



Cruising Portugal's
DOURO
RIVER VALLEY



By Kay Dougherty

Portugal's Douro River is a watery green ribbon weaving among history, grapes and traditions.

As European river cruises grew rapidly in popularity Viking River Cruises saw the need to build longships designed specifically to navigate the Douro's sharp turns and narrow locks. Each ship has the capacity for 106 travelers to spend 8 days cruising and touring this UNESCO designated region.

Lisbon, the closest European capital to the United States, is the meeting point prior to a Douro River Valley cruise. The city's architectural beauty, intimate size, distinctive Fado music and historical role in navigating the world fascinates travelers across a varied range of interests. Understandably, spending a few days in Lisbon prior to the cruise is an option many choose.

You board the ship in Lisbon's second largest city, Porto. After settling into your stateroom and unpacking for the duration of your trip (that always feels like such a luxury) then enjoying a dinner of regional cuisine and fine Portuguese wines, you are in for a treat that few river cruises

provide. The captain takes the ship out for an hour-long nighttime round-trip journey so guests can enjoy the beauty of Porto as it illuminates its historical buildings and bridges. Sigh; this is the life.

The next morning is spent with a local guide showing you the UNESCO designated old town area of Ribeira, the bookstore that inspired J.K. Rowling's library setting for the Harry Potter books, the Baroque cathedrals covered in Portugal's world-recognized tiles and sampling the "pastel de nata" pastries that send many visitors home with a few extra pounds.





As you journey along the Douro you can learn as much or as little as you choose. You can take excursions or stay on the ship. You can use the free Wi-Fi, read a book or enjoy a dip in the pool while reveling in the warmth of customer service that is the envy of other cruise companies.

If you choose to take the excursions you will visit Coimbra, the birthplace of 6 Portuguese kings and home to the University of Coimbra, founded in 1290. If touring an ancient university sounds snooze inducing you will

be pleasantly surprised (but will not get your snooze).

The students wear capes that are as heavy in weight as in symbolism. You will learn from a student about the traditions that are solemnly (except for a raucously notable week in May) followed to the present day. You will have the privilege of visiting the library, another UNESCO site, which houses over 250,000 ancient books. And you may be surprised by the solution the university has found to keep insects from devouring all of

that old paper and leather. They have a special variety of one-inch long bats that sleep in the book stacks during the day and emerge at night to munch on insects. (UNESCO forbids pesticides so necessity spurred creativity and bat employment.)

Along the Douro you will have several opportunities to visit wineries and port manufacturers. Portugal has been famed for centuries for its port. Perhaps less known is that in recent years the wines of Portugal have dominated international wine competitions (no doubt producing a few sniffs of French dismay). The Douro River Valley was the world's first demarcated wine region.

This becomes even more surprising when you learn that there is virtually no fertile soil in the region; grapes are grown in "anthroposoil" which was created by manually breaking rocks. Determination is a characteristic of the Portuguese!

Viking River Cruises is deservedly well known for its ability to create meaningful local experiences. That's how you find yourself having an elegant (but not stuffy) dinner in an 11th century monastery overlooking the Douro. It's why you get personalized attention from the staff at Sandman's as they explain the port-making





process. And it provides you welcoming access to properties (Mateus Palace anyone?) and people not easily available to independent travelers. Who among us is so noble we don't enjoy the occasional brag-worthy experience? (Be honest.)

As the cruise nears its end you have the opportunity to visit Lamego, home of the Baroque Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies. The sanctuary is a shrine is on the route of the Saint James Way pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

You may think this sounds like the perfect opportunity to finally stay on the ship for that elusive nap. Try to resist the lure of the lounge chair and visit this exquisitely tiled Moorish staircase that descends a hill in the center of town. (Don't worry; Viking River knows that you want to walk down, not up, the stairs.)

When you realize that the cruise is ending you will probably feel certain that someone took a couple days out of your life without telling you. Eight days cannot have gone by so quickly.

The bad news is that they did.

The good news is that you will reflect with some wonder on how much you saw, experienced, learned and enjoyed (and ate) in such a short period of time.

You will almost certainly have a desire to return and experience other regions of Portugal. And you will probably spend the flight home pouring through the catalog to pick your next Viking River Cruise. ■

