

FEATURE

HISTORY WINE and HEARTBREAK

BY NEIL GRAHAM



PHOTOS: NEIL GRAHAM



Porto harbour. You can see the history but you're missing the smell of the ocean.


The flow of Portuguese to the Americas has been so one-sided, so from-there-to-here, that I had never considered trekking to Portugal to reverse the trend, even though for 20 years I've lived in Toronto neighbourhoods where Portuguese is the predominantly spoken language in the streets and bars and coffee shops. The problem—Portuguese tourism would certainly see it as a problem—is that Portugal lacks the condensed cultural clichés to sell the country abroad. Spain is bullfighting and flamenco, France wine and baguette and Italy opera and more wine. All are Hemmingway era stereotypes, but old notions remain captivatingly quixotic to tourists. But what about Portugal?

My knowledge of Portuguese history has an embarrassing lull. I know of Prince Henrique The Navigator, the son of royalty who spurred Portugal's obsession with navigation by discovering (a contentious term, especially for peoples who awoke and found themselves discovered) Madeira in 1418, the Azores in 1427, and Cape Verde in 1444. Then I have a five hundred year chasm until the novels of contemporary writer Jose Saramago. Facilitating my journey to a richer understanding is Julian Cade of Portuguese motorcycle tour operator

Motocadia (motocadia.com), who invited me this past June to join one of his guided tours.

After landing in Lisbon, we take a taxi an hour north of the city to the town of Obidos. Travelling with me is Miguel Rebelo of Toronto's Europa Tours. Rebelo, a Canadian of Portuguese ancestry, is Motocadia's authorized representative for Canada (miguel.rebelo@europatours.ca, 866-870-1377). Our cab driver lived for a dozen years in Toronto, moving back to his homeland in the early 1980s. While he and Miguel converse in Portuguese, I scan the countryside and catch fragments of their conversation, including "Mississauga," the name of the

Toronto suburb where the driver's son still lives, and think of the former tenants of my neighbour back home, a young Portuguese couple with an infant son recently deported in the Conservative government's crackdown on expired work visas—a response worthy of the one sided relationship between the US and Mexico.

Obidos, where we spend the night before morning departure by motorcycle, is a walled town and Miguel and I spend the afternoon traipsing about by foot. Tour buses disgorge a cargo of seniors who wheeze and gasp up the steep cobblestones searching for the castle erected in 1282. The wall that encircles the town has a three-foot-wide ledge and no 



handrail, with a discrete sign recommending that children have supervision—a scenario unimaginable in litigious North America.

Over dinner with Julian we discuss our route for the next five days. Without knowledge of the destinations he discusses but with a belly full of wine, the names of the villages and roads and castles float and tumble above the table without meaning. But I drift off to bed knowing that in less than a week they may be places hard to forget.

After breakfast at the charming Casa D'Oribidos, we convene in the parking lot and leave to the north. We have 100 km of motorway to knock off, but as my head is still thick from last evening's wine, this suits me fine. The toll road is an example of the benefits that Portugal has received from its membership in the European Union, but illustrative of a contradiction, too. Relative to its EU neighbors Portugal lags behind economically, so on this national holiday weekend the road is barren. At first I think we've mistakenly entered a section of road

closed for construction, but eventually an Audi whizzes past. Julian explains that natives loathe paying tolls and expensive gasoline curtails unnecessary trips.

A refugee from a corporate leasing job in Bristol, Englishman Cade tired of riding in the congested UK. Family holidays in Portugal exposed him to the country but what piqued his interest in commercial tours was the absence of domestically run tour operators. A Spanish company visits once a year but Cade was convinced that he could find more interesting roads. But it was a challenge. The influx of EU money, as demonstrated by the new motorway, has resulted in fabulous but erratically located roads. Promising new pavement would abruptly end at gravel and Cade would begin his search again, and again, until he developed his current route.

Along the highway the air reminds me of the Canadian north woods; a faint pine aroma but sweetened with the scent of Eucalyptus, with the occasional waft of not-quite-up-to-EU-

standards sanitation. Exiting the highway we cut northeast through the Serra da Lousa Mountains then on to the Serra da Estrela Mountains. The road to Seia has exceptionally good pavement with long sweeping bends, then we begin a long climb that traverses terrain so barren as to make Sudbury, Ontario seem lush. These are typical European mountain roads. On one side is a rock face, in the middle is a fabulous road, and on the other side is a plummet to your death. We stop for the night in the mountain town of Manteigas and pull into the courtyard of the Casa das Obras. Walls in the hotel are thick enough to withstand a fortnight of heavy shelling, and even the air seems from another century. After a few games of pool in a wing of the hotel I can only describe as a medieval recreation room, I head through chilled corridors to bed.

Looping southeast toward the Spanish border the next morning, we visit the medieval mountain town of Sortelha. After we shut our motorcycles off we hear soft distant singing—a church service. Oddly, the scene reminds me of John Ford westerns: three gringos wander through the desert and find themselves standing in a church door in a remote Mexican town, looking for redemption. We pass on salvation and seek a café for coffee. There are few tourists, and in the stillness it is easy to believe modernity has sidestepped Portugal entirely, but what will happen as the economy grows because of European Union membership, as many believe? The great boom in travel missed Portugal, and sipping coffee in the mountains with voices from the church drifting up the hillside I'm thankful it did.

Rarely is traveling consistently enjoyable or endlessly fatiguing; rather it swings between the two poles like an erratic pendulum. The afternoon has grown hot and my head is back in Sortelha. We take motorways to compensate for our dawdling but I'm having trouble concentrating. Usually, at reasonable speeds, I can ride safely with an eye on the scenery, but this afternoon I'm locked straight ahead on the road. We're on our way to intersect the Douro River on our way to Pinhao.

It is extremely hot as we follow the winding road alongside the river, and fatigue nearly, but not entirely, distracts me from the surroundings, then slowly the pendulum swings and I'm interested again. As we near Pinhao, a long queue is waiting to cross the river to town. The bridge is undergoing renovations but the

ferry shuttling cars and pedestrians is moored to the far side of the riverbank. Miguel notices a sign that directs bicyclists and pedestrians to a walkway erected on scaffolding beside the bridge. The catch, and there is always a catch with bridges that magically appear to guide travellers to safe harbour, is that it is narrow, with a 90-degree bend along the way. With the saddlebags removed and a graceless twelve-point turn completed, the bags are reinstalled and we walk our steeds across the planking. I tell myself that a motorcycle is only a heavy bicycle and try not to look at the river flowing beneath.

Our hotel, the Casa do Visconde de Chanceleros, lives up to the grandiosity of its name. Guest rooms circle a pool and the entire hotel is perched on the bank of steep hill that rises from the river. Pinaho is in the heart of wine country, a region that begins at the Serra do Marão mountains and extends almost 100 miles to the Spanish border. The mountains create a microclimate, limiting rainfall. Summers are hot and dry and winters cold.

The history of port wine is a lesson in seventeenth century European geopolitics. In 1678 Britain declared war on France and blockaded its ports, effectively stopping export of French wine. Looking for an alternative source of wine, Britain turned to trading ally Portugal. The Douro region, at the time, produced great quantities of rather poor quality red table wine, but the invention, or discovery, of port as we know it changed that. Stopping the fermentation process by adding brandy while the wine is fruity, strong, and sweet, port is at its best wine's equivalent of espresso.

Port wine is perhaps what Portugal does best, but good food to accompany that wine is not found at random. The indigenous Portuguese diet is meat, fish, and boiled potatoes. Thankfully, Julian has found the best places to eat. It's still meat, fish and potatoes, but at least it's very good.

Bracing ourselves for the retracing of our steps across the temporary scaffolding as we take our leave from Pinaho the next morning, we come upon the ferry, still moored to the bank, and watch as an attractive woman steps from a BMW sedan and walks down to talk to the captain. She places her hands together in the universal plea for expediency: palms together, fingers pointing upward. Please, please, please. The captain then theatrically waves all of us on, and is later heard



Wine Country: the Douro valley.

apologizing to the government minister in the rear of the BMW.

We follow the Douro westward to Porto. The road clings to the cliff and when we reach the halfway point and cross the river, I'm dizzy from the winding road. Motocadia supplies Triumph Sprint RS motorcycles, a good compromise of comfort and handling, but my camera gear has so weighed down the rear of the bike that in corners it feels like concrete has been strapped to the rear of the seat.

Porto is preceded by the smell of the ocean and we abruptly come out from under a bridge and burst into a big European city. Terraces hang with laundry and the sidewalks are teeming with people, colour, and life. In honour of my surname, we visit Graham's for a sampling tour of its port, and the summation of my research for nascent port drinkers is this: stay away from the sweet. It is the dry ports that have a more complex character that may not at first be apparent. In a logbook I find a beautifully eloquent description of Graham's port, written by Master of Wine Michael Broadbent in 1873. "The supposed appearance of phylloxera, which causes so much terror, is now put down to the effect of severe frosts which affected the leaves. A change from a grave manner to gay was visible amongst the farmers. A good vintage."

Our trip ends with a ride down the coast to the modern Hotel Miramar in seaside Nazare, but not before we ride the most spectacular road. At Oliveira we take the N227, a road with perfect pavement, banked corners, and a

flowing rhythm like a mountain brook. But this is my heartbreak—it's raining, so we potter along and the weather finally clears when we've gone too far to retrace our route. The poor weather continues once we arrive in Nazare, but the next day, a non-riding day, is sunny and warm and the ocean beckons.

If you, like me, loathe the idea of group *anything*, then you'll be as impressed as I am at the palatability of Motocadia's tours. Julian is an accommodating host in the proper English way, which means he knows when to drop out of the way. And he's picky (once again, in that English way) and likes good food, wine, and impeccable lodging. Group sizes are small and prices start at around 2,300 Euros for a couple on a bike for a week, but ask him for details because I'm still aggrieved that it rained. If you go and ride N227 in the dry, don't dare drop me a line. As for Portugal, by all means go, and go now, because it won't stay this refreshingly untouched forever. **CC**



Walking the plank across the Douro valley, thankfully a one way trip.