

## PORTUGAL, THE DOURO, AND ON THROUGH NORTHERN SPAIN

25 June – 6 July, 2017



Text by John Biggs © 2017

Images by John Biggs and Catherine Tang © 2017

## PORTUGAL, THE DOURO, AND ON THROUGH NORTHERN SPAIN

Portugal was a monarchy until 1908 when it was overthrown and the republic born. The king was killed but the Royal Family Braganza still lives in exile in Brazil. In 1932 Antonio Salazar became PM and ruled an authoritarian nationalistic “New State” government until he died in 1970, but his government continued until 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974 when a democracy was formed. Portugal was neutral during the WW2 and a poor country until it joined the EU in 1986 creating growth and wealth. It was hit especially hard in the GFC. Pop 10.3 million and suffering from emigration. Refugee quota of



10,000 pa but only 1,000 come as perceived as poor and few existing ethnic families, aging population, desperate to repopulate. Currently 11% unemployment, most jobs now in service industries. Mandatory school to Grade 12, free, and 15% at uni 1,000 E pa. uni fees. Min wage 550 E and average 878E. Welfare is 22% of GDP. With a strong left wing government wages are kept high so that money circulates through the system resulting 2.5% annual growth. 80% claim Catholic but only 16% go to church. Sees itself as a secular state, all monasteries closed in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Taxes are high, from 25% to 48% on highest salary, plus 11% social welfare levy, \$500 E pa for average house owner’s tax, VAT from 6% to 25% for nonessentials but includes cars. Our guide admits all this high but then everything is covered and “I don’t mind doing this for my country”

Our journey takes us north to Porto, along the Douro to the Spanish border, then to Salamanca, Burgos and Bilbao.

### Lisbon

Our pick up whizzed us in to Lisbon pretty smartly, but what I saw was not what I expected. From the air Lisbon appeared separated by the distended mouth of the Tagus River: we ended up on a wide avenue with lots of expensive traffic. In my mind’s eye I had expected crowded little cobble stone streets with ancient trams clanging by. That Lisbon did exist as we found out next day in a tour of the Old Town in a clanging tram. Our hotel Four Seasons was an expensive US chain with prices to match but after cramped little British bedrooms this was luxury.

Next day, a Sunday, we were given a bus tour of the main sights. The trams reminded me of ‘30s Hobart, which yes I can just remember. Splendid buildings, crowded alleyways, many buildings faced with Portugal’s signature: walls of buildings decorated with tiles. These tiles had two purposes: decoration keeping buildings cool. The blue and white was from Dutch inspiration from Delft which was in turn inspired from China. We saw lots more of this beautiful work throughout Portugal.



Along the Coast we passed by the 25<sup>th</sup> April Bridge opened by Salazar’s New State government in 1974 and named after him. That was soon changed to the April 25<sup>th</sup> Bridge because that was the

date the New State govt. was overthrown. It was designed by the same architect as San Francisco's Golden Gate, as is easily seen. At the west end overlooking Lisbon is a statue resembling Rio's Christ the Redeemer.



Belem is north along the coast and is a contraction of Bethlehem. It celebrates Portugal's navigational past, with statues to Henry the Navigator and Vasco da Gama whose tomb is in the awe inspiring Monastery of San Jeronimo. The pillars are meant to represent the ropes essential on a Portuguese caravel. Part of the building was destroyed by an earthquake but rebuilt. The roof was especially difficult, stonework held in place by wooden scaffolding, and fingers crossed it would stay when the scaffolding was removed. In case it didn't prisoners were used to remove the woodwork, but it did stay – for another 4 centuries. A 15<sup>th</sup> century castle was built to show Portugal's might as foreign ships approached Lisbon and still stands for tourists. It overlooks another of Portugal's accomplishments, first crossing the Atlantic to Brazil in a tiny two seater plane in 1920s.



We went to Rossio market for lunch, wine sampling and sangria, a plate of sausages and other bits sizzling from the hotplate. One stall was devoted to cork products including my cap. The story of cork is interesting in itself, a source of friction between Portugal and Australia's respective wine industries, and I come to that later. The pavement of the square is actually dead flat but it doesn't look it: looks like this girl thought she had to jump over the waves. Pastéis de Nata are sweet custard tarts that are a cult in Lisbon, thence to Macau thence to Hong Kong, which Governor Chris Pattern devoured to console himself after Beijing's obscene insults were thrown at him.



Pena castle near Sintra was built by King Ferdinand II in mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a folly: a Disneyland of what Ferdinand thought castles should be like. Ferdinand had marvelled at the stunning views from the rocky outcrop and wished a castle built to rival the Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria. It is billed as one of the finest tourist attractions of Portugal, as indeed Disneyland is in Los Angeles, Hong Kong and wherever else. It is a mix of vividly painted terraces, decorative battlements and mythological statues, all of which stand in stark contrast to the lush greens of the forests that encircle Pena. Ferdinand spent much of his later life based in the palace with his second wife, Elise Hensler. Ferdinand was rather naughty and Elise had this phone installed so she could check on whether he was in his office, as he had said he was. Or not.

Sintra town, downhill from Pena, itself is very pleasant. We lunch on canned sardines from Rossio on the steps of the Town Hall, visit the markets and photograph the sights. More quirkiness: to a loud fearsome roaring, this ghost of Spanish soldier rises to scare the pants off us. On hearing the sad sighs of fado, we bought a CD. Fado originated in Lisbon, describing usually, a women's sense of loss as her husband goes to sea, dies, or simply leaves her. Fado represents the melancholy side of the Portuguese, which sits along with the fun loving, piss-taking side of Portuguese. You can see both in their large brown eyes.

On the way home we take a short visit to Cape da Roca the westernmost point of Europe. There is a monument there against which people queue up to take selfies, and quite a splendid cape.



Coimbra is Portugal's university city, the third largest city in Portugal, population around 143,000 depending on the time of year as 20,000 students attend the university there. Coimbra was once



the capital, and when that was moved to Lisbon the university was founded in 1249 in compensation. The university is high on a hill overlooking the town, currently 20,000 students enrolled. As is said of Armidale NSW it probably has the highest mean IQ of any town in Portugal but only in term time. Today 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students on formal occasions wear a white shirt, black tie and black cape, while freshmen wear ordinary clothes. The price they pay for being so young and inexperienced is that they are tortured regularly by the seniors for any infringement of arbitrary rules, like hazing in some US universities. Not that this

student is dressed up to inflict pain: she is selling pencils to raise money for the students. John III gave his palace to the University in 1534. Here we see various faculties and administration buildings, with a nice view over Coimbra city.



In town for lunch in a nice large square, we ordered a Portugal's speciality: sardines. Along came the order with cheese, salad, bread and 8 sardines, with a half bottle of crisp vinho verde instead of the ordered glass. The cost was for all that authenticity was around \$40. There is a cathedral off the square and we had a look inside: pulpit and organ both set against beautifully tile work, the Iberian organ with trumpet pipes spraying the congregation.

### Porto



Porto is the 2nd largest city after Lisbon, pop. 240,000, and is at the mouth of Douro river. Porto is more attractive than Lisbon, what I had imagined a Portuguese city to be like. The Romans knew Porto as Portus Cale (the sheltered port), the English as Oporto, and the Portuguese as Porto, and it in turn gave its name to a fortified red wine we know as port. Thank the English for that, Joseph Forester in particular. I return to Portugal's gift to humankind d later. Let us first wander through Porto.

We dock near the port distributors on APT's AmaVida. We find it comfortable, lavish in its food and drinks. The very friendly crew are mainly from Eastern Europe..

We cross via bridge to the main part of the town. The usual statues of king's and generals whose names I have forgotten. Then we come to the ornate railway station, decorated on the outside with typical blue and white porcelain and inside the main ticketing area is decorated with detailed porcelain descriptions of battles and of the grape harvest. The vines grew to tree height on olden times needing a ladder as you can see. I have forgotten the names of the squares and buildings but they are good look just for themselves.



The building of the Brotherhood of Clerigos, a charity, was designed by Nicalau Nasoni for The Brotherhood in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. The bell tower is the highest in Portugal providing wonderful views over the city and beyond. The church has an elliptical nave, with polychrome marble, granite



and gold carvings. It is used both as a church and for cultural events. Then another church likewise with the porcelain trimming. Walking the street here is a man, no not a statue, and he remained in that position for a very long time. A more pleasant sight is an actress being prepared for a film role. The first sign of the close relationship with UK is the red letter box. We walk back along the bridge to the other side and descend by cable car – over the cityscape note, not a national park like Wellington – to learn more about port.

Legend has it that the English imported their Portuguese red wines but they didn't last the journey too well, so they added brandy. Not strictly true. The brandy is added during not after fermentation as the alcohol content reaches 7%, stopping fermentation thus leaving some unfermented sugar behind. The brandy]is added to make the overall mix about 20% alcohol.. And that's what we know as port. The English in the 18<sup>th</sup> century discovered that this process was being used by the abbot of Lamego, which we later visit. Young unaged ports are known as ruby, tawny is aged in barrels, and vintage aged in bottles hopefully for a very long time. White port is made similarly but using white grapes and is usually sweet but dry white port does exist. Excellent white port was available at 6E or \$10 a bottle. We didn't buy because of an imagined weight problem. We returned home to find it is rare here and many times \$10.



The port is made miles upstream in the Upper Douro and used to be floated down in these boats, called rabelos, staffed by 6-7 men. The roughly 200 km journey down was very dangerous involving several rapids. Since then the Douro has been tamed with five locks and associated hydro power stations, and the port is shipped to Porto by truck in a few hours instead of sometimes weeks. The port is then bottled in the various shipping agents and wholesalers in Porto, many being English companies such as Cockburn, Croft, Dow, Graham, Osborne, Offley, Sandeman, Taylor. We are to visit the Upper Douro later.

We bus to Guimaraes, a prominent town in the middle ages, with its 10<sup>th</sup> century castle, still in good shape. Afonso Henriques a century later in 1128 fought his mother over Portugal's sovereignty and won. He then oversaw Portugal declaring independence from Spain and it has remained that way. Guimaraes was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001 and in 2012 European Capital of Culture. It is on the Camino de Santiago, as marked by this scallop shell – we saw plenty on our travels in this part of Spain and Portugal. We strike our first bout of rainy weather as we walk through the village. The pictures say what there is to say.



An example of quirky Portuguese humour as the holy family travel by scooter. A more serious mural a bit further one. Some shots of the old town of Guimaraes then to the splendid town square with the ubiquitous cathedral in the CBD. Back to the boat and we pass through the first of the locks on the

Douro.

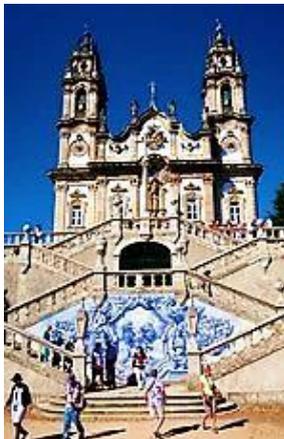
We have dinner at the splendid Quinta de Aveleda which produces its own wine and most of its food. It has been in the same family for five generations all of whom were keen on gardens. Quinta is an old term for farm especially vineyard, so-called because it paid one fifth of its produce as rent. Unfortunately we should have had a walk in the woods but it is too wet. An interesting thing they brew their own vinho verde, green wine, which is well under 10% alcohol, often made from albarino grapes, slightly spritzy or fizzy as it ferments further in the bottle. One thing is that it is spoiled if the grapes touch the earth so they train the vines high from the ground. This strange structure is a hen house. The hens deserve such a fine abode because the rooster is an unofficial symbol for Portugal. Based on a 15<sup>th</sup> century story where an innocent pilgrim was found guilty of murder. He begged for life and pointing to the judged cooked rooster said: "That rooster will prove my innocence" Whereupon the cooked rooster came to life and crowed lustily, the pilgrim went free.



Back to the AmaVida and we cruise further up the Douro now well and truly in wine country as you can see, the vineyards extending 100 km along the Douro. There are three regions, the first is temperate Mediterranean, the second with deeper valleys and higher mountains and more extreme temperatures while the third, Upper Douro, is quite dramatic, steep slopes and terraced stony schist soils protected from humid winds, forcing vine roots up to 30 m into the ground to get water. Lower yields but much higher quality. We will visit all areas.

We stop at Regua to visit the Douro Port Museum, a well worked out display of the history and winemaking practices of port and Douro red. Unfortunately no photos allowed so I can't share.

Lamego is the site of an important pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Remedios reached by 600 steps adorned in a most amazing way with urns porcelain panels and statues. We are taken by coach to the top and walk down to the market square below. We have a snack of local specialities, pastries and smoked ham. The museum has many art works, intricate carpet work illustrating the Oedipus legend and a stunning gold chapel. The cathedral dominates the market square. The look back up to the Sanctuary is as stunning as is looking down.



in.

The Palace of Mateus was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the Count of Vila Real. You may recognise the front: yes, the label on Mateus Rose now out of fashion and rightly so, but it was once one of the world's most popular wines, thus financing this pile. Today it is a private foundation home to music festivals and arts exhibitions. The family still live there so we were shown through the splendid rooms with 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century furniture but again no photos, only outside. The gardens are really splendid, well worth photographing.



Steep winding road takes us to the higher reaches of the Douro through a landscape that is imposed on raw nature, like rice terraces in Asia. The Douro valley is sheltered between mountain ranges, which protect it from the damp Atlantic climate to create a dry micro climate that is 5C in winter and 40+ in summer. Port production is limited to up to 500 m above sea level above which port



production ceases. In the 1930s there was oversupply because of world conditions so the bigger producers on the river side quintas got together to produce a law that made port making illegal over 500m above sea level – the reason being that the rich producers were low down and the poor having to work the mountain tops and they wanted the poor out of port production.

But those farming above 500m, planted muscatel instead of varieties of port's touriga grapes but used the same techniques for port to produce muscatel, which is adopted throughout Portugal as both an aperitif and as an after dinner wine, and with which the once poor winemakers made a killing. We had lunch at Quinta da Roeda at Favaios at 600m asl. Actually I thought their muscatel no great shakes, nice but light grapey, not as lush as Australian muscat. Their lunch comprised fluffy bread, sausages, roast pork, salad, chicken, a wonderfully complex soup that proprietor Luis, Rowan Atkinson's bulging eyes and overacting, said contained everything in the farm but phylloxera bugs which had long been long killed off. And that was starters. The main was a heavy slow cooked veal stew, followed by three different desserts, all flushed down with unlimited white, especially flowery but dry, a heavy red only 13% but massive in the mouth, and the lot put to rest with grappa. Even just nibbling bits of all this produced massive internal problems.

We then were taken to a port tasting at a Sandemann's quinta, on top of a hill overlooking Pinhao with the most stunning views. Our guide was dressed as the Sandemann ad designed by a Brit in the 1920s, the black cloak symbolising port and Portugal, the Spanish hat the sherries they produce in Spain. After studiously comparing a medium dry white port with a young tawny, we lurched down to the ship for the captains dinner. A wickedly indulgent day.



Our final day in Portugal. We pass two dams and in between is fabulous scenery.

Our destination is Barca d'Alva where we depart by bus for Castelo Rodrigo, a medieval castle on a hill top where there are marvellous views across to Spain. In fact it was captured by Spain from the



Moors but under a 1297 Treaty it became Portugese and on the border with Spain. The village has narrow streets and ruins of a former palace and the quaint Rocamadour Church. The church was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in plain Romanesque style, being on one of the routes of the Santiago de Compostela and rebuilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when after the Portuguese voyages of discovery brought considerable wealth back, in this case wooden sculptures covered in gold. There are shops selling local wines

and food. Castelo Rodrigo is renowned for the fact that as elsewhere in those more tolerant times Jews, Muslims and Christians lived peaceably.

This monument marks the Battle of Castel Rodrigo also called the battle of Sobradillo when a large Spanish force entered Portuguese territory by the border and surrounded the town of Castelo Rodrigo in reprisals against Portuguese looting of Spanish towns. Castelo Rodrigo was defended by a

small garrison of 150 men. The military governor of nearby Beira, Pedro Jacques de Magalhães, had the greatest number of Portuguese forces he could muster, numbering 2,500 infantry and 500 horses. When the Spaniards' final assault on the castle was rejected by their garrison, the Portuguese counterattack forced the withdrawal of the Spaniards with 3330 casualties (dead and prisoners, not counting the wounded). The Spanish Duke of Osuna managed to escape disguised as a friar.

We arrive at the border with Spain and say farewell to Manuel our very witty and erudite guide, studying for a masters in portology.

### Cork

A word on cork, which is 70% of Portugal's export trade and which Manuel defended vigorously. We saw cork trees, which look like any evergreen medium sized tree except they were in various stages of being decorked. It takes 25 years for a cork tree to be ready. The bark is then stripped off and thrown away. Next year however it is ready. The bark is thin looking and rather grotty but when soaked in hot water it swells to cork length thickness and more, and then corks are produced. After the first debarking it takes 9 years for the bark to be ready for the next stripping. It is a valuable market and obviously is not one for quick returns.



Years ago cork was running short for the wine industry; further around 5% of corks spoil the wine by seepage and oxidation. Both facts led to the development of plastic stelvin screw caps for wine bottles, where the spoilage rate is near zero. Unscrewing a stelvin cap doesn't have the romance of and ritual of removing a cork, smelling it, and nodding approval to the sommelier, but it is a damned sight more convenient.

This is where our guide Manuel and we Australians disagreed. He claimed that plastic seals are well and good for ordinary wine, but quality wine needs corks if it is to age correctly. Maybe because of the popularity of stelvin, what was once a cork shortage has been turned into a cork surplus for now cork is used for hats, caps, handbags, jewellery, as well as for traditional uses such as floor tiles and insulation for space shuttles – and for wine bottles on the Iberian Peninsula. We saw no screw tops there although we did in France. When in Bordeaux, we were told that technology is improving, allowing stelvin wines to breath and that in a few years corks would be used only by romantic traditionalists.

Some argue that the slow ingress of oxygen plays a vital role in aging a wine, while others argue that this amount is almost zero in a sound cork and that any admitted oxygen is harmful. The only generalisation is that Europeans tend to think cork must be used for top wines, Australians and US prefer stelvin even for top wines arguing that aging still occurs.

### Spain

Salamanca is a Spanish city that goes back to pre-Roman times. In 1218, Alfonso IX of León granted a royal charter to the University of Salamanca, making it one of the most prestigious academic centres in Europe. In 22 July 1812, an Anglo-Portuguese Army led by Wellington decisively defeated Napoleon's French army in the Battle of Salamanca: so chuffed were the VDL colonials that The Cottage Green in Hobart Town became Salamanca Place. In 1988, Salamanca in Spain was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site; just what Hobart needs if our diminishing heritage is to be preserved.

We spent an hour there basically as a toilet stop while on route to Bilbao. Like many Spanish cities it has few or no public toilets. Instead you go to a café, buy a drink then you can use their toilets. This arrangement suits café owners and the city council who are spared the expense and bother of building and maintaining public toilets. Win-win except for bursting tourists. Anyway, that sordid business over we followed the roof tops, passed the statue to Maestro de Salinas a 16<sup>th</sup> century musician who helped developed the equal temperament scale, followed the tallest spire – and what was the New Cathedral. This confused elephant is in the Main Square, the first of many examples of the Spanish love of quirkiness. Salamanca has two cathedrals, the 12th century Romanesque Old Cathedral, and the much larger 16th century New Cathedral, built in the Gothic style and completed in the 18th century. Quick photographs of each and we had to leave this very attractive City.



Our lunch stop was at Burgos, a smallish town of 200,000 but with the biggest Cathedral I've ever seen, dwarfing St Paul's in floor area at least. We paid the entrance fee and walked quickly through, following the arrows, getting lost in the huge space. Massive side chapels with altars as big as most high Altars run off the cloisters.

Bilbao in the Basque Country of the northern Spain has a population of 345,141 but the surrounding region lifts that to roughly 1 million inhabitants. Bilbao experienced heavy industrialisation, making it the centre of the second-most industrialised region of Spain. In the 1980s, Basque calls for independence, which the Spanish called terrorism, labor demands and the arrival of cheap labor from abroad, led to a devastating industrial crisis. Nowadays, Bilbao is a vigorous service city, a renaissance sparked locating a Guggenheim Museum there, specialising in modern art. Hobart has its MONA which is doing on a much smaller scale what the Guggenheim does for Bilbao but we don't have the quirky things like the Puppy, 48,000 flowers which have to be replaced every 6 months with its own internal watering system (see cover), rhythmically snapping birds that beg to be fed money, and musical puppets. The city is famous for its handsome late 19th century buildings, many now apartments.



We took a bus from Bilbao to San Sebastian, a resort town on the Bay of Biscay in Spain's mountainous Basque Country and the last city before crossing the border into France. We went there principally for a comfort stop with time only for a short stroll along the elaborate Maria Cristina Bridge (left) to the beach on the Bay of Biscay and returned via a lesser bridge. Here are some fine buildings and statues, this one of Antonio d'Occendo, expert sailor, heroic soldier and devout Christian. Next stop St Jean de Luz in France. I'll close with a panoramic shot of San Sebastian which regrettably I did not take.

