



She's been called 'simply irresistible' by Tom Cruise, and admirers everywhere are falling over themselves to sing her praises. Christa D'Souza meets Hollywood sensation Penelope Cruz

If there is one thing which Penelope Cruz loves to do, it is to sleep. By her own admission she is a 12-hours-a-night girl, sometimes stretching to 15 if she has the chance, which does not bode well for our rendezvous in Beverly Hills today. Why? Because yesterday was the day that *Vanilla Sky*, the film she has been making with Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz, wrapped, and nobody got to bed until 6.am... meaning she has had a total of three hours' sleep. Indeed, according to Cruz's LA publicist, our lunch may have to be cut short, so absolutely knackered is her client. And I do see what she means when Cruz and I meet face-to-face. Her unmade-up eyes are shadowed and bloodshot, her wild mane of hair is in rats tails, her lips raw and bitten, and there is the hint of a blemish developing on her ashen-toned right cheek.

And yet... as is the maddening case with any genuinely beautiful woman, Cruz, 26, looks ravishing. More ravishing than she does on screen, or even, for that matter, in any of those photographs from the multi-million-dollar Ralph Lauren campaign she has been fronting since last year. And a good deal younger too, in her kooky red Moira Shearer hat and Scholl-style sandals, revealing in all their glory her gnarly, ballet dancer's feet. And she has freckles! No wonder Tom Cruise said she was 'simply irresistible'. No

wonder *all* her leading men find her such sheer joy to work with... but more of that later.

Hunched at a table for two, scrutinising a package that has just arrived for her via FedEx – a press cutting with her name and picture highlighted in fluorescent pen – she jumps up to meet me, a tiny slip of a thing, and immediately apologises for her tiredness. 'I look awful, no?' she asks in her fluent, heavily accented English, with such concern etched across her exotic, doe-like features that I suddenly find myself offering to come back at a more convenient time. 'Ah, non, non, *non*, I am happy to be doing this,' she says, and then throws a grateful smile to our waiter as he sets down a bowl of chicken soup and a dish of vegetable crisps in front of her. 'I'm sorry, but I have to eat something immediately because when I am tired, I get really, really *hungry*.'

Poor Penelope. It's been like this for eight months, this business of living out of a suitcase, filming till late, getting up at dawn and being wheeled out for interview after interview, shoot after shoot... but then, that is the price one must pay for being the girl all of Hollywood desires.

'She's just a breathtaking physical presence,' raves John (*Shakespeare in Love*) Madden, who directed her in the much-awaited *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. 'She pulls the camera towards her in a way that is reminiscent of a



Portrait by Diego Uchitel

young Liv Ullman.' Of her role as Johnny Depp's drug-addled wife in *Blow*, director Ted Demme says, 'She was not right at all for the part, but it was just because of her absolute beauty that I hired her. With eyes so brown and deep, and so filled with life,' he rhapsodises, 'that when the camera goes on her you just focus in on her eyes and never look at anything else.'

Cameron Crowe, director of *Vanilla Sky*, goes a step further. 'She has,' he pronounced grandly to *Premiere* magazine last month, 'the ability to create fire with any object or moving thing.'

Indeed, not since Sophia Loren has a foreign actress made such an impact on Hollywood, and if it sounds like the compliments are a little, well, male-orientated, that simply is not the case. Not five minutes after we have sat down for lunch, the Oscar nominee Ellen Burstyn suddenly appears on the patio, determinedly making her way towards our table. 'How are you?' says the veteran actress. 'I just wanted to say it's so very nice to meet you, and congratulations on your performance...' – congratulations which Cruz receives with unflinching graciousness.

Because of her looks, it is tempting to think of Penelope Cruz as a mere model-turned-actress, an exotic ingenue who just sprung on to the scene at the right time, when in fact she is one of Spain's best-known actresses, with almost 20 Spanish-speaking films under her 23-inch belt. They include *Jamon, Jamon*, which she made when she was just 17, *The Girl Of Your Dreams*, for which she received a Goya (the Spanish equivalent of an Oscar), *Belle Epoque*, directed by Pedro Almodovar, and then his Oscar-winning *All About My Mother*, in which she played a pregnant nun with Aids. Indeed, so successful has her Spanish film career been, her personal fortune is already estimated to be in the region of \$15 million. Meanwhile, her celebrity profile at home is on a par with Antonio Banderas's, which means that she and her entire family have to wear dark glasses in public if they don't want to get snapped by ¡Hola!

Conquering Hollywood took a little longer – not least because of the language barrier. She only learnt to speak English five years ago, and her first English-speaking film – *The Hi Lo Country* by Stephen Frears – was not released until 1999. Initially, the industry was rather sceptical. Being an ethnic beauty was all very well (cf Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek), but not being able to speak the language fluently was, in their eyes, a real problem, even if she was, as it were, playing foreign. Billy Bob Thornton, for example, the director and producer of *All The Pretty Horses* – her third film out this year, in which she stars as a Mexican heiress opposite Matt Damon – had to fight with studio executives at Columbia to hire her. But by then, her rise had become inexorable. Not only had Ralph Lauren decided to make her his poster girl, but John Madden had snagged her for the coveted role of Pelagia in *Captain Corelli*, Working Title's biggest budget film yet.

What catapulted her into the major league, however, was the seal of approval from Tom Cruise. The two had not met, but Cruise had just bought the rights to *Open Your Eyes* (the thriller upon which *Vanilla Sky* is based), and was very interested in meeting Penelope, who had played the lead in the Spanish-speaking adaptation of the book, *Abre Los Ojos*, two years earlier, in 1997. Last summer, therefore, he and director Cameron Crowe flew out to Greece, where she was filming *Captain Corelli*, and hired her on the spot.

Almost overnight, Cruz became A-list fodder for the tabloids. Then came the shocking news of Cruise's separation from Nicole Kidman, which became even more juicy when a cache of grainy pictures appeared in *Hello!*, ¡Hola! and so forth, of Cruise and Cruz walking arm-in-arm in Central Park, looking soulfully into one another's eyes. 'You thought those pictures were real?' gasps Cruz, her chocolate eyes widening in surprise when I bring the subject up. 'But they were taken on the set of *Vanilla Sky*! You know what?' she adds, tucking away a stray tendril of hair and bending down to take a spoonful of now-tepid soup. 'They try to create that rumour with every



'Nic really makes me laugh. I grew up watching all his films'

Penelope Cruz and Nicolas Cage in the film 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin'

nothing left for myself'. None the less, her face splits into a radiant, quite unexpected smile when I repeat John Madden's observation that she and Cage have quite similar personalities; and that in his opinion, Cage (who brought his own personal chef and hairdresser with him to the Greek island of Cephallonia where *Corelli* was filmed) is actually quite shy. 'Shy?' exclaims Cruz delightedly, 'but I am shy too! Yes, I suppose Nic is shy, but he also has a great sense of humour. He really makes me laugh. I grew up watching all of his films,' she adds fulsomely. 'My mother liked *Moonstruck*, but I watched them all: *Rumblefish*, *Raising Arizona* and, of course, *Leaving Las Vegas*. That, I think was his best performance. He makes acting look so easy. It's in his blood, you know?'

Born in 1974, the daughter of Eduardo and Encarna, a shop owner and a hairdresser, Cruz grew up with her younger brother and sister in a flat just outside Madrid. She was a hyperactive, rather intense, superstitious child who used to exhaust herself with rituals such as rubbing her head over and over to ward off disaster. At four, she started ballet lessons, and two years later gained a place at Spain's prestigious performing arts school, Conservatorio Nacional, to study modern and classical ballet.

Her interest, though, soon switched to acting, and at 14 she was discovered in a talent contest by the manager who still represents her in Spain, Katrina Bayonas. Three years later, after making sporadic appearances on Spanish TV, she made her breakthrough into film with a role in Bigas Luna's 1982 hit *Jamon, Jamon*, opposite Javier Bardem. In the film, Cruz, playing a teenage siren from the wrong side of the tracks, is topless, and told what her 'perfect breasts' (as Luna insisted on calling them) taste like, by her two co-stars. None of which Cruz was particularly embarrassed about at the time, but after seeing it on screen she was horrified. A minor 'breakdown', as she has called it, ensued, where she cut off all her hair and slept at her parents' house for up to 17 hours a day. 'I had a strong rejection of anything sexual or sensual for a while,' was the way she once put it, adding, 'I didn't do any love scenes, not even kisses, for many years.'

It was in 1996, just after she had made her tenth Spanish-speaking film, *Belle Epoque*, that Cruz decided to test the waters in New York, 'to study dance, to study theatre, see some movies'. And learn English, of course. In 1997 she spent a year in London – a period of her life that she is intriguingly vague about, perhaps because it strays too far into the personal – but none the less I managed to get a few details. She lived in

movie, and so now it loses its impact. It doesn't affect me any more. It doesn't affect my family any more because they do not believe what they read.'

She is referring, of course, to the spurious reputation she gained when Matt Damon left his girlfriend, Winona Ryder, on the set of *All The Pretty Horses*, and when Nicolas Cage very publicly left his wife, the actress Patricia Arquette, while he was on the set of *Captain Corelli*. Cruz has already denied there was ever anything between her and Cruise, and laughed off suggestions that she and Matt Damon were an item, claiming that their relationship was as 'brother and sister'. The same, apparently, goes for Cage (who had in fact been living separately from Patricia Arquette well before *Captain Corelli*). 'We are not together as a couple,' implores Cruz, 'we are friends!' adding rather robotically that she never, ever discusses her private life because otherwise, 'I would have

Hampstead Heath with a boyfriend who was a DJ. She spent quite a bit of time going for auditions, and once even dyed her hair peroxide blonde when a certain part called for it. 'I looked very, very strange,' she says, pursing those beautifully swollen lips at the thought. 'I felt a little like an alien.'

For one so obviously beautiful (wait until you see her in *Captain Corelli* – running down those cobbled streets, mane streaming underneath her little Greek headscarf), and so unapologetic about being an actress-cum-model, ('I love it! I love to work with all those great photographers and see how they create that world!') Cruz does seem amazingly – for want of a better way to put it – *real*.

And possessed of genuine empathy too, which I hadn't picked up on at first, perhaps because of the slight language barrier. Not just because she donated her first Hollywood paycheck to Mother Teresa's sanctuary in Calcutta, or because she has a habit of adopting stray animals (she has, in total, six dogs and six cats scattered around the world, three of which she picked up off the street when she first arrived here in LA), but because there is absolutely nothing plastic about her – she is the same on the screen as she is now, and as she is, I would wager, when she is alone or with friends.

She is also someone who comes across as being quite obviously ruled by her emotions (an unusual trait in this town), someone who, by virtue of that, has endured more than her fair share of suffering. When she talks about her current favourite CD for example, *Kid A* by Radiohead, I swear she almost starts to cry. 'When I figured out the lyrics in that first song – you know the one I mean about waking up sucking a lemon? It just hurt me so much. I don't know what happened to the guy who wrote that song, but I was going through a difficult time in my life at the time when I heard it, and now,' she solemnly crosses the fingers of both hands and twists her wrists, 'I have something like a bond with that record. I am *obsessed* with it.' The idea that there are some people for whom neither music nor animals play any part, appalls her.

'She just cares so deeply,' is how Billy Bob Thornton, her director in *All The Pretty Horses* has said, 'that I think it'll be her downfall. This is a long-winded way of saying that she's co-dependent, and it makes life pretty tough sometimes.'

John Madden, for one, is convinced that this ability to emote is what separates her from any of the other sultry Latin actresses favoured by Hollywood at the moment. 'She has a bizarre depth of emotion, an access to pain which is comparable with someone twice her age,' he explains, adding, 'She also has this sense of melancholy about the world which is fascinating to watch. She *is* herself. That is what runs the whole movie.'

'I like to have my emotions aroused,' is Cruz's own, sparser, analysis. 'If you do not have bad times then you cannot properly experience the good times.'

For the moment, Cruz appears to like living this slightly pin-cushiony, out-of-a-suitcase existence. This summer she has vowed to take a rest, to 'do the things I cannot do now', like dancing in nightclubs, taking photographs (she always makes a point of shooting those who shoot her, Annie Leibowitz, Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts included), and, of course, sleeping 12 hours a day. After that it's back to her 'real home' in Madrid, where she will be making a film with her childhood heroine, Victoria Abril, and planning a new project with Pedro Almodovar and Antonio Banderas. There is some theatre in the offing too. She would, for example, love to do her favourite play, Jean Genet's *The Maids* – that is, if she dares. 'It's so intense,' she solemnly explains. 'I'm almost too scared of it.'

Los Angeles, meanwhile, is proving perfectly simpatico for the moment. She has set up temporary home in the Sunset Marquis hotel, a favoured haunt for rock'n'rollers with a sound studio in the basement, and has built up a small tight-knit group of pals, including Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who taught her ten-pin bowling and gave her the nickname 'Trouble', Billy Bob Thornton (after whom she named one of her cats) and, of course, Cage. Over Oscar week her best



Cruz never discusses her private life, 'or I would have nothing left for myself'

Tom Cruise and Penelope Cruz on the set of the new film 'Vanilla Sky', in Times Square, New York

friend Goya Toledo, a Spanish actress whose film *Love is a Bitch* was nominated for best foreign film, flew over, as did her sister, Monica, 22, a flamenco dancer who has performed with Joaquin Cortez. Then there was Javier Bardem (who came over for *Before Night Falls*), and her best mucker in LA, the Mexican actress Salma Hayek, whom she has known for more than six years. Hayek is her partner in crime out here, the buddy whom she sometimes goes out with wearing identical outfits, both women, for some reason, sometimes pretending they have facial tics. 'Yeah, well we did do that once,' says Cruz. 'We do silly things.'

Not that one can instantly conjure up an image of 'Pen' Cruz (as her friends call her) acting silly. It is hard watching her in the highly stylized *Blow*, for example, wearing S&M gear and shouting 'Let's party, motherf*****s!' while she snorts cocaine from a large bowl, because it is so NOT like her in real life.

'She is very proper,' confirms Ted Demme, 'very quiet, very reserved. But that's why I like her for this film. You could probably have very easily seen Jennifer Lopez in this part, but that would have been too obvious.'

'That was a very strange character,'

agrees Cruz, taking a sip of fruit juice, 'especially since I can't even drink coffee. Well, I can drink one coffee in the morning if I have to work long hours, as long as I am not too tired from the night before. I have a very sensitive nervous system,' she goes on to explain, 'for example I like wine very much, I like the feeling of it, but I have half a glass and I'm drunk! I am a very cheap date.'

She is on her last legs, and simply has to get some rest because tonight she is shooting the poster for *Captain Corelli* with Cage, so we arrange to speak the following day on the telephone. She is almost obsessively private about her personal life – a function perhaps, of being such a celebrity in her own country for all these years – but I really do need to pin her down about the persistent rumour that she and Cage are, as they call it in tabloidesque, 'close'. But the call does not happen. Cruz, her publicist explains, is too played out to talk, so we reschedule for when I am back in London. When I call, however, at the appointed time, she is still unavailable. I try the next day but am rebuffed again. 'I am so sorry,' says her manager, Katrina, 'it's been insane. She doesn't have time for sleep, she doesn't have time to perform bodily functions.' Four days later, it is beginning to get a little farcical. Eventually, though, we hook up and I put the question to her. Is she going out with Nicolas Cage? And if not him, then who? There is a pause... and at first I think we might have been cut off, but no, Cruz has heard everything I have said, and is just formulating a response in her own time.

'Look, I know you have to ask this question. All journalists ask this question, and I always say sorry, it is my private life. It is not healthy for people to know these kind of things. But in a way it is good you ask me about him so I can say this: Nicolas and I are very good friends.' So is she single then? 'Look, I said, I'm not gonna discuss my private life,' she insists with a firmness that precludes any more questions on the topic. This girl may not be able to do the crossword, but she's sure going to do well in Hollywood.

'*Captain Corelli's Mandolin* opens on May 4, *Blow* and *All The Pretty Horses* open on May 25