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## Abercrombie's Tourist Allure

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



Mary Murphy, who comes from Dublin, Ireland, was part of the crowd Thursday morning standing in the heat, waiting to be granted admission to the Abercrombie store on Fifth Avenue and 56th Street. "We're feeling it now," she said of the rush she and her girlfriends were experiencing as they inched their way toward the front entrance. "The smell," she went on, "and the guys inside the door are so gorgeous. You feel like you're bringing a slice of America back."

For the average self-respecting New Yorker, Abercrombie, and even its half-naked models, became passé somewhere around the fifth grade. But for out-of-towners, the retailer's flagship store is somehow synonymous with the Big Apple. "We come about twice a year," Ms. Murphy went on. "We'll save up: now we come for the summer wardrobes; we'll come back in November for the Christmas shopping."

Even though my own knowledge of the brand is limited to the aforementioned models, and to shopping bags featuring them, and to the fact that the store was involved in some unpleasantness a few years back over allegations it discriminated against minorities in its hiring, I had other things on my mind—finding a pair of relaxed-fit khakis. (So what if their target demographic is 18- to 22-year-olds.) I hadn't been able to find a pair at some other big-name chains that wasn't too short after the first time I washed them.

Unfortunately, the shirtless model posing for photographs just inside the front door with teenage shoppers like a hood ornament (and whose torso boasted more twists and turns than the Taconic State Parkway) was wearing jeans. Ditto two fully clothed models in body-hugging plaid shirts and sandals at either side of the entrance. I wasn't so naïve as to ask either of them the way to the men's department. They probably couldn't have told me. Indeed, I came to discover that there are two classes of employees at Abercrombie's. First, there are the beautiful models, both male and female, standing on each landing swaying ecstatically to the club music blaring through the store's sound system, and greeting each shopper with, "Hey, what's going on?"

(Or as Ron, a Dutchman of approximately my age who was waiting patiently on a chair in the lobby and reading a New York City guidebook as his wife and teenage kids spent him into Greek-debt-level oblivion, put it, "They're not selling; they're only standing.")

Second, there are the grunts, the traditional salespeople, "who fold things," as one of the models put it.

A member of that benighted sub-culture informed me there was little if any resentment on their part toward the beautiful people—"We love and respect each other," he said, if somewhat aspirationally—the same apparently can't be said of both models and salespeople's attitude toward management. Unsolicited, several told me they were steamed by a new policy, starting this Sunday, under which they won't be eligible for a break until they've worked six hours. Previously, they had to clock only five hours before earning a half-hour respite. And I can tell you from personal experience, it's hard to look beautiful for six minutes straight, let alone six hours.

More to the point, there appeared to be only one pair, or one model, of khakis in the store, and they weren't cut with the middle-age man in mind. Probably the only body type they'd have fit was that of a bronze statue on the basement level who was protecting a ball of indeterminate sport and wearing nothing but what appeared to be a jock strap.

Same thing for the figures in the masterpiece mural that ran from the basement to the fourth-floor ceiling and that featured mostly young men in various states of undress doing things like shimmying down ropes and hanging out at what seemed a lumberjack camp, if lumberjacks didn't spend their days felling timber but working out at Exhale.

As I left Abercrombie, my hunt for a pair of slacks fruitless, I spotted Ron, the Dutchman, settling in for a long afternoon. Don't ask me why, but this year for some reason I'm looking forward to Brooks Brothers' annual Father's Day sale more than ever.

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