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how to spend it

Portugal's Douro Valley

Portugal's hidden wine region is ready for its moment in the spotlight, says Mary Lussiana, as vintners open their estates to guests in creative, historically sensitive ways – and one very elegant resort company enters the scene with a new take on Lusitanian luxury



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As in many of the world's sunnier climes, locals in Portugal's Douro Valley like to wax poetic about their weather. Most famous among the expressions here is a rhyming couplet: *Nove menses de inverno e três de inferno* (nine months of winter and three months of hell), the latter referring to June, July and August, when the thermometer simmers between 40-45°C with exhausting regularity. But in 2015, even before the blaze of summer has crept into the crevices of the rocky landscape, the Douro is hotting up as a holiday destination.

A happy dovetailing of factors has piqued international interest in this valley; not least among them was the recent first-place ranking of a Douro vintage port (Dow's 2011) in the *Wine Spectator's* top 100 international wine list, with two red wines – Chryseia 2011 and Quinta do Vale Meão Douro 2011 – in third and fourth respectively. A success by any country's standard, but for a region that has until recently concentrated on fortified port rather than table wine, it is an outstanding one. Now focus is turning to whites, with grapes – grown necessarily high up on the inhospitable, dry schist slopes – producing some remarkably fresh and delicious bottles against many expectations.

But there is also the fact that the country's wine tourism is evolving rapidly. Unlike regions such as Burgundy, where you can drive from one little *cave* to another, sipping and spitting before bundling your chosen cases into the boot, the Douro has never been especially open to passing visits. Tastings were done at the shipping lodges in Vila Nova de Gaia; pictures of the vineyards

on the walls were often as close as you got to “feeling” the terroir. But just as the food world now casts its lens on the link between field and fork, wine consumers want to truly know the places their wine is coming from. And so where once the mighty Douro was plied almost exclusively by flat-bottomed wooden *rabelos*, navigating cargoes of port through turbulent rapids and narrow gorges from the steeply terraced vineyards that line its banks to the lodges downriver, today wine-lovers are heading upstream in small private or hotel boats to the vineyards themselves, letting the shallow earth trickle through their fingers or treading the grapes in the ancient granite stone *lagares* at harvest time. Appointments are often necessary at the vineyards, but many also have plans to expand their offering, with pleasingly rustic lunches of regional cheeses and sausage at a communal table outside; and visitor centres have now been built, with Symingtons – from whose cellars came the third-place red (the Chryseia 2011) mentioned earlier – having recently opened a particularly impressive tasting facility in Pinhão.

This charming town can be reached on a train travelling from Porto to Pinhão, which follows every curve of the river's edge as it trundles through the valley. Departure is from the magnificent early-20th-century São Bento railway station, where 20,000 blue and white glazed tiles depict the country's history. When you alight at Pinhão's 19th-century station, its tiles instead depict scenes, customs and landscapes of the Douro region. Just a tangle of fragrant wisteria separates the station from what was the first five-star hotel on the Douro: The Vintage House. Originally an 18th-century wine lodge, it was opened by Taylor's, the venerated port producers, in 1998 to much acclaim; a change in ownership and funding problems because of the crisis in the sector have somewhat taken their toll, but its 43 rooms still command wonderful views onto the Douro and the terraces beyond. The Symington visitor centre is just a stroll up the hill, rewarded with a very comprehensive overview of the winemaking process, complete, of course, with a range of tastings. Walking trails through the vineyards have been mapped; one vineyard has 53 different varieties of Douro grape for visitors to compare. Paul Symington, the managing director of Symington Family Estates, told me he was inspired by how wine tourism had evolved in Stellenbosch, in South Africa's Cape Winelands, and wanted to try and foster the same accessibility in the Douro.

And no wonder, for the history of the wine industry in this, the oldest demarcated and regulated wine region in the world, is rich indeed. In 1756 the Marquis de Pombal, having rebuilt Lisbon after the great earthquake of 1755, set down the perimeters of the wine region here with actual stone posts, many of which remain, perched high above the green waters of the Douro. He articulated rules on production, and forbade elder trees to be planted inside the growing zone, to avoid the temptation of adding elderberry juice to the port to enrich the colour. In 2001, a portion of this 250,000-hectare region was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in honour of its “evolving and living cultural landscape”. (It is the second such designation within the Douro; the Vale do Côa archeological park had received Unesco World Heritage status in 1998 as one of the most important open-air paleolithic rock-art sites in the world.)

Not unlike the Cape Winelands have done over the past two decades, the Douro is rapidly evolving a more sophisticated profile for the traveller. Buzzy restaurants open with increasing frequency. Not to be missed is DOC, chef Rui Paula's riverside restaurant on the road between Régua and Pinhão. His cuisine is honest flavours, beautifully presented and redolent of the character of the landscape: creamy codfish soup with black olive oil, or meltingly tender pork neck with sweet potatoes, the potatoes smoked to counterbalance their richness. Not far away, in a disused train station warehouse in Régua, is the lively Castas e Pratos. The wine-bar ambience is elevated by excellent regional dishes, such as alheira, the delicious pork-free sausages (normally made with poultry and game) invented by the Jewish community at the time of the Inquisition.

But the food that arguably impresses most is at Portugal's first wine hotel, Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo, which opened in 2005. High up among the terraced vineyards, with sweeping views over the river, this 18th-century manor house was bought in 1999 by the cork magnate Américo Amorim – currently Portugal's richest man – who set about restoring the little chapel, planting vineyards to bring the total up to 85 hectares (try the superb Mirabilis, a Burgundy-style

white) and renovating the manor house to accommodate 11 bedrooms. Guests come from all over to walk the trails, enjoy the pool with a view and indulge in the excellent local food; the tartar of veal with ginger is exceptional, paired with the Quinta's own-brand vine-leaf tea. The suites are simple – slate floors in the bathrooms, antiques – but are suffused with the deep tranquillity of the surroundings.

Similarly appealing is the acclaimed Quinta do Crasto, set on the slope of the riverbank near Nossa Senhora do Carmo. Four hundred years old this year, it has one of the most magical settings in the valley, and an infinity pool whose turquoise clarity contrasts with the deep-green river beneath. The five bedrooms dotted around the estate, furnished with simple, decorative regional beds and chests of drawers, are shortly to be joined by another handful of rooms.

However, if proof is needed that wine tourism is set to run and run in the Douro Valley, it can be found in Quinta do Vallado. Its CEO, João Alvares Ribeiro – a descendant of the famous Dona Antonia Adelaide Ferreira – opened five rooms in the old ochre-coloured Quinta several years ago, before launching a low-lying, sleek slate and whitewashed hotel next door in 2012. With 10,000 visitors to the hotel and winery annually, he has seen first-hand how brand loyalty is built through tourism, and is poised to open another six-room hotel, Casa do Rio, this summer at a vineyard in the Douro Superior, not far from the Vale de Côa archaeological park.

This format – a handful of heritage- and history- imbued rooms, nestled among the working vineyards – seems the ticket, then; but not all have been successful. Among those that have closed are Quinta da Romaneira, which was bought and exquisitely renovated with memorably faultless, ethereal taste with French designer Thierry Teyssier's Maisons des Rêves collection (perhaps ahead of its time when it opened in 2007, with an all-inclusive price tag of €1,500 per night for two). The other is Aquapura, near the heritage city of Lamego. Most feel Aquapura's downfall was in concentrating too much on being a hotel, and not enough on being a hotel within the wine-growing Douro. That is set to change, when the estate that housed Aquapura reopens next month as the first Six Senses resort in Europe. Along with its commitment to sustainability and wellness, this is a group that usually makes a point of weaving itself tightly into the local fabric and culture.

After a multimillion-euro makeover by the acclaimed Anglo-Irish designer Clodagh, what lies outside the Six Senses Douro Valley is being brought in. The focus in the 57 rooms and villas is on the surrounding ancient woods, the vineyards and the Douro, allowing the rhythm of the seasons to be felt. An extensive organic vegetable garden will provide counterpoints to the local meats served in the restaurant, cooked on the Josper grill and in the wood-fired oven. A wine library, two of its walls cleverly embedded with ancient vineyard tools, will provide an interactive link to the museum in Régua; a dedicated wine concierge will advise on the helicopter tours on offer or book guests for a half-day on the Pipadouro boat, a luxuriously restored 1950s vessel that specialises in vineyards tastings. The wine directors are acclaimed winemakers Sandra Tavares da Silva and Francisca van Zeller. Even the soap, from a centuries-old recipe found at a nearby quinta, is made from grape seeds, olive oil and port wine. A sense of place has been meticulously studied and promises to be paramount.

And what an inimitable place the Douro is to be part of. Aquilino Ribeiro, one of the great Portuguese novelists of the 20th century, wrote that “the Douro region, considered as an environment, is a wonder of man, not a wonder of creation. Every single thing there sings of the strength and victory of its settlers. From the stone, the earth was made, from the fierce sun, the generous liqueur.” And now, as those timeless landscapes meet of-the-moment gastronomy, viticulture and stylish, original hospitality, the Douro of the 21st century stands primed for discovery.

For more travels in scenic winelands, see [South Africa's Cape](#) or [Wine Tours of France](#).

Mary Lussiana travelled as a guest of **Scott Dunn** (020-8682 5080; www.scottdunn.com), which offers four nights at Six Senses Douro Valley on a B&B basis, including return flights from the UK and car hire, from £900 per person based on two people sharing. **Quinta do Crasto**, 5060-063 Sabrosa (+351254-920 020; www.quintadocrasto.pt), from €100. **Quinta do Vallado**, Vilarinho dos Freires, 5050-364 Peso da

Régua (+351254-318 081; www.quintadovallado.com), from €160. **Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo**, 5085-222 Covas do Douro (+351254-730 430; www.quintanova.com), from €139. **Six Senses Douro Valley**, Quinta de Vale Abraao, Samodães, 5100-758 Lamego (+351254-660 600; www.sixsensesdourovalley.com), from €360. **The Vintage House**, Lugar da Ponte, 5085-034 Pinhão (+351254-730 230; www.nauhotels.com), from €140. **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies twice weekly from London Heathrow to Porto, from £124 return.