

TRAVELS AROUND

THE NORTH-WEST OF THE PENINSULA





Portugal has been gaining in popularity with tourists in recent years thanks to its stunning landscape and beaches, superb gastronomy and wealth of history.

We visited the north of this once underrated member of the Iberian Peninsula to stay in the exquisite M Maison Particulière hotel situated in the heart of Porto's historical centre – an area which was classified as a Cultural Heritage of Humanity site by UNESCO in 1996 – to find out more about this fascinating city. From there we travelled across the Portuguese border to the north of Spain where we experienced a rural staycation in the tranquil area of Tomiño, in Pontevedra province in the autonomous region of Galicia, staying in the newly-opened Alto da Pousa bungalows.

PERUSING PORTO...

M Maison Particulière, or simply "M" as it is affectionately referred to by the owner, is a 16th century building that has been respectfully renovated into a 10-bedroom boutique hotel. Each room has its own individual personality, with some facing the prestigious main street of Largo São Domingos. A melange of different décor styles, but mainly baroque and rococo, runs throughout the property, with wood wall panelling, marble and wood floors, stucco wall and ceiling mouldings, tapestries, heavy velvets and glorious suspended lamps all adding to the overall opulent feel to the property.

The reception area is a great indicator of what you will discover beyond. You are met with a magnificent chandelier looming over a lounge area comprising a leather chesterfield and heavy wooden chairs upholstered in velvet textile, in front of a Parisian marble fireplace. The natural light is limited but the ambience is perfectly set thanks to the various ornate table lamps dotted around the room and, of course, the dimmed light from the chandelier.

During the day the two young ladies who share reception duties attend to your every need – their enthusiasm to impart their knowledge of this historic building and the city in which it resides is truly captivating and creates more intrigue to the stories that this property holds within its walls

In this privately-owned boutique hotel, every element has been personally chosen by the owners themselves, inspired by their own travels and passions. They visit every month to check on their loyal and long-serving staff, and continue to add such personal touches as choosing flowers to artistically arrange in wonderful ornate vases.

Behind the reception is the dining room where breakfast is served. Diners can sit under (yet) another jaw-dropping chandelier around a single large dining table with a centrepiece of silver candelabras and cut crystal glassware, in an intimate room adorned with striped red and black wallpaper and a large 16th century painting. During breakfast, soothing classical music plays while you enjoy some of the many options available from their



wide-ranging menu served on Portuguese porcelain tableware (Vista Alegre, of course), with all of the ingredients bought from local markets only hours before.

The bedroom we chose to stay in was Suite V, which had a small balcony looking out over the city. The double-glazed windows blocked out any noise emanating from the charming street below when we were sleeping. However, we greatly enjoyed talented street buskers who performed directly below us, singing over the hubbub of locals going about their business while tourists meandered the streets soaking up the atmosphere.

There is a lift but we chose to ascend to the room up a winding staircase adorned with endless paintings of kings of queens of Portugal, and when we reached our destination we were met with nothing less than luxurious splendour. Our spacious suite had a bed fit for a king, with a resplendent headboard and the bed itself laden with a matching heavy velvet blanket over the highest quality cotton bed linen. A Parisian marble fireplace and small lounge area with a large single slab marble wet-room were other impressive features of the room, among many – but you get the idea...

Porto as a city has a lot to offer. The hotel is in the heart of the charming old town but is also very close to the Douro River, where live entertainers also show-off their talents and the Ponte Luis I bridge crosses over to the Vila Nova de Gaia, another interesting quarter of the Celtic city which existed under the Roman Empire and was where merchants traded port wine for centuries.

In the old town itself you can take the tourist bus around the city, or alternatively take the tuk-tuk (otherwise known by their trade name, Tuking People), which is a fun way to learn about the city as you move around the cathedral, waterfront and important monuments. The city has become a highly recognised and exciting area for gourmands, and rightly so due to its privileged location – rich in exceptional ingredients from both the land and the sea. There are creative restaurants aplenty, and your restaurant bill won't give you a heart attack at the end of the meal. Try typical dishes such as bacalhau à brás (salted cod, eggs and potato) or chouriço à bombeiro (grilled spicy sausages cooked over a flame, usually at the table) and you won't be disappointed.

Interesting places to visit in the city are the famous bookstore Livraria Lello, the Sao Bento railway station, the Palacio da Bolsa (Stock Exchange Palace) and the Museu de Arte Sacra da Igreja de Santo Ildefonso, but at every corner you turn you stumble across something new and fascinating in a city that seems to always keep on giving.

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GLORIOUS GALICIA

For the next part of the trip, we ventured across the Portuguese-Spanish border to the north of Spain into Galicia where we headed out of the cityscape and into the countryside to enjoy a rural stay in a bungalow in Alta da Pousa in Tomiño. This municipality is within the province of Pontevedra, close to the Miño river. A newly-opened rural resort, it was the brainchild of the owner and father of the charming young manageress, Antia. This father and daughter team, who also own Taperia A Carla on the same grounds and serve wonderful locally-sourced gastronomy, offer a very friendly service that goes beyond any humble country retreat.

Their dishes are traditional but beautifully presented on contemporary plates. We especially enjoyed their Galician octopus with potato and paprika, buttery scallops with fresh herbs, and pork with goat's cheese and dreamy sweet sauce, and happily indulged in their homemade desserts and wonderful local wines – hic!

The newly-built and extremely comfortable bungalows feature a modern décor with open-plan kitchen, lounge area, bedroom and en-suite bathroom. An interesting feature is that each bungalow has its own hot tub for an extra touch of luxury, topped-off with an overhead glass ceiling to enjoy the skylight at night – while their state-of-the-art heaters quickly warm up the rooms if the evenings are cold.

There are six bungalows in total, and each one is named after a variety of grape that is grown in the vineyard situated in front of them, giving appropriate acknowledgement to their surroundings.

Tomiño is a place where you can really disconnect and appreciate nature, enjoying leisurely walks in the countryside. If you miss the town life, Vigo is just three-quarters of an hour away by car.

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