

# travel

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Boating  
 blissfully through

# PORTUGAL

Story and Photos by Julie L. Kessler  
Special to the Star-Advertiser

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After leaving Lisbon, many travelers to Portugal go directly to one of the Southern resorts in the Algarve to enjoy dramatic rocky coastlines, sandy beaches and the Mediterranean climate. While stunning, Portugal has so much more to offer than great beaches. The famed Douro River — River of Gold — flows westward from Spain across Portugal to the Atlantic and can be experienced from the comfort of a Viking River Cruise while stopping in towns and villages along the way and marveling at the mountain terraced vineyards that produce Portugal's most well-known product — port.

Following a few precruse days in Lisbon and a drive to the city of Coimbra, I boarded the Viking Henning in Porto for a ride down the meandering Douro River, stopping at several remarkable villages and wonderful wine regions, ending with a day trip to Salamanca, Spain, and finally, a return to Porto.

### Lovely Lisbon

There is no shortage of beautiful churches and excellent museums in Lisbon, but not to be missed is the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum. Of Armenian descent, Gulbenkian was born in 1869 in what is today Istanbul. Gulbenkian was educated in England he became a British citizen, but he also lived in Egypt, spent years in France, then passed most of World War II in Portugal where he remained until his 1955 death. He was an influential oil magnate, a

vast art collector and a generous philanthropist who was dubbed "Monsieur Five Percent," reflecting the share Gulbenkian collected on each oil transaction.

Most notable in the museum's permanent collection are massive, gorgeous Qing dynasty vases, a room devoted to the works of Rene Lalique and extravagant European furnishings. There is also a wonderful garden with several sculptures and plenty of ducks milling about.

After visiting historical Belem in Lisbon's west, where at the Belem Tower, Belem Palace and Monastery of Jeronimos, one can gorge on Manueline architecture — the merger of Moorish, Renaissance and Gothic styles. It's a 10-minute cab ride east to the nearby Alcantara section.

At Alcantara's LX Factory, a series of gentrified fabric warehouses house all manner of uber-cool design shops, galleries and quirky stores sandwiched between chic bars and eateries. There is a hip, throwback barbershop and for non-carnivorous types, a boutique selling vegan shoes. Bairro Arte has trendy trinkets and German design shop Kare sells unusual, well-priced, decorative household accessories. Head to the alleyway, take the elevator to the fourth floor's Rio Maravilha, and you may partake in mighty minty mojitos while taking in the stellar veranda views.

It is a pleasure to aimlessly stroll the wide Avenida da Liberdade, Lisbon's version of the Champs-Elysees. Almost all the international luxury brands are present, but that's the least interesting part. Enjoy beautiful mosaics, plenty of cafes and, on warm weekend nights, impromptu dancing to festive music where young and old two-step waltz, samba and fandango with joyful abandon.

A 45-minute train ride from central Lisbon is Sintra, once the summer retreat for Portuguese royalty, granted UNESCO World Heritage site status in 1995. It's easy to spend several days here in the cooler climate and lush greenery exploring all the sites. However, if you only have one day, see the magnificent Moorish Pena Palace and otherworldly Regaleira Estate.

### Charming Coimbra

Two hours from Lisbon, charming Coimbra is steeped in history, both ancient and recent. It was the national capital until the 14th-century, and the University of Coimbra, founded in 1290, is the ninth oldest operating university in the world — the oldest is



The serenity and beauty of the Douro River as seen from the Viking Henning is hard to match, top. Lisbonites dance the warm summer nights away on the popular Avenida da Liberdade, above. At left, the magnificent 18th-century baroque Casa de Mateus in Peso da Regua.



Please see PORTUGAL, E5

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## PORTUGAL

Continued from E1

Italy's University of Bologna, followed by England's Oxford and Spain's Salamanca.

More recently, Coimbra gained fame for inspiring J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series when she lived there for several years. Indeed, while walking around the gorgeous campus on former palace grounds, also classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, students wear mid-calf-length black cloaks that Rowling's prose seared into our collective consciousness.

Most impressive is the university's baroque library, arguably the world's most beautiful. Its ornately painted gold-embellished ceilings and period furnishings compete for attention with the more than 53,000 preserved 16th- to 18th-century books.



**Douro River cruise stops**

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### Passionate Porto

Porto is a beautiful, hilly, riverbank city with a jovial atmosphere. Its historical center is a UNESCO World Heritage site and in 2001, Porto was designated the European Capital of Culture.

In addition to the cafes along the riverbank, the Sao Bento Railway Station lobby displays more than 20,000 blue tiles depicting Portuguese history. Several pedestrian streets provide opportunities to eat, drink and shop — and, of course, plenty of cathedrals beckon.

For a great view, walk up Porto's 18th-century Clerigos Tower built on its most elevated spot.

From Porto, Viking guests transferred to the Hemming, a ship specifically designed for the Douro. Of the 101 guests sailing that week, about one-third were American, the balance British and Scottish. About a dozen guests were in their 40s and 50s, but most were 60-plus.

In addition to the included excursions with excellent, knowledgeable guides, Viking's biggest asset is its staff: service is impeccable and consistently attentive, from the front desk to housekeeping to waiters. Without doubt this is because Capt. Taigo Marques is at the helm. Gracious and kind, he was always accessible to answer questions about the river, the ship and his beloved Portugal. Locally inspired food prepared by chef Pedro Mendez and staff kept everyone happy.

### Delightful Douro

The Douro is the world's biggest mountain vineyard region, and in 2001, the river and surrounding area became a UNESCO World Heritage site. Wine production has marked the region for 2,000 years. With 115 varieties of authorized grapes in Douro, a glass of the vine's gift can easily be at hand.

For architects, engineers and Lego builders among us, the region is home to some of the most scenic bridge structures. And for budding or professional photographers, the golden summer light of Douro that lasts until 10 p.m. — with the bewitching hour around 8 p.m. — is so sensational that stunning photographs practically take themselves.

After disembarking at Peso da Regua, an excursion to Casa de Mateus brought guests to the magnificent example of 18th-century baroque architecture reflected on Mateus' wine bottle labels. Partially opened to the public in 1970, the structure is still home to elderly royal descendants who reside in 20 percent of the palace.

Wood carvings and furnishings from England, Spain and India are present along side British and Portuguese silver. Most impressive is the library, with 3,000 books, some dating to the 16th century. The collection includes an illustrated version of the massive, two-volume national poem that chronicled Vasco da Gama's journey to India and his discoveries along the way.

Historic, tiny Lamego is known for esteemed Raposeira sparkling wines. Those who walked



PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

### IF YOU GO...

#### Douro River Cruising

**The best way:** Viking has several 10-day Douro River cruises scheduled for 2018 and 2019. The journey commences with an included land portion in Lisbon and transportation onward to Porto where the river cruise portion starts and ends. Rates, including guided excursions, Wi-Fi, wine with meals and other benefits, start at \$2,799. It may be more cost-effective to book air travel through Viking. Info: 800-706-1483; vikingrivercruises.com

**Where to stay:** If extending your time in Lisbon, the Corinthia Hotel Lisbon is a large, modern hotel with top-notch amenities and easy access to the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum and town of Sintra. Address: Av. Columbano Bordalo Pinheiro 105-1099. Info: 351-21-723-6363 (No toll-free number); corinthia.com If extending in Porto, the Pestana Porto — A Brasileira is a comfortable, modern hotel that boasts an excellent location across from the Bandeira Theater and in walking distance of bars and restaurants. Each afternoon complimentary port is served in the lobby. Address: Rua Sa da Bandeira N. 91, 4000-427. Info: 888-441-4421; pestanacollection.com If extending in Douro, the Six Senses Douro Valley, near Lamego, was once a 19th-century private residence that has been impeccably redesigned and is set on eight verdant hectares of vineyards and orchards. Address: Quinta de Vale Abraao, Samodães, 5100 - 758 Lamego. Info: 855-695-6693; sixsenses.com



content than port.

Bread is Favaios' other esteemed product. This tiny village has eight bakeries that together produce 8,000 loaves of "four-cornered" bread. A small, yet terrific, aptly named Museum of Bread and Wine is in the town center.

At the Bomfim Estate in Pinhao, the port-production process can be absorbed in a lovely setting. The Symington family, which owns Bomfim, has more than 2,400 acres of vines in the region, producing wines and more than 30 percent of premium ports for four historic houses: Graham's, Cockburn's, Dow's and Warre's. Down the street, Pinhao's Lilliputian train station has beautiful blue tiles that depict local culture.

### Splendid Salamanca

Salamanca's old city became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1988. Dominated by the 800-year-old university where Christopher Columbus once taught, the town is delightful. Its cavernous old and new cathedrals and the Plaza Mayor — once used for bullfights but now the site of city hall — are awe-inspiring for their magnitude and architectural detail.

Docking back in Porto just in time for another stunning sunset, I was reminded of a sentence uttered by Scottish bacteriologist and physician, Sir Alexander Fleming, who said, "Penicillin cures, but wine makes people happy."

I toasted Dr. Fleming and of course the Vikings, who long ago traversed the area on longboats, leading to my own delightful exploration of Portugal's magical Douro River.

Above, the imposing Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies up 680 steps in Lamego. At left, Senora Rosario, one of Favaios' who together produce 8,000 loaves of "four-cornered bread" in traditional Portuguese ovens. Below, the mountain terraced vineyards of Douro Valley.

the 680 steps to the imposing Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies were rewarded with beautiful blue-tiled landings along the way and forever views of the region's red-tiled rooftops.

Housed in a former bishop's palace, Lamego Museum is an enormous receptacle of religious art, papal vestments and Flemish tapestries. Near the exit are several intricate, Meiji-era vases from Kyoto.

The charming town of Favaios is practically synonymous with moscatel, a wine produced from a single grape variety in a very restricted territory with a higher sugar and lower alcohol

