Henry Louis Gates Jr. was walking with friends through Oak Bluffs on Tuesday evening, late for a dinner reservation. One after another, tourists on the busy street stopped the noted African-American scholar, seeking to shake his hand or snap his picture.

Gates repeatedly obliged, acknowledging the reason behind his suddenly spiking popularity: His mugshot from his arrest on a charge of disorderly conduct outside his home in Cambridge last week has been broadcast around the world.

“Yeah, you want a picture with a convict,” Gates joked, one of his dinner companions recalled.

The encounters on Martha’s Vineyard were a telling glimpse of the real “Skip” Gates, friends and colleagues said yesterday, his affable manner and witty charm at sharp odds with the image that surfaced after his arrest last week.

Police reports depict him as an arrogant, belligerent man shouting racially charged accusations at the officer who showed up at his doorstep after his arrest last week.
Friends say ‘Skip’ Gates rides no high horse – The Boston Globe

a call of a suspected break-in.

That is not the Gates friends and colleagues know.

“Skip is always himself, down-to-earth and unpretentious,” said Cornel West, a Princeton professor who befriended Gates when they both taught at Yale 25 years ago and who later taught at Harvard. “Skip is Skip is Skip the way a rose is a rose is a rose.”

But, West added, Gates “has a righteous indignation at injustice, and I think that’s what you have there.”

Yesterday, Gates was on his way to New York, where he was honored last night by CNN for his work in bringing African-American history and culture to a broad audience. Then he’ll be off to Los Angeles, where he will interview actress Eva Longoria for his new documentary series on immigration.

For all his worldliness and sophistication, having been raised from an early age to shoot for the Ivy League, Gates is fundamentally a down-home guy, happiest when surrounded by friends and his two grown daughters and prone to routines, friends said.

The 58-year-old professor rises early, even in the summer, and works on his writing from 8 until noon; most summers, he manages to finish a book. Then it’s a 16-mile bike ride from the manse he rents in Oak Bluffs - a large, white plantation-style house with stately columns that friends jokingly refer to as “Tara” - to Katama Beach and back. Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo accompanies him on the daily ride.

Because Gates’s legs are of unequal length and he has had hip replacement surgery, the professor rides a big red-white-and-black tricycle dubbed the “Soul Mobile.” He greets passersby by ringing a little bell, also a handy warning that he’s approaching.

Gates’s disability and many painful surgeries as a boy helped hone his sensitivity to the weak and to those having a tough time in life, West said.

Gates was raised in a working-class family in the small West Virginia town of Piedmont, tucked between the Allegheny Mountains and the Potomac River Valley. In his 1994 memoir, “Colored People,” he wrote a letter to his daughters about rising above the constraints of race.

“I rebel at the notion that I can’t be part of other groups, that I can’t construct identities through elective affinity, that race must be the most important thing about me,” Gates wrote. “Is that what I want on my gravestone: Here lies an African American?”

Race, though, has been a central theme in Gates’s work, which has established him as perhaps the most distinguished African-American studies scholar in the country.

Gates’s sense of humor, combined with his deep knowledge, makes his Introduction to African-American Studies class, which he co-teaches with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, a must among many undergraduates.

“A lot of students try to take this class at Harvard, especially if you’re in the African-American community,” said senior Tonia Branche.

And he is versatile. In addition to being a prolific writer, He always has one foot...
outside the Ivory Tower - filming a PBS documentary series; running an online news magazine, the Root, dedicated to African-American news, culture, and genealogy; and editing an encyclopedia of the African-American experience.

He is apt at finding ways to combine his quick wit and tough intellect, and unafraid to ask pointed questions on how the world works, Bobo said.

During an episode of Gates’s “Wonders of the African World” television series, he asked one of his African hosts why his ancestors sold Gates’s ancestors into slavery, sparking a provocative discussion.

“He’s able to joke about all the ‘booty-shaking and misogyny’ in many hip-hop videos,” Bobo said, “yet can testify convincingly in defense of [the band] 2 Live Crew’s free speech rights and help to establish the nation’s first and leading hip-hop archive.”

Because of the high standards he sets for himself, Gates has little patience for people who aren’t very good at what they’re doing, friends said. But he won’t waste much energy embroiled in a counterproductive argument.

“The idea that he is someone who quickly plays the race card is nonsense,” Bobo said. “That is just not who Skip Gates is.”

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