

Maribel's Douro notes

When to visit

Because the summers can be scorchingly (read “infernally”) hot with temperatures often soaring to 45 degrees in the Upper Douro, it’s highly advisable to plan one’s visit in the **spring** or **fall**. As the saying goes, “nove meses de inverno, três meses de inferno” (or “9 months of winter, 3 months of hell”).

The late fall, the last week of October or first week of November, in our opinion, marks the very best time to visit from a scenery perspective. After the harvest the vineyards burst into incredibly vibrant colors of rust, reds, dark chocolate brown, orange, accented with specks of gold.

Getting Around

The valley, some 100 kilometers from the city of Porto, is best explored by car, as public transportation is limited to the scenic Linha do Douro rail line, running through the heart of the valley from (Peso da) Régua to its eastern terminus, the small village of Pocinho, along the Douro river. The final section of this rail line, between Pinhão and Pocinho, is often described as one of most beautiful train lines in Europe, as the tracks never stray from about 100 feet from the river.

Some visitors like to take the first section of this scenic train ride from Porto’s Campanha rail station to the largest town in the valley, (Peso da) Régua, a journey of one hour, forty-five minutes. See the rail schedule at **Comboios de Portugal**. If you decide to make this journey into the valley by train, the first hour of the journey is not scenic, but once approaching Régua it becomes much more so, so it’s best to sit on the right side of the car to enjoy the river views. Train tickets cannot be purchased in advance, and seats are not reserved. The cars do have a/c but there is no bar car, so it’s advisable to bring drinks and snacks for this 2-hour long journey.

Some who wish to do this long day trip by train take the 7:25 departure from Porto arriving in Pinhão at 9:45. There is a return train to Porto that departs during the high season at 16:21, arriving at Campanha station at 19:00. But please check the current schedule on the link above.

On Saturdays only, from June to October the Linha do Douro offers visitors the chance to ride on an historic steam train with five carriages. This train departs from Régua at 15:23 and returns at 18:32 with a stop at Pinhão, and then ventures on to Tua and back. There is on-board entertainment with regional singers and musicians, and passengers

are offered a glass of Porto Ferreira. But this train is not equipped with a/c, so it can make for a very hot ride in summer, and the round-trip fare is steep, costing €42.50/person.

Once in Régua one can pick up a rental car at the only car rental agency in the valley, the Europcar office on the town's main thoroughfare a Av. João Franco next to the Douro Museum. (The office closes on Sundays).

We believe it **best** however, if possible, to drive from the city of Porto to the valley, via the speedy A4 motorway through the 5.4 kilometer Serra de Marão tunnel to just past Vila Real then down the equally speedy A 24 to Régua in the Baix Corgo sub-zone. The drive should take around 1 hour, 30 minutes. On both the A4 and the A 24 you will encounter electronic tolls, so it's essential to rent the electronic transponder already installed (by law) in your rental vehicle.

A very easy rental car pick up, in our experience, would be at the Porto airport, as getting to the A4 towards Vila Real is effortless. The airport rental car locations do charge an airport pick up supplemental charge of 25 euros but well worth the money to avoid the aggravation of negotiating the heavy Porto commuter traffic.

Navigating the Douro roads

The Baixa (Lower) Corgo sub zone of the Douro DOC, at the eastern end of which the city of Régua sits, produces ports that are meant to be drunk young and some fine DOC wines, such as the Miura from Quinta do Tourais, easily visited, just 5 minutes from the city, along with Quinta da Pacheca next door. The Quinta do Vallado also produces exceptional reds and is as well an easy 5-minute drive northeast from Régua. About one third of the area is dedicated to viticulture in this sub zone of the Douro.

To visit some of the highly acclaimed port wineries in the stunning Cima (Upper) Corgo sub-zone, visitors should take the highly picturesque N2 (N222) east from Régua along the river's edge, off of which some wineries are conveniently and easily located and well-marked (Quinta do Seixo, Quinta do Tedo, Quinta do Pôpa, Quinta de Marrocos).

To reach others tucked into into the steep, terraced hills of schist, one needs to venture beyond the N2 on winding, narrow roads up the dizzyingly steep slopes on the right or left banks of the river. These journeys are not for the faint of heart. Some of these sinuous roads will challenge the driver with their endless hair pin curves, pot holes and lack of guard rails, so it's best not to schedule a "late in the day" tour/tasting, such as at Quinta do Crasto or Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo. Both of these

spectacular, highly prestigious wineries can be reached by boat & private shuttle with advanced reservations.

To quote an article from The Guardian: *“Be be warned: these roads are for confident drivers only. They are intestinally curly. Climbs are crazily steep. Cliffs must be tightly hugged and other vehicles may well be kissed. Safety barriers seem anathema. Most roads are breathe-in thin. Heroic cyclists with Hoy-like thighs might enjoy the suffering these roads provide.”*

The spectacular viewpoints (miradouros)

The **Miradouro de São Leonardo de Galafura**, a 28 minute, 15-kilometer drive northeast from Régua, is both the highest viewpoint in the entire valley and the highest in Portugal. On a clear day one can see for 30 kilometers. At the viewpoint there is parking, a small (locked) chapel and some stone picnic tables, nothing more except for truly exceptional, jaw dropping views. (There is a restaurant São Leonardo on the highway below but you may not find it open.) It’s said that poets have come here to be inspired.

The **Miradouro de Casal de Loivos**, just a 10-minute drive directly north from Pinhão, is the most accessible belvedere of the three. And the BBC proclaimed it “the best view in the world”. You’ll find it in the small village of Casal de Loivos.

After taking photographs at the platform you can tour the olive mill museum, **D’Origem**, while there. From the Miradouro, walk towards the village, past a café on your right and at the junction you’ll see the entrance. Price includes 3 wine tastings as well as olive oil and honey. It’s open from 10-12 and 2-5 or until 6:30 during the harvest season. If you don’t wish to drive, you can take a taxi from the Pinhão rail station for about €10 each way.

The **Miradouro de São Salvador do Mundo**, off the EN222-3, a 10-minute drive from São João da Pesqueira, makes for a longer and much more challenging journey due to the narrowness of the road but one is rewarded with spectacular views looking down at the Valeria dam. Take the N222 east from Pinhão to get there, then follow direction Carrazeda / Ferradosa)

The **Miradouro de Frei-Estêvão**—If you don’t wish to venture as far south as São João da Pesqueira or if you have limited time, this handy and quite spectacular viewpoint and picnic area is found on the N2 road going south towards Ervedosa do

Douro (north side of the road). It makes for an easy stop on the return from Ervedosa village to Pinhão after a delightful lunch at Ervedosa's Toca da Raposa.

Taxi services

Régua

Emmanuel David, Douro Taxis

Tel: (+351) 915 012 777

Email: dourotaxi@gmail.com

<http://dourotaxi.com.pt/index.html>.

Pinhão

Manuel Anselmo

Tel: (+351) 966 192 904

<https://www.taxipinhao.com/en-gb/mentions-legales>.

Sightseeing

Sightseeing in the Douro Valley, often described as one of the most beautiful wine regions in the world, consists primarily of taking scenic, rollercoaster-like drives up to spectacular viewpoints while along the way admiring the gorgeous countryside with its endless, miraculously, nearly vertical terraced vineyards planted on precipitous slopes made of schist, the most infertile soil one can imagine ("heroic viticulture" it's called).

The one museum of note in the valley is the **Museu do Douro** in the center of Régua at Rua Marquês de Pombal, which charts through exhibits, photographs, farm tools, interactive displays and video clips the history of port wine making in the valley. It also explains the process of the harnessing of the river through the building of dams to make the transporting of the port barrels to the lodges in Gaia safer and easier and gives insights into the lives of the workers. The museum sits in the center of town and is housed in a nice blending of old wine related buildings and new construction. For port novices, this museum gives an excellent introduction to port production. The three-story museum also includes a wine bar, a gift shop and a restaurant. From March through October the museum is open daily from 10:00 am-6:00 pm. From November through February it closes at 5:30 pm. Closed December 25, January 1, May 1.
Entrance: €6.

There are few historic monuments to visit in the valley with the exception of those in the pretty city of **Lamego**, a 20-minute drive south from Régua. Lamego boasts the spectacular Baroque staircase of the **Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies** (Santuário de Nossa Senhora dos Remédios) above the town on the Monte de São Estevão hill in a park (with ample parking at the top). With its twin bell towers and its tiers of 686 steps, decorated with panels of stunning blue and white tiles, similar in style to the staircase of Bom Jesus do Monte outside of Braga, this beautiful monument was erected by the Bishop in a display of gratitude for sparing the city of Lamego from the Black Plague. On September 8, the citizens make a pilgrimage here, carrying the statue of the saint up the staircase to its lavishly tiled chapel. Some, seeking cures for their illnesses, climb these steps on their knees as they do in Braga. Lamego also offers an 18th century **Episcopal Palace**, which now houses the city's religious art museum featuring Flemish tapestries and five panels by the Portuguese 16th century painter Vasco Fernandes (open Tuesday-Sunday) and a castle in ruins.

While in Lamego, for dining there is the new and quite stylish **Vindouro** at Travessa da Rua dos Fornos 19, open for lunch from 12:00-2:45 (closed Sunday night and Monday).

To the north of Régua, and 3.5 kilometers east of the town of Vila Real, one can visit the early 18th century Baroque **Casa de Mateus** (by 40-minute guided tour only through the house, winery and chapel), designed in part by Italian architect Nicolau Nasoni, who was responsible for Porto's Clérigos Tower. It's advisable to book ahead online to secure a guided tour in English.

Archeological buffs who wish a day long tour, can drive the 62 kilometers (1 hour, 20 minutes via the curvy N222) east of Pinhão, to the town of **Vila Nova de Foz Côa**. In this area lovers of prehistoric art will find thousands of 20,000 year old petroglyphs blanketing the Rio Côa river valley, now declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. One can visit these mysterious engravings via a guided jeep tour in the **Vale de Côa Archaeological Park**, the world's largest open air prehistoric art museum, filled with Paleolithic engravings that span a 17 kilometer area.

There are 3 sites that can be visited with a varying degree of physical effort: Penascosa, the easiest to access, Canada do Inferno, a bit more strenuous and Ribeira de Piscos, of medium difficulty. For this jeep tour one must book at least a week in advance (due to the quota system), and the tour departs from the three visitor reception centers in the park. One can also visit the Museum in Foz Côa daily except Mondays. The museum has a restaurant.

One can also arrange this 2-hour tour of the Penascosa site independently with Marco Ferraz of **Ambieduca**. There is an afternoon departure at 1:45 pm and the meeting

point is the Reception Center of Castelo Melhor. This village sits 15 kms from Vila Nova de Foz Côa.

We recommend that you not make this trip in the summer when temperatures can soar to 45 degrees C in this infernally hot valley.

Douro River cruises from Pinhão

Pipadouro runs two beautifully restored 1950s wooden schooners from the pier at Pinhão. The larger, the Pipadouro II, was an admiral's boat, can be booked for a sunset cruise, a full day cruise with lunch on board or even night's stay aboard, while the smaller vessel, the Friendship I is used for shorter journeys.

Anima Durius operates the Stella Maris sailboat and the 6-passenger Baco speedboat from the Pinhão pier. Several different cruise options are possible: a two-hour or four-hour cruise, sunset cruise, all day cruise with lunch or a cruise plus visit to the small, family-run and prestigious Quinta das Poços winery with a light meal. These boats can also be chartered for a private cruise. And Paulo, the owner, receives stellar reviews for his services and can adapt them to fit guests particular needs.

Rivus-the Wine Boat offers boat tours, one hour, 30 minute cruises, aboard their 12-passenger "Senhora do Carmo" 1917 classic English trawler before or after winery visits, such as a visit to the hard-to-reach but stunning Quinta do Crasto. During the cruise guests are offered wine and snacks. These cruises can be taken in the morning or at sunset. They can be booked with a winery tour/tasting plus lunch (Conceitus Restaurant at the Quinta Nova) or booked for the cruise alone. The cruise starts at the Ferrão south quay off the N222 where the Restaurant Casa dos Peixinhos is located in Tabuaço. This service requires booking 24 hours in advance. Download the complete brochure of services on their web page.

Magnifico Douro operates traditional, colorful, flat bottomed *rabelo* boats that were used for centuries to transport the port wine barrels down the river to their resting places in the Vila Nova de Gaia port lodges. These cruises depart from the pier in Pinhão. The one-hour cruise, going only to Romaneira and back has hourly departures from 11 am-5 pm with the last boat departing at 4 pm from November until March. Cost: €11/p. The two-hour cruises going to Tua and back depart only twice daily, at 10:45 am and 2:25 pm. Cost: €22/p. Seating is on wooden benches, audio guides are provided in several languages, and during the one or two hour cruises a glass of port wine is served. These boats operate when it rains since the seating area is enclosed and can handle dozens of passengers. These tour boats are used by bus tour companies and by small group wine tours from Porto.

Companhia Turística do Douro also uses large traditional rabelo boats and offers both the one and two-hour cruises year round. The one hour cruises depart at 10:30, 11:30 12:30, 2:30, 3:30, 4:30 and 5:30 (cost: 10/p), while their two hour cruises depart only at 10:30 am and 2:30 pm (cost: €20/p). A glass of port is served during the journey. Narration is given in English but not particularly informative. These boats also operate in the rain.

Dining in the Douro

D.O.C.

This strikingly minimalist, glass enclosed dining space, “a window over the Douro”, with large outdoor terrace jutting out over the river in Folgosa, sits midway between Régua and Pinhão on the N222. The kitchen here is manned by Michelin-starred chef Rui Paula of Casa de Chá da Boa Nova and D.O.P. in Porto, and it’s widely considered the top spot to dine in the valley, albeit the region’s most expensive. If your travel budget allows for a splurge, have a celebratory lunch on the expansive wooden deck built over the river (perfectly Instagram-able). Here the chef serves tasting menus only, priced at €90 (including a vegetarian option) or with a wine pairing for €150. Closed for Sunday dinner and all day Monday.

For a unique splash out experience, one can book the Douro á Vela sunset cruise, a 4-hour experience aboard a motorized sailboat, to enjoy the breathtaking views of the valley from the river while sipping a port tonic, then dock at the DOC pier to enjoy a lavish dinner. *While I’ve sailed on the Douro a Vela and dined at D.O.C., I’ve never combined the two, but it would make for a magical experience for a very special occasion.*

Toca da Raposa (the Fox Hole)

This charming but unassuming restaurant, a white house with a stylish slate interior, sits in the middle of the village of Ervedosa de Douro at Rua da Praça 72, on the south bank, east of Pinhão and is considered one of the best dining spots in the region. The drive up to the village on the N2 south east from Pinhão, we found truly one of the most spectacular in the valley. I urge everyone to explore this area. *The locals of the village call themselves “foxes”, thus the name of the restaurant.*

Run by a husband and wife team, the inn serves updated traditional Portuguese cuisine in very generous portions, with organic vegetables harvested from their own garden. A favorite of winemakers and of local wine guides, the friendly owners serve a set menu of toasted regional bread with olive oil, a toasted alheira sausage, braised lamb shank accompanied by potatoes, squash and zucchini and one’s choice of dessert, that is an excellent value (€60 for 2 with 2 glasses each of wine). One can also order a la carte.

The homemade desserts, such as the almond cake and the bolo borrachão (“drunken” cake) with port, really shine. The restaurant boasts an excellent wine cellar.

Tasca da Quinta

In downtown Régua, on a pedestrian street behind the Douro Museum, owned by the folks of the Quinta de Tourais winery, this *tasca* is equally cozy and charming. It’s also tiny, with 6 or 7 tables, seating about 25 diners, so one must reserve, and tables are held for only 15 minutes. This is comfort food at its finest, in a whimsical setting of mismatched furniture and tablecloths, vintage radios, accordians and ceramics decorating its walls. With the help of the owner, Guilherme, diners pick their wine bottles from an old fashioned cabinet rather than from a wine list. Guilherme couldn’t be nicer or more helpful, as he takes a great deal of time with his guests to explain the menu items, actually hand written in a little notebook. The delicious, updated traditional cuisine is prepared in a tiny open kitchen. We enjoyed the cornbread with olive oil, pork shank with black-eyed peas, the baked octopus (*polvo a la lagareiro*), and homemade apple tart raspberry mouse, all for an excellent price to quality ratio.

The Quinta de Tourais excellent red wines are featured, whose winemaker, Fernando Coelho, is Guilherme’s uncle.

During the week the restaurant only opens for dinner, but on weekends it also serves lunch.

Castas e Pratos

This restaurant, much-loved by winemakers and Michelin recommended, sits in a stylishly reconverted rail warehouse to the east of the train station in Régua. Downstairs you’ll find a sleek wine bar and wine cellar offering 700 labels, one of the most complete in all of Portugal, and upstairs on the mezzanine, the more formal dining room with its original high beamed ceilings and translucent floor. This is Régua’s most prestigious and inventive gourmet dining spot. At the far end of the warehouse you’ll find its sister restaurant, **Sus Douro**.

Cozinha da Clara

We recently enjoyed a fine lunch here in the contemporary restaurant of the Quinta de la Rosa in Pinhão. We began with an amuse bouche of octopus aspic, followed by two mains: a fabulous soupy rice filled with delicious seafood prepared in a Staub cast iron pot and roast baby goat with potatoes and broccoli, all paired with a bottle of the excellent entry level house La Rosa red, a blend of Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, and Touriga Franca. The menu changes with each season and vegetarian menu items are

always available. The restaurant offers a “Claire’s Dining Table” experience at night with a special tasting menu that must be booked ahead. While it was raining, we weren’t able to enjoy sitting on the outdoor terrace just above the river, but we’ll return to sample more of chef Pedro Cardoso’s creations, including his pumpkin flan with lime cheese paste and walnut ice cream.

Vela Douro

A quite affordable and casual option just steps from the Pinhão pier, behind the LVB 79 restaurant, this small schist building with outdoor terrace directly in front houses a cozy and friendly restaurant that specializes in grilled meats (although there are fish options as well and a large tomato caprese salad for vegetarians). We’ve had pleasant lunches here, feasting on their grilled lamb chops, *Secreto* of pork, ribeye steak and other grilled meats, served with heaping portions of salad and vegetables.

Rabelo

The elegant, classical style gourmet dining room of the Vintage House Hotel in Pinhão is best enjoyed during the summer when one can enjoy alfresco dining under the wisteria on the terrace facing the river. While not inexpensive by local standards, we feel that in ambience alone it is worth the slight splurge for romantic, leisurely evening dining (we haven’t dine here at lunch, as it fills up with small luxury wine touring groups from Porto).

O Porco Wine & Tapas Bar

This is a simple but cute café that sits on the main street in the village of Pinhão serving espresso, wines by the glass, sandwiches, charcuterie/cheese platters (the “Pig Plate”) with homemade bread and *petiscos* (snacks). It consists of a long bar with a few tables and makes for a handy option after a long day of intensive wine touring when one just wants a simple and light evening meal. The owner is multilingual Jorge Matias of Jorge Barefoot Tours, who can arrange a day long guided tour of the wineries for visitors.

Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo

The Quinta Nova’s sophisticated **Conceitus** restaurant by André Carvalho enjoys an enviable setting in one of the most spectacular estates in the Douro, way, way up in the hills west of Covas do Douro. Come here with advance reservations on a beautiful, sunny day so as to enjoy a port tasting and tour its Wine Museum, followed by a splurge alfresco lunch (the chef’s “3 Moments” 48 euro tasting menu + optional 24 euro wine flight) on its terrace under the grape vines and absorb those spectacular views! We do not recommend that you book for dinner, however, as the 35-minute drive up to the winery from Pinhão on the M590/CM1268 is one of the valley’s most challenging, and

certainly not for the timid! However, one can book lunch here and ride the train from Régua or Pinhão to the Ferrão stop at the river's edge, where the staff will transport you to the estate.

Quinta do Portal

Further up in the hills north of Pinhão in the village of Celeirós, sits this prestigious wine estate, the Casa das Pipas guesthouse and restaurant next to the winery. The 6-course tasting menu, consisting of an amuse bouche or *couvert*, bread with olive oil, a starter, soup course, main and dessert, prepared by young and very talented chef Milton Ferreira is an excellent value.