

TO CONTACT US
ABOUT TRAVEL NEWS:

By phone: (813) 893-8496
or (800) 333-7505, ext. 8496
By fax: (813) 892-2327
By e-mail: flordian@sptimes.com

TRAVEL

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1997

THE TIMES

St. Petersburg Times

A visit to Portugal is a tour through flotsam and jetsam left by waves of successive civilizations, artifacts as well as snippets of language, weaving a fabric so tight that Portuguese became the mirror of Portugal's history.

THE patois OF PORTUGAL

By BRIDGET McQUATE

A historical parade of exotic people had been through Portugal before me — Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Celts, Romans, Lusitanians, Suevis, Visigoths, Moors and the French, among others. I was the clean-up crew, picking up the traces of each culture left behind without knowing exactly which tramping division discarded what.

Portugal's language competes with its history for exoticism. The word I heard the most while there sounds like "shkoodoosh" and means *escudos*, the Portuguese currency. The language is fun to try. I thoroughly enjoyed saying my most frequently used Portuguese phrase, pronounced "Tame oom kwartoo para eshita noyt?" ("Do you have a room for the night?"). What I enjoyed far less were the Portuguese answers to my questions, which left me at a total loss.

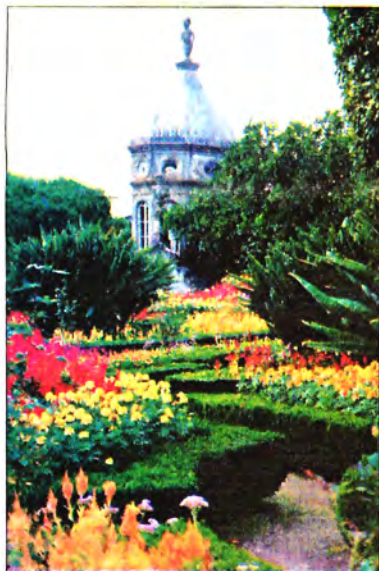


Photo by BRIDGET McQUATE

A sculpted garden brightens up the 16th-century Palacio dos Biscainhos in Braga.

My two-week, four-city tour of Portugal started in Lisbon and was accomplished through the country's excellent and inexpensive bus and train system.

Lisbon

To someone from the New World, the sheer groaning old age of everything in Lisbon stimulates admiration for its graceful perseverance. The houses and buildings clinging to the sharp hills and clustering throughout the crowded valleys of the city are faded, weary structures of light and muted tones with balconies and terra cotta tile roofs. Portugal's Manueline architecture isn't found nearly enough, but can be seen on some of the grander buildings and cathedrals, distinguished by themes of entwining heavy ropes and upside-down horseshoe shapes.

Cable cars and inclines clank and zoom up and down the steep cobblestone streets. Damp laundry adorns

Please see **PORTUGAL 3E**

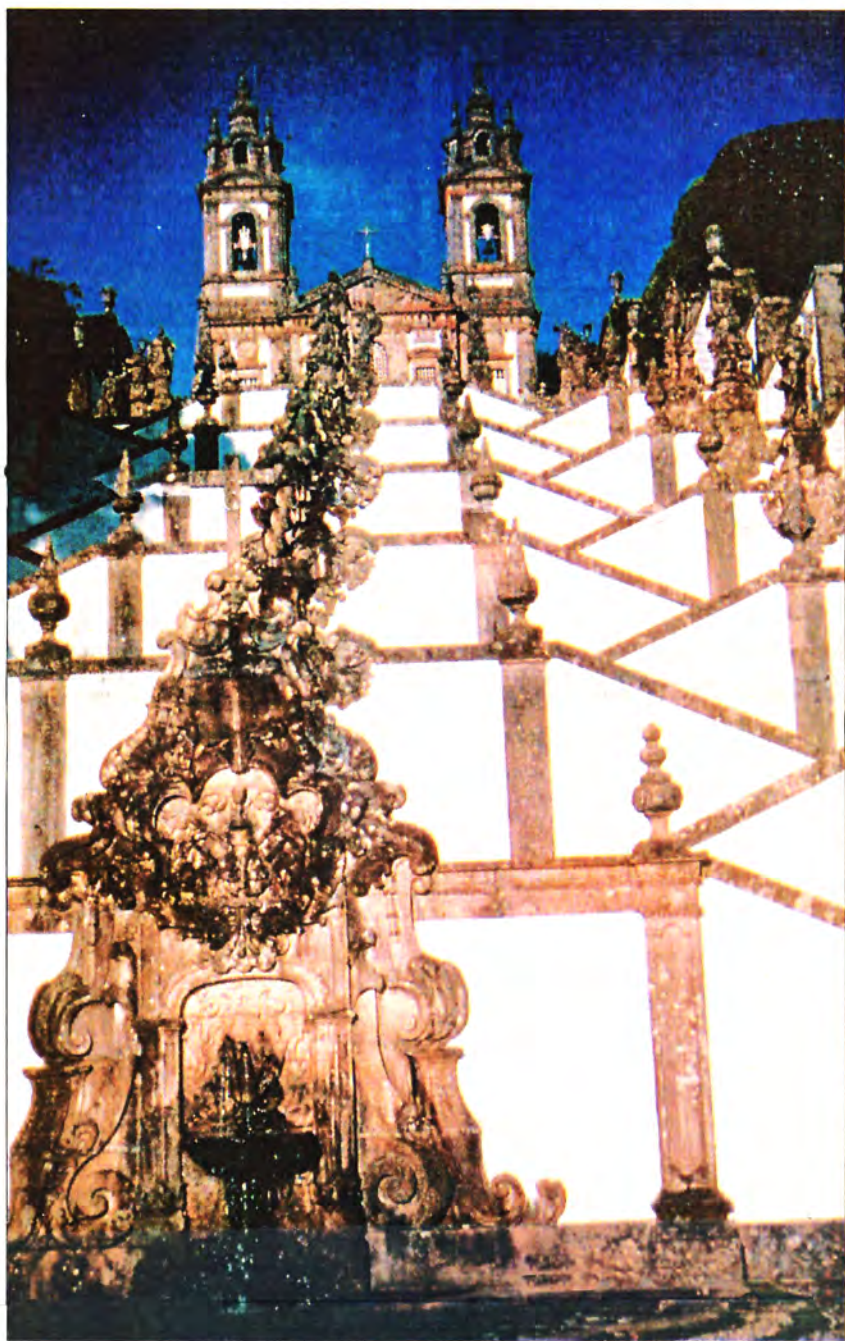


Photo courtesy of the Portuguese National Tourist Office

The 12 landings of an elaborate staircase represent the 12 Stations of the Cross at the church of Bom Jesus do Monte near Braga.

Portugal from 1E

trellisworks of layered clotheslines strung between windows above narrow alley streets — many made of steps to shave off their impossibly steep angles. Active, buzzing outdoor cafes compete for hungry tourists and idling Lisbonites along the city's wider, cosmopolitan streets.

I couldn't stay away from the huge castle of Sao Jorge on the hill overlooking the tightly packed buildings of the city below. The sturdy, angular castle had been built and occupied by the Moors until it was sacked in 1147 by the first king of Portugal.

A musician playing eerie tunes on a recorder set the ancient ambience as swans glided around a moat. My head swam with images of Teutonic knights, Moorish soldiers in terrifying suits of armor, kings dining on monstrous chicken legs and giant chalices of mead wiping their oily mouths on their tunic sleeves.

As a vegetarian and nonviolent type, I'm not sure why these visions exhilarated me. Perhaps it seemed admirable that, despite their barbarian ways, those ancient people plunged unabashedly into their decadence.

Evora

The road to Evora, a two-hour bus ride from Lisbon, passes plantations of cork trees with their trunks scarred salmon-pink to dark burgundy where the bark was stripped off up to the branches. An occasional sunflower plantation and tiny oases of concrete restaurant/gas stations break up the sparsity of the dry, beige brushland that looks like a scene from Don Quixote. A sprawling castle on a summit escaped my notice until another tourist on the bus pointed it out.

Evora, a town of 40,000 people, is surrounded by an old castle wall. A 16th-century aqueduct still spouts water that Evorans bottle and take home. Little white houses have been built into some of the lower archways of the aqueduct. Every house in the town is white with terra cotta roof tiles. The ruins of a tiny Roman temple have survived in Evora and now stand next to a museum displaying stone coats of arms, Roman artifacts and Manueline doorways.

The main activity in Evora after you've seen the sites, which



Times art

include the castle wall and aqueduct, several ancient churches and well-tended parks, is to sit and sip something at a cafe. Then you can rest and come out later to sit at a cafe again.

I stayed at a beautiful former ducal mansion with antique furniture and floor-to-ceiling marble in the bathroom (marble is mined in the area) for \$44 a night. The newfangled shower shot water up from the floor as well as down from the shower head. I wasn't exactly sure what to do with the floor-mounted spritzer, but my toenails had never been cleaner.

Coimbra

On the way to Coimbra, the bus stopped in Fatima where, back in 1917, three young children had seen a series of six visions of the Virgin Mary. As it happened, I was there on the day before the anniversary of the final vision, and the place was filling up with tens of thousands of faithful. I was glad to just be passing through.

The ancient university of Coimbra, dating from 1290, still bustles with students from its perch on a steep hill from where narrow, cobblestoned alleys coil in all directions on the slopes. The incredible museum on the grounds of the university has Roman cryptoforticos for a foundation and so many pieces of old sculptures that hundreds of leftover body parts are stacked in a storage room in the cave-like basement.

The most well-preserved Roman



Photos by BRIDGET McQUATE

At the Roman ruin of Conimbriga, near Coimbra, a defensive wall was hastily erected, cutting right through the middle of several unfortunate households.

ruin in Portugal, Conimbriga, is a 20-minute drive from Coimbra. Mosaic floors, fountains and bath houses have survived the years on a wooded hill above a deep river crevasse. The stone wall surrounding the ruins had been erected hastily and cuts right through the middle of several houses that were left unprotected outside.

Another worthy attraction in Coimbra is Portugal dos Pequeninos Park, where scaled-down versions of Portugal's most famous buildings have been constructed amid vibrant sculpted gardens and exhibits from Portugal's former colonies.

The various gardens of Coimbra are escapes to romantic worlds with ancient fountains, *azulejos* (Portugal's mosaic tiles) and a universal message was universal. I wanted to tell someone about the guy but knew my command of Portuguese was too limited.

Braga

One of the biggest and most fascinating attractions in Braga is the Se cathedral, an ancient, fortress-like church with century upon century of historical relics jumbled together in its endless halls and rooms. The guide took me on a personalized tour beginning with the hilltop containing several tombs and a glass casket holding the mummified body of an Archbishop Lourenco from the 14th century.

The rest of the massive church building is a maze-like series of rooms exhibiting ancient religious paraphernalia. The exhibits lead up to the balcony of the cathedral, where hundreds of gold angels adorn the ceiling and clarion-shaped pipes blare out dramatic chords from an extravagant organ.

A mysterious sign was displayed in every room of the great church in several languages. The English said: "Disposition of the objects is provisional." The guide might have shed some light on the matter but he spoke no English, communicating only with hand signals. He gave the "finished" sign with both hands to indicate the end of the tour, so I thanked him and walked down the stairs. When he realized we had missed a room, he put a side block on me to get my attention. I suppose he thought I couldn't really hear unless I could hear in Portuguese.

At my next stop at the Palacio dos Biscaínhos, a 16th-century mansion, explanatory pages were prepared in English to provide information about the luxuriously furnished rooms and decorative gardens. These translated pages gave me my second hint of the language challenge that proved almost more perplexing than the Portuguese in Portugal. The new complication: the English in Portugal. Being an editor in my professional



Ancient stairways coil in all directions down the steep inclines of the university town of Coimbra.

life, I became continually tempted to pull out a red pen and hack away at the English grammatical disasters confronting me. An especially exhilarating challenge presented itself at the next stop, a Celtic ruin about 13 miles from Braga. The ancient Celts were said to have inhabited the hilltop city of Citania de Briteiros from between 900 and 500 B.C. The old city centered around a stone Christian cross and was found, centuries later, littered with thousands of Roman coins.

A section of translated English in the guide to the Citania ruins explains:

"Rectangular, circular and clyptical house, some simple some complex, streets and little squares perfectly, pipes, almost intact, for taking the water to the public fountains, this monument was initially considered a funerary-building. Nowadays the most part of the archaeologists think it as a bath-building, a whole collection of objects of personal use which can be seen at the Museum of the Sociedade Martins Sarmento — all this, and everything else we can admire as simple tourists or as students or scholars, will help us to meditate on this very ancient civilization which belongs, no doubt, to the history of origin of the lusitanians."

I found myself faced with a dilemma I experience in editing technical articles: It's hard to help writers say something better if you have no idea what they're trying to say.

Anyway, as a "simple tourist," who



A reconstruction of a famous Lisbon archway is found at Portugal dos Pequeninos park in Coimbra.

was I to think I could improve it?

The real high of the Braga area, physically and figuratively speaking, is reached after climbing the elaborate and unabashedly gorgeous staircase of the church of Bom Jesus do Monte.

Twelve layers of the staircase represent the 12 passions of the cross, and minichapels with life-size statues depict each scene leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. White plaster walls and gray granite fountains, ornaments and statues are splashed by 300 years of dampness with hungry green plants embracing them. Some eager pilgrims to Bom Jesus climb the staircase on their knees, furiously working rosaries in their hands. For

the not-so-pious, an elevator incline whizzes up to the church on the pinnacle from the bottom of the stairs.

The payoff at the top is priceless: sculpted gardens in countless different colors, mosaic floors, statues and fountains surrounded by a wild, wet mountain forest. The view from Bom Jesus is of the Braga valley and its miles of vineyards where Portugal's port wine grapes are grown.

On my final night at the hotel in Braga, a poignant blurb in a pamphlet about the people of the area got me all choked up: "Such is the life of the people of Minho, in its general lines. Uses and custom, however, differ from one district to another, from one valley to the next, and lead to variations of the songs, dances and dress." The next paragraph had an emotional description of "the imposing Procession of the Burial of Our Lord . . ."

Apart from my adventures with language in Portugal, I found the country to be one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. The people in Portugal are extremely friendly. One man who returned some money that I had dropped called me *memna* (mayneena), which made me feel very good inside. For all I knew, *memna* meant "dumb American cow." But it sounded so endearing that I just didn't care.

Bridget McQuate is a freelance writer living in Philadelphia.