

Back in Portugal

Am finally on my way to beautiful Portugal again - this time on back-to back cruises with Zegrahm Expeditions. Their itineraries are about as far away from mainstream cruises as possible - small ship, no dancing girls, no bingo, no casino. But lots of excursions on zodiacs, lectures, documentaries and films. And my fellow companions are sure to be among the most well-travelled I've ever experienced.

Jetlag is my nemesis so I always fly out a few days before the first day of a group trip, just to get a head start on adjusting to a new time zone. This time my body must make a eight hour time change and there is no better place to do this than in Lisbon. It is such a beautiful, clean and safe city -- reminiscent of San Francisco -- and I feel comfortable here.

The Golden Gate? No --
Lisbon's 25th of April Bridge
built by the same company.



I love the Marquis du Pombal Hotel right on Avenue Liberdade - a wide mosaic-lined street with a beautiful tree-lined parkway down the middle leading to the main square. I had made arrangements with Paulo Ferreira a licensed guide for my airport transfer and day tours. This was an excellent move.

The first day after a flight (including an 8 hour layover in Brussels) is always difficult for me and I didn't surface from my hotel room until early afternoon. I ambled down Avenue Liberdade with the goal of visiting as many Ale-Hop stores as I could - there are four in the area. I love their concept -- stores filled with items you didn't know you needed until you see it. And everything is very cute and practical. I was able to find all four branches before I wound my way back to the hotel.

I've learned that when I arrange a second visit with a guide, it is like being with a long-time friend. Paulo is an excellent guide with his own transportation company and knows his way around. I have booked day tours to Mafra and later to Sesimbra with him. Each of these historic areas is close to the Atlantic, but in different directions.

So on day two, he is right on time for our excursion to Mafra and its show piece - the National Palace. Mafra Palace is exquisite as well as huge. It was built by King Joao V in the first half of the 18th century to show off the gold and riches pouring into Portugal from the New World -- mainly Brazil. It is stuffed corner to corner with antique furnishings, artwork, paintings, carpets, etc. Its chapel (as large a church) It is considered to have the most significant grouping of baroque sculpture outside of Italy.

The Palace collection is 90% intact as it was a royal residence until 1911 when the last King of Portugal spent the night before going into exile. It became a museum shortly thereafter.

Of special note, its huge intact library (36,000+ volumes) has a unique way of dealing with insects as there is no air-conditioning or heating in the building. They have a resident group of bats which are let loose each evening to feast on a buffet of flies, ants, silverfish and other crawly things that inhabit the room.

To say it the Palace is huge is an understatement -- it is just under a mile walk-around for the historic center of the building - and it just keeps going on and on. In addition there is the convent, hospital and gardens to visit. There are also sections that are not open to the public. Of course there is a nice gift shop too!



Our day included a seafood lunch at Viveros de Atlantico, a beach restaurant - Yum.... Sauteed baby clams as a starter, then a paella seafood dish. Neither of us had room for coffee or dessert.

We had already feasted on half the clams before I decided to take this photo.

Two days later, our touring takes us to Sesimbra, including Cape Espichel with its old monastery, Arrabida National Park (great views here!), and lunch at O Alcochetano in Alchote, a teeny picturesque village.

Cape Espichel is the Portuguese point closest to the US. Its old, abandoned monastery complex is a heritage site. Weather in this area generally cold and raining so those monks suffered a lot with cold and damp and no heating.





The restaurant is family-owned where father does the grilling, mom and helper work the kitchen and daughter and husband wait on tables. Paulo and I split an unbelievably fresh grilled grouper.

And lo and behold, what is on the way back to Lisbon???? The Freeport Lisboa Fashion Outlet! This is what I love about having my own driver:

Me: Can we stop???

Paulo: Of course we can!!!!

I had about an hour to run around and do as much damage as possible. It was a Sunday so stores were crowded and lines long at checkout. I could have used much more time!



Alas I needed to return to Lisbon for a quick reunion and catch-up with friend Valle; then go to the Tivoli Liberdade Hotel two blocks away for a reception and welcome dinner with the Zegrahm Expeditions group.

This is my first time with this company and first impressions are good. They seem to be well organized with a experienced cruise staff and a well-traveled, interesting clientele.

There is no doubt in my mind that the next month will be a great adventure!

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