



A Douro Delight

Douro landscape, Portugal/Spain border

Sarah Lee journeys along the Douro River to discover the heart of Portugal's port wine region.

Photos: Sarah Lee

There's nothing quite like it – the moment your ship lifts anchor, the engines engage and you pull away from port cutting a determined path through the water. As the *Douro Queen* set sail from Porto along the Douro River there was tangible excitement as each passenger relished the journey before them.

We'd joined after three days exploring Lisbon, Coimbra and Porto discovering much of the country's culture and heritage of naval explorations. Reflecting for a moment on the ship's long sun deck, I drew comparisons between the anticipation we felt and that experienced by those brave men who set a course for the New World centuries earlier.

In **Lisbon**, we'd heard how Henry the Navigator and Vasco da Gama were pioneers of Portugal's explorations, charting routes from the city's Atlantic shores.

The upscale Belém area honours these early explorers. Vasco da Gama's tomb is housed amid the Gothic splendour of Jerónimos Monastery with its palm tree-shaped columns and tropical fruit adornments, a nod to the produce brought back from Portugal's exotic empire.

The famous Padroco dos Descobrimientos limestone monument, which juts out over the River Tejo, has Henry the Navigator leading a stellar cast of Portuguese noblemen in journeys to Africa, Asia and South America.

En route to Porto we stopped in **Coimbra** to take in the city's university – a strange mix of straight-lined uniformity from the totalitarian Salazar regime of the mid-20th century and joyous colour bursting from its Baroque and Rococo chapel.

Blue, white and yellow azulejos tiles hung like giant carpets on the walls, while an organ featured trumpeting angels heralding the incredible beauty of the tiny room.

The chapel was dazzling in its grandeur yet, just next door, the university's library held further wonders, with some 40,000 centuries-old texts held in an exquisite Baroque room. In a bid to protect these fine old books, the library is home to a family of bats that scoop up the more threatening bookworms and paper-eating bugs!

The next day, after a brief city tour and stop for coffee and pastéis de nata (delicious Portuguese egg

custards) at Cafe Majestic – a grandiose monument to 1920s cafe culture – I took an opportunity to discover more about Henry the Navigator, who was born at the city's Casa do Infante in 1394.

Now a museum and part of Porto's UNESCO World Heritage Site, it was a customs house and mint when Porto was one of the world's most important ports, transporting goods up the Douro and out into the Atlantic.



View of Pinhao from Quinta do Seixo



Porto



Port wine barrels on ships along the Douro, Porto



Henry wasn't a great explorer himself, but he organised explorations from the city's port. Today Porto no longer has a port, but its port wine lineage is ever present in the boats that ply the river with barrels sporting the names of its most noble producers – Ferreira, Croft, Dow and Cockburn to name a few.

The city has immortalised their most famous son in the modern Henry the Navigator Bridge, one of three that span the Douro. The finest of these, though, is the huge arch of Dom Luis I Bridge, designed by Teófilo Seyrig a partner of Gustave Eiffel. As we sailed under the heavy structure later that afternoon, its intricate metal work reminded me of the Eiffel Tower.

In a matter of minutes we were out of Porto's urban reach and breathing the cool air of the Portuguese countryside. The weather had turned cloudy and slightly rainy but you don't get the green of the surrounding pine forests on permanent sunshine.

Soon we came to the first of four dams along our path on the Douro, which seemed to swallow us whole as huge iron gates closed behind the ship before gently bobbing it up to head further upstream.

Docking at **Bitetos** that evening, we drove through the lush green countryside and tiny hilltop villages to the 11th century **Alpendurada Monastery** for dinner. From high on its turreted terrace, we spotted the Douro coursing majestically through the valley below.

Because the river is restricted to navigation only by day, we moored up each night. The following morning, I woke to find a simply perfect view from my balcony cabin. The river lay still like sheet glass, offering a faultless reflection of the river valley. We spent the morning relaxing on board which, with the stillness of the landscape, was more than easy to do.

We had been promised big things that day and, as we approached the giant Carrapatelo dam, we ➤



DOURO STYLE

We joined the *Douro Queen* in the former Roman city of Vila Nova de Gaia, just across the river from Porto.

Our welcome aboard was quickly followed by a 6-course dinner, including roasted veal tenderloin served with Porto wine sauce.

From the superb, open-seating dining room, we also enjoyed views of Porto's historic Ribeira waterfront on the opposite bank of the broad Douro.



Photo © Douro Azul

DOURO STYLE

The Carrapatelo Dam wasn't the only narrow squeeze for the *Douro Queen*.

At 254ft long and carrying 126 passengers for Uniworld, she is the largest cruiser on the river. She is also the only one with a pool on her sundeck, which also includes two whirlpools.

The grand lobby is finished in polished wood and marble and the Panoramic Lounge features a rare traditional brass-look nautical style.



knew we would not be disappointed. Standing like a metal megalith before us, the dam gate came down like a guillotine, locking us between its dark walls.

After the water had flooded in again, pushing us to the riverbank, we had to evacuate the sundeck as staff laid every bit of the top of the ship flat, to make it under the hold-your-breath gap with a tiny bridge the other side of the dam.

Sailing to Régua that afternoon, the landscape changed as we entered the port wine region. The river's embankments stepped ever higher away from the river, revealing terraces of vines dotted by the occasional pretty village or church. Bar the sporadic bird swooping overhead and an intermittent flurry of information from our tour guide, the scene was still, the air quiet.

That afternoon, as the majority chose to visit the 18th century **Mateus Palace**, I stayed on board to enjoy the solitude as the ship wound its way to **Pinhão**. This picture-perfect town, tucked between the curves of the river, relates the area's port-producing heritage in the azulejos tiles adorning its tiny train station.

The next day offered us a chance to discover this culture for ourselves with a trip to **Quinta do Seixo**, where they produce Sandeman port, among others. There, surrounded by orange, almond, olive and elder trees, we were greeted by the legendary black-cloaked Sandeman 'Don,' who gave us a tour of the vineyard and explained the difference between ruby, tawny and vintage for us port novices.

I thought a vintage port would last well, even when opened, but he told us it should be "kept for 24 years and drunk in 24 hours" – the archetypical special occasion drink. Within the glass-fronted bar, we sampled port – a pale Apativ – and then a tawny. I don't know whether it was the fact we had been soaking up the history and scenery for a few days, but they tasted better than ever.

The valley down from Quinta do Seixo is strikingly beautiful. There's the occasional rumble as a car bobs along a hillside road but, other than that, it's silent – the scene freeze-framed into a timeless tranquillity.

Back on board and heading to **Vega Terron**, Portugal's Douro border-post with Spain, the drama really unfolded in the scenery. Steep, neatly planted vine terraces in green and dusty brown hues looked like pins in a solitaire board. Then, within a few miles, they gave way to narrow, winding waterways fronted by steely grey, pink and yellow granite.

Dinner that evening was another grand affair, but this time the *Queen's* relaxed dress code gave way to slightly more formal attire for the captain's dinner. A beef broth celeriac, grilled black prawn with baby carrots and fillet mignon were topped off with a delicious Baked Alaska, presented with a traditional



Church of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios, Lamego

fanfare of music, candles and sparklers. Great fun and a real conversation piece.

It was an early start the next day for a two-hour drive through the Spanish countryside to the medieval city of **Salamanca**, spotting storks and griffon vultures along the way. The exuberant architecture was a sharp contrast to the simplicity of nature on the river, but it was fresh and exciting. We paused in Plaza Mayor, the city's main square, for *churros* – doughnuts that beg to be dipped in the thickest hot chocolate.

The real highlight of the day, though, was a city tour taking in the 15th century **Casa de las Conchas**, or House of Shells, with its shell-encrusted exterior; the **University**, where the incredible section of the painting *Salamanca Sky* held us in awe; and the **Cathedral**.

The latter is, in fact, two fused together to make Spain's second largest after Seville. The old Cathedral has huge cracks in it – an effect of the huge earthquake that rocked Lisbon in the 17th century – while the elaborate stonework of the modern part features an astronaut and ice cream cone, symbols of the modern age.

Returning to the ship, we had a casual, open-air Portuguese-style barbecue and looked ahead to the return sailing. Our journey was far from over and the next morning brought more delights as we headed to the intriguing town of **Castelo Rodrigo** in the Portuguese countryside. This hilltop town has just 80 residents and our guide warned we would likely see none of them, as many had holiday homes there, making the former fortress all the more sleepy.

Poppies danced on the breeze below its tower while storks soared across the sky and tiny green birds flitted among stone buildings. Castelo Rodrigo has seen many territorial disputes, with the Portu-


guese and Spanish fighting for a share of this pretty outcrop in centuries past, but you wouldn't know it today. It is peace personified.

Back on board, we set a return course to Porto via **Pinhão**, where we dined at the town's Vintage House, a beautiful building that used to be the registration centre for all the port wine in the area but is now a hotel. It was a setting treated with dignified dress by my fellow cruisers, but sadly it wasn't matched by the food. It was perhaps the worst meal of the trip – in sharp contrast to the quality of food served on board.

The one benefit of visiting Vintage House, though, was that we got to sample a vintage port. The care and respect with which it was opened in traditional fashion, with the bottle cut by a red hot metal clamp, and the deep ruby red liquid decanted was evidence enough that we were at the centre of this craft.

Making our way back along the river the following morning we made our final stop to visit **Lamego**, crowned by the church of **Nossa Senhora dos Remédios** a stunning Baroque masterpiece that towers over landscaped terraced gardens. Though it has 611 steps, the walk down from the church amid fountains and azulejos tiles is relaxing and gentle.

That evening we gathered on the sundeck for a farewell pre-dinner cocktail and, as the ship arrived back in Porto to a fanfare of *Chariots of Fire*, we sailed right to the mouth of the Douro at the Atlantic to catch the dazzling sunset.

After another fine dinner, I headed up on deck to take in the night views of Porto, a city that had seen so many visitors and explorers pass along its busy waterway. As I reflected on our explorations along the Douro, Porto shimmered in the night like one of those wondrous cities of gold of the New World. 

RIVER CRUISING



DOURO STYLE

It has to be said, I was by far the youngest passenger on board.

The majority of my fellow passengers were aged 55-plus but were a friendly, fun-loving group.

Perhaps that's the nature of river cruises.

The manageable size of the ship means you get to know people quickly and easily, while open-seating in the dining room led to many a sociable meal.

Any single cruiser would certainly soon feel at ease here.

FACT FILE

Douro Queen

Built	2005	Passenger decks	4	Crew	34
Beam	37ft	Length	254ft	Staterooms	65
Passengers	126	Draft	6.5ft		

More info: Connections Elegant River Cruises offers the 10-day Lisbon and Beautiful Douro River Cruise, including 7 nights on the stylish Uniworld-managed vessel and 2 nights in a Lisbon hotel. Scheduled flights are with Air Portugal and all transfers are included. A VIP Home Departure Service is included on every departure date, picking up from home to airport and return. Prices start from £1,795 per person, departing on October 30.

Connections Elegant River Cruises also offers a 2-night extension in Porto from £170 per person, based on two nights bed and breakfast at the 4-star Mercure Porto Hotel (or similar). Private transfers included.



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