

PORTUGAL

Roasted chestnuts, a 100-point wine, no waiting

• PORTUGAL, FROM 1J

previous morning, I'd scored a few sips of a Dow port that Wine Spectator had ranked at a rare and perfect 100 points. And through it all were woven the fragrant wisps of smoke from what I now knew were roasting chestnuts.

AROUND LISBON

At that point I was halfway through my 10-day vacation in Portugal. I had started in Lisbon where I heard more about the lineage of Portuguese royalty than I'd ever wanted to know. I saw monuments to kings and navigators and climbed medieval alleys to St. George's castle, which has spectacular views of the city and the Tagus River. I walked on black-and-white mosaic sidewalks where the patterns of basalt and limestone tiles rippled with age.

In the port town of Belem where many explorers launched their voyages in the 15th and 16th centuries, I saw the tomb of Vasco da Gama in the Monastério dos Jeronimos. The monastery, with its elaborately detailed late-Gothic and marine architecture, is classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

At the Belem National Palace, I saw the Changing of the Guard, a far more casual ceremony than at Buckingham Palace, involving only five guards. I sampled Pastéis de Belém, a rich custard baked in a puff pastry cup, its secret recipe reputed to be as closely guarded as that of Coca-Cola.

Huge slabs of dried salt cod — *bacalhau*, the staple of Portuguese cuisine — were stacked like remnants of lumber at outdoor markets. I sampled the reconstituted fish in several different dishes and also ate fried sardines, octopus, potato and kale soup, and a traditional Portuguese dish of clams and fried pork.

I drank port as an aperitif and vinho verde, a crisp, slightly effervescent Portuguese white wine, with meals. And after Isabel, my Lisbon tour guide, pointed out several men waiting for a Ginjinha bar to open at 10 a.m., I tried a shot of the sweet liqueur, which is made from sour cherries and Portuguese brandy. I decided to stick with port as my after-dinner drink.

The next day, I took a train to the hilltop town of Sintra, about 20 miles north of Lisbon, and walked through the fairy-tale Palacia da Pena, a highly colorful and intricately decorated palace, and the sprawling stone ruins of Castelo dos Mouros, a fortress built by the Moors in the eighth or ninth century A.D. with panoramic views of the countryside.

ON TO PORTO

Then I took the train from Lisbon about 200 miles north to Porto, Portugal's second biggest city, where the Douro River empties into the Atlantic Ocean. I wandered its steep cobblestone streets, walked through

more historic buildings and from my guide, Helena, learned about even more kings.

One night I ate dinner at a cafe that featured live fado, the melancholy music that some call the Portuguese blues. While other patrons chattered through the singing, I watched a man in his 70s, wearing an old-fashioned but elegant double-breasted gray suit, dance in place at the back of the room, unsmiling, aloof, focused on the music.

The old port houses — Ferreira, Sandeman, Graham, Warre, Cockburn, Barros, Dow and more — line the left bank of the Douro River in a town called Vila Nova de Gaia, just across the river from Porto. Years ago, flat-bottom boats with pointed ends like those of gondolas brought barrels of port down the river to Vila Nova de Gaia, where the fortified wine was aged and bottled. Now the river has been dammed. The wine is transported by tanker truck, and the boats are for tourists.

Helena had set me up with a tour and tasting at Graham, which is owned by the same company that now owns Warre and Dow, and which, like the rest of the port industry, is rooted in Great Britain. Walking past huge wooden barrels, I learned the differences between tawny and ruby ports, single-year vintage ports and blended ports.

The Graham guide also explained the traditional crushing of the grapes: The human foot, he said, is perfect for crushing grapes without breaking the grape-seed, which would release bitterness into the juice. Graham's grapes are still crushed by people stomping, but some wineries use flexible robotic feet made of silicon that come close to duplicating the properties of a human foot.

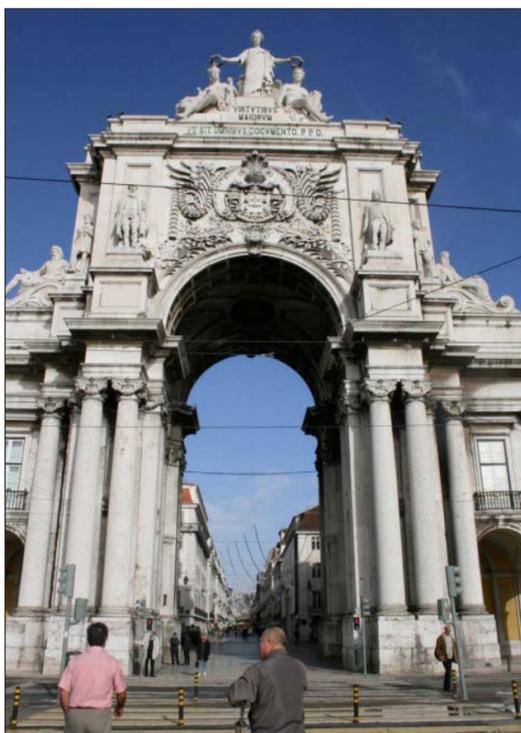
A PERFECT SCORE

The guide lined up five glasses of port on the counter, hesitated, then reached under the counter for a bottle and poured a taste of the Dow 2007 Vintage Port into a sixth glass. For days people had been bragging about this wine, which Wine Spectator had given 100 points a few months earlier, and unexpectedly, I now had the opportunity to taste it.

There was no spitting bucket, no slip of paper for making notes, no ceremony. As I sipped, the tasting host talked casually about how well port pairs with bleu cheese or dark chocolate.

I rolled the Dow 2007 across my tongue, held it in my mouth. It tasted lovely. But all the samples I tasted were smooth, sweet and refined, and I have to admit that the difference between a 90-point port and a 100-point port was lost on me.

The next morning, as Fernando drove through the Douro Valley, he, too, bragged about the Dow 2007. "I had some yesterday," I said, "at Graham." His eyes widened. "You are very lucky person," he said. I said I thought so, too.



LISBON GATEWAY: The Triumphal Arch links Commerce Square with Augusta Street.



OVER A BARREL: Port ages in the cellar of the Quinta da Pacheca winery in the Douro River Valley.



WHERE TRADITION LIVES: Quinta da Pacheca has been in the Pimentel family for more than a century.

We stopped at Quinta da Pacheca, a small winery that has been in the Pimentel family for more than a century. Recently the family opened a small restaurant on the property and refurbished an 18th century house and converted it to a 14-room hotel. The hotel was full during the harvest, and many other people came to watch the crush, said Tania, who gave me a tour.

"We hire 50 men for the first day of crushing," Tania said as we stood by the big granite tubs that had held the

grapes. "The men are wearing shorts. They line up shoulder to shoulder, their arms on each other's shoulders. Only the leader speaks: 'Right, left, 1-2-3-4,' and they methodically step and crush for a couple hours. Then they turn on the music, they dance and drink and continue to crush the grapes." The crush continues for days, she said, but with fewer men and without the music and dancing.

She poured five wines for me, including a white port, the first I'd had, which was not as sweet as red port and had more wine-y flavor.

In the kitchen of the empty restaurant, I got a bonus that only another foodie would appreciate: a tutorial on how dried salted cod is reconstituted and made into edible fish. Then Fernando and I ate our lunch of roast cod by a big picture window with a gorgeous view of the vineyards, the olive trees that marked the end of the property and the vines that climbed the slope on the opposite side of the river. Sipping port with rich chocolate cake, I briefly wondered if I could rearrange the last days of my trip and stay here.

Our last stop was Quinta do Seixo, a vineyard owned by Sandeman 30 minutes east of the Pacheca winery. My young guide was dressed as Sandeman's trademark "Don" with a black cape representing Portugal and a wide-brimmed *caballero* hat representing the company's Spanish sherry business. He gave me the now-familiar tour of wine casks and gran-



OH, PORTO! Porto is one of the oldest European centers and is registered as a World Heritage Site.



NATIONAL TREASURE: This market in Porto sells a variety of fish, a staple of the Portuguese diet.

Going to Portugal

Getting there: Flights from Miami to Lisbon used to involve a change of planes, but last week, TAP Portugal launched nonstop flights between the two cities four days a week, (five days July 8 to Sept. 18). It is an eight-hour flight, with roundtrip fares starting at \$950. Information: www.flytap.com

Booking a trip: I used Food & Wine Trails, a Northern California travel agency that specializes in wine-related travel to Italy, Spain and Portugal. Along with lodging and transportation, the agency arranged for personalized tours of Lisbon, Porto and the Douro Valley. 800-367-5348, www.foodandwinetrails.com.

Information: Portuguese National Tourism Office, www.visitportugal.com

WHERE TO STAY

Tivoli Jardim is in the heart of Lisbon, a block off Avenida da Libertade, at Rua Júlio César Machado, 7/9 1250-135; 011-351 21 359 10 00; www.tivolihotels.com. This 119-room hotel has a popular restaurant, Olivier, and shares a pool and gym with the Tivoli Lisboa next door. Summer rates from about \$200.

Hotel Teatro, which opened in May 2010, sits on the site of the Teatro Baquet, a theater that was the cultural hub for Porto before it was destroyed by fire in 1988. The 74-room hotel, reminiscent of W hotels, has a theater-themed decor. It is part of the Design Hotels group. Restaurant, bar and gym. Glass walls allow little bathroom privacy. Rua Sa da Bandeira, 84; 011-351 22 4000-427; <http://hotelteatro.pt>. Summer rates from \$150.

Wine House Hotel at Quinta da Pacheca winery in the Douro Valley, Apt 3, 5051 Régua; 011-351 254 313 228; www.QuintaDaPacheca.com or enoturismo@quintada pacheca.com. An 18th century house converted to a 14-room hotel with light woods, modern design, airy feel. Summer rates from \$190.

prised me by saying the crush was done by machine. At the end of the tour, he poured six samples of port, pointed out the store, and left.

Among the tastings was a white port that was sweeter and smoother than the one I had sampled at Pacheca, and I could imagine myself sipping it cold back in Florida.

The next morning, I caught the train back to Lisbon. Rain came down in fat drops during the ride, and the air was cool when I got off the train. As I left the station, I bought a paper cone of chestnuts, still warm, and ate them during the taxi ride to my hotel. It was, after all, the time of the chestnut trees.

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