

# Portugal 2009



AN AMAZING GUIDED EXPERIENCE - BACK IN TIME -  
ALL BROUGHT TO LIFE - THROUGH THE ENCYCLOPAEDIC  
KNOWLEDGE OF A FRIENDLY AMERICAN EXPAT -  
LIVING IN PORTUGAL

I was going to Lisbon to embark on a Mediterranean cruise with Edmundo and the Turners. But what on earth got into me to take a car and drive into the northern parts of Portugal for a week beforehand? Dare I say that I simply liked the idea of sightseeing, enjoying the local food, and staying in old monasteries and convents known as pousadas? And, as we were going to be near Fatima, we should go visit the shrine to Our Lady. Well, that's the sum of it.

Little prepared was I for stories of:

... of battles

... of Portuguese Kings

... of the Discoveries

... of so many UNESCO World Heritage sites and

... of apparitions of the Blessed Virgin in Fatima

let alone for visiting these fascinating places of historic interest with a walking encyclopaedia, Greg, an expatriate living in Lisbon.

**O**f battles . . . where Commanders fell on their knees and prayed to the Blessed Virgin for victory and then in thanksgiving built magnificent Gothic monasteries in Alcobaça and Batalha, which we visit. The Commander of the 14th Century Battle of Aljubarrota, Nuno Álvares Pereira, later became a mystic and was canonised as a saint by Pope Benedict XVI while we were in Portugal.

**O**f Portuguese Kings . . . who believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary was the physical reigning 'Queen of Portugal' and not just symbolically the Patroness. Since the Coronation of King John IV took place in Vila Viçosa in the 14th Century, the Kings of Portugal never again wore a crown. We visited the Palace of the Dukes of Braganza in Vila Viçosa where all this was brought to life. In Casa Alta, in the walls of the Castle of Ourem, we stayed with the Royal Chaplain to the Dukes of Braganza.

**O**f 'the Discoveries' . . . where more than 500 years ago, the Portuguese reached Congo in Africa and Vasco da Gama discovered a sea route to India thus giving the Portuguese supremacy in the lucrative trade of silks and spices that had previously been the domain of Venice and Constantinople. We see these voyages commemorated in the Monastery of the Hieronymites in Lisbon.

**O**f UNESCO World Heritage . . . where we see seven of Portugal's twelve sites. In the museum-city Évora, with roots back to Roman times, we stayed in the Pousada dos Lóios which stands next to the 2nd Century Roman Temple to Diana. In the historic town of Guimarães, a well preserved and authentic example of the evolution of a medieval settlement into a modern town, we stayed in a Pousada that was once a home for the poor. Guimarães is referred to as the 'birthplace of the Portuguese nationality'.

**O**f gastronomy . . . Both the Douro region and the city of Oporto are on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Our visit to the Douro region, where wine has been produced for more than 2,000 years, Greg had arranged for us to lunch with a local wine-making family, who have been growing grapes on terraces of the Douro since the mid-18th century. Their white Port Wine made a delicious aperitif before the roast goat that was specially prepared for us. In the city of Oporto, where huge Port Wine storage warehouses with tiled roofs line the hillsides overlooking the Douro River, we enjoyed special grilled octopus for lunch at the famous Taylor's Port wine cellars high on the hill.

**O**f Apparitions . . . I have not prayed the Rosary since childhood when, as a family, we were compelled each night to kneel in the lounge room and say five decades together. "The Family that Prays Together, Stays Together" was the Father Peyton 'call to arms' of that time, to beseech the Blessed Virgin to protect us from 'the yellow masses gathering just north of Australia's shoreline'. At that young age, I don't think I connected it with the Message of Fatima. How can I be in Portugal though and not go to Fatima?

**So there!** You have it in a nutshell. You will also have noted references to the Blessed Virgin dotted throughout. It wasn't until the end of the holiday that I started to get my head around the battles between the Portuguese and the Moors and Castilians, and also

the marriages and murders of members of the Royal families, so I suppose I gravitated towards some religious references of which I was well schooled from childhood.

### **First Night in Lisbon**

Clams in a white wine, garlic, parsley, lemon and mustard broth isn't a bad start to a simple evening meal, is it?

Greg, the hospitable Discover Portugal travel agent knows Diego, the owner of the Cantinao de Bem Estar (A little corner of well being) restaurant in a narrow cobbled street running up the hill behind our hotel. The line is long, but, wink-wink, we're in like Flynn. Diego is all bluster; short and corpulent; and given to crankiness, but treats us like royalty as he squeezes us (and Greg) into a corner table.

The restaurant is over-lit and very crowded; just a 'hole in the wall' restaurant for locals; but isn't that what we always hope to find in a new city? Where's my spoon to drink the clam broth? Nah, I have to leave some room for the whole grilled bream. The salted and charred crispy skin is better than any salted pork crackling I've ever tasted. And no reflux! We must bring Edmundo and the Turners back here when they arrive.

### **Kings and Queens - Vila Viçosa and Évora**

Day 1 on the road in Portugal took us to Vila Viçosa, the home of the Dukes of Braganza, and then here to the old city of Évora. This is our first taste of staying in a pousada. You can imagine the setting of these grand old convents and monasteries on the best hills with a smart interior designer coming in and having carte blanche to redecorate. It's very comfortable except some of the staff may once have been gardeners for all they care about serving breakfast with a smile in the cloisters.

I cracked my head on my cell door as I was leaving this morning but I think I've managed to staunch the blood flow now. I don't dare touch the sticky lump though. Edmundo is in good form and our happy American driver Greg is a walking encyclopedia and eager to share all about his adopted country. I've given up on trying to absorb who begot whom and whose brother killed the other to put his nephew on the throne. This is a holiday!

The food is remarkable. The selection of cold antipasti at dinner last night looks so simple but tastes out of this world – olive oil, garlic and coriander is used a lot. Our grilled grouper with a side plate of rice and clams (think wet risotto) was sensational. It took Edmundo to go choose the caramelised prune (think thick caramel!) to go with the decaffeinated espresso. We had to walk home uphill over the cobblestones and do a quick circuit of the town at midnight or else I could never have slept.

### **The Indians are Encircling the Camp – in Évora**

Each time I got up on my first night in Évora I could hear the drums. What was going on?

Évora is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and is the capital of the Alentejo region of Portugal less than two hours from Lisbon. We are staying in an old convent, the Pousada dos Loios with a Roman Temple right outside our front door. (The Roman columns and the Christian Cross puts a certain relevance into Roman and Catholic.) The well-

preserved town centre is still partially enclosed by medieval walls and a large number of monuments from various historical periods, including the 16<sup>th</sup> Century University.

The 'drums' I hear are the thud-thud-thud from the University musical groups of students in black capes and coloured linings as well as different merit badges showing their studies (known as Tunas). They are participating in a Tuna Festival in the cloisters of the old University just below my convent cell. We went down last night after dinner and joined them, but departed back to our cots at midnight. And they had only just begun!

Obviously there are no 'studies' this week.

## **Guimarães**

No Rest for the Wicked! How can a man have a siesta with all the noise in the largo beneath his window?

We are in the north of Portugal in the medieval town of Guimarães. Between the local traditional dancers and the Brazilian Caphoeira Martial Arts group, not one minute of rest has been possible, and now it's time to get up for drinking and eating again. It's been so hot, I have run out of short-sleeved shirts and I don't know what I will wear either!

The historic town of Guimarães is associated with the emergence of the Portuguese national identity in the 12th century. An exceptionally well-preserved and authentic example of the evolution of a medieval settlement into a modern town, its rich building typology exemplifies the specific development of Portuguese architecture from the 15th to 19th century through the consistent use of traditional building materials and techniques.

## **Roast Baby Goat for Lunch with the wine-making Mattos family in the Douro**

An ophthalmologist turned wine grower, whose family has owned twenty-four hectares of vines up and down the mountain in the Douro for three centuries hosts us royally. Previously I had known only the Mateus Rose, which also comes from around this region.

## **Fatima,**

Our last two nights of the holiday are spent in Casa Alta, a small manor house on the massive outer wall of the Castle of Ourém, which dates back to the 13th Century. From my bedroom I can clearly see the huge illuminated cross atop the Basilica of Fatima in the distance. I am going to use the historical references of this Castle and its Fatima connections to help highlight parts of my story.

In 701 AD, the Moors took over the territory and built the upper portion of the castle of Ourém. In the 11th Century, Spain begins the reconquest of what is now Portugal. In 1136, after winning important battle, the King of Leon and Castille awards Ourém to Goncalo Hermingues for defending and caring for the castle. Goncalo takes for his wife, Fatima, the daughter of the defeated Moorish Chief. Fatima converts to Christianity and was baptised by the name Oureana giving both names to history. Oureana dies and Goncalo retires in grief to the Cistercian Convent of Alcobaca. King Dinis I ascended to the throne 30 years later. His wife Queen St Elizabeth of Portugal was given title to

Ourém. She commissioned the building of Casa Alta as a house of prayer.

In 2000, Father Mariani leased and renovated the property as a retreat house for his confreres of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, as well as for pilgrims to the Fatima Shrine and anyone seeking the peace and beauty of the site. And here we are. At first we couldn't understand how our intended pilgrimage to the shrine of the Blessed Virgin in Fatima had landed us in a house full of silver, works of art, and portraits of grand benefactors. In attendance were a Ukrainian butler and a devoted housekeeper, and a beautiful white Samoid dog, called Prince. But soon we met the real Prince, Father Mariani, who had the demeanour of a 19th Century bishop. He greeted us with a flourish at the front door dressed in a voluminous black soutane and monogrammed black velvet slippers.

After stepping into his library for minimal formalities, we couldn't count the amount of titles and Orders of Merit bestowed on the worldly Californian priest. He is a character bigger than life, with a long list of honours and titles - including that of Royal Chaplain to the Dukes of Braganza, Pretenders to the Portuguese Crown.

After being shown to our rooms (I was in the Duchess of Braganza Suite) by straight-faced Igor and prim and proper Valentina, either one of whom could have been KGB plants, we emerged into a garden and pool area of magnificent flowers overlooking the valley of Ourém and Fatima. To our delight, cocktails and dinner proceeded in three different 'stage-settings' in the garden. Adding a touch of the magnificent, Father Mariani appears amongst the walls of blooming hydrangea in full regalia with some of the minor decorations around his neck. What an engaging individual!

As Fatima specialist Leo Madigan (a New Zealander) says Fatima is a place where heaven chose to speak to earth. It is the 20th Century's oak of Moreh - where the Lord appeared to Abraham- the Sinai of Moses, the Bethlehem and Calvary of Jesus. As at those sites, it is the message that gives the place significance. The first essential of the message is prayer and penance. When Our Lady spoke to the three shepherd children atop a gnarled and stunted olive tree at the Cova da Iria she urged we pray the Rosary. I've already shared with you where I stand on that.

What am I to do? After gin and tonic and red wine in Father Mariani's garden, I'm not sure how chastened or prepared we are to go to the evening Candlelight procession at the Basilica of The Blessed Virgin at Fatima, which commences with the recitation of the Rosary led by pilgrims in many languages. Edmundo and I with candles lit join the pilgrims singing "Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria", and follow the original crowned statue of Our Lady of Fatima held aloft on a bed of roses in the Candlelight procession around the esplanade in front of the Basilica.

This moved some cogs for me. But it was the midday Mass celebrated the following day by a blind English priest in a small chapel in the basement of a non-descript hotel that was more touching. More cogs turned as he preached on motherhood and the Visitation of Mary to her sister Elizabeth who was with child. And I could only be strengthened by seeing the man beatifically saying the whole Mass with the assistance of a disguised small Dictaphone in one hand and a cord in his ear. All other actions including the giving of Communion were assisted by a young assistant from Cape Verde holding his arm and going through the motions with him.

## **Alcobaça Monastery**

Our visit to the Cistercian medieval Alcobaça Monastery near Fatima, founded in thanksgiving for having won the Battle of Santorem, was heightened by an informal performance by contratenor Luís Peças and Joao Santos on keyboard.

The Monastery was founded by the first Portuguese King Alfonso Henriques in 1153 and maintained a close association with the Kings of Portugal throughout its history.

Alcobaça is one of the few European monuments that has managed to preserve intact an entire group of mediaeval buildings and its church is the largest early Gothic construction in Portugal. The history of its foundation in 1153 recounted in the eighteenth century azulejo panels that line the walls of the Sala dos Reis (Kings' Hall). As we "read" the story of these panels, we learn that D. Afonso Henriques, the first king of Portugal, promised St. Bernard his lands in Alcobaça if he managed to capture Santarem from the Moors, which did in fact happen in 1147.

### **MONASTERY OF BATALHA**

The Monastery belonged to Dominican Order, with no bells as customary for the Order. Batalha's Abbey is one of Europe's greatest Gothic masterpieces and is protected as a World Heritage monument. It was built in 1388 after King João I made a vow to the Virgin that he would build a magnificent monastery if she granted him a victory over the Castillians in the Battle of Aljubarrota. An equestrian statue of Nuno Alvares Pereira, the king's commander at the battle, stands before the southern façade.

Delicious Plain Portuguese food continues! - Can you smell it?

I don't know what herbs other than nutmeg and coriander might be making this broth so sweet. Lean lamb, loosely hanging from small pieces of shank or rib bones melts in my mouth. As with so many of these simple Portuguese dishes, potatoes, garlic and bread are an integral part of the recipe.

Pork and clams that are so affordable for hard-working families also seem to feature in many recipes in casserole, soup, and deep fried variations. There's plenty of olive oil in everything but my constitution can't come at the wonderfully smelling 'deep fried' offerings. I leave that to Greg. A bite of his rabbit at dinner last night was delicious!