

Cruising The Douro Valley (by coach)

Thursday 4/4/24

My 3.00am alarm call was a little bit of a shock, but as I had gone to bed at 7.00pm the previous night I wasn't too tired.

My driver, a Plymouth man called Alec was of Romanian origin and very nice. He was a very competent driver, who used to work for Amazon, and was used to long drives. I was even able to shut my eyes and relax! – I don't think I slept though.



We made good time and picked up a lady from the Taunton area who lived in the back-of-beyond. Alec's satnav took us to a field that looked across at her house. However, following instinct Alec turned round and found the house and driveway.

Over the journey there (and later our return journey) Mary & I had quite a few pleasant chats getting to know each other.

Rosemary, who I had met the previous year on the Danube cruise, & I kept in touch via WhatsApp, and we eventually met up in Itsu where I was eating porridge and enjoying a coffee. It was 10.15, and I was parched having had nothing to eat or drink since leaving home.

Rosemary ordered porridge as well, and then we passed the time wandering duty free, even though neither of us wanted anything, and catching up. It was as though we had only seen each other the week before and not 6 months.

When I checked in at the airport (Gatwick) I requested an aisle seat. I was 1 row behind Rosemary. The plane wasn't full, and Rosemary's neighbours wanted to move seats, so she moved up to the window, I moved up a row to the aisle seat, and we put our bags coats etc on the middle seat and carried on talking. After a very steep take off, we bumped our way through the rain clouds to blue skies and a cruising height of 11,900mtrs. The pilot told us it was 70° in Porto, and we should arrive at approximately 14.45.



I read a bit during the flight and started my journal. The crew came around with a drinks and sandwich trolley, and I bought a bottle of water for 3Euros. I was so thirsty.

By 14.30 we had descended a bit and could see land below us through the broken clouds. Soon we had a steep descent and landed at 14.45. Dead on time. By the time we had visited the loo in the dark (the lights didn't come on until we were at the

wash basins) it was a stroll to baggage claim, then through customs which was unmanned, to find the Saga reps.

Rosemary's taxi companions went AWOL – that happened last time too with the Puff-a-lots! – this time it was lost luggage, so he held us up while he reported it and then went shopping for t shirts etc at the cost of the airline.

To the dismay of many of our fellow travellers we had a 2hour coach trip to the boat as the water level was too high to open the lock gates, due to Spain opening their locks to release the over volume of water; so we had no overnight stay in Porto, we were going to start our cruise at day 2's destination at Regua.

Once out of the industrial area that surrounds the airport, and on the motorway, we were passing hills covered in pine and olive trees, with views of deep valleys.

We had a near miss with a car, which was joining the motorway; instead of putting his foot down to merge into the traffic, he stopped. I think there was only about 1inch between our coach and his Volvo. We were travelling on the A24; the mountains, which were topped with wind turbines, were in a haze, the vineyards were bursting into bud, and there was lots of new building going on. We went through a very long tunnel near the Rio Bevico, then turned off the Motorway towards Viseu.

The motorways in Portugal are all toll roads (built with EU money). Spain, their neighbour has motorways built with EU money, but are toll free. A sore point with the Portuguese.



We arrived at the Spirit of the Douro in Regua at about 5.30pm, where we were moored for the night on the “bonded” side of the Sandeman Port estate, with a Mr Sandeman standing guard. So, no free roaming. However, we did have lovely views of the village lit up at night.

Soon we were escorted to our cabins.



The cabin walls were thin, and I could hear my neighbours on their phones. The bathroom is tiny and quite dark. It is made of black and dark brown marble, and very cold to stand on. There was no magnifying mirror this time either.



The cabin itself is smaller than that on the Spirit of the Danube. But the whole ship was smaller. I don't think I'd like to share – we'd be in each other

way, and there isn't enough hanging or drawer space. I had to go sideways to pass between the bottom of the bed and the shelf which served as dressing table.

Friday 5/4/24

I had a disturbed night. The ship that had tied up next to us, departed at about 2am. My cabin was portside, and Rosemary's starboard. She had views of the dock wall.

By the time I had woken properly and had a shower, the skies were blue with the promise of sunshine.

At 8.00am there was a stretching class with very relaxing music. Breakfast was also at 8.00am and that is where Rosemary & I headed. Breakfast was similar to last year with self-service cereals, fruit juices, toast, croissants, and a cooked breakfast. The Portuguese bacon is delicious, very thin and crispy.



Our battleship grey ship on the Sandeman Estate

After breakfast Rosemary and I sat on the foredeck in the warmth of the sun attempting to do the daily quiz and crossword.

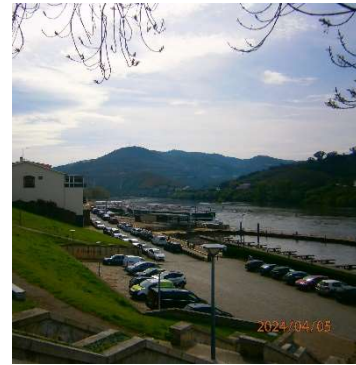
We were mustered into the lounge at 10.00am for a safety briefing. Unusually, there is no handbook in the cabin with safety info, mealtimes, wi-fi password etc.

We were assigned coaches for our trips out, and Rosemary changed to mine; not only so we could be together, but to avoid what we dubbed the Cling-ons! (her taxi companions).

We were then taken across the river by coach into Regua.

Instead of going round the museum, which was a last-minute arrangement to compensate for missing Porto, Rosemary & I explored the lanes and backstreets, and discovered the shops. How many of our fellow travellers managed the steps up to the roof top museum we

will never know.



Some of them seem a dodderly bunch. 1 man had fallen 3 times in 2 days, and I sat and watched another trip up the stairs holding a glass of water. However, this one was wearing flip-flops; not at all suitable.

After a sumptuous lunch - salad starter, fish (more like goujons cooked in tempura batter) & skinny chips; and of course, a glass of Rose, we set off for the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Remedios.



It was fabulous. Built on top of Mount St Stephen between the 18th & 20th centuries, this is visited by pilgrims from all over the country.

During the Middle Ages, Catholic worship was celebrated there, in an old hermitage dedicated to Santo Estevao, that was erected in 1361. It was demolished in the 16th century as it was at risk of collapsing. In 1750, the



construction of the present sanctuary began, and was only finished in 1905.

In the interior beside the *azulejos* panels representing scenes on the life of the Virgin, there are two gilt carved wood collateral altarpieces devoted to Saint Anne and St. Joachim, designed by José de Santo António de Vilaça, who is also the author of the main gilt carved wood altarpiece in the octagonal cupola-covered chancel.

The ceiling was magnificent in its simplicity. It looked like a piece of wedgwood.

The monumental and beautiful Baroque staircase with 691 steps, is divided into nine profusely decorated levels with



pyramids and statues, namely the Courtyard of the Kings and some fountains which were fed by springs & took over 200 years to complete.

The balance and harmony of the church façade are due to the pinnacled bell towers and to the sculptures crowning the pediment. The framed windows of the façade are decorated with garlands. In the centre of the façade the entrance is



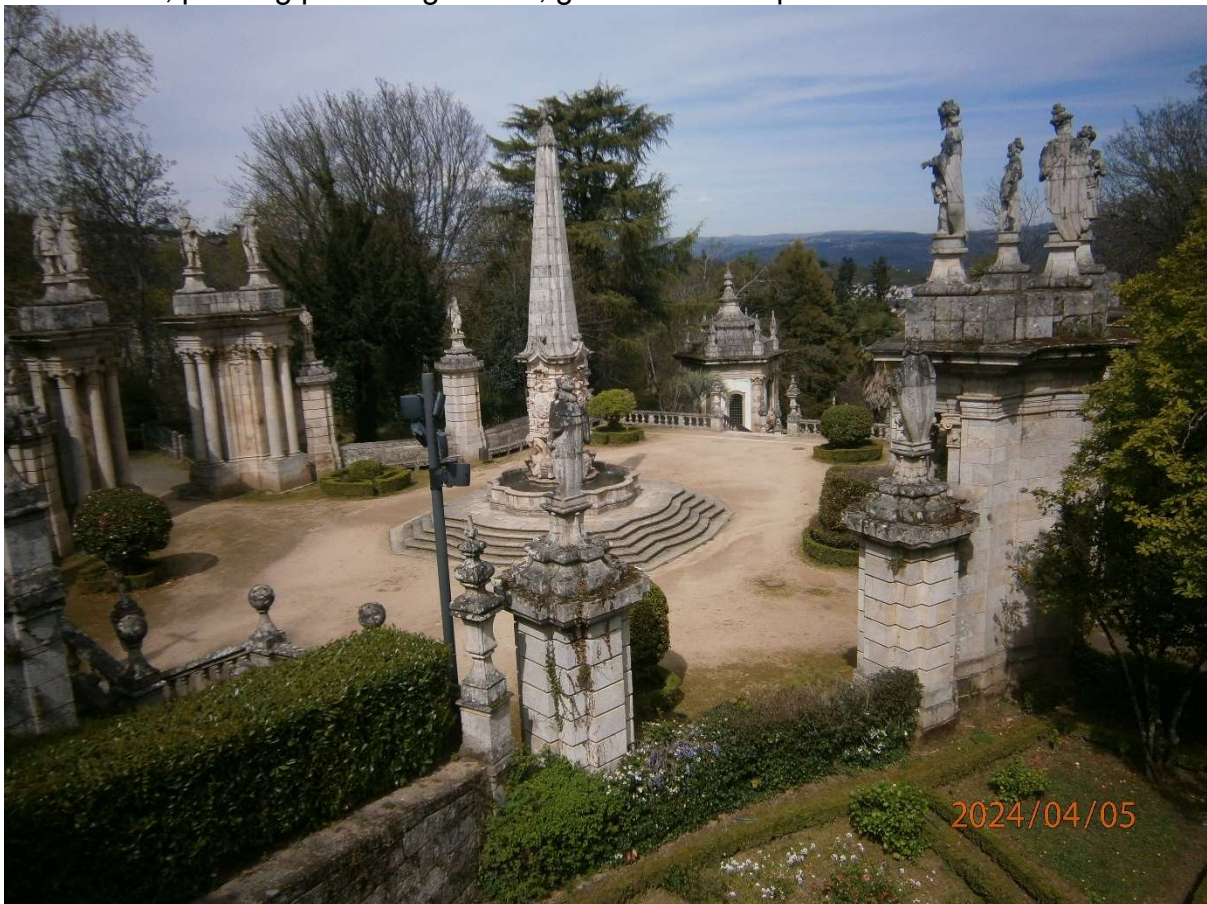
decorated with floral designs and is topped with a niche hosting the image of Our Lady of Remedy.



Most of the group returned to the town by coach, where they populated the coffee

shops and bars. Rosemary & I chose to walk down.

The views of the town below were amazing. It took less time than we thought to climb down, passing parterre gardens, grottos and chapels.



The main concourse in the town lined up with the staircase, and was dotted with rectangular pools with fountains and statues.



(Bishops statue with Tiago our tour director & David one of our guides, having a chat)

We were to meet up at the bishops statue, but having time to spare, went into the Cathedral.

The Sé de Lamego is a mix of Gothic and Renaissance architecture dating back as far as the 12th century. This makes it the oldest cathedral in all of Portugal, although the only surviving feature from this time is the Romanesque base of the bell tower.

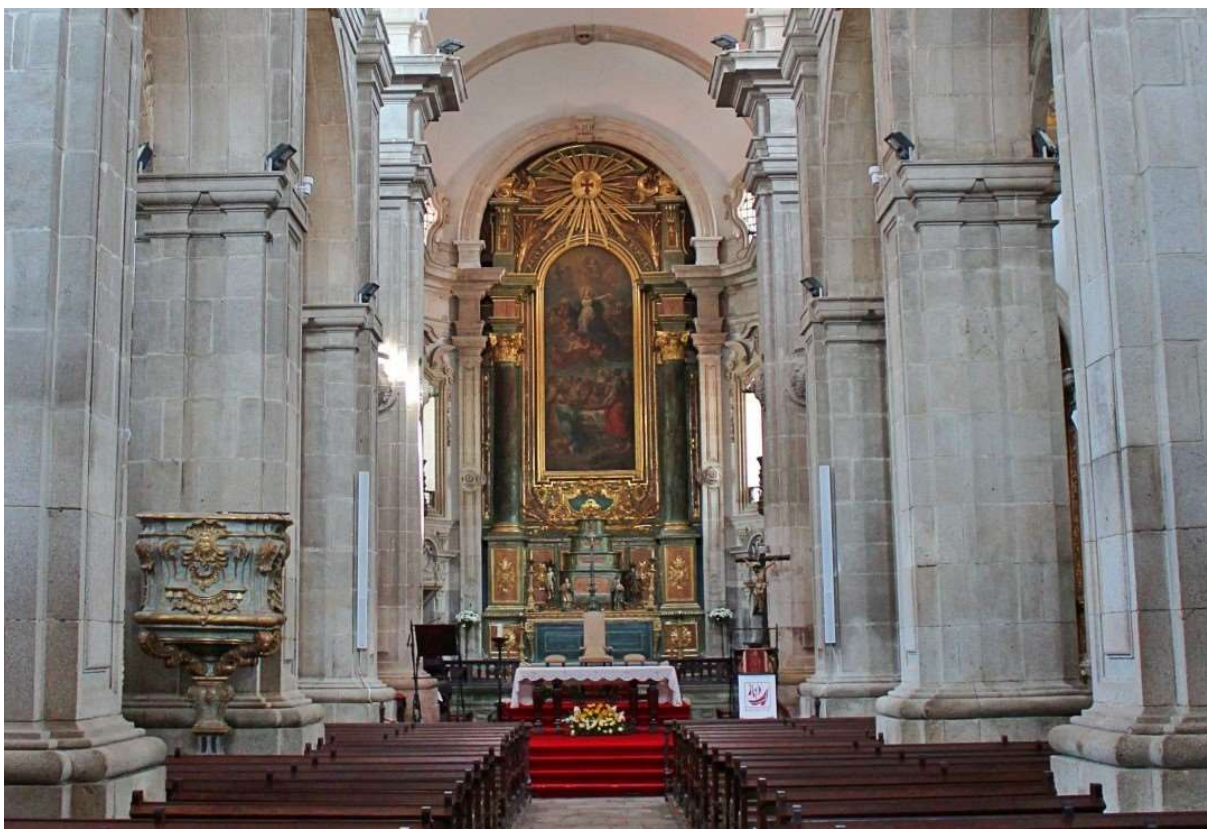


The church's interior doesn't quite match with the facade as it is much more recent, being mostly 18th century. It is however notable for the beautiful biblical frescoes which adorn the ceiling.

The frescos were drab in comparison to some, but it was beautiful in its own way.

Beyond the main chapel is a small but serene two-storey cloister. This comprises of a around a dozen fine stone arches and a central fountain,

where we saw many of our fellow passengers sitting in the shade.



Rosemary & I then sat in the sun chatting until it was time to meet up at the coach pick up point. We had walked 3.6 miles, we thought we had done more.

It was then a half hour journey back to the ship where we had a “singles cocktail meet & greet”, followed by welcome cocktails for everyone before dinner.

Our ladies singles group decided to sit together for the first night and get to know each other.



Left to right:- Norma, Gill, (Thereafter known as Knitting Gill), Jill, Pat, Me, Rosemary & Mary

For dinner I chose Crunchy Albeira (Portuguese Sausage) with caramelised apple and Lime mayonnaise to start, with Vegetable Gyoza (a sort of Kofta) with sweet chilli and sautéed mushrooms. It was very nice.

In the evening, we were entertained by Glenn, who was good. So different to last year's entertainer.

Saturday 6/4/24

I woke to grey skies at 7.15 and after a shower met up with Rosemary for breakfast. This morning was supposed to be a sailing day, but we were delayed waiting for the cling-on's lost luggage, which was found at the airport.

So instead of moving on we had a quiz on TV theme tunes, plus the daily crossword. At 11.30 we had a presentation on what should have happened. The film was very good showing the river and its rapids when it was used by sail and oars to transport wines down to Porto, before cruise ships took to it.

After a very nice lunch of chicken stroganoff, with a salad starter, we cast off and started sailing upstream to cheers of our shipmates.

The river was very narrow, with room for only one ship, and fast-moving water, traces of the rapids of old. Unlike the Danube cruise which was smooth, this one had a feeling of being on the water, with a slight roll at times.

We soon encountered our first lock. It had a drop of 28meters. We had a running commentary from the lady behind us who was reading all the signs and signals at the lock. We don't think she had sailed before as some of the comments were so obvious. Everyone was asked to leave the sundeck, so shortly after we had a stampede to the lower fore deck. It took 10 minutes for the gates to start to lift. where passengers experienced their first drenching from the lock gates.

Once through the lock, we were in a bit more of a Mediterranean climate as far as grape growing is concerned, with less rainfall.

The hills are a network of vineyards, dotted with Quintas all displaying the brand of wine or port. The river widened after the lock, and we steamed up to Pinhao where we were due to remain overnight.

Once moored up we were taken by coach to Avesada wine estate. The roads were very narrow and twisting, with steep drops down into the valley below.

Quinta da Avesada is in the centre of the Douro region at its highest point (at an



altitude of 600 meters) consisting of four buildings (one of them is one hundred years old) and 25 hectares of planting. 90% of its plantation is dedicated to the



production of Muscat grapes, with which Moscatel de

Favaios is produced, and is designated a national apéritif. It is the Wine-Growing Village of Favaios with about 1,000 inhabitants that gives name to this wine. Today the production of this liqueur is exclusive to Adega Cooperativa de Favaios. It was a very thick sweet wine. I liked it.

It was a very quick tour, as due to being behind in our sailing schedule, we were late and they wanted to shut. They were busy preparing for an inspection to retain their license. We were also supposed to visit a traditional village bakery but were too late for that too.

The restaurant was a 15-minute drive away, and we were met by an accordion player, accompanied by a line of clapping staff. We were directed onto a terrace overlooking the vineyards, where we had local bread and cheese with Quince chutney. I tried the bread with a little of the chutney to soak up yet another glass of Moscatel. It was heady stuff, but very more-ish.



The restaurant looked lovely. Set with round tables seating 10, a buffet table in the centre, and a huge log fire. I guess the people who dashed to the table near the fire regretted it later on.



Dinner was strange: The main course plate was under the soup plate, which was under the starter plate; and they were all cold.

The starter was Cod in a soggy tempura batter, 2 types of sausage and salad.

This was followed by a cabbage and bean soup with pasta, (mine had rice because of the gluten). I didn't like it at all. It was tepid at best.

Main course was boiled white cabbage, roasted new potatoes and a large chunk of braised beef. Again, none of it was hot. The wine was local and very rough. Not to my taste.

Desert was very limited for me. I could only have fresh fruit as the desserts were creamy gateaux. Coffee & Grappa followed. – I would only use the Grappa to clean my paint brushes. It was very harsh.

Our host introduced each course with a story about the food and drink which I found hard to understand. The accordionist reappeared accompanied by a drum. They played a flamenco tune which was OK, and then several “local” tunes which after a while became repetitive and annoying. (perhaps it was due to lack of alcohol on my part!)

Back on the coach we faced a 30-minute drive down the steep hairpin roads that were ‘concerning’ in daylight. Mr Spindles (due to his legs) yawned very loudly and very frequently all the way back and became very annoying to everyone. Crossing the bridge over the river he started singing “I’m a troll”, which he then tunelessly whistled all the way through the ship to his cabin on the lower deck. – unfortunately, the same deck as me.

I was ready for bed on our return and some Gaviscon, as our meal was very heavy for such a late hour.

Sunday 7/4/24

It was raining when I woke at 6am to the noise of next-door snoring. After a leisurely 1½ breakfast we were told we had yet another delay and wouldn’t be sailing until lunch time.

Teigo, our tour director, said he would lead a walking tour to the town, & we single ladies decided to go together, so it would be an amble.

There was a market this morning all along the waterfront. The fruit and veg looked lovely and fresh, but the sausages and hams were sweating in the heat. It was 18° and sunny.



The tiles at the railway station were beautiful and depicted the process of wine production of old.

Traditionally the women picked the grapes, the men carried them up or downhill to a wagon and the boats transported the wine barrels down



river.



There were some nice modern art installations, but many of the buildings were in a bad state of disrepair, some at the point of collapse.



Once back at the ship, I went to my cabin to take my walking boots off, before going up on the sundeck with a coffee until lunch.

Lunch was the usual salad starter, followed by veal cutlet with chilli potato wedges, which weren't hot to taste, but had a pleasant spicy warmth.

Sadly, we weren't able to sail in the afternoon, due to "too much water", so we were taken to the Mateus Palace by coach.

It seemed strange that other ships were travelling up stream. However, later on we deduced we had problems with the ship, as there was lots of banging going on in the engine room. Most noticeable if we returned early, or by the passengers who decided not to go out.

The outside of the Mateus Palace was much nicer than the inside which I found to be gloomy.



The Casa de Mateus was built in the first half of the 18th century by António José Botelho Mourão, the 3rd Morgado de Mateus. It replaces the family house already existing on the site in the early 17th century. In 1911 it was classified as a National Monument.

The sculpture of a woman by João Cutileiro, which has been sleeping in the lake since 1981, is part of the image of the House.



Sections of the palace are set up as a museum foundation and parts are still lived in occasionally by the family. We moved from room to room in the baroque-style palace. There are no corridors. All rooms open one into the other. The family created a corridor for the bedrooms, so they had privacy, but they too once lead one into the other. The ceilings were beautiful, carved in deep chestnut wood. The Four Seasons room had 4 paintings of women with produce of the season. Another room had furniture on display including a table with a mother of pearl top and two other intricately carved chests (one with ivory and one with Portuguese wave carvings).



Two of the rooms contained religious items that had been moved from the chapel to preserve them. There were a large number of relics and a collection of vestments worn by the priests in the chapel. The Blue Room showed off blue Cantonese China and a beautiful Japanese chest. On the other side of the main hall, we found the library that had been restored. The centrepiece was an ancient, illustrated book of poems by the famous Portuguese poet Camões documenting Vasco Da Gama's voyages. The copper etchings used to create the illustrations were also on display.


After the palace tour, we went to wander in the gardens. The gardens were modelled after Versailles. The different areas were separated by hedges. Arches were used to move from area to area. Hedges and grass were trimmed to create patterns. It was all quite beautiful and artistic.



Wildlife was encouraged by allowing the odd cabbage plant to go to seed which was buzzing with huge black bees. There was also an ornate bug house.

There had been a religious festival, and we were lucky enough to see the carpet of flower petals in the square leading to the chapel



There were more in the village leading to the church. 



Our return journey was along the river following yesterday's half day cruise. We now await the evening briefing to see what happens tomorrow.

Well, we have 2 options; stay on board and visit Sandeman Port in the afternoon or go to Salamanca by coach, which would take 4 hrs each way. We would stay overnight in the hotel Alameda Palace. Rosemary & I opted for the latter; however, it would mean we would have to have breakfast by 6.30am ready for an 8.00am departure.

In the evening we were entertained by a Portuguese folk group. They were good, even though we didn't know what they were singing about.



Our dancing Queens

Monday 8/4/24

I woke to my alarm clock a bit bleary eyed. The women in the cabin next door had been talking and laughing until gone 11.30. I did tap on the wall, and one said “someones knocking” & then they knocked back! They were also going to Salamanca as they were up the same time as me.

The coach left at exactly 8.00am. We were sat behind Mr & Mrs Brigadier, who gave a running commentary – ‘Its raining down’ (of course it was; rain doesn’t go up) & ‘ We are on the A24 headed East’ – Of course we were, Spain was to the East of Portugal. If we had gone West we would have ended up in the sea! He had one ear pinned back, and one sticking out; we decided it was for multidirectional hearing!

Following the overnight rain, the navigation buoys were barely visible, with many submerged. The amount of water cascading over the weir was incredible, making the other side resemble rapids.

Enroute, we were treated to a fabulous vividly coloured rainbow, which Rosemary



managed to capture, and thereafter the skies cleared slowly and the temperature began to rise in the coach.

After 2 hrs, we had a brief pit stop so we could visit the loo and grab a coffee (or in our case an orange juice) courtesy of Saga.

The scenery was a little like Dartmoor. Big boulders stacked one on the other. Nearer Spain we saw cattle in flooded fields and storks in trees. There was lots of roadside gorse and white broom.



We soon arrived at our sumptuous 5star hotel, Alameda Palace. After we had collected our room keys we decided to walk the stairs to our floor as there was a queue at the lifts. What a mistake! We gave up on the 4th floor and continued by lift. It is an old hotel with very high ceilings; - I think Rosemary said there were 20 steps to each floor.

Rosemary was in a wing directly opposite mine. We could wave from the windows.

The corridors had parquet flooring which smelt of beeswax. The furniture was antique.



My room was bigger than my bungalow. 2 queen sized beds which had lots of firm springs, a bathroom with 2 wash basins, toilet, bidet, bath & shower. The built in wardrobe was bigger than my kitchen at home.

The most amazing and bizarre room was the ladies toilet down stairs. (apparently the gents was the same) The cubicles were all mirrored on every surface! I could see 16 versions of myself in each direction!



After a welcome drink of sparkling rose wine, we went through to a buffet lunch of various salads, paella – both traditional and vegetarian; tortilla, fresh rolls and butter, accompanied by a glass of wine, followed by an ice-cream dessert on grated dark chocolate with a rectangle of merengue with orange topping. It was very nice. While we were eating dessert we were entertained by Flamenco dancing by 2 ladies from the Salamanca school of Flamenco. Coffee was served with a very dark sherry, which was a lovely end to the meal.



After our meal, we were taken by coach to the central square, Plaza Mayor (It took about 4 minutes). Our Spanish guides then took over, and we explored the plaza.

It is considered to be one of the most beautiful squares in Spain. It was built in



Baroque style according to the plans of Alberto Churriguera,



who has a statue dedicated to him. On the north side is the City Hall, a Baroque building that has five granite arches and a steeple decorated with figures.

Salamanca is an ancient university town, The Carthaginians first conquered the city in the 3rd century B.C. It then became a Roman settlement before being ruled by the Moors until the 11th century. The university is one of the oldest in Europe.

The Cathedral School of Salamanca existed as far back as the late 12th century. The oldest university building in Salamanca, now the Rectorate, is the old Hospital del Estudio, where students received free medical treatment providing they left their bodies for research if the treatment was unsuccessful.

One of the city's buildings, Casa de las Conchas is named after the 300 scallop shells clinging to its facade. The house's original owner, Dr Rodrigo Maldonado de Talavera, was a doctor at the court of Isabel and a member of the Order of Santiago, whose symbol is the shell. It now houses the





public library, and is entered via a charming colonnaded courtyard with a central fountain and intricate stone tracery.

There was also a beautiful ceiling above a stairwell. It was noisy as it was a sort of freshers day for the students. It was also a “free day” for the population of Salamanca. It wasn't a BH, but a

day to do as they wished and to celebrate being able to eat meat again after Easter, and to go to the river for a mass picnic.



We were unable to go into the cathedral because it was closed due to the celebrations.

The Puerta de Ramos, contains an encore to the 'frog spotting' challenge on the university facade. (for some reason it is one of their emblems) We went looking for the little astronaut and ice-cream cone chiselled into the portal by stonemasons during restoration work in 1992.



Astronaut

Ice cream cone (2 scoops!)

Following the tour, Rosemary & I wandered on our own, and accidentally found a small market, where we bought silk bolero shirts and Rosemary also bought a beautiful divided silk skirt for 35Euro total

Regaining the hotel without having to refer to the map, we enjoyed a glass of rose wine in the bar area courtesy of Saga.

Dinner was at 7.15 in the beautiful dining room with its numerous crystal chandeliers. It was a strange affair;

Vichyssoise Soup, (mine with no cream), & a wrapped gluten free roll which was a little dry. Main course was white fish of some sort, on a bed of courgettes, peppers, and aubergine, except the meal was luke warm and on a cold plate. My dessert was yet again fresh fruit. I requested decaf coffee, and they thought I meant tea. When I



finally made myself understood they filled my cup with hot milk and gave me a sachet of decaff coffee!

Tiego came round to see if we wanted a wake up call, as breakfast was at 6.30am and we were to leave at 8.00am sharp. So we had an early night.

The beautiful dining room

While we were in Salamanca, the passengers who didn't want to go with us, had a trip to Sandeman Port. They said it was incredibly clean, they were impressed. They also sent us a photo, and a message saying we were missed. (they had rain and overcast skies until we returned)



Tuesday 9/4/24

I woke at 5.00am after a really good nights sleep with no chatting or snoring through the walls. After a good wash, (I decided it would be imprudent to try to climb into the deep bath) I was dressed and packed by 6.00am ready for a coffee. What a shame there was no facilities in the room.

Breakfast was a buffet arrangement, with sloppy scrambled eggs which didn't look at all appetising. The journey back was uneventful and Rosemary and I sat naming the characters on our cruise:

- Mr Good Moaning and his under the thumb wife.
- Dumb and dumber (AKA Mrs Venus flytrap) – they were both gormless.
- The Cling-ons who I have described earlier
- Madam front seat (said she suffered from travel sickness, but sat over the wheel and slept all the way)
- Brigadier and Mrs Plumb
- Mr & Mrs Pseudo Plumb
- Mrs Push-Shove
- The dancing moustache
- Mr ten to two (because of his feet)
- Mr tech geek (loads of cameras and lenses)
- Mrs Fitness who always wore leggings but was very over weight

To name but a few!

Back at the ship, I leapt of the coach, desperate for the loo, and forgot my coat and bag, which was on the shelf above my seat. Cabin visited, I charged down the gang plank once it was clear of embarking passengers, to meet the Captain at the bottom, who was waiting to cast off, saying "No rush!". Thankfully our tour guide had picked my coat and bag up, and I had time to dump them in my cabin before lunch. It was nice to return to Saga's dining room and good food.

We were going to sail!!!!!! Down stream towards Porto, We had only done ½ a day sailing to get where we were.

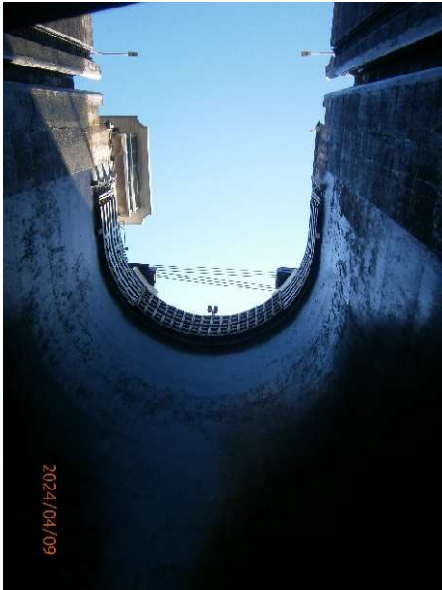
We then went on the foredeck and took it in turns to visit the loo so we could save seats in the sun. The 4 passengers in front of us were rowdy and noisy – too much drink perhaps? And they got soaked when we went under the gate of Bagauste lock, which had a drop of 35meters. We were ok as we were under the overhang in the relative dry, coffee in hand.



In the afternoon there was a cookery demonstration in the lounge where they were making traditional custard tarts. We didn't go, the sun was too nice. We sat doing the crossword. We were really motoring on,

passing through a narrow rocky gorge. The scenery changed from vineyards to scrubby rocky outcrops.

We were due at Carrapatelo Lock at 17.05.

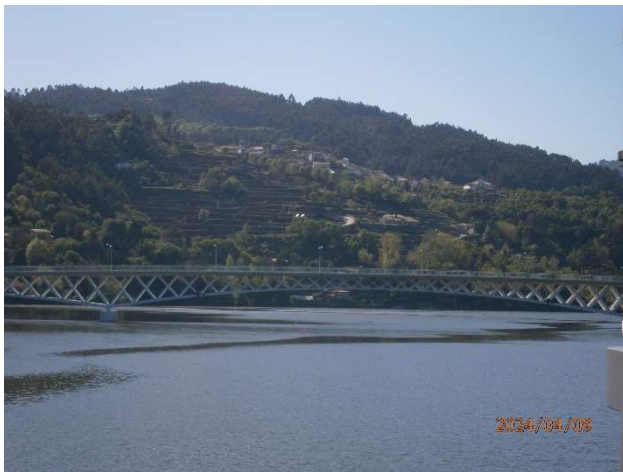


In the photo, we weren't yet at the bottom!

River vessels have reservations for each lock passage, so they have to keep to a schedule to arrive at the proper time. (Thus the captain could tell passengers the time each lock would be reached.) The dams have a dual purpose. They provide hydroelectric power to the northern part of Portugal, but they were also built to "tame" the formerly dangerous Douro.

The lock at Carrapetelo Dam has the highest rise in Europe at **57 mtr**. (In the Panama Canal, a vessel is lifted 26 mtr using three lock chambers.)

Carrapetelo is a single lift chamber. The gate is a vertical fit, not the swinging gates one sees in most locks, large or small. Inside, you are at the bottom of a deep concrete chamber. The lift took but a few minutes. There was about a foot clearance either side of the ship. The Spirit of the Douro was then able to sail out on the other side.



Later we went under a low bridge. The captain cleared the sun deck, so once again loads of passengers came down to the fore deck. The Captain retracted his bridge, and put a cane on the railing near his bridge (the tip level with the



top of his bridge once it was lowered). The ship was put into reverse, to give steerage, and we went with the current for part of it. We were dead centre of the span. We cleared the bridge with 4 inches to spare.

The river got narrow, and we passed another ship which was going up stream and it had to wait for us to traverse the narrow gorge.



The landscape became more rugged with trees rather than vines, verdant forests and riverside villas and villages. There was some industry associated with the river, mainly sand and gravel wharves. But mostly it was a tranquil landscape with green hills rising up from the river.

Dinner tonight was the Captains Gala. The solo ladies managed to sit together again. We had Beef Carpaccio, Prawn Cocktail, Asparagus Soup, Salmon on a Vegetable Risotto, Roast Beef, Roast Potato (only 1), green beans, and for a change they had made me a gluten free dessert. It tasted like caramel flavoured Angel Delight, decorated with fruit.



After our dinner we went into the bar for the ceremonial opening of a bottle of vintage Port. I've seen it done on the TV with a sword, but our bar manager did it with hot tongs and cold water. We were told they don't open vintage port with a corkscrew as it could contaminate the wine. The wine was then decanted, and we were offered a glass. – They were going to charge us 6.50 Euros per glass, but because of all the problems, it was free.

I went to bed extremely full!

Wednesday 10/4/24

I am Sooo tired! My neighbours were playing classical music, including Handel's Messiah until 11.30pm, and were then shouting over it. I tried phoning their cabin, but the phone was off the hook. Their snoring woke me at 5.00am.



By 6am the ship was underway. We had blue skies too. Today we are headed to Gaia and Porto.

In Gaia, we have yet another trip round a winery. Rosemary & I had already decided give it a miss – its sort of de ja vu!

So we took a steep uneven cobbled street which appeared to go nowhere other than up. So halfway up we took a left turn down back lanes, passing things we wouldn't have seen otherwise.



A mural on a wall, and a sculpture of a rabbit made out of rubbish.



We were soon back by the water, and, having had the cable car ride on our 'to do' list we paid 10euros for the return trip.



It was a short trip, but the views were great.

Our photo was taken on the cable car, and we could purchase it for 10Euros at

the top. Having regretted not getting the one at Petronus Towers, I bought one.

On our return to Gaia we had just enough time to browse the souvenir stalls before re-embarking for lunch.

Lunch was lovely, Tuna sandwiches (a small 2" square of baguette with tuna on top) accompanied by salad leaves. Main course was John Dory on a bed of pureed carrot.

Dessert was a mousse type caramel cake which I had with fresh fruit.

Rosemary & I met at 2pm and walked into Porto. We could have gone by coach with the others who went to the Cathedral and railway station, but they weren't due to leave until 2.30.

Sadly, as we left the ship the emergency services were there trying to rescue someone in the water between a ship and the river wall. We didn't linger.

The coach trip was delayed because of it.



We walked over the bridge, and through a tunnel, emerging on a bright busy street with a green square which had a statue to Christopher Columbus.



We found 2 English telephone boxes, some beautiful buildings, browsed the souvenir shops, and used the loo at a riverside café. The prices

Porto side of the river are twice that of Gaia.



While in Porto, the hospital rang and booked me in on Sunday for hopefully, my last Colonoscopy. My diet had to change the next day to a low fibre one. It wasn't too hard – cornflakes, no fruit, white bread.



The ship had moved up while we were out, and hadn't yet connected the gang plank, so we went to an

outdoor bar where we partook of refreshment. A coffee for me in a doll sized cup; and a Portuguese custard tart for Rosemary with a glass of Port wine.



We had walked 5.7 miles today (& as Rosemary reminded me a ¼ of it was up hill!)

Once back on board, we had the cocktail of the day, on the sun deck - Tequilla Sunrise, which was lovely, lots of orange juice.

Our farewell dinner was OK. Not the best one we have



had; Mozzarella cheese with baby tomatoes and pesto sauce to start (mine was minus the cheese); Cream of pea soup garnished with crispy bacon, (there was no cream in it); Rosemary & I had



the vegetarian option for main course which was vegan 'meatballs' in a tomato sauce on a bed of mashed potatoes. The solo ladies all sat together for the last supper, and then for a quiz, before bidding farewell.

Some of us were leaving at 6.00am and had to have our cases outside our cabin door. *Our restaurant manager & mad head waiter* at 5.15am Others were leaving 1 hour later.

Thursday 12/4/24

I didn't sleep well, even though my neighbours were quieter. They were up at 4.00am, and my alarm was set for 4.45.

It didn't take long to finish packing – it was only toiletries and PJ's

Breakfast was a paltry affair, - only scrambled eggs and cereal. I couldn't have the eggs as they had dairy in it. There was no bacon and no gluten free bread.

Unfortunately, I had to start my no fibre diet today, although I did sneak a banana at 7.45 as I reckoned I had enough time to digest it. I also made a dry sandwich with just marmalade, which would have to last me 8 to 10 hrs until I got home and could raid the freezer.



Check in was quick and easy, and Rosemary & I were soon sitting at departure gate 11 waiting to be called. I fancied buying some Haribo sweets as my diet allowed jelly type sweets. But at 10.50 Euros a bag they stayed on the shelf.

We were supposed to board at

8.05am but were still sitting there at 9.00am.

We were an hour late taking off, because our plane was late getting in. The first half of the flight was OK, and the second half was slightly bumpy. It was very hot on the plane. Many passengers managed to sleep, but even though I was tired I was unable to.

Once landed we made our way to baggage claim. Rosemary's arrived, but ½ an hour later I was still waiting for mine. Apparently, the crate holding my case was damaged and they couldn't open it.

I decided to go to the loo and saw my case on the carousel on my return.

The poor chauffeur had been waiting over an hour. However, we were soon on our way, dropping Mary off at Five Head in Somerset.

Between Mary's home and mine I nodded off, and the driver woke me asking if he could take the Modbury/Yealmpton turn off. David was formerly a blue light emergency driver and lived in Exmouth.

Arriving home at 6.45 pm, I had to get the key from my key safe as I had accidentally locked my door key in my case. It was in the pocket of a handbag which had a broken zip. I had bought a replacement but forgotten to transfer the keys over.

I had some fish fingers in the freezer, which I cooked for my dinner - what a come down! Welcome home!