

# TIMELESS PORTUGAL

## Exploring Douro Valley wine country with Emerald Waterways

Terraced vineyards spill down hillsides flanking the Douro River, which takes cruise travelers through northern Portugal to the Spanish border.

By Katherine Rodeghier

Standing on the ship's deck felt like being on the stage of an ancient amphitheater as rugged stone walls ringing hillsides rose steeply around me. But these walls didn't hold seating for toga-clad spectators awaiting some amusement. They lined row after row of grape vines on terraces tumbling down the banks of the Douro River in northern Portugal.

And the amusement was mine, one shared with fellow passengers as scenery unfolded around every bend in the river. Red-tile roofs topped white-stucco buildings of *quinta*—wine estates—and villages popped up along the banks, church spires rising from their centers.

I was sailing on the *Emerald Radiance*, built in 2017 for Emerald Waterways. Unlike Emerald's other ships, this one is smaller, 112 passengers instead of 182, to fit inside the Douro's dams. We passed through five on our eight-day "Secrets of the Douro" itinerary beginning and ending in Porto, a centuries-old city near the mouth of the river at the Atlantic Ocean.

Such a voyage wasn't possible a generation ago. The Douro had been a wild river



Wine barrels line the warehouse at Quinta da Pachecca estate, where passengers dine one evening.

flowing through a narrow passage cut by wind and rain, a raging torrent during high water, too shallow for ships when the water subsided. The dams, built from the 1960s to 1980s for flood control and hydroelectric

power, tamed it. Now resembling a necklace of lakes, the river is navigable for 130 miles, all the way east to the Spanish border.

Cruises on the Douro have risen in popularity, drawing attention to northern Portugal.

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Emerald Waterways





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The *Emerald Radiance* offers the eight-day “Secrets of the Douro” weekly through early November.

In 2001 a chunk of the river valley became a UNESCO World Heritage Site, not only for its importance as a wine region but also for its dramatic landscape and historic structures. Excursions from the ship touched on

several more UNESCO sites, making my cruise on the Douro an enlightening cultural experience. At least one excursion in each port was included in my *Emerald Radiance* itinerary, and two Discover More trips were

offered at additional cost.

I opted not to join the “extra credit” excursion to Guimaraes, Portugal’s first capital and a UNESCO site with an 11th-century castle and 15th-century Dukes Palace. That left me more time to explore Portugal’s second-largest city, Porto, and mingle with some of its 250,000 inhabitants.

Porto’s Old City made the UNESCO list in 1996. A walking tour led me through a web of lanes and alleys and down the pedestrian Santa Catarina, where many stores occupy buildings in the Art Nouveau style. I stopped to take photos at the Belle Epoque Majestic Cafe, where J.K. Rowling sipped coffee during her stay in Porto and dreamed up Harry Potter stories. Around the corner a queue stretched more than a block outside the entrance to the Lello & Irmao bookstore with its lavish Art Nouveau furnishings and a staircase said to have inspired one depicted at Hogwarts in the Potter films. The 1906 building has become such a mecca for Potter fans that the store now charges an admission of four euros, redeemable with a purchase.

Our tour pushed on to the Torre dos



Clerigos with its 247-foot-tall bell tower and the 1915 Estacao de Sao Bento railway station, where about 20,000 blue-and-white tiles depict scenes of local history, transportation, commerce and farming.

River ships arriving and departing Porto pass under the double deck Luis I iron bridge, made by a student of Gustave Eiffel in 1887. The master himself, creator of the Eiffel Tower, designed another of Porto's five bridges, but it is Luis I that gets the most attention. Daring—or foolish—youths jump off its lower deck into the river, a spectacle best seen from the adjacent Ribeira neighborhood of pastel-hue houses and arcades. Waterfront cafes, bars and shops make Ribeira a popular spot to hang out, day or night.

Our *Emerald Radiance* walking tour transitioned to a motorcoach to cross the bridge to the opposite bank of the Douro and the “new town,” Vila Nova de Gaia or simply Gaia. To avoid taxes in Porto, the Douro

Valley's earliest winemakers kept storehouses here to be close to Atlantic docks, where sailing vessels from around the world called. Getting to these storehouses from wineries up the river was no small feat in the days before the dams. Small, shallow-draft wooden sailboats, *rabelos*, navigated around rapids, sometimes smashing on rocks and sending barrels of wine tumbling into the river. Today the wine is transported to Gaia mostly by truck, and replica *rabelos* cruise the river on tourist excursions.

About half of the wines made from grapes grown along the Douro are table wines, including many nice vintages poured onboard the *Emerald Radiance* and included in the cruise fare at lunch and dinner. The other half of the region's grape harvest becomes port, a blend of as many as 80 varieties of grapes, though five black grapes are most commonly used. About 48 hours into their fermentation, grape spirit—77 proof—

is added, giving port an alcohol content ranging from 19 to 22 percent.

The Douro River Valley ranks as the oldest demarcated wine-growing region in the world, established in 1756. Only fortified wines from the valley's eastern vineyards can legally be called port, a name protected within the European Union.

Britain was the biggest market for port in the 18th and early 19th centuries, especially during the Napoleonic Wars, when access to French wine came to a halt. British ships sailed right past Bordeaux, rounding the Iberian Peninsula to Portugal. Upper-class Brits favored the sweet, strong taste of fortified wine. The grape spirit added to the wine had the added benefit of stabilizing it on the often rocky voyage home.

Wine producers still keep warehouses in Gaia. Our group stopped for a tour and tasting at Taylor's Port, founded by Englishmen in 1692. One of the managers led us through



“Cork Lady” Paula Guimaraes discusses the many uses of cork in an onboard presentation.



If the Mateus Palace looks familiar, you've probably seen it on bottles of Mateus Rosé wine.

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At the Spanish border, passengers disembark the ship for an excursion to Salamanca, a university city noted for its 18th-century Plaza Mayor.



the port-making process, telling us about three of Taylor's up-river vineyards where grapes are still stomped by foot. He showed off a rare, single-harvest port that has aged for 162 years and has triple the amount of sugar as Coca-Cola. Port comes in several varieties—including tawny, ruby, rosé—consumed with dessert or as a nightcap. White port, such as the chip port we sampled at Taylor's, is drier and served as an aperitif. One afternoon, the *Emerald Radiance* bartender gave a cocktail-making demonstration, showing passengers how white port can be mixed with tonic and other ingredients in a refreshing adult beverage.

Portugal's other well-known wine, Mateus Rosé, also comes from the Douro River Valley near the town of Vila Real, where our Discover More tour group visited the 18th-century Mateus Palace. Its fanciful exterior, with Baroque towers and flourishes, appears on the label of the wine's iconic, flask-

shaped bottle. But that's where the palace's connection to this sweet, slightly fizzy wine ends. The Count of Mangualde, who owns the palace and resides there part of the year, does not make Mateus Rosé but collects a royalty for the image on every label.

**M**ost passengers in our tour group couldn't resist posing in front of the palace before walking through its manicured gardens of sculpted box hedges and blooming flower beds. Inside, we visited the library with its large collection of rare books, entrance hall with cherubs carved into its wooden ceiling, Blue Room named for its porcelain collection and religion museum containing vestments and the relics of about 20 saints.

The connection between wine and the Douro kept popping up all week during my cruise. In the village of Pinhao, the ship's tour escorts led us on a walk to the old train station, where 24 blue-and-white tile murals

from the 1930s illustrate wine cultivation and production. Passengers had a chance to try tile painting in a workshop onboard, one of several *Emerald Radiance* activities, which also included a presentation by "Cork Lady" Paula Guimaraes. Most of the world's supply of cork comes from Portugal, where it is a crime to cut down a cork tree, she said. Cork is harvested from the bark and used not just to seal wine bottles, but for making a variety of products she laid out in the Horizon Lounge: wallets, hats, belts, jewelry. I bought a necklace made of cork and silver.

An EmeraldPLUS activity took passengers off the ship for dinner in the warehouse of the Quinta da Pacheca wine estate. Strolling musicians entertained us as we drank wine and port and feasted on local fare, some dishes incorporating olives and almonds grown on trees alongside vineyards in the valley. The "Almond Capital of Portugal," Vila Nova de Fox Coa, lies just a few miles from the

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Tile art in Pinhao's railway station tells the story of wine cultivation in the Douro Valley.



A tile-painting class lets travelers try their hand at this cherished Portuguese art form.



Porto is Portugal's second-largest city with a population of 250,000 and the embarkation/disembarkation point for cruises on the Douro River.





An architecturally unusual museum is a must-see at the world's largest Paleolithic rock art site.

Douro on the route our excursion took to the Coa Valley Archaeological Park.

The world's largest open-air Paleolithic rock art site encompasses about 50,000 acres at the confluence of the Douro and Coa rivers. Petroglyphs dating back 10,000 to 40,000 years were found here during preliminary work to construct a dam on the Coa in the 1990s. The discovery was kept secret, but when word leaked out, preservationists rallied to save the area. UNESCO stepped in, adding it to its list of World Heritage Sites in 1998. Our tour visited the park's Museum of Art and Archaeology, which displays original and replica prehistoric rock art drawings, mainly of animals such as horses, goats, deer, boar and aurochs, an extinct species of ox.

But the museum merits a visit for two additional reasons: its location and its architecture. We entered the concrete triangular building through a narrow passage leading down to the lobby that opened up to what felt like an underground chamber. Architect Camilo Rebelo's monolithic design was chosen in a competition, and the museum opened in 2010. It stands on a hillside overlooking both river valleys. I walked onto the terrace of the museum cafe for the week's best view of steep hillsides terraced with vineyards. A ship slowly cruised the Douro far below, an ant floating through a canyon.

Other Instagram-worthy views presented themselves on the ship's excursion to Lamego, a city of about 26,000 a short drive from the river.

Our motorcoach dropped us at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies, perched on a hilltop overlooking the red-tile roofs of the city. The facade of the church, a mix of Baroque and Rococo styles, has an unusual statue depicting the Virgin Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus. After shooting a few photos, I grabbed the walking stick thoughtfully provided by the *Emerald Radiance* and started down a monumental staircase to the city center. Our tour escorts gave us the option to ride the motorcoach but encouraged us to tackle the 686 steps and take time to enjoy the view. The stairway is broken up by nine terraces where

the now-familiar blue-and-white tiles form murals of religious scenes and statues depict the Stations of the Cross. Changing views of the city below and the sanctuary above kept my camera clicking, and in less than an hour I finished the descent, my gimpy knee no worse for the wear. On religious holidays, the faithful make the more difficult climb up the granite stairs, some on their knees.

I had plenty of time to explore other Lamego sites, including the 12th-century cathedral and the Lamego Museum, housed in an 18th-century Bishop's Palace where a set of four rare Flemish tapestries depicting the story of Oedipus caught my eye.

We put Portugal behind us on an excursion into Spain. Salamanca lay a two-hour drive from where our ship docked at the Spanish border. Yet another UNESCO World Heritage Site on our cruise, the Old City deserves its nickname, "The Golden City," for the tawny sandstone buildings aglow in

the midday sun.

Our walking tour led us through the 18th-century Plaza Mayor with its City Hall and Royal Pavilion; the public market, where platters of ham, cheese and olives were passed around for us to sample; and the city's first university, which marks its 800th anniversary in 2018. Two cathedrals stand side-by-side, a 12th-century Romanesque one adjoining another begun in 1513 in the Gothic style and completed some two centuries later in the Baroque style. Our guide challenged us to find something surprising in the historical figures carved into the "new" cathedral's entryway. Before long we spotted the image of an astronaut added in a 1992 restoration.

The 33,000 university students in this city of 150,000 give Salamanca a youthful vibe, and we were charmed by the music students who performed for us at the end of our tour. Dressed in the medieval costumes of troubadours, they assembled in a shady courtyard to play traditional songs on guitar, accordion and tambourine.

We'd reach the farthest navigable section of the river at the Spanish border, so the *Emerald Radiance* turned around for its return to Porto, giving passengers a second opportunity to go through the locks on the Douro's five dams. This exercise never failed to draw a crowd to the sun deck, especially the passage at the Carrapatelo Dam. It was the first one built on the Douro, between 1965 and 1972, and with a maximum lift of 115 feet, one of the highest lock and dams in the world. The doors of its lock clang shut like a bank vault.

Even passengers like me who are fairly clueless about mechanical things are impressed by these feats of engineering and thankful for their existence. Without the dams, a river cruise across this colorful swath of Portugal would not be possible. **CT**

## 2018 DOURO RIVER ITINERARIES

**E**merald Waterways' *Emerald Radiance* offers passengers several options in 2018.

**Departure Dates:** The eight-day "Secrets of the Douro" itinerary, roundtrip from Porto, departs weekly through November 10.

**Prices:** Basic fares start at \$3,295 per person, double occupancy, plus airfare. Tips, meals, wine and beer at lunch and dinner, and at least one excursion in each port are included.

**Other Itineraries:** Land tours in Lisbon and/or Madrid can be added to the "Secrets of the Douro" itinerary. A 15-day package combines a Douro cruise with a river cruise in southern France, and a 21-day itinerary includes both cruises plus land tours in Lisbon and Nice.

**For More Information:** Emerald Waterways (*Cruise Travel Magazine*), One Financial Center, Suite 400, Boston, MA 02111; call 855-222-3214 or visit [www.emeraldwaterways.com](http://www.emeraldwaterways.com).



J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, frequented Porto's Majestic Cafe.