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Finch Goes to Portugal: A Travel Journal

During October 2007, six Finch women and several husbands arrived in Portugal for a six-night adventure. United by their positive memories of Finch College and passion for foreign travel, they came by invitation of Yvonne Roome who organized a tour of her adopted country.

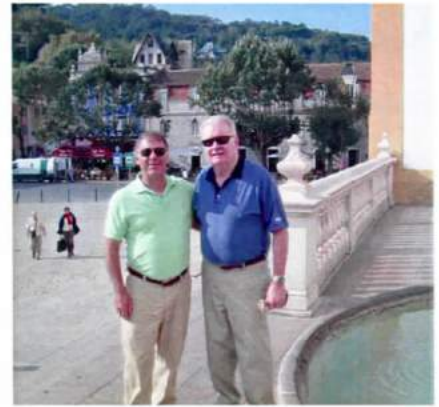
Wesley and Sandy Davidson, Cheryl and Jan Deknatel, Magda and Bob Katz, Barbara Piermont, Virginia and Ed Sheerin, and Hubert and Vilma Wiesenmaier, resided at the Hotel Baia, facing Cascais Bay in a quaint fishing village, less than an hour from Lisbon. We ate together nightly trying such native treats as sardines, local sea bass called robalo, and local wines. A stroll after dinner on Cascais's cobblestoned streets usually ended up at the gelato store.

On the Estoril Coast in Quincho, with the thunderous Atlantic surf below, Yvonne arranged an elegant dinner at Hotel Muchaxo our first night. The next day, we traveled by bus to Azeitao where the Jose Maria da Fonseca family has been making wine for generations. Our guide graciously gave us samples of red wine and the famous dessert wine, Moscatel de Setubal. We were also treated to queijo fresco, a delicious white cheese made with goat's milk.

Afterwards, we went over the Arrabida Mountain, a Natural Park, where we saw hang gliders off the cliffs, surfers below, and castles above. After a curvy, scenic route, we arrived at Pousada de Palmela, a former convent, that dates back to the 12th century, with Roman archaeological remains on the property. Pousadas are government-run inns that are reinvented monasteries and convents. Here, just outside of Setubel, we had a four-course lunch that included the traditional dish, cod, and a sweet dessert made of egg whites and ground almonds whose recipe Magda had to have!

On Sunday, many of us walked to nearby Estoril. On the way, we stopped into the Casa de Santa Maria (1902-1918) situated between the Santa Maria Lighthouse and Pedra do Caalo facing the sea. This Mediterranean style house has Moorish arches and extensive use of 17th centu-

ry tiles. Further down the road, we quenched our thirst on the terrace of the grand hotel Villa de Italia. Later, we dined at Furnas do Guincho restaurant on their covered porch while we were spritzed with rain for about 20 minutes, the only rain we had on an otherwise sunny vacation!



Bob Katz and Ed Sheerin

On the return trip, we stopped at a local flea market and roadside stalls where Vilma spotted good bargains in sheets and towels.

Next day, we took a bus to Sintra, a charming village that was the playground and hunting ground of the Portuguese royalty. No wonder English poets such as Byron were attracted to its beauty! We toured the National Palace of Sintra with its deceptively plain Gothic façade that belies an opulent interior. The Palace, dating from the late 14th century, was the summer retreat for Portuguese royalty until the 1880s. The ceilings were impressive, particularly in Saladas Armas, which contained coats of arms of 72 noble families. The Saladas Pegas has an interesting, amusing history: Apparently King Dom Joao I (1385-1433) had an affair with a lady-in-waiting. As the court ladies were gossiping about his dalliance, the King got annoyed and ordered magpies, symbols of loose-tongued ladies, painted on the ceiling, one for each court lady.

Over the Sintra Mountain, through the woods to hostess Yvonne's we go!

Yvonne, who lives in the artistic village of Azoia, had us over to her 400 year-old native stone house. In her downstairs den that once housed a donkey, her cute white Lhasa Apso, XuXu, resides. We had an aperitif at her charming home and met her friends, Lynn, originally from California, and her husband, Diego, an architect from Puerto Rico, and were introduced to Swiss neighbors Paul and Jean Pierre. Later, we walked down to a fine restaurant, Refugio da Roca, where we dined on langoustes, crayfish the size of lobsters, shishkebob hung on sticks from the ceiling, and desserts that included Yvonne's favorite, a mousse type made of caramel and egg whites. Manuel da Silva, a well-known artist, also an ex-Californian, joined us as he did the first night. Afterwards, we went to his home whose façade reads Terra, Ciel, & Mar (Earth, Sky, & Sea).

On Tuesday, we set out by bus to Lisbon to view the Gulbenkian Museum, the Jeronimous Monastery and the Belem Tower. The Gulbenkian, an award-winning architectural museum contains one man's astonishing collection.



At the home of Manuel da Silva (center) with Wilma Wiesenmaier, Yvonne Roome, Magda Katz, Cheryl Deknatel, Virginia Sheerin, Barbara Piermont, and Wesley Davidson.



Wesley Davidson, Barbara Pierrmont, Virginia Sheerin, Yvonne Roome, and Vilma Wiesenmaier

One part is devoted to Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Islamic, and Asian art and the other to European artists such as Rubens, Turner, Rembrandt as well as art nouveau jewelry. Mr. Gulbenkian, who was born in Istanbul in 1869, was an oil magnate, and lucky for Lisbon that it received his collection which also includes Marie Antoinette's original chair (the French got the copy), priceless Persian rugs, and coins to rival the Getty Museum in California.

We were fortunate to have a knowledgeable guide who spoke very good English for the tour of Lisbon. We went to the Jeronimus Monastery (1388-1533) where the explorer Vasca de Gama was buried, Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), as well as King Emanuel. An example of late Gothic architecture called the Manueline style (1495-1521), this limestone and marble former Monastery contained such details on the ornate columns as palm trees, marine motifs - evidence of the explorers's travels to Asia, India, and Africa.

Nearby we went to Belem Tower, which has served as a custom control post, a telegraph station, a lighthouse and a prison. We also discovered in Belem the divine pastries de nata, custard tarts with flaky light pastry encasing creamy egg custards and sprinkled with cinnamon. After lunch, we went to the National Museum of Azuelo where we learned how azuelos were made (colored stones that were first introduced by the Moors in the 8th century with classic geometric design).

Later, we explored on foot, up very steep steps, through alleys and narrow streets, the Alfamo, the old part of the city. Here, the outside of the homes remains the same as they had been, while the insides are being restored. When most of Lisbon was destroyed in the infamous 1755 earthquake, Alfamo survived.

After a brief rest, we dressed up and met Yvonne at Estoril's Casino, one of the largest in Europe. After dinner, we watched a show that incorporated music, a clown, fire, water, dancers, elaborate costumes and acrobats on swings — a performance reminiscent of Cirque du Soleil. Afterwards, we gambled and Virginia's right arm won her

some money at the slot machine and Sandy won \$200 or so playing craps.

The next day, in two cars with English guides, some of us, headed north along the coast to Obidos, a medieval town that is totally surrounded by castle walls. There are shops that sell handicrafts, a famous cherry liqueur, a pou-sada, and St. Mary's Church, lined with azueloes, which used to be a Visigoth temple in the 8th century.

We continued on to the Bay of Nazare, a picturesque fishing village where we saw mackerel drying on open wooden racks on the beach, and a well-seasoned woman, deboning the fish with one hand, in record time.

From Nazare, we went to Fatima, the famous Roman Catholic pilgrimage site. The Chapel of the Apparition, a 20th century structure built on the site where the appearances of the Virgin Mary are said to have taken place, was having services. Today, devotees still go the last few miles on their knees over the stone!

On Wednesday, we enjoyed a farewell dinner with Yvonne in Cascais in the Hotel Albatroz's private dining room in. Once the summer home of the dukes of Loule, Albatroz regaled us while Yvonne, goaded on, provided the entertainment: no, not singing this time, but tales of her auspicious beginnings as a four-year-old performer in Sweden, to her days at the McDuffy School in Massachusetts where she was awarded a prize for posture, and was told her voice was too strong for the Glee Club. Next, this raconteur spoke of her salad days in New York, her career at Radio Free Europe, her colorful husbands, and of finding her way to Portugal.

Fortified with a little history, good food and company, we reluctantly returned to our everyday lives, a little richer for our wonderful trip, thanks to this indomitable Finch graduate's hospitality.

Wesley Cullen Davidson

