

The Smooth Guide: A weekend in Porto

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“In Braga, they pray; in Porto, they work; in Coimbra, they study; in Lisbon, they spend, and in the Alentejo they sleep.” So goes the old Portuguese saying; but while Porto’s reputation for rolled shirtsleeves and a resolute work ethic endures, the city is increasingly home to design-savvy hotels, original restaurants, world-class concert halls and chic boutiques. In short, the grey granite streets of this city – which not only gave its name to the country but also to that “divine nectar of the Gods” – are now echoing with vibrant culture and the footsteps of locals at

play.

In 2010, the hotel and restaurant scene is moving as fast as the River Douro that divides the town of Porto from Vila Nova de Gaia, where the bankside situation begets the perfect climate for ageing wines brought down from the vineyards of the Upper Douro Valley. A tour of one or two of the Port Lodges, such as Taylor’s, is essential, not only to appreciate the difference between a Tawny and a Ruby, but to inhale the history and atmosphere of a tradition that has endured unadulterated for centuries.

It’s here, above these lodges, that the city’s news-making boutique hotel, The Yeatman, opened in September. Walk into the glass-walled lobby, and all of Porto and its multifarious architecture lie before you – the colourful façades of medieval houses, the Church of São Francisco’s gothic spires, the 12th-century cathedral piercing the skyline behind the baroque Clérigos Church and its tower.

The Yeatman has set out to “define a destination”, and it does just that with striking individuality. Its 82 rooms and suites are arranged in tiers, like a vineyard, and spill out to generous terraces and sunbeds with stunning views over the Douro and the city. In the sunny bedrooms, white slatted shutters delineate the luxurious bathrooms, while the suites are all different, and some of them charmingly themed. There’s a bed in a Balseiro (wooden barrel), recently emptied of port, surrounded by oxblood walls, and in the Presidential Suite the bed conveniently rotates for a view to suit your mood.

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The hotel is seamlessly integrated with the port culture that's so inherent a part of this place. One lift transports guests to the vineyards, another to the port lodges. The outdoor swimming pool is infinity-edged (and decanter-shaped) and the vast spa offers vinothérapie courtesy of blue-chip boutique brand Caudalie: Merlot Wraps and Barrel Bath immersions are standard. Meanwhile, award-winning chef Ricardo Costa's food-and-wine-pairing dinners are now a regular Thursday occasion, and draw a loyal crowd. It's the kind of culture Porto has deserved for too long.

Theatre is instead the theme of Porto's first Design Hotel, which also opened this year in the heart of the city. Hotel Teatro is the work of celebrated Madeira-born designer Nini Andrade Silva, and the 74 rooms are awash with her trademark low underlighting, distressed woods and metals, and opulent fabrics in dark shades. Theatrical costumes hang in glass cases, curtains replace doors and stage lights are literally woven into the carpets.

Lovers of traditional design should head to the Palácio do Freixo, an 18th-century gem at the edge of the city by the Florentine architect Nicolau Nasoni. Late last year it was given new life as a Pousada (Living History Hotel), via a clever architectural annexe to an old flour mill next door housing 87 bedrooms, leaving the original palace with its chapel, painted salons and elegant gardens beautifully preserved alongside the Douro.

Indeed, the hotel scene shows no sign of slowing down. The future promises the arrival of Amanresorts (in the Douro Valley initially, and then in Porto a year or two on), while an InterContinental is due to open next spring on the imposing main square in the Palácio dos Cardosas, once home to the legendary Café Astoria.

Portuense coffee is excellent (no doubt due to Brazil's historical status as the jewel in the crown of the Portuguese empire), and cafés are a vital part of life here. The most famous is Café Majestic on Santa Caterina Street. It opened in the 1920s with an elaborate (and then vanguard) art-nouveau façade. People-watch, soak up the history and indulge in a Pastéis de Nata – the custard pastry that's a national institution.

Porto is famed for its tripe, and the rest of the country often teasingly refer to the Portuense as "tripe-eaters". The noisy, colourful Bolhão Market is replete with vendors of *tripas enfarinhadas*, but for something altogether more appetising head to DOP Restaurant, which opened this spring in an annexe of the Palácio das Artes. The food is superb, combining a mastery of flavours with a lightness of hand and a confidence that keeps the dishes simple. Chef Rui Paula, who has run the original restaurant DOC (suspended on stilts over the Douro) since 2007, successfully takes traditional ingredients

and delivers them into the 21st century with aplomb: sardine gazpacho with black-olive toasts; scallops, topped with mushroom and quail's egg, partnered with smooth chickpea purée.

If you want food with a view, make for Foz, the neighbourhood where the Douro empties into the mighty Atlantic. Book at buzzing Shis, where you can dine on chef António Vieira's sublime carpaccio of seabass with a truffle vinaigrette and almost taste the sea.

Thankfully, Porto is a first-class walking city. Almost any stroll is picturesque, hilly enough to rid you of some of those calories, and affords the chance to dip in and out of signature boutiques – such as Aguas Furtadas, with colourful ceramics and decorative paper designs, and Muuda, a concept store mixing art with fashion from local designers – as well as the city's most notable buildings.

In 1996, the historic centre was listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site; the medieval alleys and the fading grandeur of the baroque churches were suddenly renovated and restored. Then in 2001, Porto became a European Capital of Culture and the Casa da Música was commissioned. In 2005, Rem Koolhaas unveiled Porto's new concert hall – an extraordinary structure compared to an uncut diamond (and, less charitably, to an upside-down open shoe box), providing an auditorium flooded with natural light through the use of transparent acoustic curtains. Porto's other great cultural institution is the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, built in 1999 by the Pritzker Prize-winning (and Portuguese) architect Alvaro Siza Vieira.

Those with the urge to procure rather than perambulate can visit some of Portugal's most famous branded boutiques. Among them, Vista Alegre – maker of fine porcelain to royal houses all over the world since 1824 – is a must. The pieces it produces today are as beautiful, and relevant, as their 19th-century counterparts. Also part of the Vista Alegre empire is the seamlessly modern Atlantis glassware and the 19th-century Bordallo Pinheiro range of pottery. Pinheiro was famous for his andorinhas – ceramic swallows – and it is this emblem that another innovative boutique, A Vida Portuguesa, has adopted. Opened here in late 2009 after its flagship met with massive success in Lisbon, it specialises in original Portuguese designs that have survived the test of time, from olive oils to charming tin animals. It also sells the wonderful hand-milled soaps of Claus Porto, in the same glorious retro packaging they've had since 1887.

Along the narrow cobbled streets of the jewellery quarter, you'll undoubtedly see in many a window large filigrée-gold Hearts of Viana (named after a nearby town and traditionally given to new brides). But the current talk of the town is Luísa Rosas, who comes from a

long line of goldsmiths and launched her first jewellery collection late last year – refined, delicate ovals and circles of textured gold twinned with diamonds.

The most famous shop in Porto, however, is Lello & Irmão bookshop. It opened in 1906 with a hard-to-miss neo-gothic façade and an equally spectacular interior centred on an extravagantly winding and intricately carved red staircase (local lore claims it was the inspiration for one-time Porto resident JK Rowling’s Hogwart’s). A huge art-deco stained-glass skylight crowns the building with the motto *Decus in Labore*. Back to the Portuense work ethic – though the city around it now has a multitude of reasons to do anything but.

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