

Oct 2004

Southern Portugal with Lyndsie & Eric

Chapel of Bones ... cork ... megaliths ... the Algarve ... Seville.
We meet in Lisbon and travel South.

Back to Lisbon

The next day we left Pinhão in the Douro Alto for Lisbon to meet our friends, Lyndsie and Eric. We meandered along the Douro River, then south on the A1 autoroute. All of the roads are very good.

We arrived in Lisbon, and found our new hotel, the **Residencia Duas Nações**, located in the Saldanha section – center city. The only problem was parking. You have to find a spot on the street. It took me a half hour, easy. The hotel was comfortable and clean, very international. \$70/night included breakfast.

We hooked up with L & E, who were staying in a very nice hotel, **Hotel da Torre**, in the Belém area very near the Jeronimos Monastery, where the explorer, Vasco Da Gama, is buried. It was great to see them. It was Eric's first trip to Europe, and he was loving every minute.

We arranged to meet in a funky little jazz bar in the Barrio Alto. The narrow streets in this area are pedestrianized. So, after a drink we wandered. We stopped to look in on a few places that we had read about. We stopped to peruse the posted menu of several others. Anzie and I finally stopped a gentleman who looked like a local. Turns out he was. We asked him his favorite place to eat in the area. That's where we ate. It's a little hole-in-the-wall fish restaurant run by a mother and son. The meal was excellent and the price just right. Wish I could remember the name. It's just past that Fado club on the downhill slope. You can't miss it!

After dinner we strolled a bit, and ended up again at the wonderfully rococo Café Brasileira for an après-diner or two. We parted company at about midnight.

Evora

The next morning we picked up L & E and their luggage. We had traded up from a tiny to a small-sized car with almost adequate trunk space. We headed southeast into the Alto Alentejo province of which Evora is the capital. Evora, a world heritage site, is a fascinating town with plenty of historical significance while still conveying a lived-in feeling. The old town is surrounded by a wall built by the Moors.

We stayed at the **Residencial Policarpo**, a charming 16th century inn boasting painted ceilings and azulejos (painted ceramic tiles) highlights. The Policarpo family has run this inn for four centuries! Talk about longevity. We parked our

car in the courtyard. It was so small that it was impossible to maneuver the car into the designated space. Luckily Eric was able to pick the car up and move it into position.

The Chapel of Bones

After we had settled in, we went wandering. The streets were so winding that we had to leave a trail of bread crumbs to find our way back. One of the most bizarre religious sites we ever saw was the **Capela des Ossos**, the Chapel of Bones, located in the **Igreja de São Francisco**. The walls, ceiling and supporting pillars are constructed from the bones of some 5000 people. The bones were collected by 17th Century Franciscan monks from the overflowing graveyards of surrounding churchyards and monasteries. Some of the skulls you see are those of small children. Whoever designed the chapel was very creative in the use of femurs, humeri, radii and ulnae. The inscription over the front door says it all: " Our bones await you're your bones."

The main square, **Praça do Giraldo**, is a center of activity: musicians, buskers, cafes. Met a squeezebox player who was pretty cute. All of the lunch places were busy, filled with locals out to Saturday lunch. We found a delightful restaurant just off the square, **Café Alentajaro**. We were ushered through three crowded rooms to another, also crowded. We ordered drinks and food, after checking out our neighbors' plates and indicating to the pretty young waitress that we'd have that also. We waited and waited, but it was worth waiting for. Huge portions! And the price was right: \$60 for the four of us, including drinks.

After lunch we followed our bellies on a walkabout. We visited an exhibit of Joan Miro. It turned out to be mostly sketches and etchings, none of his colorful canvasses or sculptures. Entry was free and worth every penny. Toured the ruins of a 3rd Century Roman temple, and a medieval church, as well as a 15th Century convent turned into a posada. Very elegant. It was now nap time. The guys split from the girls, who were certain that they knew the shortest way home. The guys took a quick look at the Sé Cathedral, while the girls took pictures of a neighborhood lady watching her little alley from her half door. Anzie decided she needed to get just a little more distance, fell and took a great picture of the cobbles coming up to meet her..

Still somewhat full from lunch, we ate a light dinner at the **Alentejo**: soup made from bread with garlic butter and Gazpacho.

Corks and Megaliths

Leaving Evora, on our way south of Lagos in the Algarve, we took a little excursion to an ancient Druid temple. Getting there was most of the fun. We followed narrow farm roads through cork forests. We had seen these evergreen oak cork trees from a distance, but this was our first time close-up. We could see the raw red undercoat where the cork had been harvested. On the inner layer of the tree was painted the year of the harvest. The bark can only be harvested

every seven to ten years. We passed by storage yards where strips of bark were piled high.

The Portuguese cork industry is threatened from several quarters. Whereas Portugal enjoyed a virtual monopoly, cork is now grown in several other countries. The wine industry constitutes their biggest customer base. However plastic corks seriously threaten their business.

We visited a Cork Museum in Silves in the mountains above the Algarve. It was in an old factory that had manufactured a variety of cork products, from bottle stoppers to insulation. The machines looked fairly antiquated, but they were automated. Paraffin is injected into the cork to make it waterproof. The factory, which had provided employment for the whole area, closed in the 70's when the river used for floating the cork down to the seaports silted up. The museum store offered an assortment of products made from cork: boxes, wrapping and writing paper, jewelry..... How about a cork rain hat that is as flexible as its fabric counterpart? Eric bought a classy cork cap.

But I digress...

On the way through the cork forest we passed a large flock, or else many flocks, of sheep. We had never seen so many lambs in one place, It looked as if nearly every ewe had a lamb. Those rams had been busy! Even though their fleece wasn't exactly as white as snow, the sheep contrasted magnificently with the sylvan green-ness of their pastoral surroundings.

I've never been to Stonehenge, but the megaliths that constitute the **Almendes Cromleque** are worth the visit. The assemblage of upright stone slabs covered half a football field. Many of the slabs had mysterious rune-like carvings. The placement of the megaliths appeared to have some sort of oval pattern, but we couldn't figure it out. Probably had something to do with the solstices. Perhaps it's more understandable from an aerial view. Anyway, the megaliths give evidence of the Celtic influence back in the late B.C.'s to the early A.D.'s.

We also visited the **Great Dolmen of Zambujero**, a temple-like structure built of enormous (18 ft. tall) stones roofed by stones of similar size. How did they do it?

We cruised a nearby farm village, **Valverde**, looking for somewhere to lunch. We stopped at the **Ricardo Restaurant** to check it out. It looked like a farmhouse with outbuildings. Turned out to be quite the find! It was Sunday lunch, and the place was bustling. We were served family style -- huge platters that everyone shared. We ate lamb baked with herbs, which was absolutely delicious. Such an improvement over the "lamb" we get in Senegal, which isn't slaughtered. It dies of natural causes ... usually old age. As we were cleaning our plates a lady introduced herself. She was the cook. We threw her as many encomiums as our limited language skills allowed. She got the picture. She then introduced her husband, Ricardo.

Ricardo is tall, dark and handsome. In his late forties, he looks like an over-the-hill bullfighter. As we shook hands I was impressed with the strength and callousness of his hand. Ricardo gave us a tour of his winery, **La Quinta da Deserta**, which incorporated the fields and buildings behind the restaurant. He took us out to what appeared to be a large garage, which turned out to be a modern winery. The immaculately clean building housed plenty of stainless steel tanks, piping and other processing equipment – including valves. Ricardo started the winery only five years ago. He produces 5000 litres a year, about 7500 bottles. He expected 2004 to be a vintage year. Anzie asked Ricardo what he did before becoming a restaurateur and vintner. “I was a granite carver”.

Algarve

Portugal’s southernmost province juts into the Atlantic. Because of the warm currents, it is the warmest area with annual temperatures ranging from 48-61 degrees in January to 68-82 degrees in July. Because of its sandy beaches and verdant mountains tourism has replaced agriculture and fishing as the region’s main industry. Henry the Navigator made the area famous in the 15th Century when he built and launched many ships to begin Portugal’s age of exploration.

Lagos

We navigated the narrow, winding lanes of this medieval fishing village until we found our rental townhouse. It was three stories, petite, yet possessed all the amenities. The terrace overlooked the sea and the surrounding rooftops. The location was perfect. It was inside the walls of the old town and was within walking distance of downtown.

I was concerned that our terrace was separated from our next door neighbors only by a short railing, until I met them. They turned out to be a welcoming group of Portuguese from Lisbon. They invited us over for a drink, and tried to sell us their townhouse for \$1 million.

Lagos was also a perfect location for daytrips. Within an hour we journeyed to the southwestern most tip of Europe, the wind-scoured grandeur of **Cabo Sao Vicente**. We watched people fishing off these 250 ft. cliffs. We quipped that the fish would not only dead but thoroughly dried before the fishermen could retrieve their lines from that height.

Within 45 minutes of Lagos we were in **Silves**, the home of the Cork Museum. We toured a Moorish sandstone castle, watched a parade in front of the cathedral, and proceeded further up into the mountains. We climbed through the village of Montchique to a mountainside restaurant. We ate roasted chicken “:pili-pili” and lamb out on a deck overlooking a vast valley.

After lunch we headed west to **Aljezur**, a striking riverside village that has two distinct halves: one Moorish, below a ruined 10th century hilltop castle; the other

called Igreja Nova, or New Church, lies up the hill on the other side of the river. After a quick stop in a café for a drink, we headed home.

Seville

Within two and a half hours we were in Seville, Spain. That morning we made preparations: “Got your passport?” “Yup”. We were all set to be stopped at the border. It didn’t happen. Welcome to the EU. We crossed the border at 70mph.

We parked our car outside the **Santa Cruz Jewish Quarter**, near the Alcazar, an ancient Moorish castle/fort. We wandered the narrow, winding maze of alleys until we stumbled upon our hotel, **Hotel Murillo**.

We always take a bus tour in any large city, just to get oriented and find those sites that we want to visit on our own. Seville is indeed a magnificent town. A river runs through it, bordered by gardens. Old Seville is exquisite with its many squares, grillwork balconies with painted tiles on the underside, gardens, tiles, tiles and more tiles. The Moorish influence is so prevalent.

For dinner we went to a restaurant in the Jewish Quarter named **Dona Lina Hotellaria**. Lyndsie found it in a guide book. It was located in one of the many picturesque squares for which the Quarter is noted. We dined on gazpacho and paella washed down with Porto Fino. Everything was exquisite.

After dinner we went for a stroll. We happened upon an informal concert in the square fronting the **Cathedral of Seville**. It consisted of a guitar and a viola playing classical music. With the wonderful acoustics in the square the music just seemed to fit the surroundings of ancient, charming Seville. We became lost again trying to find our hotel. We didn’t mind. We found something new and interesting every turn we took.

The next morning we split up. Lyndsie and Eric went to cash travelers’ cheques and tour the Alcazar, while Anzie and I toured the Cathedral, alleged to be the largest gothic cathedral in the world. It was constructed in the 15th Century over the remains of the former Grand Mosque. The only remnant of the mosque is the minaret called “La Giralda”. The church is so huge that it took us two hours using a headset recorded tour guide. Included was an art exhibition of the Madonna as portrayed over the past five centuries.

The **Alcazar** is a palace that was built over the ruins of a Moorish palace. Supposedly this is where Queen Isabella welcomed Columbus from America. Lyndsie said it was well worth the visit.

Back to the Algarve

We spent the rest of our stay fairly close to home in Lagos. We ate twice at the same Indian restaurant. What’s that you say? You go to Spain to eat Indian

food? Well ... yes, the reason being that we have no Indian cuisine in Dakar, and we love it.

The beach at Lagos is blessed with beautiful rock formations: natural bridges, caves, etc. Although it was a bit nippy for a dip, we were able to watch a portion of a jet ski competition from the beach as well as from a very busy beach bar.

The next day we headed back to Lisbon to catch our planes home. Since then Anzie and I have had many conversations about buying a little *pied á terre* in the Algarve. Who knows?

A la prochaine,

Chuck