

TRAVELOGUE

INFO TRIP PORTUGAL ON THE RIVER DOURO

SHIP: "DOURO QUEEN"

13.04.-20.04.2023

PREFACE

Porto or also Oporto is one of the Peninsula's major urban areas. Porto city proper is small compared to its metropolitan area, with an estimated population of just 240,000 people. Nevertheless, Porto is the second largest town in Portugal. Compare: the capital has got twice as many inhabitants. But there is more than one thing in Porto that surpasses Lisbon. One of these things is the star of the city and the magnet of this region, the river Douro.

About 900 kilometres long, it is the highest-flow river of the Iberian Peninsula. It rises in Spain, goes briefly south and then flows west through the northern part of Portugal. At Douro's mouth at Porto the river meets the Atlantic Ocean. By the way, I got the chance to see the mouth of the river from the window seat of my plane approaching Porto. The harbour of Porto is the place where **MY CRUISE BEGINS**.

EMBARKATION TIME

The distance between the airport and the ship's berth is appr. 25 minutes by car. Our DOURO QUEEN lies at the "Gaia quay" on the left bank in the harbour of Porto. Most of the guests arrived till 7 pm. We had Danes and Germans on board, and we stayed overnight. A good chance to explore the surroundings already on the first day. Cruise Director Wolfgang did the information talk before dinner. He covered all topics regarding ship's life, safety rules and excursions. After the welcome buffet in the restaurant everyone enjoyed the first evening on board or shoreside. The QUEEN had docked just a few minutes to downtown by foot. Next to the ship a few "Rabelo" boats were moored. Rabelo is the type of boat that was used to transport wine barrels. Most of the time, the Rabelos just drifted with the river current, they rarely sailed. Upstream, the boats were usually towed. Nowadays they are used for tourist excursions.

SECOND DAY \ CITY TOUR PORTO - WINE TASTING

Friday morning, after breakfast we had the first highlight ahead. On 3 buses together with local guides, almost everyone explored Porto during the four-hour city tour. The coastal city enchants right from the start with colourful houses and its local flavour. The buildings that can be seen from the shores, give an idea of the great past of this city. My expectations were exceeded even further.

Built in the highest part of the city, the huge Cathedral (in Romanesque and Gothic architecture) is the foremost religious building in the old town. Also, the City Hall with the monumental tower - made with marble and granite - is one of Porto's impressive landmarks. The church and the 75 metres tower of "Clerigos" and the historical "Ribeira Square" are worth seeing.

After the bus tour we had a stop next to the "Market Hall" and a walk in the heart of the town. We could admire more magnificent buildings in the crowded centre. As soon as the shops opened, the city came alive, and we could see and feel the bustling life. The little alleys aside and the small bars and restaurants were magnetically inviting. Unfortunately, we had some rain this morning, but it didn't affect our impressions.

Finally, some of us crossed by foot (on the top lane you get the best view) the most famous bridge in Porto, the "Ponte de Dom Luis I", a double-deck metal arch bridge that spans the River Douro between the cities of Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia, built in the 19 century.

At the end of the programme, we visited one of the wine cellars next to the ship. Porto gave its name to one of the noblest wines in the world: *Port wine*. We saw huge ancient casks, and we had got the chance to taste some of this for the region's typical specialities.

Back on board the ship departed, and our cruise was about to begin. Around teatime in the afternoon, we approached the first of the 5 Douro locks on our way upstream, *CRESTUMA LEVER*. In this barrage our vessel was lifted some 14 metres.

Later, before dinner, we were invited to the official welcome reception with the ship's management. We got a glass of delicious TAWNY PORT, then the whole team and the heads of departments were introduced.

DAY THREE \ PINHÃO \ QUINTA AVESSADA \ MATEUS PALACE

Saturday morning, bright sunshine and 25 degrees were promised. Our next destination ahead, Pinhao. A small village with appr. 700 inhabitants and Mediterranean climate, due to the distance from the Atlantic coast. The entire village is situated on a slope on the right south bank of the Douro River at the mouth of Pinhao River.

Immediately after the ship's arrival we had a short walk through little Pinhao heading for the station. A building, decorated with blue and white tiles showing landscape motives, biblical stories, and traditional winemaking of this region.

Afterwards we got on the buses and within 30 minutes we arrived at the highest plateau of the Douro region. On the top of the hill, we had lunch in a "Quinta" (a winery with a restaurant: "Quinta Aarrassada"). Regional wines were served with a typical Portuguese meal. The owner, Luis Barros (his nickname is Mr. Bean) told us during lunch, a very funny story about how God Bacchus invented wine and gave it to the people. Finally, the rich wine offer showed effects. Later, on the bus everyone was asleep.

Second part of the excursion in the afternoon was the visit to the baroque "Mateus Palace" – located nearby the city of "Vila Real". On the way there we passed a village (called "Sabrosa") where the famous Portuguese explorer and navigator Ferdinand Magellan was supposed to be born.

At the Mateus Palace we had a guided tour inside the building and afterwards we could explore the huge gardens. My favourite place. It is said to be among the most beautiful in Europe, with box hedges and a 35m long cedar tunnel.

On our way back we drove through an incredible landscape. Along a serpentine road we saw countless vineyards on steep slopes. Back on board an active and eventful day in the Douro Valley found its end.

DAY FOUR \ BARCA DE ALVA \ CASTELO RODRIGO

This Sunday morning, we have been sailing along a breath-taking stretch. The riverbed of the Douro was extremely narrow, and the boat passed massive granite boulders – only a few metres from the ship. Everybody was enjoying the amazing scenery from the sundeck.

After lunch we arrived at our today's harbour: Barca de Alva. A small village next to the Spanish border. Barca de Alva was also the turning point of our cruise. At this point we had covered some 217 kilometres upstream, and everybody got ready for our next tour, the excursion to "Castelo Rodrigo".

Our ride took about 30 minutes, and it was close to the Spanish border. This urbanisation is also known as the white village because of the almond trees that surrounded it. The economy of the area is based on agriculture, stockbreeding, granite trade and cheese production. The village is located on a hill about 700 m above sea level. Throughout the centuries, people with different religions had peacefully existed in this city and had created the social fabric of Castelo Rodrigo. The most famous buildings in the town are the castle and the ruins of the palace.

There was a guided tour of the settlement followed by free time. On the way back we had a stop at the edge of a huge gorge. Vultures were supposed to live there. And indeed, we were lucky. With a fantastic view we could see some griffon vultures circling above the canyon. A second stop led to another viewpoint from where we were able to see the entire valley and the Castelo Rodrigo complex from afar. It is "Mount Marofa" on which an oversized figure of Christ stands looking out into the country. Everyone took some pictures of this vantage point and the great scenery before we set off the way back.

In Barca de Alva we stayed overnight. Most of the guests explored the village after dinner and had some drinks in little pubs next to our berth.

DAY FIVE \ BARCA DE ALVA \ SALAMANCA

On this Monday a full-day excursion was on the programme. From Barca de Alva we drove by bus appr. 130 kilometres to Salamanca in Spain. The 2 hours ride led us through the hilly landscape of Castile-Leon, in northern Spain. Salamanca is a World Heritage Site and was European Capital of Culture in 2002. About 150 thousand people are supposed to live there.

In Salamanca two Spanish tour guides joined us. They were steering our groups through the congested city. Salamanca was founded by Celtic-Iberian tribes on the banks of River Tormes. A place with great history and countless sandstone buildings. For this reason, Salamanca is also called the "Golden City". The sandstone was gleaming in yellow-gold colours this afternoon. Visiting Salamanca takes one back to the Middle Ages.

In the centre of the town is the huge "Plaza Mayor". A large square surrounded by an enclosed structure. This building complex is praised as the most beautiful square in Spain. Within this architectural jewel there were street cafés restaurants and a colourful and cheerful hustle and bustle. Salamanca is also known for the university with its famous mascot, a frog on a skull. The university fills the city with more than 40,000 students, giving it a lively, multicultural feeling.

After the city walk, we went for lunch to a hotel-restaurant in the centre – called "Alameda Palace". We sat in a large marble hall and Spanish paella was served, and we had a sumptuous buffet with starters, soup, salads and cheese; it had left nothing to be desired.

During the dessert service we were surprised with another highlight. We have been entertained with a brilliant flamenco show. The group of 4 artists performed traditional and popular dance acts and songs. A very enjoyable act.

After some free time, we got back to our buses and we headed for Portugal where our DOURO QUEEN, still was lying in the harbour. After arrival we started sailing downstream.

DAY SIX \ REGUA \ LAMEGO

During the morning hours on this Tuesday, we drove again along the most interesting section of the river with its extremely narrow passageways. This day we also passed the hugest lock on the river. The *CARRAPATELO* barrage where we were lowered some 35 metres.

We reached Regua at 2 pm and started our excursion to Lamego. The town with around 12,000 inhabitants is only a few kilometres away from Regua. The main attraction there is the pilgrimage church of "Nossa Senhora dos Remédios" (Our Lady of Remedies) high above the city on top of a hill. The rococo facade between two baroque towers is an unusual architectural style. But the foremost attraction for most visitors is the long staircase with 686 steps leading up to the city centre. On the staircase are 14 platforms decorated with ceramic tiles. A pompous building that doesn't attract only pilgrims.

Of course, I went downstairs on all 686 steps. However, I counted the steps and got 626! But almost everyone came to a different conclusion! Probably a miracle?

The cathedral below, built in Romanesque style, is also worth seeing. Although only the bell tower remains from the old walls. The other parts and building elements have been added some centuries later.

The second part of the trip was the return to Regua where we had a stop at the Douro Museum. We learned that Porto is considered the capital of Port wine, but the sweet wine is produced in the region around "Peso da Regua". A few of our guests had not chosen the museum tour, they were preferring to take a walk along the charming harbour promenade. The weather was just too nice.

Tonight there was a special programme on board. The farewell with Captain's Dinner. At 7 pm everybody enjoyed a glass of delicious WHITE PORT in the lounge. The Cruise Director, Captain and Hotelmanager expressed thanks to the guests and to the entire crew. After that a delicious 8-course menu was served. At 9.30 pm the next highlight took place. A group of 9 artists presented Portuguese "Fado" and a varied folklore show.

DAY SEVEN \ PORTO \ VILA NOVA DE GAIA \ BRAGA

Approaching Porto early in the afternoon, we got a brilliant view. The day we had left the city, the visibility was bad, and we had heavy rain. But today almost everyone on the sundeck followed the comments of our tour guides. Especially the 6 bridges and their histories are an important topic of Porto. We passed through all bridges and were even at the mouth of the river Douro and next to the Atlantic Ocean. Sailing in the middle of the river, we had the most magnificent view on both banks at the same time.

On this Wednesday afternoon, the last tour took place. The trip to "Braga". Braga is considered the religious centre of Portugal. It is the third largest city in the country with appr. 190 thousand people and about 50 kilometres away from Porto.

The fascinating city proudly presents its extensive history and offers excellent tourist attractions. "Bom Jesus do Monte", the gigantic pilgrimage church (5 kilometres outside) is Braga's main attraction. Because of the more than 30 churches in the city, Braga is also called the Portuguese Rome. Well perhaps a little exaggerated. Anyway, the charming city centre is entirely pedestrianised, with delightful plazas, bustling shopping streets and gardens. The most beautiful city gardens include the "Jardim da Avenida Central" and the "Jardim de Santa". The bars and restaurants were crowded this afternoon. Finally, we still had some free time and used this last holiday to get some souvenirs. Typical for the region are Port wine, cork products, ceramic tiles, sardine tins and handmade embroidery.

Back in Porto, I took the cable car once again up to the "Monastery of Serra do Pilar", located on a hill above the town of Vila Nova de Gaia, to take a picture of the sunset from the "Ponte de Dom Luis I" bridge. An atmospheric farewell to a wonderful city and to an impressive cruise.

Muito obrigado!

Reinhard Wimmer, Porto 20th of April 2023