



My Old Alpargatas

by Tony Beckwith
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I am wearing a pair of dark blue, rope-soled *alpargatas*. Espadrilles, if you prefer. Shoes made of canvas tops and jute soles. Purchased some time ago at a country store in the wilds of Uruguay for very little money, especially when compared to what people pay for designer espadrilles these days. And yet they are priceless to me because of their sentimental value. You see, I grew up wearing *alpargatas* and, to this day, they are time machines that carry me back to my childhood. They were about all I wore on my feet during school holidays in the 1950s in Montevideo. One of the early rituals of summer was the trip to the store to get some new ones. My mother would take me to the *almacén* down the street where I was told to pick out what I wanted from a pile of *zapatillas*, all banded together in pairs. Colour choices were limited. Mine were always dark blue.

When they were new, the canvas tops were stiff, and the rope soles were firm and a little prickly and smelled of burlap. The more you wore them, the softer they became and the more they moulded to the shape of your foot. They were ergonomic and eco-friendly, and allowed your feet to breathe comfortably on the hottest summer day. You could flatten the back of the canvas upper with your heel and make them even easier to slip on and off. Of course, if you got them wet the soles would stiffen and feel like a couple of planks on your feet, but they would soon regain their flexibility with a little bending and twisting. When they are well worn in, *alpargatas* are as comfortable as an old pair of slippers.

Rope-soled shoes of one kind or another have been used for centuries all around the Mediterranean. When the Arabs arrived in Spain in 711 AD, they brought their language, culture, and architecture—and their *al-barghat*, their hemp sandals, which became the *alpargata* in Andalucía. In his book, “South from Granada,” written in the early twentieth century, the English writer Gerald Brennan mentions the use of *alpargatas* among the peasants of southern Spain.

People in north-eastern Spain were probably introduced to this kind of footwear even earlier by maritime traders

supplying coastal towns from their galleys. The Catalans, as they are now called, refer to them as *espardenya*, a word derived from *espart*, the local name for esparto, the hardy grass used to make rope. This was where French got the word ‘espadrille’ that English later borrowed. They were originally made as simple footwear for farm workers, olive grove tenders, fishermen, and so on. But people also kept a special pair, decorated with ribbons and other motifs, for dancing the *sardana* at fairs and festivals. When vast numbers of Spaniards migrated to the countries of the Río de la Plata in the late 1800s, they brought their rope-soled shoes with them. And since the bulk of that early immigration came from Andalucía, Uruguayans and Argentines have always called them *alpargatas*. Unlike my British grandparents, who called them ‘alpagarters.’

In time a Basque, Juan Etchegaray and a Scot, Robert Fraser, both immigrants to Argentina, joined forces to produce inexpensive canvas shoes for the country’s burgeoning workforce. The Fábrica Argentina de Alpargatas was founded in 1885 and expanded to Uruguay in 1890. The company became a household name in the entire Río de la Plata region, its shoes on almost everyone’s feet, and its calendar—memorably illustrated by Florencio Molina Campos—on almost everyone’s kitchen wall. By the early twentieth century, Uruguayans and Argentines were enjoying their beaches and found that *alpargatas* were perfect for walking on the hot sand. It didn’t take long for them to see that they were the ideal footwear for children, who could destroy any pair of shoes in a single summer, tearing around on a bicycle or racing around on a beach.

Alpargatas in my day were unapologetically democratic. Everyone wore them: agricultural workers, gauchos, construction workers, and men, women, and children in all the other demographics as well. They are also important in a historical and anthropological sense, being descendants of the footwear that mankind has worn since the dawn of time. A cultural icon that will no doubt be with us till the cows come home.