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Portugal – Lisbon and the north

Besides bullfighting, what does Portugal have to offer? How about every type of environment imaginable – except desert - good food and wine, castles, cork, wonderful people, nice weather? All offered at good value for the dollar. I'd like to present a panoply of our experiences and impressions, just to whet your appetite.

But first, a little history. Portugal conveys the impression that it has come along way in a short time. One must remember that it wasn't very long ago that the country was stagnating under the regime of the dictator, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. Salazar held power from 1932 until his death in 1970. The economy showed great progress in the '50's and 60's. However the period of decolonization that began to sweep Africa in the late '50's and early 60's precipitated his downfall. Unlike other colonizing countries, Salazar refused to give up his territories – Goa, Portuguese Guinea, Cape Verde, Mozambique and Angola – without a fight. The costs of those military excursions drained the coffers. Then came the bloodless “Carnation Revolution” in 1974, so called because the victorious soldiers stuck carnations in their rifle barrels. The road to stability was rocky for a number of years. In 1986 Portugal was admitted into the European Common Market (EC). Flush with EC funds, the economy began to expand. Despite setbacks due to labor unrest and corruption scandals, Portugal qualified for the E.U. in 1998. Expo 98 gave them a jumpstart. The 2004 European Football Championships motivated further revitalization. The country opened its arms to the world, and the world embraced it.

Lisbon

Take the capital city, for example. While preserving its heritage – architecture, gardens, charming neighborhoods with narrow streets – one can see the ever-growing presence of foreign capital -- notably Germany, Spain, France and the UK -- in the form of industry.

The city is exceedingly tourist-friendly. One doesn't have to walk far in any direction from the city center to find the ubiquitous “*i*”, the symbol for tourist information. The attendants are friendly, helpful and mostly English-speaking.

Located on seven low hills beside the Rio Tejo (Tagus River), Lisbon reminds me a bit of an ungentrified San Francisco. You can cover a lot of the center city on foot; however climbing those hills can be a killer. Thankfully there's a series of funiculars and cable cars that spare you from butt-busting.

We elected to stay at a hotel located in the center of town on a pedestrian-only mall, Rua Augusta, not far from the water. The **VIP Hotel Lisbon** was quite adequate, but nothing special. But it had location, location, location! Our tiny room with bath was located on the top floor with a view of the rooftops and the

mall. A continental breakfast was included for the price of \$85 per night. We stayed for two nights.

Caveat: We were ripped off by the taxi that took us from the airport. We understood that the fare to town was standard. However, when we arrived the driver informed us the fare was about \$25.00, for a 15-minute ride! He explained that the extra charge was for our baggage. When I suggested that we find a policeman to arbitrate, he dropped the price twice in two minutes. The final price was still around \$15.00. So, beware! Establish a firm price including extras before you get in the cab.

The first thing we did after getting settled was to walk down the **Rua Augusta**, which is paved with grey basalt cubes, to the **Praça do Comercio** about two blocks away, overlooking the river. It's a beautiful venue, surrounded on three sides by 18th Century arcaded ministries. A great arch, **Arco da Victoria**, opens onto the Rua Augusta. This is the setting for many events. A photo exposition called "La Terre du Ciel" (The Earth from the Sky) was displayed in a series of tents. The photographer created a dramatic series of pictures all over the world taken from the vantage point of an airplane or helicopter.. This same exhibit was on view in Dakar shortly after we arrived, but it was greatly expanded in Lisbon.

We always take a tour bus in a big city. It's the best way to become geographically oriented and to discover those spots that you want to visit later. It takes two different tours to cover the whole city. We took both. You're allowed to get on and off whenever and wherever. So we first did a complete cycle, and chose the points where we wanted to stop. On the next round we did our stops.

The districts of **Chiado** and **Bairro Alto** lie above the city center. You can reach them by walking, cab, funicular or elevator. The latter is found in a large multi-story department store, **Carrefour**. You enter the elevator at city center level. At the fourth floor you exit through the doors into the nightlife center of Lisbon. We stopped at the **Café Brasileira** for a beer or two. The atmosphere is reminiscent of the 1890's: very long mahogany bar, plenty of brass, an Art Deco motif. It's a loud and busy place – my kind of place!

Sintra

The next day, Monday, we picked up our rental car, a Twingo. It looked like its name – small. It had a back seat that was suitable for munchkins only. Our luggage filled the trunk. Based upon our original description of the car over the internet, we planned to use it with Lindsey and Eric when they arrived at the end of the week. No way! But we decided to try it during our trip up North. It had a sunroof and was good on gas consumption.

We drove northwest about 21 miles to **Sintra**. The roads are excellent, by the way. The **Costa do Estoril** has many other choice towns to visit, like **Cascais** and **Estoril**. We chose Sintra because of its history and scenery. It's a city of castles, the summer home of royalty and romantics for 800 years. It was difficult to choose which of the two major palaces to visit: the **Sintra National Palace**,

the **Pena National Palace**. As we had time to visit only one, we chose the Sintra. It is dominated by two huge, white conical chimneys. There's a lot to see, but the highlights are the kitchen, the Magpie Room, and the beautiful hand-painted tiles throughout.

The Pena resembles a joint effort between Gaudé and Disneyland. Picture the Disneyland Castle with a bunch of multi-colored turrets and domes attached. It's furnishing are alleged to give it a much more homey atmosphere than Sintra.

We climbed a mountain in our little Twingo searching for the **Monserate Gardens**. The scenery is gorgeous, the journey adventurous. The sunroof was open, and the smell of pines was heavenly for us desert rats. The gardens, though pretty, were a bit anti-climactic after the ride.

We ate at the **Tulhas Bar & Restaurante**, a converted grain warehouse. Good, reasonably-priced food.

Couvert

A Portugese custom. At every restaurant we visited a variety of hors d'oeuvres or tapas were brought to the table before we even ordered. Our first experience began when the waiter presented us with plates of prosciutto, cheese, olives, bread, butter and fresh anchovies. "Isn't this nice?", we remarked as we tucked into the offerings. " Boy, we could make a meal out of this free food." Only it wasn't free. The bill we received at the end of the meal included two "couverts", with prices ranging from \$1.50 to \$6.00, depending how many of the plates we partook. We learned to refrain, unless the offerings were very special.

Obidos

We found plenty of fortified hilltop villages, but Obidos, a UNESCO Heritage Site, is reputed to be one of the most beautiful. It's entirely enclosed by high medieval walls. We thanked our lucky stars that our car was a tiny Twingo. A normal-sized car wouldn't fit these lanes.

We were able to park in front of our inn, **Casa do Relógio**, for just five minutes while we unloaded our bags. While Anne checked us in, I wound my way precariously down to a parking area in front of the town's main church, the **Igreja de Santa Maria**, about 300 yards from the Casa. Obidos is a popular stop for day trippers. We joined the throngs strolling through the cobbled lanes lined with bright white houses trimmed in blue or yellow and draped with bougainvillea or wisteria. We climbed up to the **Castelo**, a 13th century castle that has been turned into a "pousada". We stopped in for a glass of porto.

We dined on tapas, including tasty sausage and cheese, at the **Bar Lugar da Mourria**, just down the lane from our inn.

That night I was awakened by what I can only describe as an arthritic crisis. Every joint in my body cried out in pain. I hobbled to the bathroom and downed several pain pills. Nothing touched the pain or even took the edge off. I don't think I slept the whole night.

The next morning I could barely walk. Poor Anzie had to do everything – get the car. Carry most of the bags. The only thing I could do is drive.

Northern Portugal

This was the longest part of our trip – about three hours. We headed north, past Porto, the center of the port wine region, then west up into the mountains until we reached **Guimarães**. Guimarães is celebrated as “the birthplace of Portugal”. King Alfonso Henriques was born here. In 1140 he launched the Reconquista, the war that re-captured Portugal from the Moors.

We drove through the town in misty rain up the hill to the **Mosteiro de Santa Marinha da Costa**, a 12th Century monastery that now houses a pousada.

Pousadas and Paradors

These are deluxe government-run former castles, monasteries and palaces usually located in areas of natural beauty or historical significance. The ones we visited looked and felt like five-star hotels, complete with gourmet restaurants. You'll find pousadas in Portugal and paradors in Spain. You can get a brochure describing the locations and accommodations at any tourist information office or on-line on the Portugal tourism web page.

This was our big splurge. \$120 for a double including breakfast. The 11th century monastery was dedicated to the patron saint of pregnant women, Santa Marinha. Nonguests are allowed to visit the chapel and gardens. Guests are free to wander the cloister and sleep in converted monks cells. Our monk must have been a VIP. Our “cell”, in a renovated portion of the monastery, was quite roomy complete with a nice-sized bathroom and a lovely view of the gardens.

Although I was still hobbling in pain, we toured the cloister after lunch. It is abundantly decorated with *azulejos*, painted ceramic tiles. We stopped in the large parlor for a cocktail before going into dinner. Anzie had a *Kir Minhoto*, a white wine with a hint of almond. Very tasty! “Lonely Planet – Portugal”, 2003, p. 82.

The dining room is an impressive sight. It appeared to be a converted chapel. Baroque pillars soar to the high vaulted ceiling. Gothic-style leaded glass windows. We entered from the sacristy/altar area. The waiters wore evening attire. The cuisine was excellent. Anne had roast lamb, which was tender – a refreshing change from the elderly lambs we are presented in Senegal restaurants. I started with an entrée of caviar wrapped in sole, followed by roast veal.

Portugese veal is so different from the milk-fed veal we are used to. It is just very tender steak. I'm sure Portugese calves lead much happier, albeit short, lives compared to their American brethren.

Azulejos

Painted ceramic tiles are without doubt the Portugese' favorite decorative art. They cover every type of building from churches to railway stations to private homes. They are often assembled into large genre art murals, depicting industrious men and women hard at work. Although some polychromatic examples are in evidence, the majority are in monochromatic, not quite "delft" blue. They really do brighten up the exterior of a house without looking crass.

Some day I want to use them to decorate a house. Perhaps, like those wonderful bright pastel colors that decorate buildings in South Beach, they won't translate well to New England. Ah well, not to worry about the critics. Just do it!

The Douro

We awoke to a misty morning. Chuck was still hobbled, so we took breakfast in our room. This day was probably our most difficult, but most rewarding, tour.

We drove off into the mist. It was slow going for a awhile because of poor visibility. Then it became slow going because of the serpentine roads through the mountains. Chuck's wrists were sore from negotiating the many hairpin turns. We were happy to see a sign marking our destination: Pinhão 10kms. We arrived one hour later.

We could tell when we reached the Douro region. Vineyards everywhere, and on the most unlikely topography. Terraced on the sides of mountains, the vintners had to be half mountain goats. Imagine the Grand Canyon terraced into vineyards. Now you've got the picture. Absolutely breathtaking! It's October -- the harvest season! The vines were drooping with ripe grapes.

Pinhão is a small town perched on both sides of the River Douro. The river is big enough to transport barges of wine barrels and tourist riverboats that originate in Porto.

It was 3:00 in the afternoon, and we were starved. We checked out a few restaurants that were closed. We finally found the **Vintage House**, located in a former railway station with a terrace café that overlooked the river. We had to talk them into giving us *couverts* – bread, cheese, cold cuts and olives. With a bottle of white wine it was a feast, even though the bill socked us pretty hard. Hey, they knew we were starving. The town is well known because of the wonderful painted tile depicting scenes from the 18th & 19th century of the grape planting and harvest process. See photos

We crossed to bridge and climbed the narrow two-lane road until we reached our home for the next two nights, **Quinta de la Rosa**. This is a wine estate that has a few rooms and a restaurant. Perched on a rather steep hillside (we didn't see any "softly sloping" hillsides anywhere in the Douro). Although Chuck's pins had improved somewhat, we asked for a room where we could park close. We took a very cautious ride down the seriously winding driveway to our room, which was actually a cute little two-room house located right next to the shipping dock of this working winery

After settling ourselves we climbed the three flights of steps up to the terrace. We ordered glasses of port (What else?) and struck up conversations with the other guests. They were from all over Europe – Brits, Germans, etc. We had a delightful dinner, with plenty of wine and after-dinner port.

As we lingered over our post-prandials, we noted a group of young men and women singing as they passed the dining room window. Our host explained that this was the grape-crushing crew on their way to work, and that we were free to join them. We descended two flights of stairs and walked through the winery and the glorious fragrance of fermenting grape.

We arrived at the grape-crushing room, which contained several large, open, stainless steel tanks. These were the mechanical crushers. In the center of the room were two 12-foot diameter "wading pools" that were filled with grapes. The vintner explained that only the best grapes are crushed by foot. Four-person teams trudged back and forth across each tank with their arms across each other's shoulders to give them more stability. This wasn't an easy task. At each step they had to raise their feet almost out of the 2 ½ foot mush. They did this for four hours. It must be terrific exercise. The girls had gorgeous legs! They welcomed us onlookers to join them. No takers.

After a fine breakfast we took to the road to explore the region. We cruised along the banks of the Douro for awhile. Following a route recommended by the [Eyewitness Travel Guide](#), we climbed up into the mountainous vineyard region. It took the Portuguese over 200 years to develop their vineyard, but they left barely a square meter uncultivated, regardless of the topography. We passed by some familiar names: **Taylor, Sandeman**. Some not so familiar, yet world famous among Port connoisseurs, were: **Calem, Ferriera, Ramos Pinto** and **Rozés**.

Port

Here are a few interesting tips we learned about Port:

It's a combination of red wine and grape brandy. They began to add the brandy in the late 1600's so that it "would travel well" to England. It is made exclusively in the region demarcated as the Douro valley. Until quite recently all port wines were required to pass through the city of Porto. Now the wineries are selling direct.

There are several types of port:

- Ruby and Red Ports – are the sweetest and cheapest. Made from a blend of lesser wines, they are bottled early and drunk young.
- Tawny Ports – named for the mahogany color they gain after years in oaken casks.
- Single-Harvest Ports – the really good stuff. Made from high quality wines and aged at least seven years before bottling. Includes the late-bottled vintage (LBV) ports, made from an excellent harvest. Aged four to six years before bottling, then aged for up to two decades.

Port should be served from a decanter because there's always sediment in the bottle.

If you get a chance, try a glass of White Port, either dry or sweet. The dry is served with a twist of lemon.¹

We stopped for lunch at a posada in Alijo, **Barão de Forrester**. Named after Joseph Forrester, who did so much to advance the wine trade in the Douro that he was made a Baron by the king. The baron would be proud of the cuisine served at the posada.

Tune in next time for Travels with Lyndsie and Eric where we journey to Lisbon, Southern Portugal and Seville, Spain.

A la prochaine,

Chuck