

# IBERIAN IDYLL

*Portugal lends Old World charm and traditional food fun  
to an ultra-luxury cruise along the Atlantic coast*

By Doug Wallace



Happily, there's no such thing as too much Champagne – it's like too rich or too thin. So I have no problem popping the cork on the Pommery chilling on the coffee table of my suite on *MS Silver Dawn*, checking into the 10th luxury liner from Silversea Cruises.

I'm on the ship's maiden voyage and feeling special about it; just a quick toodle up and down the Atlantic coastline of Portugal to and from Lisbon. Glass in hand, I quickly grasp the concept of ultra-luxury – not just regular, ho-hum luxury, but a step beyond. Silversea was a pioneer of the all-inclusive luxury cruise, and they know how to lay it on thick: sumptuous fabrics, teak verandas, glam lounges, an opulent spa, eight restaurants, white-gloved butlers. I ogle the ginormous bathtub and spend a few quality minutes in the walk-in closet, which smells like new car.

The view from my balcony brings a big smile to my face. Truthfully, I have always favoured Lisbon over Paris (nothing against the French). I consider Portugal the Canada of Europe – sensible, polite, hospitable, convivial. Thanks to the deep Tagus River, we are tied up to one of Europe's most romantic and diverse cities, the terraces atop each of its trademark seven hills offering breathtaking vistas.

Much of central Lisbon was flattened during an earthquake in 1755, rebuilt in an architectural style called Pombaline – a sort of pared-down Neoclassical look – named after the Marquês de Pombal who led the reconstruction. This gave the medieval streets a “modern” facade.

Throw in ample examples of Gothic, Baroque, Art Nouveau and Art Deco (Lisbon managed to avoid the bombs of the Second World War) and you have a melting pot of architectural beauty, the prettiest city.

I wander through the pedestrian-only Rua Augusta and the streets of the lively Baixa district, into the bohemian Chaido and Bairro Alto neighbourhoods. I people-watch in the mosaic-tiled public squares and pop into the shops of the gentrifying Príncipe Real. I get a real feel for Lisbon's traditional way of life in the Alfama, Lisbon's oldest neighbourhood, a labyrinth of skinny streets and tiny squares within the shadow of the medieval Castle of São Jorge, unscathed by said earthquake. This is also the home of the Fado music halls, a traditional style of melancholic music that still draws a crowd.

Lisbon's rather antiquated tram transit system lends another romantic link to the past – clang-clang-clang went the trolley and such – and a few funiculars ferry people up some of the steeper hills. These are mostly for the tourists, but they're fun.

With all the hills, it's easy to see why everyone is skinny here, despite there being so many delicious things to eat. I lunch on giant portions of the freshest tuna and octopus, crisp sardines, *bacalao* or salt cod, the juiciest olives I have ever rolled around my mouth and some of the best wine in the Old World. I don't really have a sweet tooth, but I can eat two or three of those custard tarts without batting an eyelash. You know the ones.



I also manage to learn a number of things about the foodways of Portugal on this voyage via Silversea's S.A.L.T. program, short for Sea and Land Taste. This is a mix of culinary experiences on-board and off that highlight the food culture of whatever region the ship is sailing through. Shore excursions head off to restaurants, wineries and farmers' markets, introducing cruise passengers to chefs, farmers and the like – anyone with a food story – drawing participants directly into the culinary environment. Cooking classes bring the food culture on board, with local dishes whipped up at the S.A.L.T. Lab under the direction of a regional chef. And one of the *Silver Dawn's* restaurants, the S.A.L.T. Kitchen, serves traditional Portuguese meals with Grandma-made-it-like precision.

### More history lessons, with tapas to match

The city of Porto, farther up the coast on the hilly banks of the Douro River, has been a trading post for centuries. It's peaceful and friendly, but world-wise, smallish enough to not overwhelm but big enough to offer plenty of places to get lost in – Miragaia for the galleries, Baixa for the nightlife, Ribeira for the sunset drinks. The city has a number of *miradouros*, little lookout points with amazing views. And I'm mesmerized by both the ample street art and the traditional tilework on storefront facades, old meets new.

In Porto, you never have to worry about where your next meal is coming from. Some of the best dining experiences can be found in the little street corner taverns or *tascas*, affordable eateries that specialize in classic Portuguese cooking. My trick is to do lunch reconnaissance first, sidling up to cafés devoid of tourists, listening for only Portuguese

– the locals always know the best places. I get carried away ordering a “simple” lunch of bread sausages, cod fritters and fried sardines, not realizing that the half-portions will be massive and include side dishes. I soldier on, for almost two hours, noting that the businesspeople at the next table are ordering brandies – at lunch!

Later in the week on the Algarve, Portugal's beach-filled southern coastline and the country's summer playground, we sail into Portimão and I hop on a bus for Ponta da Piedade. This geographical oddity is a series of golden-yellow cliffs, with eroded rock formations jutting out of the water, the shore a treasure hunt of caves and grottoes. The wind whips up everyone's scarves and hair, and I retreat to the shelter of the staircase down the cliffside to soak up every second of the landscape.

When it is finally time to relax, the *Silver Dawn* has my back – literally, in the case of the masseuse. The ship's Otium spa concept isn't just relegated to the spa itself, but fans out to my room, a Romanesque I-deserve-it attitude towards pampering. This level of room service has never been handled so deliciously. A staycation in your suite can include blankets and hot chocolate on the balcony, a butler-drawn bath with flower petals and music, truffle popcorn for movie-watching or to-die-for “snacks” like a lobster roll topped with caviar and gold leaf, or a foie gras burger, which isn't a beef burger topped with foie gras, but actually juicy foie gras with a berry compote and a soft, soft bun.

I'm sure there's a gym somewhere, but I'll be in the spa sauna with a glass of fizzy. Just when you think you can't drink one more glass of Champagne, you actually can.

