

Going ashore: (Cruise Port)

A Call in Oporto, Portugal

by

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Although Oporto (called “Porto” by the locals) is Portugal’s second largest city, it has until recently been essentially undiscovered as a cruise destination. This does not mean, however, that there isn’t a lot to see and do during a port call.

Oporto is an ancient city. The Romans called this important trading port on the western edge of their empire, “Portus Cale.” Over time, this name was corrupted to Portucale and eventually its use was expanded to refer to the entire country, hence Portugal.

The Moors conquered the city in 711 A.D. but were driven out by Vimara Perres, a Christian knight, in 868. Thus, compared to other areas of the Iberian Peninsular, Oporto was under Moorish control for a relatively short period. Consequently, you do not see as much Moorish influence here as in some other Iberian cities.

During the remainder of medieval times, Oporto was a trading and

shipbuilding center. In 1387, a monumental event took place in Oporto when King John I of Portugal married Philippa of Lancaster, daughter of John of Gaunt. This began an alliance between Great Britain and Portugal that has endured ever since and is considered the world’s oldest military alliance.

In the early 18th Century, the wine trade became prominent in Oporto. During this time, Great Britain was frequently at war with France, which was Britain’s traditional source of wine. As a result, Britain looked for alternative sources of wine.

Its eyes naturally turned to its old ally Portugal. Oporto lies in the estuary of the River Douro and further up the Douro, is an area naturally suited to producing wine. Furthermore, it was found that by adding neutral grape spirits to the wine, it would not spoil on the long voyage to Britain. Therefore, Britain and Portugal concluded a treaty that set a low duty on

the importation of wine from Oporto. British business men came to Oporto and established many of famous port wine houses that remain to this day.

The French also came to Oporto but as uninvited guests. Napoleonic troops under Marshall Nicolas Jean de Dieu Soult occupied the city during the Peninsular War. However, the occupation was very brief as British and Portuguese forces under Sir Arthur Wellesley, (later the 1st Duke of Wellington) crossed the Douro on wine barges and outflanked the French.

Today, Oporto is part of a metropolitan area with a population of approximately 1.7 million. The towns surrounding the city itself have grown up into industrial and commercial communities. These areas are not tourist-oriented areas but rather modern places where people work and reside.

The cruise port for Oporto is in this surrounding belt in Lexiores. Modern ocean going cruise ships have too deep a draft to travel up the River Douro to Oporto itself. Therefore, they berth at a man-made port which uses sea walls to provide a safe harbor for visiting ships. At the end of the cruise ship pier, there is a small modern building that is used as the cruise terminal. Outside of the building is a parking area for tour buses and shuttle buses. It usually takes 20 minutes, depending upon traffic conditions, to journey from the cruise port to the historic city.

The historic city itself is quite hilly, with steep inclines running down to the Douro. There are few modern buildings on these slopes. Rather, the curving avenues and narrow streets are

lined with mostly 18th and 19th Century buildings, punctuated by much older structures. Many are faded but others have seen restoration efforts.

Despite the fact that much of the industry is now in the outlying districts, Oporto is a busy town. The streets hum with buses and autos and pedestrians stroll the shopping areas.

Since Oporto has traditionally been a commercial center rather than a center of government, it is not a city of great governmental buildings and palaces. Indeed, the city's most ornate palace is the 19th Century neo-classical Palacio da Bolsa, the former stock exchange. It was originally built as the headquarters of an association of the city's wealthy merchants. Designed to impress, it has a great granite staircase with statuary and two giant bronze chandeliers. One of the upstairs rooms was decorated in gilt and was patterned after the Alhambra palace in Spain. Other rooms have Roman and classical touches. It is quite lavish.

Another commercial landmark is Oporto's railroad station, Estacao Sao Bento. Dedicated in 1916, the station is well-known for the works of artist Jorge Calaco that cover its interior walls. These depict the history of transportation and Portugal and are made up of some 20,000 tiles. Be aware that this is a working train station and viewing the tiles must be done from amidst the scurrying commuters.

One building that does have royal connections is the Casa do Infante (also known as the Royal Customs House). Built in 1325, it is the traditional birthplace of Prince Henry the Navigator, who sponsored and inspired Portugal's

great period of exploration. Today, it is a museum.

As mentioned earlier, Prince Henry's parents, King John I and Phillippa of Lancaster were married in Oporto's cathedral. This austere building is distinctly medieval with little ornate decoration except for the alter, which is made entirely of silver, and the neighboring chapels. The Gothic cloisters adjoining the cathedral itself are worth a view.

Oporto has a number of interesting smaller churches as well. The Clérigos church is known for its tower, which was once the tallest in Portugal. At the top of its 274 steps is a panoramic view of the city.

Begun around 1245, the now deconsecrated Igreja de Sao Francisco has an elaborate interior with extensive use of gold leaf - - some 300 kilos by some estimates. Other small churches have elaborately decorated exteriors. Igreja Santo Ildefonso has tiles by Colcao depicting scenes from the saint's life. Igreja de Santo Nicholas has patterned tiles covering its façade.

One of the more charming areas of the historic city is the Cais da Ribeira district. This is the old waterfront area along the banks of the Douro. It has narrow medieval streets and alleyways. Cafes, fashionable restaurants and bars are seemingly everywhere.

Spanning the chasm through which the Douro runs are several bridges.

The most important of these is the Ponte de Dom Luis I. Designed by Théophile Seyrig, an associate of Gustave Eiffel, this wrought iron arch bridge opened in 1896. At the time, its 580 foot span was the longest arch in the world and it remains the longest iron arch. Today, the upper of its two levels is for trams and pedestrians while the lower is open to auto traffic.

On the other side of the bridge is Cais de Gaia. From here, not only are there excellent views of the Oporto skyline but there are cafes and restaurants along the river. Traditional wine boats add a layer of atmosphere.

The wine boats were used to transport the port wine down the river from the wineries to the "caves" located in this district. Actually, the caves were wine cellars where the port wine was aged before being exported to Britain and elsewhere. Today, most if not all the major name port houses maintain "port lodges" here where you can learn about how port is made and sample some of the product.

As befits a major city, Oporto has museums and other cultural landmarks. There is also shopping (Rua de Saotarina is the city's main shopping street) as well as numerous restaurants, cafes and coffee houses. In addition, there are beaches along the area's Atlantic coast. Of course, you can also take an excursion up the Douro valley to see the wineries where the port is made