

River Douro – a gem of a secret



Left: The CA burgee
cruises along the
River Douro

Above:
Traditional
barrel boats

Think of Portugal and you think of sunny beaches, beautiful sunsets, and the Algarve.

Great places to cruise, whether by sail or motor boat, and marinas in abundance where marine suppliers offer chandlery, engine spares, and all you need for a life afloat.

But there is a lot more to Portugal than nibbling at the edges of the coastline. Take a look at the River Douro, stretching from the Atlantic coast almost to the Spanish border. We had a great few days there in early summer on a Greenline 40 motor boat chartered from FeelDouro.

Following our flight from Stansted to Porto, we enjoyed a very scenic route by car, initially on the main A4 highway east, then through beautiful, windy roads, stopping for a picnic by the river just outside the city of Amarante. We virtualled the boat at a large supermarket – as the route back by boat would not give us access to many shops – and then happened across the Sandeman winery.

While Sandeman is a household name in the UK for port, did you know that George Sandeman was a Scotsman who began selling port and sherry from Tom's Coffee House in London in the 18th century? Within a few years he was carrying the legendary sherries of James Duff of Cadiz (now Duff Gordon) and also shipping and bottling one of the first Sandeman vintage ports – Sandeman 1790. The rest, as they say, is history and a 30-minute tour of the winery followed by a sampling of white, tawny, and ruby port proved to be a big bonus to our first day.

Aboard the beautiful Greenline 40 called *Vintage*, we started our trip at Pinhão, a pretty little town surrounded by terraced vineyards. We followed the river, winding

its way east next to the railway track that passes through the many tunnels cut into the rock. Names such as Dow's, Graham's, Cockburn's and Taylor's appeared on the hills around every headland.

The opposing current going west was quite strong in many places and the channel narrow, but we followed the buoyage and our itinerary carefully, so there was no problem. We were told there had been a lot of rain in the previous two weeks so water had been allowed to spill from the locks to keep

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the water levels correct. Locks seemed enormous and daunting at first - the first at Valeria raised us around 30m. Each lock-in was booked in advance - which FeelDouro organised - and each time was published on www.douro.ipm.pt clicking on [eclusagens](#) from the menu.

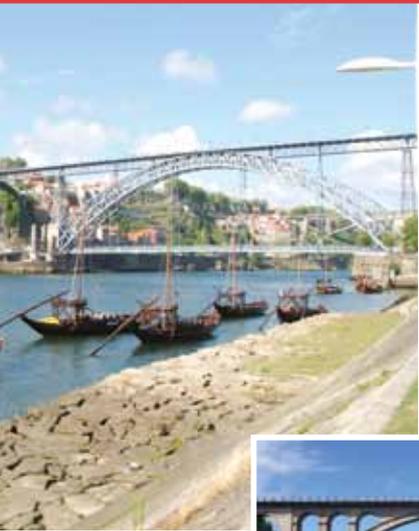
Our next stop was Sra Da Ribeira where there were just two restaurants, a hammerhead pontoon and a handful of small finger pontoons for boats less than 20ft. Going from a sailing boat to a twin-engined motor boat with substantial windage was a transition to be overcome as the wind got up every afternoon and could have made manoeuvring a little trying. But the Greenline is a very powerful craft and, with a bow thruster, made handling easier than we expected once we were used to it.

The local restaurant at Sra Da Ribeira served a variety of grilled and fried food, including local fish, mixed grill and lamb with potatoes cooked in locally produced olive oil. House wine slipped down fast enough for us to order a second bottle. Dinner for four of us was just over €43 for an antipasto type starter of cheese and the local presunto ham (similar to the Spanish pata negra or Italian Parma ham) with salad, a main course each, and one dessert.

The next morning saw us heading back through the Valeria Lock, which was much easier this time as we started high. This enabled us to tie up using the boat hook on the guard rails at the top of the lock and then move to the inset bollards, instead of trying to position *Vintage* first time at the bollards.

Organisation of the river is very clear with well-defined marker buoys – sometimes

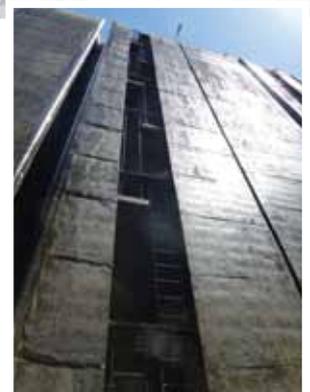
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Right: Bridges between Carrapateiro Lock and Porto



Above: The bustling harbourside of Porto



Carrapateiro Lock – a 34m rise going east to west

in very narrow channels - and the lock timings are precise so you will always know when a much larger, passenger carrying cruise ship is heading your way.

The next few days took us down to Porto, stopping off at Caldas de Aregos, passing through Régua Lock. Régua offered lunch at the winery, Quinta da Pacheca, and a visit to the Douro Museum. At Aregos a must was to sample the Mon Cherry chocolates made locally in Resende, a nearby village famous for its cherries.

Here the scenery changed from terraced vineyards to rocky outcrops with olive trees and then on to lush hillsides of trees and vegetation. This area must look spectacular in the autumn when the colours of the leaves change.

Aregos to Porto was one hop, starting at 08:45, passing through the enormous Carrapateiro Lock at 09:35. Going west,



Amarante – our picnic stop on our way from the airport to Pinhão to pick up the boat

we passed more populated areas with the occasional quayside to moor up. We came to a small island called Ilha dos Amores – Lovers' Island – which had a pontoon to stop for a walk and a picnic and then the village of Entre-os-Rios where the Ponte de Pedra promised a traditional Portuguese lunch.

By lunchtime we came to the Crestuma Lock – another cavernous drop – but again, with a slight twitch of the port engine in reverse, we could tie the stern to the inset bollards with a large fender and then use the bow thruster to get the bow line on.

Arriving at our final destination in Douro Marina just inside the breakwaters from the Atlantic Ocean, it seemed a little unnerving to be heading down a gap between pontoons of large motor yachts to then reverse into our berth – especially as the wind had got up. In a sailing yacht this could be a little tricky, but with two engines and a bow thruster to play with, it was simple.

As a yacht sailor for 30 years, I wasn't at all sure about a motor boating holiday – but this holiday transformed my thinking and I can't wait to go again.

We decided to spend an extra couple of days exploring Porto before flying home. Porto is a beautiful city - an absolute gem of architecture, history and, of course, port. Although a busy city with many visitors, you can either walk or take a hop-on, hop-off bus to explore the hilly areas around the central river. We found ourselves in a traditional Portuguese restaurant in the heart of the harbour area for dinner on the first evening – great food, great wine and a

local musician serenading the customers. The following day we happened across a seafood restaurant right on the shores of the ocean for lunch – a real treat with fresh prawns, dorado, and salmon.

A trip to a much lesser-known winery, Churchill's, finished our perfect week. Churchill's was established by John Graham – of the famous Graham's port – who had to sell his original family company at the time of the Portuguese Revolution in the 1970s. He later set up the new company in 1981 under his wife's family name and produces excellent ruby, tawny, and white port using traditional methods – including having the grapes trodden by people instead of robots.

The pièce de résistance of Porto is the beautiful room above the cellar of barrels at Churchill's where you can book a private dining evening and salmon cooked for 12 hours in ruby port is served. The room is full of beautiful, antique, Portuguese furnishings and overlooks the acres of terracotta roofs housing the city's many other port houses down to the river.

I think there is no doubt we will be returning.



Beryl Chalmers