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.
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 da 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.

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.

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Luckily, we discovered Inntravel (www.inntravel.co.uk), a small English tour operator 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 Chanceleiros. 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.
The toric form of transport that has survived is advertisements for a bygone era. One historic view, along the Avenida Ramos Pinto, like the Douro Valley—are moored permanently used to transport barrels of port from the wine boats, or barcos rabelos—once peering in, 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 giddying views over the city, which appeared to have changed little in the intervening years.

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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 1867, 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.

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.

Since the advent of railways and roads, the price 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 crowed 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 exodus, 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 giddying 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 mustache and zoot suit, is a period piece.

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We rose to another sunny day and began making our way along dusty trails, through ramshackle hamlets and small towns. 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 down-hill to our starting point. Fragrant orange trees and wild roses scented the air. I anxiously kept an eye on the walking notes provided by Inntreav-el, 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 seemed to have come to a standstill, taking us back several decades.

Casa de Casal de Loivos—perched high on the hilltop in the nearby village of Favaios, a jumble of stone houses whose tiled roofs intersected at jaunty angles, feathered with plumes of smoke from wood-fired bakeries. In the Barrigudos 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 coat of flour. We chattered away in a combination of gesticulation and gibberish. The following day, we overcom-pensated with a second breakfast in the village of Provisende (opposite), but it was closed. Af-ter glancing at the menu (“laminated mushrooms,” “toadfish-boiled bread”), I was less disappointed.

The chime of a grandfather clock was heard 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.

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

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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 delicious-mirage of receding hills. 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 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 down-hill to our starting point. Fragrant orange trees and wild roses scented the air. I anxiously kept an eye on the walking notes provided by Inntreav-el, but the directions were foolproof. 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