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Travel

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Where you'll need comfy travel pants: Porto and the Douro Valley are culinary and cruising stars on the rise

- by: *By Lissa Christopher*
- From: *Escape*
- July 11, 2015 12:00AM
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Lined with vineyards and villages ... Portugal's Douro Valley is a lesser known gem of a cruising destination. Picture: Scenic *Source*: Supplied

THE following information has yet to make it on to a travel warning advisory site, but it's important for anyone planning to visit the beguiling Portuguese city of Porto and the nearby Douro region: pack plenty of elastic-waisted clothing because the food and wine are irresistible. Too-tight pants can really blight a holiday. Don't take the risk.

The culinary options range from rustic, home-style dishes such as grilled sardines with potatoes to elaborate haute cuisine artworks on a plate. A healthy respect for custard is also maintained, not just in the form of the more-ish "Portuguese" custard tarts, but as leite creme, Portugal's addictive answer to creme brulee. And then, of course, there are the ports for which the region is famous: tawnies, rubies, roses, whites and more.

Low-cost European airlines such as Ryanair have started flying into Porto and the city's star as a tourist destination is on the rise, deservedly so. The beautiful Douro River valley to its east – embroidered and terraced with grapevines, home to renowned wineries (quintas), restaurants, wine hotels and enigmatic little villages that date back to medieval times – is also a star on the rise. It's

a lesser-known gem of a cruising destination and Australia's own Scenic will launch its first ship and itinerary there next year.

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Impressive views ... the Ribeira in Porto. Picture: Scenic *Source*: Supplied

Porto is an elegantly tarnished city with a rich history that dates back to the Romans. Its chipped wall tiles, peeling paint and rusty ironwork are part of its charm, and it is extremely charming. Its colourful Ribeira (meaning riverside) district is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a testament to the ancient art of tax minimisation. Back in the 1400s, buildings were taxed according to the size of their footprint – hence these wonderful, defiantly skinny, multi-storey structures.

Ribeira demands a lengthy staring session from a good vantage point, such as the walkway on Dom Luis 1 Bridge, but also, as luck would have it, from Vila Nova de Gaia, on the opposite side of the river, where most of the city's historic port houses are located.

Inside dim stone rooms lined with oak barrels, with the scent of centuries of fermentation in the air, port house staff will tell you more than you ever wanted to know about traditional port production techniques. Burmester, the first port house you come to over the bridge, is a good place to start. The entrance fee includes a tasting of one or two ports, but do consider paying more to taste a broader range.



Try the local wines ... Porto has many historic port houses. Picture: Scenic *Source*: Supplied

When you get hungry, hop on to Porto's clean and efficient metro system, and head out to Matosinhos. The fish markets are located here, along with a population of notably glossy black cats.

Rua Herois de Franca in Matosinhos is lined with seafood restaurants, each with a barbecue out front on the street. At lunchtime, in some of Porto's residential streets, locals sit on their front steps cooking sardines on miniature barbecues, the smoky aromas dissipating on the breeze. O Valentim, at 263 Rua Herois de Franca, and Salta-O-Muro at 386 are excellent and, importantly, also serve fine leite cremes.

The Douro River stretches east from Porto and over the Spanish border. Its designated wine production region has been a World Heritage Site since 2001 but wine has been produced here for two millennia. These days, it produces as much non-fortified wine (referred to as table wine) as port.



Fresh and irresistible ... a local food market in Porto. Picture: Lissa Christopher *Source*: Supplied

You could easily spend 10 days visiting its quintas, learning about the sub-regions and grape varieties, eating, eating some more and soaking up the rural tranquillity and culture. In autumn, the hills turn crimson, grapes are harvested and food and wine are celebrated with gusto. In summer, daytime highs of 50C are not unusual; 40 is par for the course. Locals will tell you time and again: the Douro's climate is "nine months of winter and three months of hell".

Some of the quintas, such as the stunning, 250-year-old [Quinta Nova](#) are also wine hotels. Quinta Nova has 11 beautiful rooms, a superb restaurant, and an idyllic outdoor terrace. It's both luxurious and unpretentious. There's also a tiny public chapel, built in 1795, where villagers used to pray for the men who risked their lives carting barrels of wine down river.



Intimate garden setting ... the dining terrace at Quina Nova. Picture: Quina Nova. *Source:* Supplied

A permanent exhibition at the Museu do Douro in Peso da Regua, a bit less than halfway between Porto and the Spanish border, will show you just how physically demanding the journey once was. Incidentally, if you're in Regua and looking for somewhere to eat, try Tasca da Quinta at 42 Rua Marques de Pombal. It's a tiny restaurant and wine bar owned and run by Manuela Morais, a superb home-style cook from a local winemaking family.

If you travel further east – and you must – pop in on the picturesque village of Provesende, just outside Pinhao. It dates back to the 1100s and its worn 16th-century pillory still sits upright in the town square. The village's many charms include its sunsets and valley views; its decrepit old manor houses; its tiny, wackily decorated cafe-cum-bar-cum-museum; its church; and its dim and ancient bakery.



PORTO, PORTUGAL .. for Lissa Christopher story .. Picturesque Provesende. Picture: Lissa Christopher. *Source:* Supplied

It's worth staying at least one night, if only to wine and dine at Morgadio da Calcada, a superbly maintained manor house and vineyard established in the late 1600s that now includes a contemporary wing of guest rooms. Even if you're not staying, book ahead to enjoy an evening meal of fresh local produce in the historic, candlelit dining room. If you're lucky, the best leite creme in the Douro will be on the menu and Manuel, da Calcada's owner, will be there to talk port, show you around his childhood home and tell stories.



Stepping back in time ... the sitting room in the old manor house at Morgadio da Calcada. Picture: Morgadio da Calcada *Source: Supplied*

Between opportunities to wine and dine, the Douro also has an abundance of castles, mansions and other historic sites, such as Lamego's thigh-challenging flight of 600 or so steps up to (or better still down from) the Shrine of our Lady of Remedies; the gingerbread gatehouses and lush, atmospheric gardens at Quinta da Aveleda, just 20 minutes out of Porto. These will at least help you work up an appetite for your next snack, meal or tipple.

The writer travelled as a guest of Scenic.

GO2

PORTO and the DOURO VALLEY

GETTING THERE

Etihad flies from Sydney to Porto via Abu Dhabi and Amsterdam from about \$3549 return. British Airways (with codeshare partner Iberia) flies from Sydney to Porto via Singapore, London and Madrid from about \$3690 return.

CRUISING

Scenic's new 11-day Douro River cruise begins next year. The journey starts in Porto, winds upriver to Vega de Terron and over the border into Spain. Prices start at \$6775 a person, including flights. scenic.com.au

TRAIN

The ride on the river-hugging Douro train line from Porto to Pocinho, particularly the stretch from Peso da Regua, is spectacular. Trains depart Porto five times a day. Fares cost about Eu13 (\$20) each way, cp.pt/passageiros/pt

CAR

If you are confident on tight bends, the Douro Valley makes for a delicious drive. Avis, Budget, Europcar, Hertz, National, Sixt and Thrifty operate out of Porto.

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