



Portugal Trip Notes - Running and Touring – Lisbon to Porto to Geres June 3 – 16, 2014

I asked myself why when I signed up. I asked myself why all during the trip too. Looking back at the trip, I'm just sure it was meant to be. See www.facebook.com/RunQuestTravel. A trip for the record books. A trip to remember for a very long time.

- It was an honor to be with these world-class runners and winners. Here are the 1st, 13th and 3rd from the famous Badwater run – Carlos, Marie and Harvey, plus Hugo a wonderful Portuguese guy who lives in Helsinki now and undoubtedly has his own top resume.
- The boys were all as smart and as good-looking as could be. Full time eye-candy. Also kind people.
- The sites were unique and new to me.
- Some of the hiking was treacherous, some was hotter than hell, but all was interesting and memorable.
- Gifts and mementos were generous: t-shirts, 10K entry, tile/cork commemorative bottle stopper, Spi belt, two unique water bottles, cinch back-pack and plenty of alcohol that was unexpected.



Picture of memento gift: Tiles are representative of Portugal since their buildings are covered with them. Harvey had one custom made for us and it's a bottle stopper and it's embossed with RunQuest 2014. Portugal is also the world's largest cork producer so how neat is that?



My first introduction

They came in dripping wet and I was only slightly drier having sat in my hotel lobby until the rains slowed down. They clearly didn't know to come in out of the rain – having just run a couple hours. The next picture was taken later and after our spur of the moment 10K organized run.



The lucky rooster

It is everywhere: on tea towels, plaques, tiles, mementos, t-shirts, etc.

And darned if I didn't come home and find I had one (from an early 1970s trip to Lisbon and the Algarve.) Actually since they are a sign of good luck I must have many of them like this picture of rooster bottle top corks. The legend of the Rooster tells the story of a dead rooster's miraculous intervention in proving the innocence of a man who had been falsely accused and sentenced to death. According to the legend, silver had been stolen from a landowner and the inhabitants of that city were looking for the criminal who had committed the crime. One day, a man turned up and became suspect despite his pleas of innocence. He swore that he was merely passing through on a Pilgrimage. Nevertheless, the authorities arrested him and condemned him to hang. The man asked them to take him in front of the judge who had condemned him. The authorities honored his request and took him to the house of the magistrate, who was holding a banquet with some friends. Affirming his innocence, he pointed to a roasted cock on top of the banquet table and exclaimed, "It is as certain that I am innocent as it is certain that this rooster will crow when they hang me." However, while the pilgrim was being hanged, the roasted rooster stood up on the table and crowed as predicted. Understanding his error, the judge ran to the gallows, only to discover that the man had been saved from hanging thanks to a poorly made knot in the rope. The man was immediately freed and sent off in peace.



The world is flat

In a tourist spot, selling local textiles, see the Boston shirt?

Accommodations

Now this was frustrating. It was probably compounded by my having a good deal in a five-star Lisbon hotel and then moving to a little small downtown three-star hotel. The only room I have ever seen as small was on a cruise ship and it was bigger. My Story Hotel in old town had nice amenities, was modern, and the breakfast was generous. The price was good but there was more room in an airline aisle than around the bed. I should have contacted the hotel ahead of time and upgraded from a single room. It was festival time and impossible to do upon arrival as they were booked solid. The room in Porto was no bigger though I arranged for my return the few days later to give me a larger room (and they did.) In Geres National Park the room was much larger but with a 1950s bathroom. My return to Porto after the trip again put me in a five-star and I realized that I'm much more comfortable there. By the way, a five-star in Portugal does not relate to a five-star in NYC but it was very nice.



Cuisine

Gourmand friends had warned me not to expect much from the food in Portugal. But I'm easy to please and when I ate I was happy with the continual fried fish and overcooked vegetables which usually meant cabbage. A form of tapas is common. I did skip dinner some days with the group because it was hard to have a 10 o'clock dinner which never seemed to end. All of which would be fine if I didn't need to wash clothes and get up at 6am. But the boys got it all done and stayed out until 3am. (They

also managed to fall asleep in the van, after picnics and anywhere they sat still.) Here we are with a mime as entertainment during our first meal waterside.

Weather

After the one day of monsoons in Lisbon we got lucky and had cool nights and high 60s most the time. The last day of the tour was brutally hot and then after most left and I was on a day tour to Douro wine valley it hit 98 degrees. Supposedly Portugal is pretty mild with very little serious winter and then three months of heat. In Lisbon I kept hearing "it's never this cold" and in Porto I heard "it's never this hot." It caused a lot of laundry. I never used my velour.



Driving

Yep gas is about \$9 a gallon so cars are small but not as small as I'm used to seeing in France. The roadways are fairly new and good as a result of a big input of European Union money when they joined the EU. Now it sounds like the recession continues, unemployment is horribly high, and they need more bail out. Is this a stressor and why the young smoke? Being in a vehicle can be a stressor for sure. One of our drivers drove like he runs: Fast and on the bumper of the car ahead whether it was on the curves with no barrier and huge drop offs or on the auto-routes, it was fast and furious.



Photo gallery

The Romans were everywhere and many of their roads and aquaducts remain as evidenced here and interestingly even survived the 1755 major 9.2 earthquake.



The largest collection of carriages is housed in a museum that was the oldest known riding school and even older than that of Vienna. A trip to the 14th century Monastery of Jeronimos was a bit out of town and the first of many crypts that were over the top. This was of Vasco de Gama.



I started getting enough of churches quickly so the visit Tejo Riverside to the Torre de Belem was welcomed as was the park lands. The River runs into the Ocean and there seems to be water everywhere.



Lisbon reminded me of how Berlin had such an odd mix of old and new. Waterside was the monument and museum to the fallen soldiers and I watched the changing of the guard. Does the bridge look familiar? It was designed by the Golden Gate Bridge designer and is only longer. I needed to run on it but instead ran to and under it on the 10K. Our walking tour of the old town section called Alfama showed some of the structures remaining after the 1755 devastating earthquake. It is known for FADO, the distinctive Portuguese music. I would return there for more walking during their festival and it was a bit like going to the French Quarter during Mardi Gras.



I didn't take their historic trolley but I did take a mini bus tour to some villages in the outskirts. Obidos was favorite not only because I got to walk the ramparts but because it was so perfectly restored. The story goes that in 1200s a king gave this former Moorish castle to his wife to be, Isabel of Aragon, as a wedding gift. The tradition was repeated by all future kings until the 1800s. With 14 churches and more houses than residents, this is home to the tour buses but very few got up into the ramparts.



The houses are lined in blue paint making it very much a feminine village. The famous azulejos tiles are in abundance so it's no wonder that there are numerous festivals held here.



But it is made modern by the usual street artist/beggar, tour buses full of old folks, and by tiny cars available for rent.



In the town of Alcobaca, it's the magnificent Cistercian Abbey from the 1100s that stands out. It sits where two rivers converge, it's massive in scale, and its 350 feet nave makes it the largest church in Portugal. It is also the strangest and saddest love story, if not more so than Romeo and Juliette. The crown prince fell in love with his wife's lady-in-waiting. The king was fearful of her Spanish family's

influence so he had her executed, unaware that the Prince had secretly married her after the wife's death. In this church the lovers are reunited in their afterlife with two huge and magnificent tombs.



And on that sad note, we move to Navarre where we had lunch under 350 foot cliffs on the gorgeous beaches that would even put Rio de Janeiro to shame. How about public toilets with bidets? Get clean for more churches



More churches, more tombs, and even a family of burials with giant tombs under glorious stained glass.



Some of the people of Fatima – tourist outfits, statues of the Saint who appeared to the three children, and some of the wall tile art so well-known in Portugal.



A pilgrimage to Fatima is like going to Lourdes. When we were there in the early 1970s, only this small church existed and the long walkway was surrounded by grass but still pilgrims make their way on their bloodied knees and purchase 6' candle pillars to light for whatever. Where the three children saw the vision in the tree now stands a glass building where mass is said.



I'm pretty turned off by the politics and commercialization of religion but I liked the huge new sanctuary's architecture. It holds 9,000 people and I suppose that means it's needed and appreciated; for that we should all be glad that so many get so much out of it that they're willing to give money to the institution of religion.



I walked miles and found a huge book fair complete with food booths and this whole suckling pig. The streets are famous for their designed cobblestones but they are controversial because they can be treacherously slippery in the wet. The day I arrived there was a full page feature in Wall Street

Journal about the possibility of covering them over with cement. Their Avenue Liberdade was more dramatic and wider than any street I've ever seen. There must have been an entire block of buildings removed from the center. Imagine a roadway, then a triple walkway with parklands down the center, then the four lane road, then another triple walkway with parklands down the center on the other side. Lisbon contains many parks and plazas which make for good entertainment. Here's one of the many mimes.



I didn't meet any of these, nor ride in the tuk tuk vehicles but I bet their beaches would be full of lovelies were it warm. We were cold and rainy.



A huge grand square on the river with their own Arch, as well as a warning about pickpockets which I fortunately never felt was needed.



The Castle de Sao Jorge is up on the highest hill giving a view of much of Lisbon. It is above Old Town Alfama and fortunately I got up there before the monsoons came, but I was spooked about getting down the steep cobblestone walkways. The starred restaurant was closing up or I might have indulged as much to stay dry. The olive trees were in abundance and ancient.



Harvey managed to get us into the Saturday 10K despite it being sold out. His reputation precedes him. It was a 5pm run, followed by free beer, followed by a walking tour, followed by what began a tradition of a very late dinner. Late for me yet even later for the boys as they'd go out afterwards.





On towards Porto!

Portugal's second largest city and one that is quaint, easy to get around, and a place worthy of returning.



One of many castles high up on a hilltop, this one Moorish. Three of us toured the castles in Sintra and enjoyed the views down to town.



Harvey didn't hesitate to pick up one of the 3 ½ to 4 inch snails, while Marie and I sat in a well-earned Queen's Chair up high after a run for her, a hike for me. Did we have an audience?



Harvey treated us to a wine and cheese tasting in Sintra, before a hike through a park culminating in a picnic. We then headed uphill to a swimming hole where many indulged.



Still another castle with fairyland paths, stone crossings, long circular stairs, followed by a drive out to the farthest western point – where they ran and I indulged in the cocktail lounge.



Marie and Diana out on the Roc before continuing onto the decadent buffet and before the next day's run/walk over the Eiffel built bridge in Porto.



Tile art work is the norm in Portugal. Some say it started with a mandate to clean or paint buildings periodically and tiles were easier to care for. Some say it was a sign of wealth. No matter, it's a tourist attraction now. Across the river is the best view of Old Porto. These boats used to carry wine barrels and now they carry tourists. We could have used some carrying at a later time when we visited Braga and the Dom Jesus Sanctuary with its zillion of steps which we did and which I returned to a few days later and did again. (Oh darned, the hilltop churches are blending together in my mind and maybe this was another one)



Across by way of the Eiffel Bridge is a monastery where we climbed up to the top, then later walked through the town and eventually indulged in a port tasting. It was one of three port tastings I'd enjoy.



While the young hot shots were out running, I toured the San Francisco Church. It was so gilded that it was embarrassing to open it to the religious so it's been a museum ever since. Across the courtyard is a museum and other than the catacombs the best part was looking out the window to see the Sandeman port logo. It was the first ever marketed logo and I'd later see the silhouette statue hillside in the Douro Valley.



The initial steps to Dom Jesus Sanctuary. Then the climb through the stations of the cross. And then part way up looking down on the city of Braga where we started.



The plantings would be completed on my next visit. We didn't take the funicular: it was built in 1800s on a principal of filling it with water for its downhill, then letting the water out. We kept climbing to an upper lake where we found a dead wild pig. Below: the happy climbers. Maybe happy since it was easy for 'them'.



You can see "Flat Parker" on the right. He is photographed throughout the travels as a commemoration of a young Cincinnati boy who is battling an illness.

Onto Geres National Park



Happiness is getting a hotel where I can not only walk around my bed but roll the suitcase in too. Lovely and in town which softened the blow of a very long drive to lunch that turned out to be worthwhile. This wild horse was one of many in the park.



Along a wild stream of water with a water wheel we would find someone's small garage with ancient stone grinders for olive oil before venturing into the valley and up the hills to my favorite hike. This was the only 'store' found through a multitude of small villages.



The laundry was church garments. The corn crib was filled with corn suggesting it's still used. This little lady got a taxi ride in the back of the tractor which clearly had come down to fetch her up the hill.



The hills got steep and maybe I wouldn't have looked so happy (middle picture) had I realized that I would have to cross the rushing stream. The last picture is my OMG it's over with and will my heart just stop trying to beat out of my t-shirt. Little did I know that there'd be still another stream to cross. I should have guessed when the boys disappeared for far too long . . . and came back with a warning to me "Don't Look!"

See trip notes part 2