bliss. I kept catching glimpses of my reflection in the shop's window, and although it was most unspiritual of me, I was obsessing about my hair. Instead of being a beautiful, shimmery, coppery red, it was dark brown with plum highlights. It was a nice enough color—on someone else. On me, it was horror.

Eight months earlier, when Nick and I were preparing for our yearlong trip around the world, such a crisis was among the catastrophes I'd cataloged in my "what if" files: What if one of us got cerebral malaria in the middle of nowhere? What if constant togetherness destroyed our relationship? What if I couldn't keep my hair a believable and consistent shade of red?

Except for a brief, ill-conceived trip to the dark side at 19 (when I dabbled in black), I have been dyeing my ash-brown hair various shades of red for almost 20 years. As I tell shocked friends who assume I am a true redhead, I should be a red-head. The color fits my personality, which is feisty

and passionate (or difficult and drama-queenish, depending on whom you ask) and works with my pink, freckled complexion. Over the years, this counterfeit identity has become deeply important to me. It's not that I'm caught up in appearances: I don't wear much makeup, and I buy my clothes at thrift stores. But like most women, I have a vanity crutch: one item, product, or treatment that makes me feel gorgeous when I have it and hideous when I don't. Mine is red hair.

As Nick and I packed for our trip, it became clear that we had no room for excess product. I certainly wouldn't consider a friend's suggestion that I go natural on the road (maybe I should also give up food?). I'd have to make do with whatever dyes I could get. I colored the day before we left, figuring that would take me through Tonga (month one) and New Zealand (half of month two), leaving my roots in need of refreshment by Hong Kong. Finding color there would be a breeze, I thought. And it was. Kowloon City teemed with small drugstores, and I found a non-ammonia Wella Presentations color. In a marbled bathroom at the Ritz-Carlton (the one-night stay was a belated wedding present from a friend who worked there), I erased my roots, frantically cleaning the white tiles with tissues and hiding the towel so my friend wouldn't get in trouble for my surely unsanctioned use of a luxury loo.

Two months later in Ho Chi Minh City, I spent three hours combing the 90-degree sauna that is the city's flea market. Pushing past peddlers proffering luminous white ao dai outfits and conical non bai tho hats, I found a beauty-supply stall, where a weathered grandma tried to talk me into a punky Japanese fuchsia. I opted for a remaindered French auburn because I liked the box. Unfortunately, it made me a brassy strawberry blonde.

A month later in Bangkok, I planned to spend my thirty-second birthday sloughing away the past four months of travel grunge and remedying the truly vomitous orange the Vietnamese shade had become. The bustling, modern metropolis had as many shopping malls and beauty parlors as Los Angeles; I was overwhelmed by choice. Whom to trust? Whose red was really red? But then I found a Clairol Institute hidden in the back of a mall. After I picked my shade, an efficient student massaged the color into my scalp. Next to me, a pair of stylish Thai girls who were getting golden highlights watched and giggled, and when they saw the final color, pointed to my scalp and said, "Red. Good." And free too. Clairol didn't charge first-time clients.

From then on, I decided to stick with the pros. In Bombay, my friend Ruchira took me to her salon, and I showed the stylist my driver's license for reference. It did not translate. "Oh, that's dark," Ruchira said, looking at my brown hair. "Does it look red at all, under the light?" "Turn your head," Ruchira said. "Mmm, maybe a little."

After seven months on the road, I was accustomed to discomfort: cockroach-ridden hotel rooms, packed buses, chronic traveler's tummy. But this was too much. I had two choices: strip out the brown—which I didn't think my travel-

abused hair could handle—or use henna. Unfortunately, the shade the local hennas achieved was a Lucille Ball orange, which most Indians seemed to think a fine color, judging by the number of people I saw sporting carrot-colored buns, mustaches, and beards.

I was still wrestling with the dye-or-henna conundrum in Rishikesh that morning after yoga. Watching the parade of pilgrims and dreadlocked, diapered sadhu holy men, I spotted an elderly lady wearing an orange sari, her bold, rich auburn hair glinting in the sunlight.

"You have to come with me," I said to our yogi, grabbing his hand. "What is it?"

"That woman. I need to know how she gets her hair that color. Will you translate for me?"

Perhaps to some people, chasing an old woman down a street to steal her beauty secrets might seem overzealous, but such was the pull of my vanity crutch. Besides, grabbing bystanders and asking them ridiculous questions is part of the daily grind for independent travelers. I'd long since gotten used to looking like an ass. "Namaste," I said to the woman when we reached her. She nodded, slightly alarmed, I imagine, by the addict-like glimmer in my eye. "I know this sounds strange, but I was wondering how you get your hair that beautiful color?" "With henna," she said in Hindi. Yes, henna, I knew that. I repeated the question, asking how she got her hair red instead of orange. "I add coffee to henna." But what kind of coffee? Brewed or grounds? I didn't want to take any more chances. "Grounds. Mix it with henna, leave for three hours, and then put on your hair for four hours," she said, and set off to walk away. "Thank you. Um, I'm sorry, but can you tell me if I can use instant coffee, like Nescafé,

or only fresh ground?" I asked. She looked at me as though I were insane. I took that to mean not Nescafé. The recipe worked like a charm. I was back to a decent shade by that night, although I dripped coffee dandruff for ages.

Six weeks later, we arrived in Kazakhstan. I'd assumed that remote Central Asia would be a wasteland for quality color, but Kazakhstan has a large Russian population, and because Russian ladies like bright-red hair almost as much as they like platinum blond, the dye selections were endless. I decided to skip the L'Oréal Preference counter at the department store and bought some Russian stuff from a nearby bazaar instead. Big mistake. I looked like Raggedy Ann.

I ran back to the L'Oréal counter begging for help. The salesgirl appraised me. "You use Russian brand?" she asked. I nodded. "Better you use detergent for dish. It remove power from your hair," which I took to mean it would dull the neon brightness. "After, you take this," she said, handing me a semipermanent auburn. The dish-washing soap did remove some of the power—and all of the moisture—from my locks. I decided to postpone any further treatments and stowed the box in my suitcase.

Nick and I spent the next two months on safari in Kenya, on a beach in Zanzibar, and bumping along the back roads of Malawi, my hair growing dustier and dingier in the punishing equatorial sun. When I finally L'Oréal'ed myself in a Malawian youth hostel, I wound up with a shade so mousy, it made me cry. Of course, my tears were not just for my ugly hair. After 10 months, I was tired of navigating crowded minibuses, stumbling over foreign languages, being a stranger in a strange land, and yes, having a less-than-perfect shade of red. I arrived in Johannesburg a few

weeks later, exhausted, vexed, and looking like a woman who had just crawled to South Africa. I immediately found a hip salon where a chirpy stylist rouged, chopped, and moisturized my hair, removing two inches of roots, five inches of length, and a thousand pounds of psychic weight. For the first time since I'd left home, my hair was the exact color I wanted, and this seemed powerfully symbolic: The uphill part of the trip was over; everything was going to be okay. I felt jaunty, light, happy—like a redhead again.