

The Masters Weekend – Oporto 2019

Thursday 16

On Thursday 16 May 2019, The Master's team assembled at the small smart City Airport in the heart of Docklands. As we all met-up there were re-assessments of the disparate interpretations of 'smart casual' on show. Richard Townsend set the standard at one end of the spectrum in his stylish linen casual jacket and tie while Martyn Wheatley, your scribe, set the other with his shorts and eye-challenging Portugal T-shirt.

If you like flying, then you will like the handy City Airport. It is the home to some of the fastest take-offs in Europe! Pilots have perfected the aviation equivalent of the handbrake start to make as much progress towards the earliest possible lift-off. Their incentive is to use as much of the short length of quay on which the runway sits and to avoid all the wet bits that surround it!

Sadly, we were an hour late on take off and so here started a recurring theme to our weekend. We were flying with TAP (Take Another Plane) and none of the in-flight announcements really helped to explain the delay and in fact from start to finish most broadcast information was almost completely unintelligible!

On arrival into Oporto we were greeted by our local guide Deborah who seemed to have her fingers on a very wide range of Portuguese facts from history notes, employment statistics, principle exports including even cork bikinis! As I type these notes I understand that The Master is considering a pair of cork budge smugglers as a trip souvenir!

Deborah also set about our language skills with a crash course in Portuguese so don't forget ladies Obrigada and gents Obrigardo. All this plus a home from home traffic jam to enjoy while we crawled to another late arrival at our very nice hotel, The Pestana Porto.

The hotel had a perfect quayside location in the heart of Oporto with superb views of the town around and across the Duoro to the sister city of Vila de Gaia. Nearby in full view was the magnificent arched twin-deck Ponte de D. Luis I bridge which was designed by Gustave Eifel's apprentice Teofilo Seyrig.

Like seaside rock there is a trickle of port running through everything in Oporto. Almost as soon as we had stepped over the hotel threshold The Master treated everyone to a Port Reception which he had pre-arranged in the bar. What a great way to start us off. Thank you.

Our first night dinner in the hotel's riverside restaurant, had a sunset vista, which as darkness fell, revealed the flood-lit centre of the known Port World – Offley, Taylor's, Graham's, Sanderman, Croft, Cockburn's across on the opposite shore, all came into view.

Our dinner was served by Vasco (named after Vasco da Gama), Marina (named after the harbour) and Bruna (which apparently means 'to gloss' – probably best not to ask?). Without a menu or any clues, The Masters Crew enjoyed many multiple starters until the main course of large platters of beef, with odd token bowl of vegetables, arrived. The amount of flesh prompted one guest to comment that "it looked like a road accident" but it tasted good to me.

Our digestion was aided by lovely local Monsul wines. The white was a blend of Viosinho, Goeverio, Rabigato and Malsavia grapes. The red was just as eclectic and a blend of Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz and Touriga Nacional. Both were rather quaffable and Vasco plus his ladies frequently topped us all up until everyone lost count of the alcohol units and we drank our entire weekly allowance on the first night!

By the end of the meal it was 11.30 and so to bed to sleep, to dream.....

Friday 17

Fridays start was an early 07.30 breakfast doing battle for table space with a friendly Aussie group in the snug breakfast room. Incredibly, apart from UNESCO Oporto their itinerary also includes Birmingham which many of you will know is this scribe's hometown. It really is a great destination – do go!

As instructed at 08.15 we all mustered outside the hotel and maintained this holding pattern by the Rio Duoro waiting for our water lift. A pattern was emerging – the boat crew were late. Finally, we boarded the Segurranca, our handsome old traditional Duoro vessel, which was 26m long by 6.5m wide, and our ride for the day, heading up-stream.

Along the river are some impressive barriers, locks and hydro-electric schemes which make the river navigable all year round. Until the 1970's the river featured many fast currents and rapids that made it very dangerous for all but very skilled boatmen with good local knowledge of the dangers.

Gliding over the Duoro is a pleasure of tiered banks, many covered in vines, punctuated by multi-level villages and houses. Some are humble dwellings with hard worked plots while others are pristine, extensive and smartly regimented estates with a Grand Design for a home.

The engineers were in for a treat when our second lock at Mourithe, built in 1972, came into view....IT WAS HUGE! This 35m high barrage spanned the whole route and our only way was up via a rapidly filling chamber along with another larger vessel. Impressive and yet so simple, float mounted, back railed, rising mooring bollards allowed secure boat control for the entire elevation.

With the sun out it was lunch with a view, as we went further up- stream, of succulent pork-a-la-orange accompanied by rice and cabbage as well as very tasty bread + olives on the side. Accompanying wines were by the Escorna Bois vineyard. The name translates as Ox Wagon and both were excellent. The smooth red was a grape blend of Touriga Nacional, Touriga Francs, Tinta Barroca and Tinta Roriz. The white had a fresh crisp character which like the night before was a combination of Viosinho, Rabigato and Malsavia grapes.

Also like the night before, and with time on our hands, we may have had more than the odd glass each.....and then the singing started! It broke out thanks to Jane Sawyer and was bolstered by Barry Reece, at which point the whole group joined in with, She Will Be Coming Round The Mountain followed by What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor and a finally of It's a Long Way to Tipperary! Our Portuguese crew looked on in amazement as we got stuck into our renditions.

Lunch over, we all went out onto the foredeck for a breather. It may have been due to some trick of topography, but Keith Etherington felt certain that the river was now going up an even steeper hill! Harry Tee and Brian Fishwick seemed convinced as well that this really was the case too and so they tried to persuade others. A select group lent into the hill with their inclination.

After seven hours of chatting, laughing, eating admiring the view, oh and did I mention drinking, we finally docked at Peso da Régua for our coach trip back to Oporto. If you go to Oporto do take the boat for a day trip upstream, relax and let Portugal soak in.

Friday night was free time and we all found excellent restaurants for dinner across this vibrant harbour city.

Saturday 18

It was Saturday already and our guides Anna and Diana took us on a bus tour of the sites to start us off. Prince Harry The Navigator was first up, just across the square from impressive Commercial Chambers which has amazing interiors, and then the Franciscan Church known as The Golden Cave because 450Kg of gold leaf was used to adorn it's interior! We looped around the city and crossed the Ponte de D. Lois I bridge into Vila de Gaia where apart from being Port Central also hosts extensive manufacturing areas.

Oporto is proud to be a net exporter of goods and services and the key industries are:

- a) Technical textiles for high-end items like Michael Phelp's slippery Olympic swimming kit!
- b) Metalwork including mould production for the plastics industry.
- c) Cork production but not just for sealing bottles but also extensively for insulation of sound and heat in building construction.
- d) Shoe design and manufacturing.

Sadly their decorative tile industry, whose colourful and detailed products adorn so many traditional buildings in Oporto, has declined and is now closed.

With a hill-top stop and superb views back across to Oporto, Anna told us about the invaders and heritage of the area including visits by The Romans, The Swabians, The Moors and of course the good old Christians. Their Cathedral is 12th century and formed the heart of a walled city with the eighteen gates. However the success of Oporto required expansion and so the city spread down to the dockside settlements creating the city we all know today.

One surprise was that JK Rowling was once married to a Portuguese gentleman and that they had lived in Oporto where Rowling taught English. Her favourite bookshop was Lello Irmão (Lello Brothers) which, with its beautiful façade and interior, inspired her concept of Hogwarts and the character Harry Potter. For €5.00 you can get a whistle-stop tour of the shop and for €7.50 you can enjoy the full Monty! Although the queue to get in was quite substantial I think a quick *expelliarmus* charm would soon sort that.....

Now why do you think the Brits love their tea? Apparently, this is also a Portuguese tale. When Charles II decided to marry Catherine de Bragança of Portugal, on meeting him, she presented Charles with the most exotic of far eastern gift, saying "Para Ti" which means "For you". As Catherine spoke no English and Charles no Portuguese, he assumed that the contents of the exquisite box, which was leaves of our favourite brew, was called 'ti' and hence the name stuck as the courtiers picked up the latest afternoon habit of their new queen.

Anna and Dianna were both excellent guides who were easily understood and really knew the history of their home city which they shared with enthusiasm.

The afternoon was free time before The Master's Crew re-gathered for a trip to Taylor's to learn about its history and port production. Taylors, in some cases, still literally tread the grapes that are picked for their port production. This is done in pits or lagers by in-line treading teams of men and women, arm in arm. It is a precision operation, carried out in silence and guided by the head treader who ensures all the crop is pulped. The grape juices are collected, filtered, fermented, fortified and matured in huge casks or barrels.

The results of 'Chip Dry' white, Ruby, Tawney, Vintage and LBV (Late Bottled Vintage) are wonderful to taste and enjoy, especially in the early evening sunshine, overlooking the Douro to Oporto. During the tasting Christopher Sawyer told us about a stunning chocolate cake, simply called Black, which he and Jane had eaten on the trip. He had spotted that the Taylor's shop was selling them and so he treated the troops to a few which we all shared. Black, are about the size of a large muffin and this chocolate loaded cake was also heavily steeped in Vin Santo and tasted heavenly. It was the perfect accompaniment for our glasses of port but dangerously moooooorish! I suspect they are addictive!

After the history, the tasting and the cake, we had a splendid last night dinner in a private dining room overlooking the valley during sunset. John and his team took perfect care of us serving Arrojo 2017 Douro with the succulent salmon and Contraste 2016 Douro with probably the best lamb this scribbler has ever tasted. This was followed by a naughty but nice multi-textured chocolate creation and of course even more LBV. Port aficionados should note that John chilled the LBV for 90 minutes before serving to enhance the full range of its flavours. This was a surprise to us all and worth noting.

The Master, Ken, and Maureen brought the event to a close by thanking us all for coming and sharing their excellent Master's Weekend and we thanked them for picking such a wonderful destination.

The Master also especially thanked Neville Watson for all his hard work which had made the Oporto trip such a success. In addition, he congratulated Neville for his many years of service to the livery with which we all heartily agreed. Thank you.

Then a surprise. It was revealed that the Oporto weekend was also the Silver Anniversary of Ian and Alison who were given a rousing response from everyone.

Then another surprise – Ken and Maureen are about celebrate their Golden Anniversary and so we had another toast to both couples, cheers all round and the perfect ending to our weekend.

If you missed The Master's Weekend in Oporto then I suggest that you do not miss next year's event. The Master's Weekend is one of the best ways to meet and get to know other SIM members, enjoy their company and have fun together. Next year Ken and Lesley Grattan will be taking us all to Northern Ireland so look out Belfast – here we come!