

## Barrels of fun and wine in Porto

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Michael Barrientos / The New York Times

Tasting port at the Offley cellars in Vila Nova da Gaia in Porto, Portugal.

I read descriptions that called Portugal's second-largest city "gritty" and "emerging." So as we drove into Porto the first evening of our visit, I anticipated towering smokestacks belching tinted steam into an orange sky.

What I found instead was a series of charming old stone buildings, church squares and open-air markets. There's a river that glistens as it snakes through a city that clings precariously to cliffs and a night-life scene that rivals any European hot spot on a summer night.

I had a guidebook that claimed that all of Porto could be seen in a day of brisk

sightseeing. After one day, I extended my stay to four nights.

I had never heard of Porto until my partner, Alex, and I started planning this vacation, which would take us up the coast of Portugal and into northwestern Spain. Porto was a curiosity, not a priority. By the end of the trip, I concluded that Porto was the highlight of our Iberian adventure. To me, the city seemed a blend of Lisbon and Salzburg, Austria, soaked in a barrel of delicious port wine.

Perhaps this is why I have such fond — and foggy — memories of Porto. It's a city fueled by port wine, or at least that's what draws large numbers of tourists down to the Ribeira neighborhood along the Douro River. The Ribeira is lined with cafes selling port, and on the other side of the river, in a town called Gaia, there are wine caves that offer tours and tastings.

Much like champagne, the only true port comes from the grapes grown along the Douro. At one time, the wine was brought along the river in flat-bottom boats to be processed and stored in Porto and Gaia. Trucks now handle that work, but the boats are still plentiful and the facilities that age port now host tours.

Before Portugal, I was under the impression that port wine came in one variety — sticky, overly sweet and red. I was in no rush to sip it, even in its birthplace. I was too busy consuming the very tasty, cheap and ubiquitous Vinho Verde. But after I tried a dry white port, it became my standard after-dinner drink the remainder of our stay.

At this point in the story, I would start telling you all about our adventures in the wine cave tours in Gaia. Those didn't happen. The streets around the river were so swarming with tourists (mostly drunk) that we preferred looking for port in bars and cafes, ignoring the guidebook's

advice that the caves tours were a necessity.

Instead, we decided to get a view of the entire scene from a building that is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The 17th-century Serra do Pilar Monastery, which looms impressively on a hill alongside the river, opened to the public for the first time last December, and probably offers the best views of the city and the nearby bridge built by Gustave Eiffel, best known for the Eiffel Tower.

Because the monastery doesn't offer port wine, and it requires a bit of walking to reach, it's one of the more peaceful spots to sit outside and enjoy the view. It was completed in 1670 and inhabited by Augustine friars. There are tours of the chapel and courtyard, along with a Stairmaster-worthy hike to the rooftop. Once there, we could see a continuous jumble of white buildings with terra-cotta roofs.

After the serenity of the monastery, we took the nearby Teleferico funicular, which runs parallel to the river on the Gaia side. It deposited us on a stretch that felt a bit like a carnival. It was lined with newly built restaurants that practically screamed "Tourist trap! Don't eat here!" With a bit of walking to downtown (warning: Be prepared to walk when you are in Porto), we discovered celebrity chef Rui Paula's restaurant DOP inside a former 14th-century convent. DOP stands for Degustar e Ousar no Porto ("Daring and Tasting in Porto").

I'm not one to take pictures of my food at restaurants. I usually feel that food is meant to be digested and not shared on Facebook. But I took out my camera — the good one, no less — and photographed my steak tartare and the beautiful presentation of the truffle-style alheira (a meat and flour-based sausage) on a bed of toasted bread, bacon and almonds. I was already feeling a bit like a celebrity eating here, and that imaginary status was elevated even further when Paula came out to ask if we were enjoying our food. I was officially starstruck.

Our waiter recommended so many good wines that I was pie-eyed by the time we left, and I still had more port to sample.

These boozy dinners were a fine jumping-off point for clubbing. Porto's booming nightlife is centered around the Baxia neighborhood, and we could hop from the uber cool Candelabro to the über-gay Passos Manuel to the über-quirky Galeria de Paris. We walked, spotted an interesting place, grabbed a drink and moved on to the next destination. After 1 a.m., some streets were impassable for cars because pedestrian traffic was so thick. Despite Portugal's current dire economic straits and the glut of empty real estate in some sections of Porto, the city's restaurant and bar scene is rapidly growing.

I found the best place to nurse my hangover was with breakfast at the Cafe Majestic. I made a straightforward choice of the cheese and tomato omelet. The menu is fairly limited, but the truth is that the Majestic is a necessity for the decor more so than the food. It's a beautiful slice of Porto history that feels like a trip back to the Belle Epoque with cherubs playing on the walls. Much the same way people generally don't purchase books at the beautiful beaux arts bookstore Livraria Lello, a lot of people don't focus on food as much as the decor at Majestic. However, my omelet was perfect for my infirm condition.

By the time we arrived in Porto, we had spent a week seeing nearly every church in Lisbon, so we did most of our architectural admiration from the outside during leisurely strolls. I found the key difference between Lisbon and Porto was the pace. We spent afternoons just walking aimlessly down Rua de Santa Catarina, the main shopping boulevard, or finding gems such as the open air market Mercado Porto Belo, where vendors sold clothes from young designers,

scratchy vinyl records and organic food. Lisbon felt hurried and overwhelming; Porto felt more like a vacation destination.

There is also a cultural renaissance in Porto, thanks in part to buildings such as the avant-garde Rem Koolhaas-designed Casa da Música, which opened in 2005. With its odd angles and strangely-sloping rooms, it feels as if Willy Wonka and Dr. Seuss collaborated with Frank Gehry on the design. I recommend a tour and seeing a concert in the acoustically perfect main hall, which is adorned in gold leaf.

As interesting as Koolhaas' work is, my favorite building in the city was a pink private residence-turned-museum with 44 acres of gardens. The Fundação de Serralves encompasses a 1930s Art Deco house, a chapel and a modern art museum with 14 galleries that opened in 1999.

The house looks as if it was picked up by a tornado in Miami's South Beach and dropped in northern Portugal. On the late afternoon when we visited, there were just a few other people at the museum and it felt as if we had the place mostly to ourselves. We walked through the sunny rooms and strolled as much of the gardens as we could, hearing only birds and distant jazz from a concert at the museum.

Everything about the day was ideal. As we took a long walk from the museum to the sophisticated Foz neighborhood for dinner on the roof deck of the Restaurante Museu Dos Presuntos, the description of Porto as "gritty" and "emerging" couldn't have been further from my mind. Or maybe I just forget after all the port.