

Foot Fetish

Bone up on history and culture with some shoe shopping on your next trip

By Deborah Abrams Kaplan

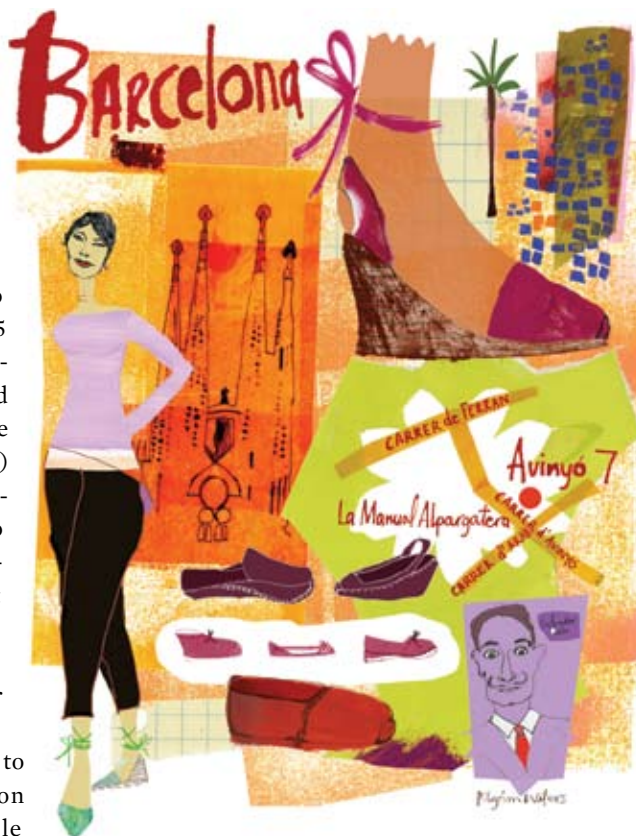
FOR METROSEXUAL MALES and women competing with Imelda Marcos, shoe shopping is a serious sport. But good shoes are more than just trophies; they are necessities often taken for granted. And what people wear on their feet is often a reflection of their environment and lifestyle.

Sandals, for example, have consistently been the footwear of choice in warmer countries, since ancient times. In fact, today's sandals look remarkably similar to Egyptian sandals from 2125 BC. (The British Museum displays a pair of leather-strapped sandals with a cedarwood base from Sebekhetepi's tomb.) Skipping ahead a few thousand years, history takes us to high heels, traditionally associated with women. But it wasn't always that way. Men wore the first heels around AD 1500, in order to keep their feet in horse stirrups.

Shoe designers continue to construct footwear based on need, climate, and available materials. So popping into a few shoe stores while traveling might rival visiting a history museum. How's that for an excuse to shop?

1 Barcelona: One of the few shoes to compete with the antique Egyptian sandal is the espadrille, or alpargata, reportedly dating

back 4,000 years. Eschewing leather, the soles are made with woven hemp and jute, topped with fabric, and sometimes held onto the foot and ankle with ribbons. Lest men dismiss the espa-



drille, know that Michael Douglas is a known aficionado (as was Pope John Paul II). Barcelona's best-known espadrille store, La Manual Alpargatera (located at Carrer Avinyó 7, in the Barrio Gotico), is a must-see. Open since 1941, the shop is stacked to the ceiling with colorful espadrilles.

2 Milan: If hosting one of the world's top runway fashion shows isn't enough, Milan's Golden Quadrangle — an area concentrated with shoe retailers — also has plenty to satisfy men and women with a fascination for footwear. Start off on Via Montenapoleone, near Piazza San Babila, where shoe stops include Fausto Santini, Ferragamo, and Gucci. At the end of the street, make a right on Via Borgospesso, and another right on Via della Spiga. Here you'll find Prada, Sergio Rossi, and Diego Della Valle. If you have time (and euros) left, weave up and down Via Sant'Andrea and Via Verri. In spite of the exchange rate, purchases made in Milan will cost less than the same shoes sold in the United States.

3 Houston: Although the push to make cowboy boots Texas' official state footwear began only this year, they've been an icon for more than a century, popularized by cowboys, movie stars, and presidents (Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush, to name two). With more than 100 custom boot-makers in Texas, modern-day cowboys like Texas Governor Rick Perry (who frequently wears his boots to work, the leather emblazoned with the Texas seal and flag) can really stand out. But plan ahead: you can wait as long as a year for

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a pair of custom boots from a trusted store like Wheeler Boot Company (4115 Willowbend) or Maida's Blackjack Boot Company (3740 Westheimer), both in Houston.

4 San Francisco: Shoe lovers with an aversion to hills will appreciate San Francisco's Hayes Valley, close to cultural icon Davies Symphony Hall and the golden-domed City Hall. This charming neighborhood blossomed after the city tore down the Central Freeway ramp in 1992, following damage from an earthquake three years before. Now, the neighborhood is home to two popular shoe stores. The red door and awning draw shoppers into Gimme Shoes (416 Hayes St.). Designer footwear at this store catering to both men and women ranges from Adidas to Dries Van Noten. The other nearby footwear mecca is Bulo (437-A Hayes and 418 Hayes), which imports its footwear and accessories from boutique labels in Europe and has separate stores for men and women on the same street.

5 New York: Since *Sex and the City*, shoe shopping in New York has been synonymous with Manolo Blahnik and other high-fashion designers. Some New Yorkers can pay \$400 and up for a pair of designer shoes. But those willing

to dig a little and head to less posh environs might wander to Atomic Passion in the East Village (430 E. 9th St.), which stocks hundreds of pairs, from Victorian boots to carved wooden shoes from World War II to Charles Jourdan pumps. "It's an eclectic, crazy mix from the last century," says co-owner GiGi Elmes. Atomic Passion mostly concentrates on women's fashions, but it has a limited selection of men's shoes as well.

6 São Paulo: Footwear is big business in Brazil, the world's fourth largest shoe exporter. Last year, the country shipped 180 million pairs abroad, bringing in \$1.85 billion to its economy. Some of the 538 million pairs that stay home are sold at one of the top Brazilian women's shoe and accessory retailers, Arezzo. Targeting cosmopolitan urban women, Arezzo features heels, boots, and sandals and has a reputation for fashionable yet reasonably priced shoes. While 100 Brazilian cities have Arezzo stores, the flagship is in São Paulo, on Rua Oscar Freire, Brazil's version of Rodeo Drive. 

At press time, Deborah Abrams Kaplan owned 272 pairs of shoes.

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