



Photos clockwise from top: Classic orange rooftops; arches in Lisbon; ocean view

A ride of a lifetime

By Diana Ballon

The plan was to meet at 4:45 p.m. in the lobby of the Hotel Cristal in Porto on the northwest coast of Portugal.

After an arduous 10-hour flight and a long hot shower, I readied myself for our meeting. Would we like each other? Would the trip lead to more?

It was actually not any kind of tryst, but the beginning of an eight-day cycling trip with Exodus Travels, a 45-year-old adventure tour company catering mainly to 50-plus outdoorsy types like myself. The itinerary promised scenic coastal rides along

the Atlantic en route from Porto to Lisbon.

Which brings me back to the lobby. Soon people began to trickle in, each giving the room an expectant scan, followed by a smile of recognition. By the end, we were 15 in total – about half from North America and half from Europe – and fairly evenly split between men and women, solo travellers and couples. All in all, it was a fit group, ranging in age from about 45 to 70.

Our local guide Alexandre Conceição, or Alex, began by introducing us to the trip's itinerary and details of our next day. We would start with a short van ride to

Burmester wine cellar for a port tasting by the river that evening, followed by dinner back at the hotel. Then the next day, starting at 9:30 a.m., would begin five days of cycling, covering almost 300 kms.

As it turned out, the trip exceeded my expectations, which were already high. Here is a recap.

THE CYCLING

This trip is gauged as a Level 2 (leisurely or moderate) activity level with about 50 to 60 kilometres a day of travel. The route is mainly flat with some shortish hills the last couple of days. Cycling usually began at about 9 a.m. and finished around 4 or 4:30 p.m. with many breaks for coffee and of course lunch. We travelled mostly on paths separate from the road, but occasionally on the side of the road, on gravel, on boardwalks, through a covered bridge, and forests of pine and past villages with their classic orange rooftops.

TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

There were many. Here is a sampling, listed in the order in which we reached them on our travels.

Nature Reserve of the Sao Jacinto Dunes is a protected nature reserve covering a 700-hectare area, with untouched coastal marshland, long stretches of sand and numerous birds and other wildlife. The reserve is near the city of Aveiro, which is considered Portugal's Venice because of its network of canals and gondola-like boats.

Costa Nova: In this small village, colourful vertical striped houses — once fishing shacks, and now vacation homes — stand between beach and lagoon.

Nazaré is a famous Portuguese fishing village where you will still find women merchants in the main square dressed in the traditional seven layers of petticoats, and fishermen drying their mackerel and sardines on big nets next to the beach. Take time to shop at the boutiques or watch the waves rolling onto the beach.

A short bike ride away is the town of São Martinha do Porto, where you can stop for lunch at Cima d'Água restaurant, and gaze out its floor-to-ceiling windows at the shell-shaped lagoon and sandy dunes beyond. It's a popular vacation spot for Portuguese but a well-kept secret to other tourists. Next stop is the magical town of Óbidos, with a

walled 13th century castle at the top of the hill, and a labyrinth of windy cobblestone streets leading you there.

SLEEPING OVER

We stayed in four-star boutique hotels, clean and quiet, with excellent protein-rich breakfasts included each morning. My favourite hotel was The Literary Man in Óbidos, where we stayed after our last day of cycling. A former convent, the hotel now pays tribute to the city's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature. Walls are lined with books, and you can sample "literary cocktails" at the bar.

FOOD AND DRINK

Expect a Mediterranean diet, delicious and healthy, with lots of fish and seafood, from cod to hake to sardines and octopus. The caldo verde is the traditional soup, made with onions, potatoes, kale or collard greens, and chunks of spicy sausage, and of course garlic and olive oil. For breakfast, you'll find cheeses, meats, eggs, as well as yogurt, fruit and usually granola. Don't expect the North American waffle or pancake — you'll have lots of good dessert options later in the day like Portuguese custard tarts.

The ginjinha, or ginja, is a sweet cherry liqueur that the Portuguese drink straight, sometimes out of small chocolate cups. Of course wine is almost as inexpensive as water (about 2.5 to 3 euros per glass) and the pours are as generous as the wine is affordable!

Shopping Portugal is still one of the least expensive countries in Western Europe, so leave room in your bag for souvenirs. But before buying, check the label to make sure it's locally produced. Cork products, pottery, roosters and canned sardines are among the offerings.

If You Go

Exodus Travels [exodustravels.com] offers walking and trekking, cycling, winter and family adventures as well as culture and mixed activity tours to more than 100 countries worldwide.

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