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For a Taste of Europe, You Have to Go to London, Paris, or Rome: Portugal

When Sara's uncle from Puerto Rico decided to visit Europe for the first time, our advice seemed odd to him. "Go to Lisbon," we urged, "and you'll get a taste of the Old World in a compact city. People are really hospitable, and you won't have to break the piggy bank, because life there is very affordable. Atlantic breezes make for pleasant weather year-round even though Lisbon is at the same latitude as New York." Tío (Spanish for uncle) had lived in New York, and he seemed surprised at the comparison. Why not go to Paris, or London, or Rome? They are enchanting capital cities, but they can be overwhelmingly vast. To demonstrate what we meant, we offered to show him Lisbon. Thirty-three years ago, Tío had accompanied Sara to college on the east coast of the United States for her first trip to the mainland from Puerto Rico. We hoped that he would let us return the favor by accompanying him on his first trip to Europe. Pleased with our offer, Tío flew from San Juan and met us in Lisbon on a Sunday evening in mid-October.

A youthful man in his early sixties, he endured a ten-hour wait at the Madrid airport before boarding his Lisbon-bound flight. By the time we greeted his taxi in front of our pension in Lisbon, he had been traveling for seventeen hours. He never complained, but dark circles under his eyes revealed his exhaustion. Anticipating his fatigue, we had agreed ahead of time that he would nap for a couple of hours before joining us for a walk and dinner. We hugged and greeted each other, excited to be starting a journey together.

Lisbon has year-round pleasant weather, even though it is at the same latitude as New York.

When we bid uncle good-night, he suddenly became silent. Tío slowly lifted his head, and his dark eyes glimmered like stars. He surveyed our surroundings in silence. We were standing at the Rúa das Portas de Santo Antão, a pedestrian cobblestone street named after St. Anthony. Houses with wrought iron balconies and white, blue, and mustard tiles enlivened the area. Sidewalk cafés cascaded into the street. Groups of people walked back and forth, animatedly filling the air with the melodic sound of Portuguese, like waves at the beach. A smile began to form on Tío's lips, and he overflowed with enthusiasm, like a child with a wonderful new toy. His body's demands for rest were suddenly overruled: "I am in Lisbon. I'm not going to bed. I'm going for a walk with you." We laughed heartily, clearly understanding that, like us, he had been smitten by Lisbon; the first symptoms are an insatiable desire to use every waking moment to soak in the city. This compulsive desire overruled physical needs such as sleep.

Bleary-eyed, Tío followed us around the corner from the pension to the Avenida da Liberdade (Liberty Avenue) for his first taste of the City of Seven Hills. Over the next four days, we would explore four of the main districts: the Baixa (the lower town that ends in the river), Bairro Alto (the high town perched atop a hill), the Alfama (the medieval town), and nearby Belém, dedicated to the navigators who ventured to the New World in the age of discovery. We would do all of our sightseeing either on foot or by trolley.

We did not waste any time, and started our march on Avenida da Liberdade, one of the grandest promenades in Lisbon. Tío quickly noticed that we were walking on works of art. Portuguese sidewalks are made up of small black-and-white mosaics that form geometric designs. Age-old Pasteleria Suiza—a Lisbon institution—displayed creamy pastries in the window. The wide center island along the avenue had outdoor cafés. Black lamplights contrasted with intensely blue skies. Palm trees and shrubbery added a tropical flavor. People sipped coffee alfresco and watched the world go by. We could hear a live band in the distance.

As we approached the musical group, the distinct plucking sounds of the Portuguese guitar competed with traffic for airtime. A microphone helped the singer win the contest. He belted out heartfelt songs that told stories of romantic love and patriotic feelings. Middle-aged couples danced vivaciously while some of their friends clapped to the tunes. We admired the love of everyday life that characterizes the Portuguese. Tío was touched by the scene. We watched undisturbed and then strolled south toward the River Tejo.

The downhill stroll took us through Baixa, (meaning "low," or lower town), one of Lisbon's main shopping districts. Instantly we became submerged in an oasis of pedestrian activity at Rúa Augusta. Street musicians provided entertain-

ment for donations while people window-shopped and chatted. Violinists, guitarists, a trumpet player, and even a hurdy-gurdy performer played music at every corner. The woody scent of roasted chestnuts tickled our nostrils and awoke our stomachs. At a portable roasting pit on wheels, a vendor made us cringe when he grabbed the incandescent chestnuts barehanded to fill the newspaper cones he handed us; however, the tips of his fingers had grayed with ashes, and he did not show any sign of pain. Clearly "*castanha*" (chestnut) man had mastered an ancient skill in handling his hot produce without scorching his skin.

Other age-old customs existed in our surroundings, unnoticed by smartly dressed *Lisboetas* (Lisbon natives) in modern garb. In the Middle Ages, purveyors of the same types of goods clustered in one spot. Shoemakers had their shops on one street, while butchers had the next block, and so on. To this day, some streets in Lisbon bear the name of the trade once practiced there, and modern shops still follow the ancient practice. Men's clothing stores sat side by side for blocks before shifting to jewelry establishments. Quietly observing all of the activity, Tío kept up with us despite his jet lag. He digested the scene while nibbling on the buttery-tasting chestnuts.

After about five blocks, the shopping area ended. We walked through a carved archway and into a vast square or *praça* (pronounced PRUH-suh). The spectacular Commerce Praça was surrounded on three sides by regal colonnaded government buildings of ash-colored stone. The sun began to set, and the façades acquired a golden hue reminiscent of flames. Real fires set off by an earthquake and subsequent tidal wave had destroyed the palace that stood on this site in 1755. Most of Lisbon—except for the Alfama Moorish quarter—collapsed in the devastating earthquake. The city was reconstructed by the Marquis de Pombal, a revered and autocratic minister for King Jose. Systematic grid patterns replaced the earlier chaotic mazes of medieval origins. As a result, most of Lisbon reflects eighteenth century design, even though the Phoenicians established it in 1200 BC and the Romans took it over in 200 BC.

The Phoenicians settled Lisbon in 1200 BC, and the Romans took it over in 200 BC. Following an earthquake and a tsunami, Lisbon was rebuilt in the eighteenth century.

Today, instead of Romans we watched a Spanish crew filming a commercial, and then crossed the avenue to take a peek at the River Tejo. Also called the Tagus River, the deep, navigable waterway becomes the Tajo (TAH-huh) in

Spain. Its volume of river traffic attests to the importance of maritime transportation in keeping Portugal well stocked with goods. Observing the expanse of water got us thirsty, and we headed back toward our pension, where we had spotted a *tasca* (tavern) that sold wine from a barrel.

Vinho verde—a delicacy found only in Portugal—means “green wine,” not because of its color, but because it comes from unripe grapes. The fizzy and tart dry wine has a low alcohol content. We dashed into the neighborhood *tasca* and leaned against the elbow-high wood counter. Tío ordered white green wine, *vinho verde branco*, and we sampled the red version, or *vinho verde tinto*. The bar owner, a husky man of medium height, drained the liquid from two wood barrels. Despite his interest in selling the wine, he candidly admitted that *vinho verde* does not travel well because the naturally occurring bubbles do not survive the jolt of the transport. The *vinho verde* region, Minho, begins about one hundred-twenty miles north of Lisbon. So these days most wine producers inject gases into the young juice of the vine to mimic the natural sparkle. Despite its lack of authenticity, we imbibed the delicious wine and strolled down the street to one of our favorite typical restaurants.

There was no mistaking the location of *Bom Jardim*, the self-proclaimed *Rei do Frango*, or “King of Chicken.” Wafts of smoke and a trail of the mouth-watering scent of grilled chicken led us directly to a popular corner that is tucked away among a number of seafood restaurants. The fame of this casual eatery among locals made the owners expand from the original two-story house to the building across the alley. We climbed upstairs and ordered what everyone comes to eat: moist and spicy grilled chicken, fries, spinach, and the house red wine. Each table had plenty of *piri-piri* (pronounced PEEREE-peeree), a hot sauce made with peppers originally brought from the former Portuguese colony of Angola. Tío savored every bite while fighting to stay awake. Luckily, our pension was just a couple of blocks away. He finally stumbled into bed for a well-earned slumber.

DAY 2

Despite the jet lag, Tío arose early to begin his journey into the Europe of the Middle Ages: the Alfama district. A panoramic view of Lisbon alone made the steep hike uphill to the twelfth-century Castelo de São George worthwhile. The castle, crowned with ten square towers, looked like the set for a knight’s movie. We frolicked around the ramparts, peering down at the city before strolling downhill to Sé, the twelfth-century cathedral. The excavations in the cloister allowed us to see a number of layers of past construction under the church.

Ready for a coffee break, we sat at an outdoor café overlooking the Alfama below. On the side of the street, we stopped to take pictures at the St. Luzia over-

look, one of thirty-two belvederes in Lisbon. This outdoor garden, decorated with scenic tiles, gave us an overview of the world that we were about to enter at the bottom of the hill. Red tile roofs hung thick with television antennae. This area of Lisbon resisted the battering from the 1755 earthquake, so many buildings predated the twelfth century. It had Visigoth and Arabic influence. Ready to enter the maze of narrow streets, we strolled downhill, and modern Europe turned back its clock and melded with the Middle East.

The Alfama was the only area of Lisbon left standing after the 1755 earthquake and tidal wave.

Bead curtains instead of doors hung from doorways, and canaries in cages perched outside the entrances to a number of houses. The chirping of the birds mingled with the sound of fish sellers calling out for customers. A television soap opera injected drama into the scene when the heroine’s sobs tumbled out of residents’ living rooms. Narrow alleys curved and we followed them up and down with the help of shallow steps. In some of the passageways, we stretched out our arms to simultaneously touch two buildings that stood across the street from each other. Peeling paint and intact blue and white tiles added a touch of elegance to the crumbling scene. Laundry hung from some of the balconies.

For the third time in two days, the smell of grilling teased our taste buds. A number of people cooked their lunch on single-burner hibachis right on the sidewalk. The smoky aroma of grilled sardines permeated the whole district. We could hear the crackling sound of fire hitting the rock salt on the skin of the eight-inch fish. Unlike the tiny canned sardines that are exported to the United States, large sardines are a staple of the Portuguese diet. It was easy to find a rustic eatery so that Tío could sink his teeth into his first grilled *sardinha*. We joined a crowd of people and crammed into a metal dinner table. A single, smiling waiter served everyone without seeming rattled by the many demands placed on him. Accompanied by a fresh salad of lettuce and tomatoes drizzled with a hardy olive oil, tomato rice, and a crunchy chunk of bread, the sardines tasted fresh from the water. After a leisurely lunch, we decided to catch the electric trolley from Sé to the Museum of Ancient Art (Museu de Arte Antiga).

Tío was holding up well. As soon as he saw the mansion housing Portuguese and other European masterpieces, he was delighted that he had forgone an afternoon nap in favor of the trip to the museum. The basement held an ornate chapel. Each grand room had paintings and sculptures by Portuguese and other

European artists. We lingered in front of the "Temptations of St. Anthony" by Dutch master Hieronymus Bosch. In 1500, he depicted St. Anthony being tormented by the temptations of the flesh. Sexually explicit figures and foodstuffs tempted the senses while scenes of torture and eternal punishment filled the other side of the canvas.

Whether it was the St. Anthony connection that called him to return to the pension—since we were staying on the "Street of the Doors of St. Anthony"—or just cumulative exhaustion, we will never know. It seemed like someone had suddenly let the air out of Tío's tires, and his knees weakened. Despite his desire to keep looking at artwork, his body rebelled, and we could hardly find a taxi quickly enough to get him into bed.

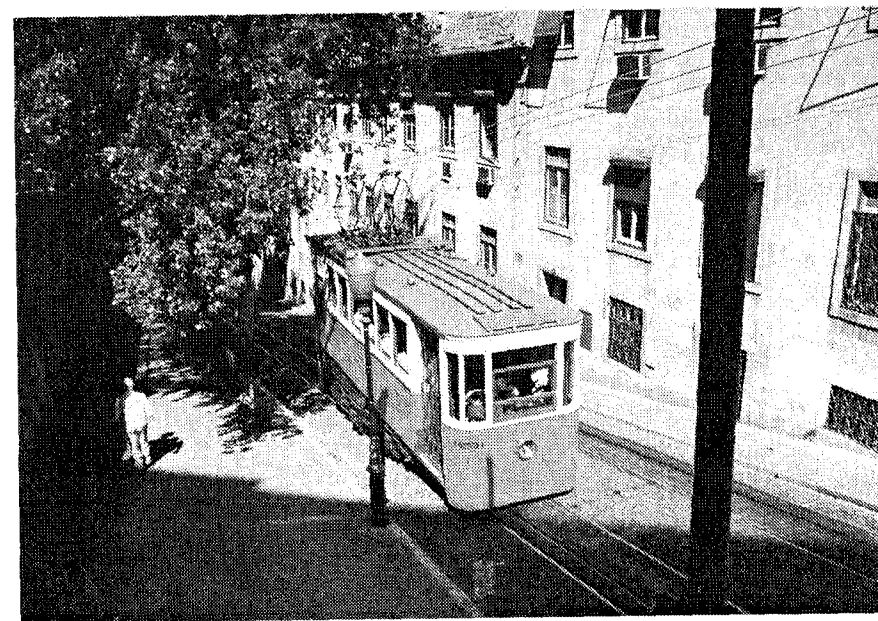
Luckily, a three-hour siesta left Tío a new man. We decided not to venture too far for dinner, in case his body's sleep alarm went off again. Instead of a full sit-down dinner, it seemed like a good night to sample different Portuguese tastes by barhopping for *petiscos*, the appetizer-size equivalent of Spanish *tapas*. Tío became invigorated as he ate *rissois de camarao* (shrimp turnovers) and codfish fritters accompanied by the now-familiar *vinho verde*. He observed the animated fellow patrons who drank, talked, and laughed. People greeted us as if they had known us for a long time. The bright look in Tío's eyes and his enthusiastic observations about Lisbon resumed while we scanned an array of foodstuffs displayed at the counter: fried quail, suckling pig in red wine from Bairrada, stuffed potatoes, and pig's ear. For a nightcap, we walked down the street from the pension to a dark, closet-size stand-up bar that sold a Portuguese after-dinner cherry drink called *Ginjinha*. The dark wood counters had stood at this spot for over two hundred years. The owner shook the large bottles and deftly poured the aged drink, with one cherry apiece, into three shot glasses. The syrupy liquid burned our throats in a delicious, slow smolder as it worked its way down to three satisfied stomachs—a fitting conclusion to another enjoyable day in Lisbon.

DAY 3

The days were going fast, and there was still much to see. Tío seemed more enraptured with Lisbon by the minute. On the third day we rode west along the Tejo River from Baixa toward the Belém section for a look at the area commemorating the navigators who sailed to the New World in the fifteenth century. The electric trolley glowed in bright primary colors with advertisements pasted on the side. Panoramic windows allowed us to sightsee all the way to Belém.

There was no mistaking that we had arrived when we saw the early 1500s Dos Tronimos Monastery with its spikes, gargoyles, and white stone carved in relief. Across the street, on the edge of the Tejo, vendors sold crafts such as fishermen's

hand-knitted sweaters. The handiwork was similar to the knitting done by the Irish, but at a fraction of the cost. The Monument to the Discoverers jutted out into the water in a peaceful park. After surveying the Belém Tower and entering the monastery across the street, we returned to the pension in Baixa for lunch, an extended nap, and a snack in preparation for a late night of *fado*—the Portuguese blues.



Funicular in Lisbon

Around 9 PM we boarded the shocking yellow Funicular Gloria, a wedge-shaped trolley made to fit the contours of the hill, for the ascent to Bairro Alto (the High Town). Restaurants specializing in *fado* abounded, and barkers summoned us with promises that their show was the most authentic. We ordered a typical dish from the Alentejo region of Portugal, pork and clams, and ate the unlikely but delicious combination while anticipating the performance. Small clams in a wine sauce mixed well with the spicy pork and potatoes.

The room darkened. A duo of guitarists played melancholic melodies that reached deep into our souls. The star, a fifty-something *fadista* dressed in a long, black dress and a shawl, entered to enthusiastic applause. Typically, older singers are most valued since a voice and performance style has to mature for a singer to

make it in this genre. Her melodious voice caressed us into a trance. She began with a tune made famous by the grand dame of *fado*, Amalia Rodrigues. The lyrics explained how *fado* singers are, like poets, born and not made. Other melodies lamented unrequited love, while some mourned the loss of loved ones. The bittersweet pain of love and nostalgia was celebrated throughout the evening. Touched by the music, we strolled back to our lodging. We had gotten a taste of the spirit of the Portuguese—a combination of kindness, friendliness, gaiety, and melancholia that had brought us back to Lisbon time after time. With these thoughts, we closed for the night.

Fado is the Portuguese equivalent of blues.

DAY 4

By day four, Tío was totally taken with Lisbon. The sadness of our impending departure the next day was mitigated by the anticipation of an art orgy at the Gulbenkian Museum.

We set out for modern northern Lisbon for a day at Portugal's best-known museum, the Gulbenkian. Calouste Gulbenkian, an ethnic Armenian born in Istanbul, Turkey, and naturalized in Portugal, became an oil multimillionaire. He died in Lisbon in 1955 and bequeathed a fortune for an art museum. In 1969, the spacious building opened its doors to the public. Like us, Gulbenkian had fallen in love with Lisbon although he was not a native.

The six thousand-piece collection that filled three floors spanned Oriental antiquities such as Egyptian, Syrian, and Islamic objects, to twentieth-century European art. Exquisite tapestries, paintings, jewelry, and furniture overwhelmed us. Gulbenkian had amassed his collection over forty-five years, beginning in 1900. Not to be upstaged, the lush gardens on the grounds provided natural beauty rivaling the artwork. We fed the carp that swam in a shallow pond and relaxed in the shade. There was so much to see that we only stopped for a quick bite at the cafeteria before continuing the feast for the eyes until closing time.

Knowing that our time was running out, we hurried to visit a must-see institution, the Port Wine Institute (*Solar do Vinho do Porto*) at Rua de São Pedro de Alcântara. After a half-hour walk south toward the edge of Bairro Alto, we settled into comfortable sofas at this temple to port wine. We perused leather binders bursting with port offerings by the glass. The fortified wines produced in the city of Porto give the drink its name. As opposed to the sweet port wines more commonly known in the United States, most port is dry and drunk as an aperitif

before meals. White, tawny, and ruby red varieties could have easily drawn out our tasting session, but we wanted to take a last round of photographs at the nearby overlook before nightfall. We went outside and clicked away at Baixa below us.

We could have lingered many more days in Lisbon and explored many nooks and crannies with Tío happily in tow. But we knew that we would return to Lisbon, just like we have over the past twenty-three years, and Tío wanted to see some of Spain.

The next day we set our course for Seville and drove our rented car north on Avenida Liberdade. As we bid Lisbon goodbye, Tío smiled happily and remarked that Lisbon had been the perfect introduction to Europe. Tears welled in Sara's eyes, signaling a mixture of pleasure, love, and gratitude. She had finally had the opportunity to reciprocate Tío's kindness when he accompanied her to the U.S. mainland thirty-three years ago.

Tomato Rice

- 2 medium onions, minced
- 3 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves of garlic
- 2 c. short or medium grain rice
- 3 c. vegetable or chicken stock
- 4 Roma tomatoes (fresh or canned), roughly chopped
- ½ tsp. ground oregano
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 2 tbsp. parsley, minced

Cook the onion in the olive oil until it is translucent. Add the garlic and the tomatoes. Sauté for two or three minutes. Pour in the stock and the rice. Season with the oregano and the salt. Cover the rice and cook according to rice package instructions (usually about twenty minutes). When the rice is cooked, garnish with parsley and serve hot.

Six servings

Portuguese Pork and Clams

Reputedly, this mix of non-kosher foods was concocted during the infamous Inquisition to test the conviction of Jews who had converted to Catholicism. Despite its objectionable origins, the unlikely mix of ingredients is delicious.

Note: Begin preparation one day in advance.

Ingredients for the pork marinade:

- 1 lb. boneless pork, cut into small cubes
- 3 large cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 bay leaf, crumbled
- 1 tsp. extra virgin olive oil (Portuguese, if you can find it)
- ¼ tsp. coarse salt

- 4 baking potatoes
- 2 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp. Paprika
- ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
- 1 pinch of ground cloves
- 2 medium onions, diced
- 6 large cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 c. dry white wine
- 3 tbsp. port wine
- 2 bay leaves
- 4 doz. Eastern Littleneck clams or any West Coast clams—the smallest you can find
- ¼ c. fresh coriander leaves, chopped

Combine marinade ingredients in a bowl and toss with the pork cubes. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Prick the potatoes with a fork and microwave them, uncovered, until they are cooked yet firm. When they have cooled, cut the cooked potatoes into large cubes and set them aside in a bowl.

In a large frying pan, brown the pork in the olive oil over high heat. Remove the pork and add the potatoes. You may need additional oil. Dust the potatoes with paprika, cayenne pepper, and ground cloves as they cook. Once the potatoes have browned, remove them from the pan and set them aside. Lower the heat to medium. Sprinkle a dash of olive oil in the pan and cook the onions until they are translucent. Add the garlic and sauté for about five minutes, adding the port, white wine, and bay leaves to the mixture. Return the pork to the pan and simmer, covered, for ten minutes.

Scrub the mussels and add them to the frying pan with the pork. Increase the temperature to medium-high and cover the pan, leaving it undisturbed for about five minutes. Uncover the pan and increase the heat to high. Begin to check for open clams; after an opened clam has cooked for an additional minute, fish it out and transfer it to a serving bowl. Overcooked clams taste like rubber, so it pays to be vigilant. The clamshells will open one by one, like popcorn. In the end, there may be a few stragglers that do not open. Discard the unopened clams and add the potatoes to the pan. Reduce the liquid over high heat for about five minutes. Pour the contents of the pan over the clam bowl and garnish with coriander. Serve with a loaf of crusty bread (use the recipe from the Italian food chapter) and a salad of wild greens tossed with olive oil and vinegar. Accompany the meal with a *vinho verde branco*. For a complete Portuguese experience, listen to an Amalia Rodrigues CD or another *fado* recording while you are eating.

Bolinhos de Bacalhau (Codfish Fritters)

Portuguese people say that they have three hundred sixty-five ways of making dried codfish, one for each day of the year. Here is one delicious appetizer commonly found in taverns.

Start preparation 24 hours in advance

- ¾ lb. dried codfish (*bacalhau*)
- 6 c. water
- 3 c. water
- 4 potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 3 cloves of garlic, whole
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 small onion, finely diced
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 tbs. olive oil
- ¼ c. fresh coriander leaves, chopped
- 1 egg
- ¼ c. plain bread crumbs

Portuguese *piri-piri* or any other type of hot sauce, to taste

Soak the codfish in six cups of water for a minimum of twenty-four hours, changing the water twice within that time. Drain. In a saucepan, bring three cups of water to a slow simmer. Add the fish, the potatoes, the whole garlic cloves, and the bay leaves. Cook, uncovered, for twenty-five minutes; watch at the beginning and skim the foam that forms on the surface. While the codfish and potatoes simmer, sauté the onions and minced garlic in olive oil in a skillet.

Drain the fish and potatoes and mash them together. Mix in the cooked onion and garlic mixture along with the egg and the coriander leaves. Sprinkle the bread crumbs on a plate. Make fritters by shaping one tablespoon of the mix into fat oval disks. Coat each disk with bread crumbs and place them on wax paper. Refrigerate the fritters for at least three hours, or overnight. This will harden them, which helps hold the fritters together while frying. The croquettes can also be frozen and fried without thawing. Fry the fritters in olive oil until they are

dark brown. Drain them on paper towels and serve with a dash of hot sauce, if desired.

Makes about two dozen

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