

Exploring northern Portugal

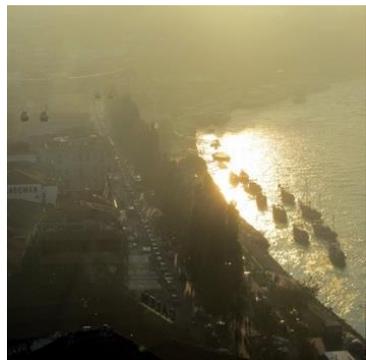
September/October 2015

We had to go back! In 2012, during a stay in the Spanish region of Extremadura, we dipped briefly into Portugal, visiting the delightful town of Elvas, just across the border from Badajoz. We were enchanted by its squares, its city walls, and its bravura 6km aqueduct, completed in 1622. The people were friendly, the food was delicious and we speculated on half a dozen bottles of Portuguese wine that turned out to be a great purchase.

The day was slightly spoiled when I injured myself in a silly accident back at our rented apartment in the hilltop village of Montanchez, rupturing a quadriceps tendon that required an operation and three weeks in plaster. No matter! We were determined to return for a fuller taste of Portugal and in October 2015 finally managed to do so.

As before, we rode the splendid Brittany Ferries service to Santander, then headed south-west from there. We spent three days on the road, fulfilling a long-held ambition of visiting Galicia and Santiago de Compostela, before arriving in Porto, where we rented a BnB apartment for three days.

An article in the Guardian pitched Porto as the latest location of choice for youthful trend-setters,



with hip bars and clubs, but we found that seriously misleading. Porto was perfect for the old-fashioned pursuit of strolling, looking, exploring and diverting. On a Sunday afternoon we set off from the Sao Bento railway station, with its extraordinary tiled panels depicting scenes from Portuguese history, heading for the high-level bridge across the Rio Douro. After savouring the view of the port barges tied up on the riverbank below, we rode down on a cable-car to the riverside - *obtaining the view of the barges and the river shown in the photo to the left.*

There are port lodges along the bank where you can sample a range of ports, and we found one that was offering Portuguese music as well: a lovely young singer/guitarist duo, whose songs seemed to chime perfectly with the mellow ports we indulged in. After a modest meal at a riverside café, we walked back to the cable car, returned to the station and took the metro back to our apartment.

After our stay in Porto, we headed an hour or so inland and spent the next week at another BnB rental, a shamelessly self-indulgent apartment in the grounds of a villa with a swimming pool and a splendid view across a very green valley to hills beyond. We were close to the town of Cabecieras de Basto and used this as our base for explorations to the historic city of Guimares to the east and to the inland port-producing stretches of the Douro to the south-west.

We took just as much pleasure from sampling the local restaurants, which proved to serve wonderful local produce, simply but alluringly cooked, with delightful regional wine with names we had never heard of. The proprietors were unfailingly friendly, reminding us of rural Italy with their welcoming charm. We undertook short local excursions too. On one occasion, in search of a walk I

had found on a map, we arrived up at a village restaurant that appeared to be full of farmers refreshing themselves after a hard day in the fields.



Until then I had managed to converse in Spanish where necessary. This time, when I sought help pinpointing the start of my walk, all attempts to communicate failed. Finally the diners found one among their number who could speak Spanish and I resolved the problem with him. The walk was certainly challenging, crossing rugged ground under a hot, clear sky, and I had to concentrate on the navigation in several places to avoid getting lost. *(See photo, left)*

When we headed home we did so on a more easterly route than our inward journey, stopping at the mediaeval town of Braganza with its feudal castle, remarkably intact given that it is eight centuries old. In a military museum we were intrigued to find a memorial to Portuguese troops who died in the First World War – all the more so when we learned that Portugal had sided with Britain and France in the war against Germany and its allies.

That night we stayed in the mountains close to the Spanish border, in the isolated village of Montesinho where we had been recommended to the Casa da Edra, a delightfully intimate guest house with superb home cooking. (The recommendation came from Kathryn McWhirter, author with her husband Charles Melville, of the wonderful Wine and Food Lover's Guide to Portugal.)



We met and made friends with a Spanish traveller from Bilbao, who so wanted us to like Spain and Spanish produce that he presented us with a bottle of wine from Ribera del Duero – a region far less known than the Rioja and producing, by his estimate, far better wines. *He is in the photograph left, with Leni and the manager of the Casa de Edra*

We stayed at Santander again where we took the Brittany Ferry service to Portsmouth – but first stocking up at the local Carrefour supermarket, making sure to buy more Ribera del Duero wine. Once home we firmly agreed with our chance companion's judgment!

We plan to return to Spain in September 2016 – this time to the Basque region near San Sebastian, and travelling by Brittany Ferries as usual. Watch this space!