

Terraced slopes step down to the Douro, the "River of Gold," near Chancelheiros village. Once a highway for shipping port wine, the river now carries travelers exploring the Douro Valley.

A self-guided fall hiking tour through the Douro Valley wine district introduces a couple to the pleasures of port and the pleasing Portuguese countryside.

A WALK ON THE WINE SIDE

BY RACHEL HOWARD
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MELFORD

"PORT REQUIRES PATIENCE," SAID

Adelina Vieira, our impossibly pretty and surprisingly young guide. "You must wait 20 years to open a vintage, but then you have to hurry up and drink it within 24 hours." Vieira offered this sage advice as my boyfriend, Angelos Talentzakis, and I toured the century-old cellar of Quinta de la Rosa near Pinhão, Portugal.

"Perhaps that old half-empty bottle of port lurking in the back of your kitchen cabinet would make a good salad dressing," said Angelos.

Given that Angelos is a bartender, it's hard for me not to feel stupid when it comes to wine. So as a birthday treat for him, I'd decided to book the two of us on a wine tour, where he could show off his nose and I could brush up on bouquets. But where to go? Trawling the web for ideas, I came across a review by a respected wine critic: Apparently, Portuguese wines are the next big thing. Late fall seemed like the perfect time for the southern Mediterranean. Even though we'd just missed the grape harvest, the colors would be glorious and the crowds gone.

Our destination was the Douro Valley, the traditional home of port, the sweet, fortified wine that connoisseurs have been sipping after dinner ever since British merchants over 300 years ago started lacing local wine with brandy to stop it from spoiling in transit. In recent years, this remote region in northern Portugal has also had wine buffs drooling over some sublime red table wines. But since drinking and driving were out, we figured the best way to experience the Douro region was to walk.

Luckily, we discovered Inntravel (www.inntravel.co.uk), a small English tour op-



Decanters of port await at the Casa do Visconde de Chanceleros wine estate. The Douro Valley's port production was once shipped downriver to warehouses outside Porto aboard *barcos rabelos*—flat-bottomed, square-sailed boats (opposite, lower). The author and her friend sample the Douro by foot (opposite, upper).

erator that organizes self-guided walking trips. The company provides maps and other tour information and arranges accommodation in family-run hotels, where guests can meet the locals and taste the regional cuisine. Best of all, we wouldn't be backpacking: Our luggage would be transported between hotels by taxi, so all we'd

have to carry was our picnic. The seven-day tour we chose would lead us by train, boat, and on foot through the Alto Douro, or Upper Douro, about 80 miles east of Porto, Portugal's second largest city, after Lisbon. Hiking between seven and ten miles each day, we would journey from the riverside hamlet of Vesuvio to the hillside village of Chanceleros. As we wended our way through the bucolic Douro Valley, we'd have plenty of time to visit vineyards and poke around in the remote villages.

Angelos and I arrived at the gleaming new airport in Porto on a sunny, crisp November morning. The taxi driver hurtled along the highway like a man with a death wish, and I was glad we wouldn't be spending much time on the road. We focused our attention on the River Douro as it swept into view. The "River of Gold" snakes 124 miles from the Portuguese-Spanish border to the Atlantic Ocean. Once a series of perilous rapids, the river was dammed in the 1970s to facilitate the transportation of port

from the vineyards of the Alto Douro to Vila Nova de Gaia, the city just south of Porto where port is still aged, blended, and bottled in armazéns. We could see these long, low cellars hunkered down on the opposite riverbank, their slanted roofs emblazoned in giant letters with the port trade's biggest players: Croft, Taylor, Sandeman, Graham, Cockburn.

We were spending our first day in Porto before catching the train into the Douro Valley, so Angelos and I stopped for brunch at the bustling art nouveau Confeitaria do Bolhão, where we made a serious dent in the array of sticky buns and custard tarts.





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The prices at the cacophonous Mercado do Bolhão, the food market, were practically prehistoric. Among the garlands of sausages, chili peppers, and plastic flowers were live chickens and pig's trotters, destined for the city's famous dish, tripas à moda do Porto. Residents of Porto are nicknamed tripeiros because they are so fond of tripe.

"Vegetarianism doesn't seem to be an option in Portugal," observed Angelos of the hearty, heart-stopping food. That didn't deter him from indulging in another local favorite, the francesinha, a steak, sausage, and ham sandwich smothered in melted cheese and spicy beer sauce, served with a fried egg and chips.

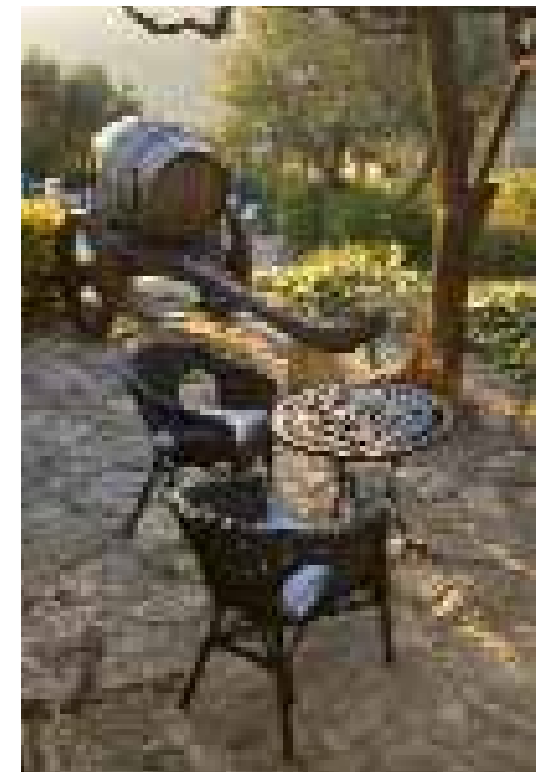
We joined the shoppers parading up and down Santa Catarina, a cobbled boulevard punctuated by little clouds of smoke from the roast chestnut stands. Seagulls swooped and crowded overhead. At Café Majestic, gilded cherubs gazed benignly upon the crowds taking afternoon tea. Established in 1921 as the Café Elite, this art deco gem still buzzes with the cream of Porto society. Even the napkin holders are tipped with gold.

But Porto's charm lies in its faded grandeur. Scrawny dogs scavenged in alleys so narrow they were in perpetual darkness, threadbare laundry festooned between tiled facades. Lured by the mournful strains of fado, the Portuguese music dedicated to the pangs of love and exile, we stepped inside dimly lit bars in the Rua de Como da Villa. The medieval cathedral loomed above the city, almost sinister in its bulk. The double-tiered Ponte Dom Luís I bridge, built in the 1880s, afforded giddy views over the city, which appeared to have changed little in the intervening years.

Since the advent of railways and roads, the wine boats, or barcos rabelos—once used to transport barrels of port from the Douro Valley—are moored permanently alongside the Avenida Ramos Pinto, like advertisements for a bygone era. One historic form of transport that has survived is

the tram, which clatters and rattles through town at irregular intervals. Even the driver, with his pencil-thin moustache and zoot suit, is a period piece.

As the sun set, we did what everyone does and wandered along the riverside Ribeira, a UNESCO World Heritage site awash with restaurants and souvenir shops. We squeezed into Il Muro, a cozy pesque-



Day hikers can reward themselves with stays at wine estate hotels such as Casa do Visconde de Chancelheiros (above). Opposite: A dog keeps a traveler company as he waits for transportation to the Alojamento Senhora da Ribeira, an inn reached via a boat ride across the river.

ria decorated with old bank notes and bad paintings. Pesqueira means dainty dish, but the portions were enormous. We feasted on pastéis de bacalhau (salt-cod fritters), a whole broiled octopus, and a skewered sausage doused in moonshine and set alight at our table.

After all that heavy fare, we were ready to break in our new hiking boots next

morning. The train ride into wine country was like traveling back in time to 1887, when the Douro railway first opened. Back then, the steam train was so slow it was nicknamed the paciência, but this was a journey we wanted to last forever.

Sometimes the tracks ran so close to the Douro River we felt like diving right in. We paused at toy-town stations decorated with azulejos, blue and white tiles painted with pastoral scenes. As we rounded a bend, a patchwork of terraced vineyards came into view, the hills a blaze of auburn and gold. Painted white, the wine estates, or quintas, were visible for miles, their names stamped across their fronts in bold black letters.

One of the world's oldest demarcated wine regions, the Douro had its boundaries set in stone in 1756, when the Marquis de Pombal put up granite pillars (known as pombals ever since) to define the area officially permitted to produce port. The whole area is now a World Heritage site, and several quintas have recognized the potential of turismo rural, offering tasting tours and rooms to rent.

It was pitch dark by the time we reached the tiny station of Vesuvio, 75 miles east of Porto. Nuno Costa and George Mocinyo, the jovial young managers of the Alojamento Senhora da Ribeira, a riverside inn where we were to spend the night, were waiting to greet us. We boarded their motorboat and glided across

the inky river under a dusting of stars.

"It's 18 kilometers [11 miles] to civilization. We wouldn't have a train station at all if it weren't for the Quinta do Vesuvio, one of the most famous estates for vintage port," said Mocinyo. The immense quinta loomed out of the darkness on the south bank of the river.

The inn's humble but homey restaurant was deserted, except for a couple of farm hands glued to a soccer game. Apparently, the locals were still recovering from the hard labor and heavy drinking of the October harvest. As we tucked into roast lamb with pomegranate, Costa tried to explain

EVERY INCH OF HILLSIDE WAS SCULPTED INTO TERRACES THAT FOLLOWED THE CONTOURS OF THE LAND LIKE AN AFRICAN WEAVE.

the difference between ruby, tawny, vintage, and white port.

“So white port is what you drink while you’re waiting for the others to mature,” said Angelos.

We woke up to a view of golden light rippling through a row of willow trees reflected in the burnished river beyond. No roads scarred the hills, and only birdsong broke the silence. Overnight, the world seemed to have come to a standstill, taking us back several decades.

After breakfast, we set off east along the riverbank. Our first day’s walk would lead us in a seven mile loop along the river, up to the village of Pinhal do Douro, and back downhill to our starting point. Fragrant orange trees and wild roses scented the air. I anxiously kept an eye on the walking notes provided by Intravel, but the directions were foolproof. We followed an ancient path through olive groves and cork oaks, their orange barks stripped bare, looking like sunburned legs. Over 50 percent of the world’s cork comes from Portugal, but cork trees can only be harvested every ten years, so most locals plant grapevines, which are more profitable. Occasionally, we came across a farmer hacking at the obstinate earth, giving credence to the local saying: “God created the Earth and man the Douro.”

I’d read that when the first tourists ventured into the Douro in the 18th century, the local inns and taverns were so flea-infested that travelers often slept on tables. How times have changed. Our next hotel, Casa de Casal de Loivos—perched high on the hilltop in the village of the same name—was a 17th-century manor house elegantly furnished with family heirlooms. From our deliciously chintz-filled bedroom, French windows opened onto a terrace in the clouds, with views of the Douro River meandering into a mirage of receding hills.

“To understand this house, you must understand the last 300 years of Portugal’s history,” declared our host, Manuel Sampaio. We listened to his (staunchly royalist) his-

tory lesson as he gave us a guided tour. With his soft grey curls and cravat, Sampaio looked every bit the aristocrat. He showed off the Hawkins pistols his great-grandfather had used in the Napoleonic War.

“And now I will show you the heart of the house,” he said with a theatrical flourish, opening a closet to reveal an altar from 1733. I asked why it was hidden away. Sampaio



A worker pauses above a vineyard at the Vesuvio Quinta estate. In addition to its renowned ports, the Douro also produces notable table wines. In the village of Provisende (opposite), a World Heritage site, a quiet street leads past fine examples of 19th-century architecture.

raised an eyebrow. “We believe that what concerns our soul should not be exposed.”

This guarded introspection is typical of the Portuguese psyche, and is even more pronounced in the traditional, conservative Douro. Nostalgia is a national trait, known as *saudade*, which the Portuguese are perversely proud of, given that their recent history includes decades of dictator-

ship under Dr. António de Oliveira Salazar, who ruled with an iron grip from 1932-1968.

The chime of a grandfather clock was our cue to take our seats in the formal dining room. White-gloved servants hovered as we made small talk with our fellow guests. The award-winning red wine from the estate soon helped us loosen up. But with a five-hour trek ahead of us the following day, we did not protest when Sampaio politely packed us all off to bed. His parting shot was directed at me: “Please. Do not think that I’m old. I’m aged. Like a good vintage.”

We rose to another sunny day and began making our way along dusty trails, through ramshackle hamlets where women scrubbed laundry at communal washstands and old men doffed their hats in greeting. Every inch of hillside was sculpted into terraces that followed the contours of the land like an African weave dyed in dazzling shades of orange and red. It was only as we approached the unremarkable market town of Alijó five hours later that modernity encroached. The main reason to visit Alijó is the Ceba Torta restaurant, but it was closed. After glancing at the menu (“laminated mushrooms,” “codfish boiled bread”), I was less disappointed.

The following day, we overcompensated with a second breakfast in the nearby village of Favaio, a jumble of stone houses whose tiled roofs intersected at jaunty angles,

feathered with plumes of smoke from wood-fired bakeries. In the Barrigodos bakery, a cheery, floury woman in designer shades was mixing a vat of dough. Portuguese pop blasted out of an old transistor radio, the sound distorted by a thick coating of flour. We chattered away in a combination of gesticulation and gibberish.

The baker produced some home-made jam, warm rolls, and a demijohn of port. Thankfully, there was only enough to fill one glass, as it was industrial strength. When I explained that we were walking the seven miles to Vilarinho de São Romão, she crossed herself and did a little jig. I





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gathered that after a few more sips of port we'd be dancing all the way there.

We emerged from the bakery, rosy-cheeked, into the sunshine. Walking in and out of valleys and forests, we crunched through the yolk-yellow leaves of plane trees, trampled on the prickly husks of chestnuts, then crossed the Pinhão River and began the stiff climb up a tarmac road. By the time we reached the summit, my legs had started to buckle.

We were exhausted as we reached Casa de Vilarinho de São Romão, an immaculately restored manor house named after the peaceful village in which it stands. The inn claims a chapel built in 1462, a fountain with spouting dolphins, and granite window seats where suitors would serenade young ladies. We sunk into a sofa beside a roaring log fire with the soft-spoken owner, Cristina van Zeller.

"The previous owner, the Viscount of Vilarinho, ran away to Brazil some years ago after gambling away his fortune," van Zeller told us. The van Zeller clan has been producing port since the 18th century. "But my grandfather used to say it's impossible to make decent wine in the Douro."

Quite obviously, grandfather was wrong: These days, fine local wines cost as much as vintage port (and that's a lot). There are over 80 grape varieties in the Douro, but only the top five are used for fortified wine, and by law only a small proportion of these grapes can be used for top quality port. Some vintners have realized that the surplus can be turned into something more sophisticated than cheap plonk for the grape-pickers. At dinner, the van Zeller's Quinta Vale D. Maria 2004 was a smooth, seductive companion to our crispy peixinhos da horta ("little fish from the kitchen garden"—actually, battered baby vegetables), baked trout, and moist almond tart.

Our final day's walk—a ten-mile jaunt to the tiny village of Chanceleiros—would turn out to be the most challenging, but also the most rewarding. We climbed up through a

thick pine forest until we emerged at a plateau with 360-degree views. From this height, we could pinpoint many of the places we had visited, mere specks on the landscape. It was a steep drop to Provisende, with its huge stone cross in the square where public hangings once took place. We continued on, making an arduous, hour-long ascent to the 863-meter

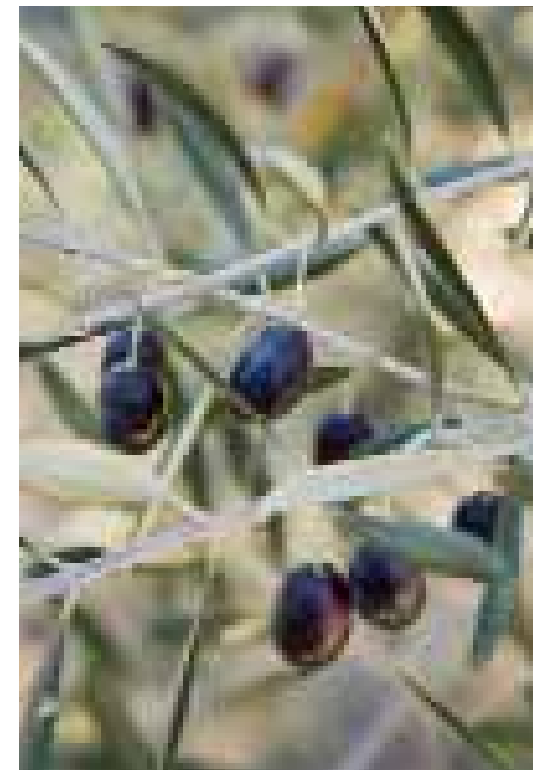
gered into Casa do Visconde de Chanceleiros, a converted quinta that bore the hallmark of its German owners, Kurt and Ursula Bocking: tennis and squash courts—and even a sauna in a giant wine barrel. Over chilled white port and salted almonds, their feisty manager, Adelaide Lopes, told us tales of the days when her parents worked on the estate as farmers. "I was born in this house, but left for Germany in 1971, when I was 16, to work as the Bocking's nanny." Lopes has been part of the family ever since, so it was quite a homecoming when the Bockings bought the quinta on a whim in the mid-1990s.

Back in the 1970s, houses in the Douro didn't have bathrooms, farm workers were paid in produce, and women were banned from coffee shops. "I once drank a beer and smoked a cigarette at a church festival," said Ursula Bocking. "It was 1972. Adelaide's mother still barely speaks to me."

Die-hard traditions and strict building regulations have saved the Douro valley from aggressive tourist development, although change is in the air. The "ultra-boutique" Quinta Romaneira in Cotas, near Pinhão, has suites for over \$1,400 a night; the five-star Aquapura spa near Peso da Régua offers chocolate facials; luxury cruise boats now ply the river, and budget airlines have landed at Porto.

But at Chanceleiros, it was easy to shut out the rest of the world. In the private dining room, the table was beautifully set for two. Candles, flowers, music—everything was in place for Angelos' birthday banquet. Lopes had even baked a birthday cake, decorated with rosebuds from the garden. We toasted Angelos with sparkling Vinho Verde. I couldn't tell you a thing about the bouquet, but it slipped down just fine.

Rachel Howard recently wrote on *Athens and London* for our online "Places of a Lifetime." **Michael Melford** photographed Tennessee for April's "Walk Into America."



Another Douro Valley product, olives, ripens before harvest. The hill town of Favaiois (opposite, lower) spreads beneath the bell tower of the town's church. At the Barrigodos bakery in Favaiois (opposite, upper)—where the author enjoyed warm rolls and strong port—a worker stokes an oven after removing loaves of bread.

summit of São Domingos, where we planned to enjoy the picnic lunch prepared for us by Cristina van Zeller. Wild horses grazed beside us as we sat on top of the world, toasting each other with apple juice as we ate our gourmet sandwiches.

A dusky lilac glow was settling over the hills surrounding Chanceleiros as we stag-

