

# LA TRAVEL

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# PRIVATE Portugal

By Katie McElveen

Some wineries let you stroll through their vineyards, taking photos and, if the season is right, plucking a ripe grape now and then and popping it into your mouth. Others set up tasting picnics amid the lush vines, complete with crystal wine glasses and cloth-draped tables. At Quinta da Pacheca though, you can go one step further and actually sleep in a massive wine barrel set in the vineyard. Complete with outdoor decks, a massive window overlooking the Douro River or the vines, private bathrooms and skylights, the 10-barrel suites are as comfortable as they are unique. If you'd prefer a more traditional sleeping situation, book one of the 15 rooms within the recently renovated inn, each of which is individually decorated with antiques and family heirlooms. The on-site restaurant serves breakfast and dinner; wine tastings take place under a shady canopy of sycamore trees and there are free bikes for exploring the quinta—or estate—and the small villages that surround it.

Our visit began with our guide handing each of us a pair of shorts and inviting us, after we'd changed, to step barefoot, into a massive vat of barely fermenting grapes, which was slightly warm and very squishy. Turns out we were partaking of an ancient technique still in use today: like most small estates in the region, Quinta da Pacheca crushes all their grapes by hand, err, or foot. Larger producers, who grow more grapes than an army of stompers could crush, have developed special crushing machines that mimic the motion of human feet treading over the fruit.

Established in 1738, Quinta da Pacheca produces just 700,000 bottles of wine a year. But be prepared for a long tasting; the estate produces an astonishing 30 different bottlings that range from vintage Port to red blends, white blends, single varietals and sparklers. And while you won't taste them all, the Quinta da Pacheca's staff is extremely generous and happy to let guests try a variety of wine. The reason for the variety is purely historic; about 30 different grape varieties are planted in the Douro Valley with no set rules about what grapes they can and can't use, wine makers have free reign to blend to their hearts' content, creating one-of-a-kind wines that can't be duplicated. For visitors, especially cork dorks, the experience is almost freeing: wines stand alone, judged purely on their own merits rather than how well they show the classic characteristics of, say, Cabernet Sauvignon.

Portugal is mostly about Port, the fortified wine created by 17th-century English sailors, who added brandy to casks of Portuguese wines in an effort to keep them from spoiling as they traveled from Portugal to England. Today, while Port remains primarily an after-dinner tippie for most of us, the Portuguese drink all types of Port with gusto, usually cold, as an aperitif, with pastries (it's particularly good with Lisbon's Pastel de Nata custard tarts) and, in the case of white port, mixed with tonic and served over ice with lime and mint.

Like Madeira, Sauternes and other sweet wines, Port is often maligned by American wine drinkers, who associate it with cheap, mass-produced juice and may not have had an opportunity to taste the real thing. One of the best ways to dispel those myths is to visit Sandeman, a legendary



producer that just happens to sit on one of the most dramatic estates in the Douro. Getting there is half the fun: set atop a slope embroidered with a snaking driveway and the region's traditionally curving rows of vines, the estate overlooks the Douro as it arcs, mirror-still, through deep green valleys on one side and, on the other, an endless patchwork of green. Although the winery offers a variety of tours and tastings, consider visiting at lunchtime, when, after a tour of the wine-making facility, you can enjoy a picnic of local cheese, charcuterie, salads and pastries on picnic tables set under a grove of olive trees. Our meal started with a fun surprise—a glass of Mateus Rose, which after a few sad years on the back of grocery store shelves, is riding the rose wave back to prominence. After that, we moved to a variety of Port: caramely-like Tawny; fruit-forward, garnet-hued Ruby and LBV, which offers the flavors of vintage Tawny Port for a fraction of the cost. Served chilled, in regular wine glasses, the wines were surprisingly refreshing and went well with a lazy, sun drenched lunch.

The best part of our Douro visit was that we didn't have to do a thing except enjoy ourselves, our trip had been planned in its entirety by Cox & Kings, which uses their decades of experience organizing group journeys all over the world to design private, curated trips for couples and small groups. Beyond providing ground transportation, guides and drivers, our planners went a step further, larding our itinerary with delightful surprises like a visit with a local chef at his home, a tour of Lisbon via sidecar and off-the-menu tastes and sips at many of the restaurants we visited. For adults used to micromanaging every moment of a vacation, it's a lovely touch and a way to experience a place in a way we never could have planned ourselves.

