

June 30. It is a mild and partly cloudy day in Portugal. We have just been through a very deep lock with a height of 35 metres and are now moving smoothly along the Douro River watching the trees and villages go by. An occasional train weaves its way through tunnels along the riverbank. There are a surprisingly large number of gum trees in Portugal as they are grown to make paper. Unfortunately, some of the guides don't realise that we Australians know more about eucalypts than they do. We have been erroneously told that the oil comes from the flowers, that the fire spreads when the seeds pop in the heat and that the paper is made from the paper bark species.



Anyway, back to the beginning of our adventure. Madeira is a small island that is similar in size to King Island. Madeira is very hilly but with an amazing series of tunnels and bridges which makes getting around very efficient. It is a 1.5 hour flight SW of Lisbon. Tourism is their main income but they also export bananas and Madeira wine. We tried a bit of the wine, as you would expect, and enjoyed it very much. We also learnt about their local cocktail, a Poncha, which is made from cane sugar white rum, orange juice, lemon juice and ice. Poncha packs quite a punch, but

it is nice. A very Portuguese delicacy is their small custard tarts- yummy, much more interesting than the ones at home.

Our hotel, Reid's Palace, was perched on the top of a cliff, with stairs down to a pool incorporating the natural rocks at the base of the cliff. Our room faced the small harbour of Funchal on the Atlantic Ocean. The weather was mild but a bit humid. All the grapes here are grown on elevated vines to allow air circulation to prevent the grapes from getting mould. Our hotel was built in 1891 and has been maintained in the style of the period, complete with a billiard room, a bridge room (for card playing), at least 3 grand pianos as well as the 3 pools etc. Hercule Poirot would not have been out of place in the elegant décor. Part of the film *Live and let die* was filmed there. Pictures on the wall showed Churchill from his stay there.

The island is covered in hydrangeas and agapanthus. They are not native to the island but grow well so agapanthus are used to decorate and stabilise the verges of many of the roads. The only native flower that we found was this *Pride of Madeira*. There are small lizards everywhere but we didn't see much sign of any other animal or bird life.



The scenery on this mountainous volcanic island was magnificent. The houses are mostly white or grey with terra cotta roof tiles. The hills are terraced so agriculture is mainly manual; machines are not able to get to the vines or banana palms for harvesting.

On a trip to the botanic gardens we saw bumble bees, dahlias, kangaroo paws, grevillea and yakka as well as a few unknown plants such as this interesting red bell.



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I was also taken by these cute little frogs around the water lillies.



On another trip we walked along a lavada – these are channels built by early settlers to carry the water from the mountains down to the fertile flatter areas to grow crops.



The coast of Madeira is a series of towns built into the cliffs and hills. We were driven around almost the entire coast in a day by a knowledgeable driver who also introduced us to ponchas.

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After 4 days of luxury on Madeira we flew to Lisbon which is also very hilly. From our hotel, the Ritz Four Seasons, we walked down the Avenue of Liberty, a very wide boulevard with expensive shops and delightful market stalls. I bought myself a lovely chunky silver chain necklace.

Lisbon city is set on the banks of the Tagus River with an old castle overlooking the city. Buses and trams wind their way around very narrow streets with a mixture of colourful old buildings and modern structures.

Our experience of Lisbon was soured by the fact that I was pick pocketed, losing money and credit cards. To add insult to injury the hotel charged 180 Euros (about \$270) for 3 short phone calls to Australia to cancel cards. I felt as if I'd been robbed twice! Fortunately I will be able to claim it on insurance thanks to a lovely young guide who took me to the police station to get a police report which she will translate and send to me.

A tour the next day took us to a magnificent old monastery with intricate carving and painting throughout. Graham also went to the maritime museum, the main focus being the Portuguese Empire made possible by Vasco da Gama discovering a passage to India.

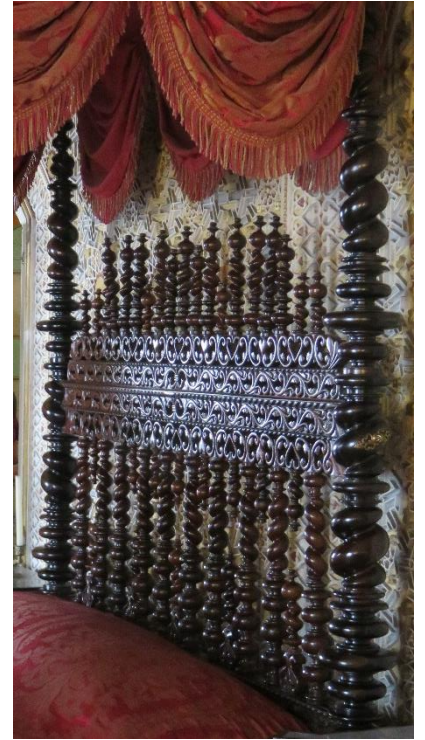


Our package included a tram trip around Lisbon on this rattler made in 1937. For normal commuting, a fleet of modern trams use the same lines. Souvenir shops feature the old trams on every consumer item imaginable. The other universal souvenirs are cork purses and enamel roosters.



A day trip to the mountains took us to a picturesque little town called Sintra 80km from Lisbon and a visit to the nearby Pena National Palace. This Moorish styled palace has also been a monastery before being opened to the public. The whole of this very large palace and all the furniture are works of art. Highly decorated ceilings, elaborate tiled areas and intricate carved furniture. It is extremely difficult to choose just one or 2 pictures to convey the grandeur and size of the building but I will try. This shows a section of ceiling, some wall tiles, 2 of the many towers, the main entrance and a bedhead. All of this built on top of a hill.





The palace visit was followed by a traditional dish of in-season sardines for lunch, a walk around the quaint town of Sintra followed by a drive to the westerly most point on the European continent. How the buses got past each other on some of the extremely narrow corners in the town defies the laws of physics (at least the laws known in Australia).



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We left Lisbon by bus heading north, stopping briefly in Coimbra. We had a tour of the university at Coimbra which was founded in 1190. The students have a uniform which they wear on occasions. This photo shows the girls. The boy's dress is the same, but with trousers.



After arriving in Porto, at the mouth of the Douro River we boarded our boat the Amavida which was home for 7 nights. Porto is where all the wine in the area is matured so all the wine houses have a storage cellar, including Graham's.



Porto has a grand railway station that is a converted convent. It is decorated with tile pictures on all 4 walls of the entrance hall. It is obviously a tourist stop as most of the people there were taking photos, not catching trains.



After visiting yet another cathedral in Porto we had a wine tour and tasted two ports, including a white port. That afternoon we started our journey up the Douro, passing through the first lock. The evening brought light entertainment in the form of a university group of musicians – all from a background in medical technology and they were great fun. Many Portuguese have a good sense of humour and their command of English is excellent. An excursion from the boat to the town of Guimaraes took us to yet another series of castles and historic churches and an opportunity to try the coffee and the outstanding local specialty-custard tarts.

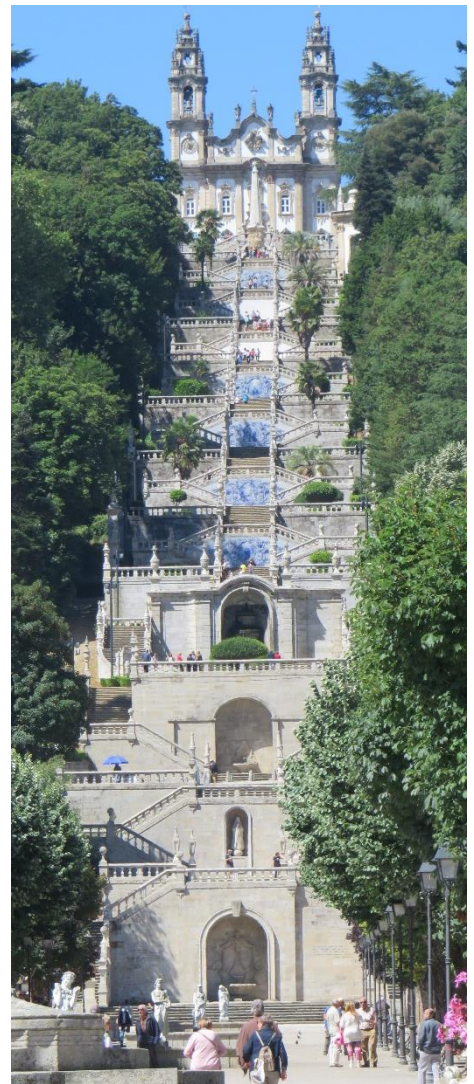


Further up the river we saw a caravan park, but it was not one we would choose to stay in. Most of the vans were permanent and squashed in like sardines.

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Dinner that evening was held in a nearby winery. After a walk around the extensive gardens we had a traditional Portuguese meal of succulent roast pork with vegetables followed by crème brulee. The next stop along the river on the following day took us to a museum about the district, but Graham and I were both tired so headed back to the boat for a siesta. Most of the shops in town were shut anyway. They close between 12.30 and 2.30 for lunch, then stay open until 7 in the evening.

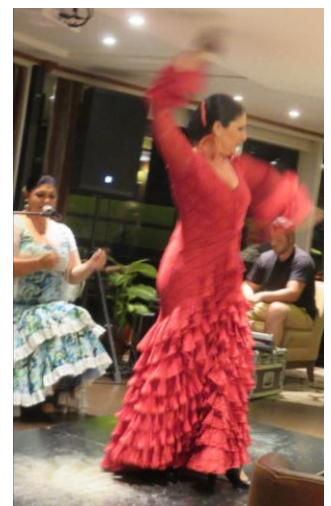
The cruise continued with very nice food and wine, several port wine tastings and interesting little towns along the way. There seems to be a consistent theme in the photos of us – this was a champagne tasting.



One of the most interesting buildings was this church above with 600 steps which lead down to the town below. We walked down the steps, but not up! Each of the blue patches is another picture painted on tiles. Another excursion took us to the home of Mateus Rose.

Our last night on the boat was on the border of Portugal and Spain so we were entertained by a group of flamenco dancers.

For 200 km the hills along the Douro River are covered with vineyards, with most of the vines growing on terraces. In between were masses of olive trees, occasional quince and other fruit trees.



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