

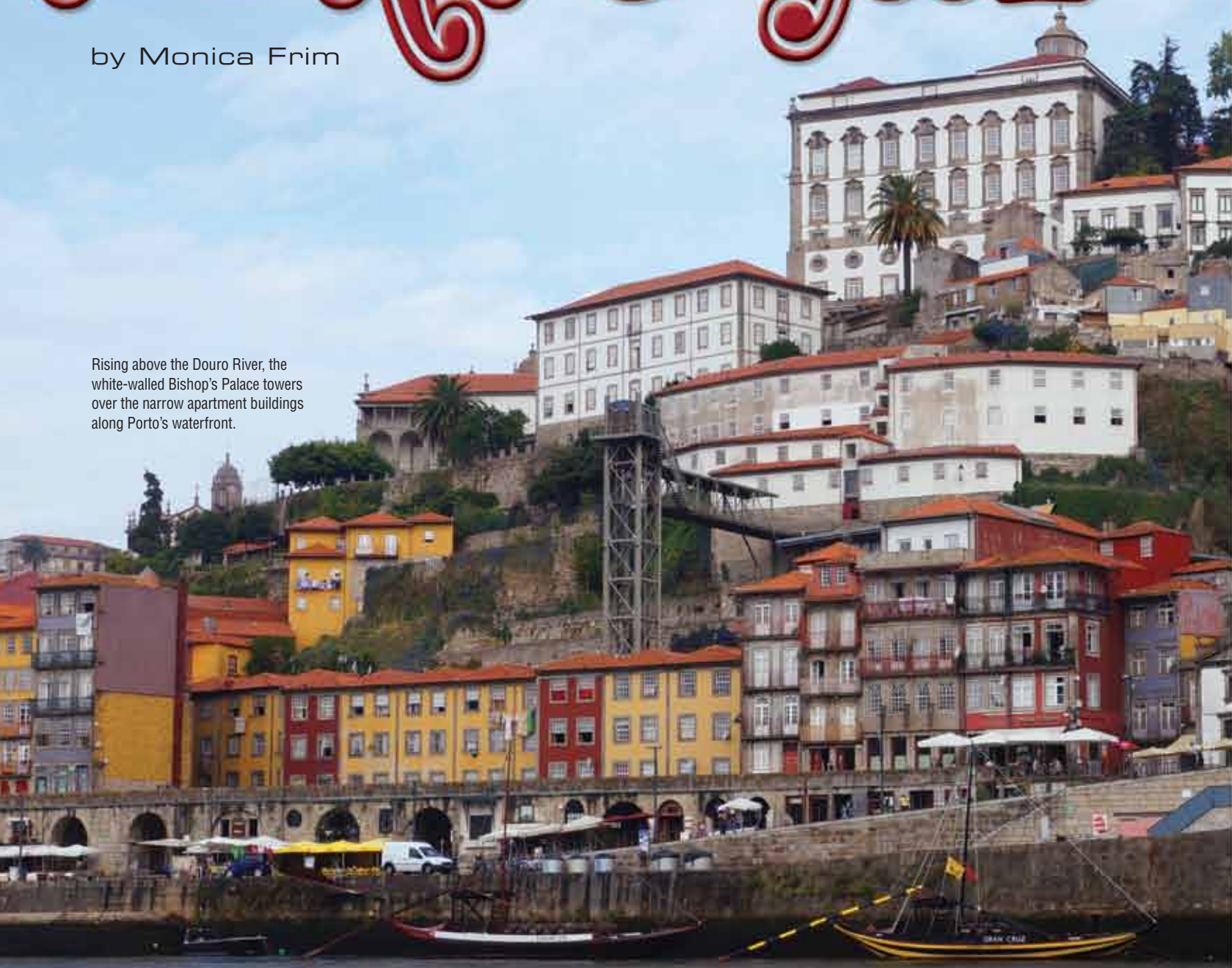
DIPLOMATIC CONNECTIONS



A Road Trip Through PORTUGAL

by Monica Frim

Rising above the Douro River, the white-walled Bishop's Palace towers over the narrow apartment buildings along Porto's waterfront.



Whenever possible I'm all for serendipity and a loosely structured travel schedule. I look forward to getting lost, whether on crowded city streets or in isolated rustic places, because I've learned that experiences that first appear as setbacks often lead to enriching encounters otherwise missed. John and I had three weeks to scout about Portugal and, like the early explorers, we occasionally drifted off-course, although our circumnavigation was not of the globe but a crazily skewed clockwise loop of a small country, and our caravel a rented Alfa Romeo.

Portugal packs a prodigious amount of history, culture and geology into a small footprint. It was Portugal's adventuresome seafarers who opened the eyes of Europe, the then-known world, to the existence of islands — Madeira, Azores and Cape Verde — that sprinkled the Atlantic Ocean well before it dropped into a presumed abyss. Their 15th century explorations unflattened the world and rolled it into a ball of continental masses — Africa, Asia, the Americas — that for a time made Lisbon the richest capital in Europe.

But on its own turf, the country was barely penetrable. Foreboding cliffs, narrow headlands, a mountainous interior riddled

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Join Monica Frim on a winding drive from Lisbon to Braga in the far north to the beaches of the Algarve in the south. Along the way Portugal's great cities mix old and new, and tiny, white-washed villages nestle in the hillsides dominated by old stone castles. Cliffs rise out of the ocean, vineyards cascade into river valleys, and ancient caves and stone circles riddle the countryside. There's something for everyone — from glitzy nightlife to rustic retreats.

Photography by John Frim, PhD, and Monica Frim

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with caves and tortuous rivers chopped the country into secluded settlements with few means of traveling or communicating amongst them. For centuries the isolated beauty of the land remained largely ignored by travelers who had more accessible options in other parts of Europe.

Portugal is still somewhat of an isolated destination, separated from the rest of Europe by Spain and from the Americas by the Atlantic Ocean. But in a world collapsed by fast jets and split-second communications, it has become one of the world's top tourist destinations. The 2013 Report on Nation Brands listed Portugal as the fourth country with the highest increase in tourism.

Roads spider across the country like mottled veins of marble, which is a fitting metaphor given that Portugal is the second largest exporter of marble in the world, most of it from the Estremoz area east of Lisbon near Spain. Like the marble

markings, the roads are erratic with confusing forks and tortuous branches that end in the unlikeliest places — lone farmhouses, cliff edges, empty fields, river banks or rocky outcroppings that sit like abandoned castles brooding over impossible habitats where only the hardest — perhaps foolhardiest — survive. While the roads are poorly marked and narrow, they are surprisingly well preserved and don't chew up the tires. This is a good thing for tourists who, having taken the wrong turn, must often drive great distances before they can find a place to turn around. One can't just veer around the block to recoup because grid roads are rare outside of Lisbon's "Baixa," the lower quarter that was rebuilt to geometric specifications by the Marquis of Pombal after the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. The Portuguese, born navigators, wend their way just fine and free; foreigners, bereft of the blood of da Gama and Magellan, do better paying

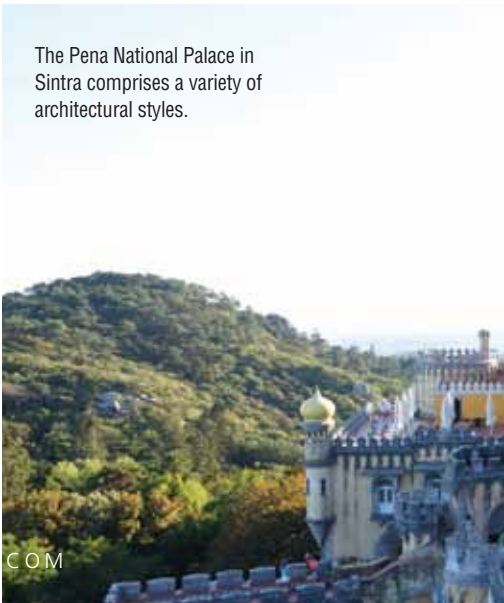
the hefty tolls on Portugal's "autoestradas."

In Lisbon the sun rises over the Tagus River and sets over the Atlantic Ocean. It is the perfect place to begin and end a journey. And so we did, leaving behind the seven hills that make up the city to follow the sun to the princely playgrounds of Estoril and Cascais 19 miles away. The two towns are connected with a stone walkway called Paredão (which translates as sea wall) that meanders among sandy beaches, rocky outcroppings and restaurants.

King Luís I planted the first cosmopolitan seed in Cascais in the late 19th century when he turned the 16th century citadel into a summer residence for the royal family, thereby spawning a movement for aristocratic families to build their own elegant mansions nearby. After World War II many exiled royal families of Europe followed suit. They established elaborate homes in Cascais and Estoril and launched the area

as a sophisticated tourist destination for both international and national jet-setters with luxury hotels to match. Today the Citadel is a "pousada" (historical hotel) that continues to attract a discerning clientele.

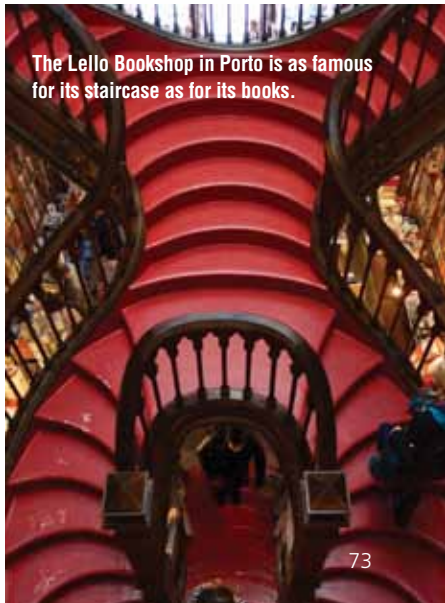
Eleven miles north of Cascais, Sintra anchors with dreamlike spontaneity (but nightmarish parking) a patchwork of castles and their protective hilltop fort in a dramatic, mystical setting. The effect is fairytale eclectic, indebted as much to the architectural whims of the various kings and aristocrats who built a pastiche of palaces as to the exuberant gifts of nature: a granite mountain of megalithic rocks and woodlands that imbue the entire area with romance and lore. A massive Moorish Castle dominates the skyline, but the crowning glory is the pseudo-medieval Pena Palace, whose "bricoleur" king, Ferdinand of Cobourg, creatively mixed Moorish, Gothic and Manueline details to turn a 16th



The Pena National Palace in Sintra comprises a variety of architectural styles.



A Garden at the Santuário de Bom Jesus in Braga.



The Lello Bookshop in Porto is as famous for its staircase as for its books.

century monastery into a royal summer home complete with exotic gardens, fountains, lakes and meandering paths. It seems that the architectural olio of royalty and a moneyed bourgeoisie was in itself a method of creating order out of many styles. Monserrate, a nearby neo-Gothic palace, bears Moorish and Indian touches; the Sintra National Palace mixes Gothic, Manueline and Mudéjar elements; and, the Quinta da Regaleira is a Gothic, Manueline and Renaissance combination. Its leafy grounds and tentacled paths make getting lost among mystical gardens, grottos, tunnels, fountains and lagoons a pleasurable pastime. One could almost picture fairies and “duendes” (goblin-like sprites) crouching under the foliage.

Portugal has a thing for storybook creatures. Medieval maps depict mythical monsters that kindled the imaginations of sailors with frightening scenarios of what would happen if they ventured too far from shore. At Cabo da Roca, the westernmost point of continental Europe, the wind whistles across the desolate headland and the Atlantic beats a mean tempo as it crashes 144 feet below the cliff top. The horizon looks flat as the earth was once believed to have been and it doesn't take much to imagine legendary sea monsters churning up the sea. Visitors can buy commemorative certificates complete with an official red wax seal over a blue and yellow

ribbon to prove their arrival at the end of the old continent. Yes, it's gimmicky but the certificates are attractive. I'm admiring mine as I write this.

With a coastline of promontories and beaches of all shapes and sizes tucked willy-nilly among them, there's no such thing as a coastal road with constant views of the sea. Portugal's roads may weave, but more often they sprout. Take one of the offshoots to a fishing village or sandy beach and the only way to drive to the next one is to retrace your route back to the main road, then take another offshoot. The practice can be tedious, but the reward, sometimes, is a beach to yourself.

At every turn there seems to be a town with a hilltop monastery or castle: Mafra's National Palace-cum-convent, with a footprint the size of 11 football fields, looms over everything else including some mountains; the white-walled town of Óbidos beckons a walk along its crenellated ramparts and a taste of the town's trademark “ginjinha,” a cherry liqueur served in edible chocolate cups; Fátima, one of the world's holiest sites, weaves a curious mix of piety and trade where even kitschy souvenirs seem to attract a pilgrim following; and nearby caves offer a refreshing geological detour. The Grutas da Moeda are small but the natural display of the exquisite formations (no harsh or multi-colored lights) and the friendliness of the



Walls made of schist support vineyards in the Douro Valley, which is famous not only for port wine but also high quality table wines.



Douro River cruises provide some of the best views of the vineyards in Portugal's north.



knowledgeable guides renders them appealing.

The Portuguese have a saying that loosely translates as: “Coimbra studies, Braga prays; Porto works and Lisbon plays.” Having checked out Lisbon's playgrounds of Cascais and Sintra, we needed to see if the other places also lived up to their reputations. We soon realized they did. Coimbra's centuries old university buildings, with a library where even the spines of the books were gilded, were classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2013. And Braga definitely prayed. The Santuário do Bom Jesus, with its moss-covered statues and 500 steps leading past the Stations of the Cross, is one of the most photographed places of worship in the country.

However, my first impression of Porto was not so much that the city worked, but that it needed work. A somber grey seemed to penetrate the air, the buildings, the very souls of the people — the old woman who dusted the carvings in Clérigos Church, the bent old-timers who trudged the steep streets in a drizzle, even the young man handing out bedrizzled flyers on the street corner. On closer inspection, many of the dilapidated mansions and abandoned warehouses were being turned into hotspots, with trendy restaurants and nightclubs. Minimalist and modern buildings like the National Contemporary Art Museum, The Music Hall and the glassy hotels of the Foz (mouth), where the Douro River meets the Atlantic Ocean, were proving that Porto was not so much a dour



Praia d'Ana is a favored beach near Lagos in the Algarve.

city (Douro means golden), but a balance of old and new, and a fusion of the two when appropriate — but still a work in progress.

The next day, the sun bleached the clouds and kindled the buildings ochre, white and well, yes, some stayed just plain grey, but it was a fine day for walking the crenellated walls of the cathedral, admiring the 20,000 hand-painted tiles in the São Bento train station, climbing the famous glossy red staircase of the Lello Bookshop and taking a Douro bridge cruise aboard the “Carlota do Douro,” a rabelo boat operated by DouruAzul. Rabelos, known only on the Douro, once carried wine from the valley to the cellars of Gaia, opposite Porto, where it was aged, blended and bottled. Today they serve as Porto’s answer to Venice’s gondolas, and the wine is transported to Gaia by truck.

Porto is the gateway to the world’s oldest demarcated wine region, the port-producing Douro Valley. We have the early 17th century English traders to thank for the port. Early Portuguese vintners added a dash of brandy to red wine to stabilize it for the long trip to England and, lo, the elite gentlemen in the clubs of London liked it.

We drove the wine country via valleys that rose like giant amphitheaters, their scallop-edged terraces tumbling in slathering greens and browns to a watery stage where cruise boats plied in place of rabelos. Here and there the manors of wine estates poked out of the greenery, their tangerine-tiled roofs in brilliant contrast to the surrounding foliage.

Near the border with Spain where the Douro River is joined by the Coa, the vineyards make room for olive and almond trees ... and the largest collection of prehistoric (more than 20,000 years old) cave drawings in the world. Visitors can take pre-arranged guided tours by jeep to three sites in the Coa Valley or visit the excellent Coa Museum with its representational drawings in Vila Nova de Foz.

Portugal’s interior is full of surprises: prehistoric rocks and caves, hidden hamlets with medieval ruins, neolithic dolmens (megalithic tombs) and other stone monuments. Many are scattered throughout the Alentejo, an expanse of granite hills and rolling plains between the Tagus River and the Algarve anchored among cork trees, olive trees and wheat fields. Enotourism has made inroads here, thanks to the region’s nascent winemaking industry that now rivals that of the Douro Valley.

The wines pair nicely with the area’s other savory industry: a delicious assortment of cheeses made from goat’s, sheep’s and cow’s milk, or a blend of all three known as “mistura.”

Encostas de Estremoz is a tiny hilltop winery that launched its label in 2001 and surprisingly produces a variety of wines. We toured the facility, attended a wine tasting and, armed with three bottles — a TE branco (white), Grande Escola tinto (red) and the Grand Gold Medal Winner for 2012 at the Concours Mondial de Bruxelles, a 2009 Reserva tinto — wended our way to Évora, the upper Alentejo’s historic walled capital.

The Portuguese call Évora a “cidade-museu,” and, indeed, the whole town is a museum where almost every building — from the beautiful to the macabre — oozes with history. In the Capela dos Ossos (bone chapel) in the church of São Francisco, the remains of 5,000 monks decorate the walls and pillars of the chapel. It’s gruesome, but somehow the dimly lit 500-year-old bones and skulls, artistically laid in carefully thought-out patterns, looked — dare I say it? — more graceful than ghastly.

From Évora, the beaches of the Algarve are a mere two-hour drive south, but the history-infused villages en route can stretch into a full day of stop-and-go sightseeing. Alcoutim on the Guardiana River that separates Portugal from Spain, the Roman ruins at Lanjeiros and the castle of Castro Marim are among some of the worthy stops.

You can travel the entire southern route of the Algarve from Vila Real de Santo António to Sagres in less than two hours — or several days if you stop at every beach and golf course. From whitewashed villages in the east where a farm-and-fish lifestyle prevails, through crowded resorts near Albufeira and Faro that are about as Portuguese as the Queen of England, to the towering cliffs of the west where the Atlantic slams the coast with Swiss-cheese results, there seems to be a beach for everyone. Grottos and caves riddle the coast, sandy beaches form horseshoe-shaped webs between rock walls that rise straight out of the sea and rocky islands pop from the surf like monsters pickled in brine.

Such is the force of the Atlantic at Sagres and Cabo de São Vicente, the Algarve’s westernmost headlands, that its



The Regaleira Palace in Sintra is characterized by Gothic pinnacles and an ornate octagonal tower.



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A fanciful bridge and caves in the Quinta da Regaleira's Waterfall Lake.



Lisbon's vintage trams provide a convenient way for visitors to ascend from the central square up the winding streets and narrow alleys.

spray can be felt on the cliff tops 200 feet above the ocean. To the north are the uncrowded beaches where mostly surfers find their paradise. We watched them at Castelejo and again at Amado before heading inland, back through the Alentejo to close off our loop in Lisbon.

With streets that dip, wind and twist among diverse neighborhoods, Lisbon's somewhat schizoid personality reveals itself in small eccentricities. In Bairro Alto, it's the nightlife of raucous bars; in Alfama, the tangle of color and shabbiness of the daily grind; and in Chiado, the designer boutiques and cultural sites of a style-conscious crowd. Yet somehow Lisbon manages to present a cohesive front where old monuments and sleek, modern buildings accommodate each other, albeit in an odd-couple-Felix-and-Oscar kind of way.

Baixa (downtown), perhaps Lisbon's sanest neighborhood, has grid streets that rise from the arcaded Praça do Comércio, one of the grandest squares in the world. Its Rua

Augusta Arch provides the best views over the Tagus River and, up the Rua Augusta, a pedestrian walkway of shops and restaurants. On the east side of the square, the Lisbon Story Centre takes visitors on an audio-guided tour through the history of the capital and sets the groundwork for the panoply of sights and monuments that are best appreciated with a little knowledge at the outset.

The city spreads itself along the Tagus River in skyward swirls of ochre and white façades. The hills undulate with the red clay tiles of roofs that gradually taper toward the city's bookend suburbs: Belém with its ancient port and imposing monastery, the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos in the west and the Parque das Nações, with its soaring concrete and glass buildings, remnants of the 1998 World Fair, in the east. One looks to the past, the other to the future. Together they hold not only the essence of Lisbon — what it was, what it could be — but the soul of a country. ■

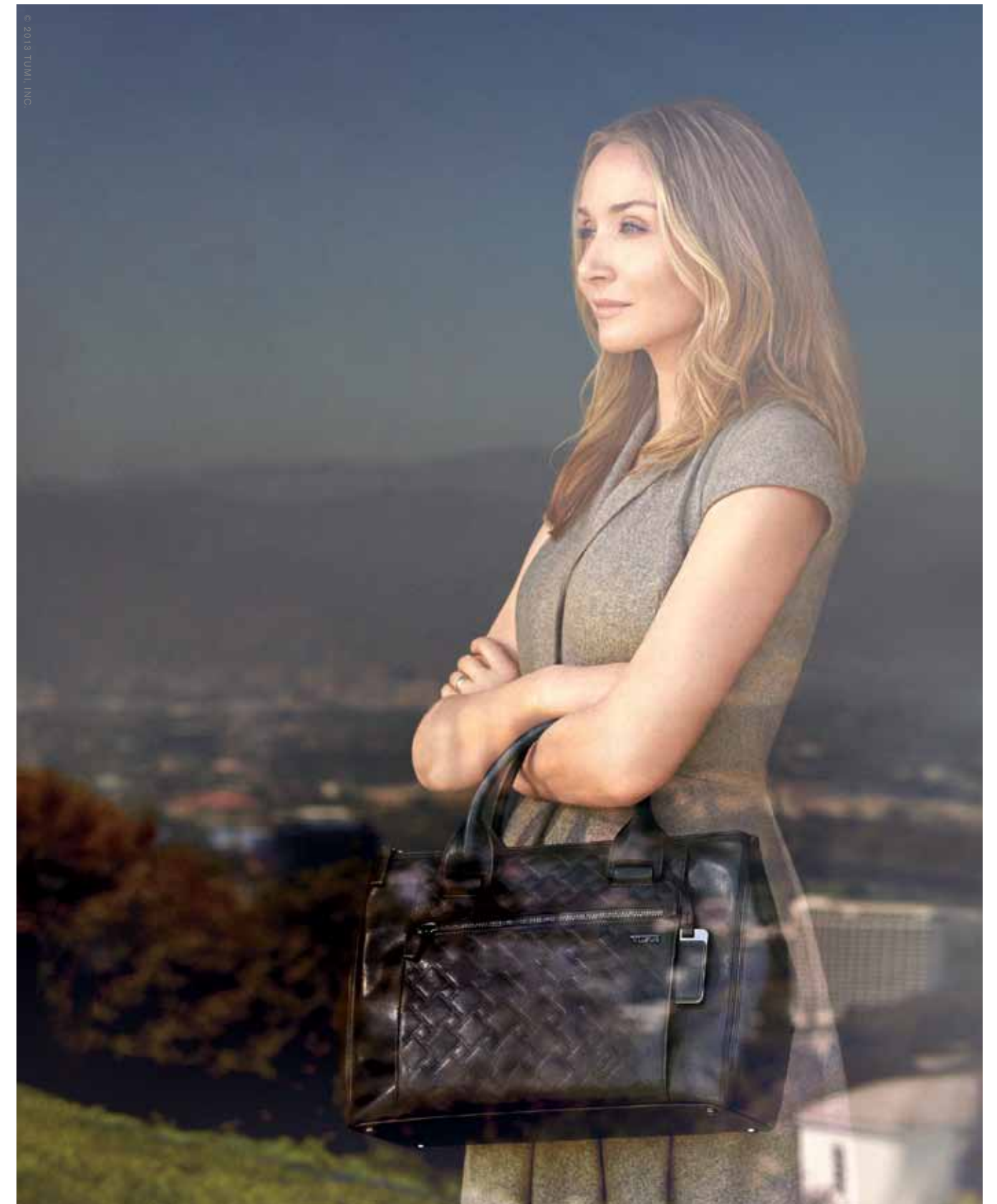


Braga's famous Santuário de Bom Jesus with its famous zig-zagging staircase that connects the Stations of the Cross.



Cabo de São Vicente (Cape St. Vincent) is Portugal's southwesternmost point.

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Tel: 351 268 887 010

www.alentejomarmoris.com

Located in the heart of the Alentejo's marble district, this hotel is an artful showpiece of marble in all its forms. From blocks of unrefined crystalized marble — one serves as a base for an illuminated glass-topped buffet table — to polished walls and floors, marble from the owners' private quarry dominates every room. Its use extends to bathroom sinks individually sculpted into different shapes in every room, marble massage tables, even musical instruments, carved out of the stone. Amenities include: banquet and meeting rooms and a ballroom. The hotel also offers wine, olive and cigar tastings.

Bairro Alto Hotel

Praça Luís de Camões, 2
1200-243 Lisbon
Tel: 351 213 408 229

www.bairroaltohotel.com

The Bairro Alto is a contemporary, award-winning boutique hotel located in a 19th century building in the arty hilltop district of Bairro Alto. Its pride is a rooftop lounge with views to the Tagus River below. The hotel was renovated in 2012 with contemporary elements: a funky bar with multi-colored light boxes on the ground floor, a casual restaurant, a tiled lobby and large, modern bathrooms that complement the traditional high-ceilinged bedrooms. The hotel faces the quiet Praça Luís de Camões but boutiques and bars are nearby.

Cascade Wellness and Lifestyle Resort

Praia do Carnavial
8600-282, Lagos, Algarve
Tel: 351 282 771 500

www.cascade-resort.com

The Cascade Wellness and Lifestyle Resort is perched on the high cliff of a nature reserve with cliff trails and stunning views of secluded beaches. The hotel mixes Roman and Moorish architectural influences with modern guest rooms housed in four wings. Each wing's name and decor reflects the voyages of Portuguese navigators to Africa, Asia, South America and Europe. Modern amenities include bathrooms with glass walls and heated floors. Tailor-made fitness programs and the unique Cascade Performance Sports Academies provide specialized training in football, golf and tennis.

In Portugal, many agencies assisted with travel arrangements and admissions. There were too many for all to be listed here but Diplomatic Connections is, nevertheless, grateful for their assistance.

Convento do Espinheiro

Évora, 7000, Portugal
Tel: 351 266 788 200

www.conventodoespinheiro.com

The massive Convento do Espinheiro is a 15th century convent that's been converted into a luxury hotel. Vaulted ceilings, Gothic arches and a functioning chapel complete with gilded altar and choir are juxtaposed with modern swimming pools, a tennis court, children's playground, fitness center and award-winning spa. Rooms range from heavily ornamented rococo to ultra-modern. Its Divinus Restaurant, set in an ancient vaulted wine cellar, offers sophisticated dining. It's a quiet high-class retreat in a field of rolling hills two miles from Évora.

Hotel Teatro, Porto

Rua de Sá da Bandeira, Porto
Tel: 351 220 409 620
www.hotelteatro.pt

Built on the site of a 19th century theater, this boutique hotel replicates the drama and excitement of the theatrical world. Guests enter a dimly lit lobby through solid doors covered with lines of poetry by Almeida Garrett. The theatrical décor extends to: a reception desk reminiscent of a theater box office; stage lights; a gold, bronze and brown color scheme; theatrical costumes; carpets imprinted with photographs of theatrical elements; a bar named Plateia (plateia is Portuguese for stalls) and a restaurant called Palco (stage). Guest rooms are modern with gold glass sinks and curtained closets.

Sheraton Porto Hotel and Spa

Rua Tenente Valadim, 146
4100-476 Porto
Tel: 351 220 404 000

www.sheraton.com/porto

The Sheraton Porto is a trendy steel and glass high-rise surprise with large, naturally-lit private, public and conference rooms. Glass elevators, balconies and a sweeping staircase with glass treads and railings open to a large lobby. Located in Porto's financial district, the hotel is especially attractive to a business clientele. It offers numerous conference rooms, the largest comprising 10,760 square feet. Other features include a club lounge with all-day snacks, spa and fitness facilities and large private rooms with excellent lighting for working. Shopping, galleries and restaurants are within walking distance.

Solar de Alvega

EN 118Km149 Alvega, 2205-104 Abrantes
Tel: 351 241 822 913 or 351 918 621 541
solaralvega@yahoo.co.uk
www.solardealvega.com

The Solar de Alvega is a family-restored 18th century manor house that sits in the tiny parish of Alvega, part of the municipality of Abrantes in the middle of the country. There's not much in the way of tourist attractions, save for a small, abandoned island castle in the Tagus River, about a half-hour's drive away. But anyone in search of a peaceful retreat off-the beaten path will find both the manor and its expatriate English owner delightful. The manor itself is furnished with exquisite antiques, heirlooms and works of art. The grounds feature a swimming pool, watermill and stream.

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www.visitportugal.com

The website is an excellent source for information on Portugal and offers a newsletter as well as a link that lets travelers upload photos, short videos and diaries.

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MYRIAD BY SANA HOTELS: *Portugal's Most Innovative Hotel*



by Monica Frim

Rising straight out of the Tagus River, the Myriad Hotel towers over the Parque das Nações in Lisbon's east end, looking for all the world like a schooner in full sail. The hotel is anchored to the 476-foot high Vasco da Gama Tower, an icon resembling a billowing sail that was built for the 1998 World's Fair. The Myriad itself is much newer. It opened in 2012, a masterpiece in glass and steel that reenergized the waterfront and blended perfectly with the futuristic buildings left over from the World's Fair. In 2013 it received two International Hotel Awards: Best Hotel Architecture in Portugal and Best New Hotel Design & Construction in Europe.

The hotel's design is the brainchild of architect Nuno Leão, who built upon Expo 98's ode to Portugal's sea-faring heritage by incorporating nautical elements into a minimalist design. In the lobby, gutsy chandeliers resembling giant jellyfish drip from a 230-foot high ceiling. Upon closer inspection the jellyfishes' tentacles are actually glasses and olive plates.

Red is the Myriad's punctuating color in a signature palette that includes black, white and silver. In the lobby a glossy red grand piano takes center stage, but you need to step in front of the keyboard to see its most distinctive feature — Elton John's autograph arcing in a loopy golden scrawl across the music rack.

Everywhere, there is light and transparency and wide open spaces that speak of Portugal's infatuation with the sea. The aptly named River Lounge looks like the prow of a ship with a wooden deck for alfresco dining or contemplating the expansive views of

the Tagus. Here the estuary looks as wide as an ocean — you could almost mistake it for the Atlantic. The lounge is the hotel's hotspot with entertainment, a central bar and a Mediterranean cuisine, albeit augmented with Portuguese fare. Plans are underway for a restaurant with 360-degree views at the top of the adjacent Vasco da Gama Tower.

The open-concept effect extends to the Myriad's 186 guest rooms (including nine suites and one presidential suite) where every bed faces a wall of windows so that no guest is bereft of a view of water. Glass-walled bathrooms, state-of-the-art electronics and ultra-modern furnishings with sleek lines make them chic retreats. Yet there's a touch of whimsy — edgy hanging cocoon chairs next to the windows over the water.

But it's the top floor that really plays on the Myriad's psyche. Here the motto "health by water" comes in the form of Sayanna Wellness, a luxurious spa where all the massage tables face floor-to-ceiling windows. Here, too, every room offers a view over the river including the sauna (steam room excepted for practical reasons). You can follow the river in both directions with your eyes: north over the trendy new residential neighborhoods all the way to the 10 1/2-mile Vasco da Gama Bridge that links Lisbon with the Alentejo and Algarve in the south, or south over the undulating white roofs of the Parque das Nações's futuristic Expo buildings and into historic downtown Lisbon.

The hotel/spa experience at the Myriad is trendy and technologically advanced, yet calming in a "floating above the earth" kind of way.

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