

Sardines and Sunglasses

As our three-week adventure in Portugal was coming to an end, Peter and I grew increasingly concerned about choosing souvenirs for our wives. While strolling past the storefronts of the pedestrian streets in the historic districts of Lisbon and Coimbra and Porto, Peter would often pause to ask, “Would Mary Helen like that skirt? What about that dress? Would she wear it?” or “Would Mary Helen like any of this jewelry?” or “Do you think Mary Helen would like any of those scarves?”

“Maybe,” was my consistent answer. “But I’m not taking a chance.”

I’m not good at guessing what Mary Helen likes. In our early years, we’d spend time pouring over jewelry catalogs. For each page, I’d try to guess the two items that Mary Helen liked the most. I never got good at it. We don’t play that game any longer.

In dress shops, I have pointed out articles I think would look good on her. Most of the time, she disagrees. Her closet is full of dresses, blouses, and skirts with bold patterns and swirls of color, but my choices of bold patterns and colors don’t align with her preferences. The one thing I’m sure of is that she likes sleeves that cover her upper arms.

On those occasions when I happen to choose an article of clothing or a piece of jewelry she finds acceptable, I ask for a rating on a scale of one to ten. Sixes and sevens are common. Nines are rare. Tens are like unicorns. No need to get her anything unless it is an eight or nine. But she does enjoy looking!

When we decided to replace our bedroom carpet with wood flooring, I dreaded the prospect of choosing from among the hundreds of options at the flooring salesroom. I was shocked that the two of us converged so quickly on four samples that we took home for a final decision which came after only a few minutes of inconsequential quibbling. Even so, I

am not confident that I can choose something in Portugal that she would like enough to wear.

“What about that nice platter with sardines in blue, yellow, and green?” Peter asked as he pointed to a lovely piece on the storefront shelf. If I got a unique piece of hand painted ceramic, she’d know that would be more for me than for her since I love ceramics.

Another reason I’ve procrastinated is more practical. I refuse to buy anything heavy on this trip where we carry everything in our backpacks as *peregrinos* (pilgrims) on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. My sore feet complained of every ounce I carried over what turned out to be 91 miles on The Camino. I might have added a scarf or a necklace or a pair of earrings, maybe even a skirt, but a piece of pottery.... No way!

Sardines are as emblematic to the Portuguese as the Bald Eagle is to Americans. Sardines are everywhere in Portugal; screen-printed on aprons, suspended from strings for mobiles or windchimes, platters in the shape of a sardine. Grocery stores shelves are stacked high with tins of sardines in olive oil, in water, in tomato sauce, in mustard sauce, and more. I bought my first tin of sardines in the tiny town of Calvinos on our first day of hiking The Camino. I discovered I really like sardines in tomato sauce. Thereafter, despite the added weight, I kept a tin or two of sardines in my backpack as emergency rations.

Peter says Gail eats lots of sardines since she lost her sense of taste after COVID. She likes the texture and the protein content.

In Lisbon and Porto, there are stores that sell mostly sardines to tourists. One *conserviera* in Porto had an entire wall of sardines sorted by year, beginning decades before I was born in 1957. People were buying these as souvenirs personalized by their birth year.

Peter stepped into an upscale *conserviera* in Lisbon on our last day where he found tins of sardines in thin cardboard packages with simple colorful designs reminiscent of Gail's signature artwork. Gail's unique style consists of carefully assembled colored cutouts glued to heavy paper. She constructed an alphabet book for her grandchildren in this format. Peter and I were certain that Gail would appreciate the artwork on the packaging which might inspire her creativity even further. What a great souvenir for Gail! So thoughtful (and small and light weight and inexpensive!)

No way I'm giving Mary Helen a fancy can of sardines as a souvenir. But time is getting tight. What shall I do? Then the solution struck me: Sunglasses! Stores selling eyewear are everywhere. Huge displays of infinite variety. Seems like everyone in Portugal is wearing sunglasses. Tourists, urbanites, *peregrinos*, farmers, cyclists, diners, buskers.... Some wore cheap functional sunglasses but I speculate that most pairs had been carefully selected by studying one's image in a mirror, tilting the head, up, down, sideways, in search of just the right pair that satisfies the desire to look a certain way. Sunglasses: jewelry for the eyes and face!

But I dare not try to select a pair of sunglasses for Mary Helen. Then a second solution struck me: Take Mary Helen shopping for sunglasses when I get home. She gets to choose what suits her, and every time she wears that pair, I'll be reminded of my three weeks in Portugal. Genius! Or so I thought.

"What did you bring me from Portugal?" she inquired as I was unpacking.

“I didn’t get you anything,” I said sheepishly, and immediately added, “Peter got Gail a can of sardines. I know better than to show up with a tin of stinky fish for my lovely bride.”

I read her thought cloud, which said, “You are so right! But you should have shown up with *something*.”

“But I do have a plan,” I quickly continued. “Sunglasses are very popular in Portugal. I want to take you shopping for sunglasses.” I quickly summarized my rationale.

I read her thought cloud again: “You were probably too distracted to think about getting me a souvenir. You are just making this up as you go along.”

“Where’s a good place to get sunglasses?” I asked.

“Fowler’s Pharmacy in Greenville,” she replied without hesitation.

“A drug store?”

“Trust me. You’ll see why Fowler’s is the place where everyone in Greenville goes to buy sunglasses.”

One step inside Fowler’s Pharmacy convinced me that Mary Helen was correct. Sunglasses filled glass cases on multiple aisles. I recognized some of the brand names: Ray-Ban, Costa, Kate Spade, Maui Jim, Oakley, and many more. Their website says that have over 8000 pairs!

“Oh no,” I thought. There are too many options. This is overwhelming. But I was wrong yet again. In consultation with the young woman behind the counter who was very experienced in helping people make selections, Mary Helen had, in only a few minutes, narrowed her selection to two pairs of Ray-Bans. One had burgundy frames that

complimented her complexion and facial contours. The other pair was more whimsical, with frames of an unusual shape. She liked both pairs and looked great in both. I told her so, but my opinion doesn't carry much weight. However, the clerk agreed with me. The decision was made easy when the clerk said, "Those Ray-Bans are 50% off."

"That settles it. We'll take both pairs!" I commanded.

Driving home, I glanced over at Mary Helen wearing the burgundy pair. She was smiling.

"Would you rather have a can of sardines?" I smirked.

"I think you know the answer."

I do!

GR Davis

22 May 2026
