

Driving in Europe: Amsterdam to Portugal  
by Barry Pasternack

While I lived in Europe off and on for over two years, I never made it to Portugal. Perhaps it was the fact that it was stuck at the end of the Iberian peninsula and therefore harder to reach than other countries, perhaps it was because for much of the time I lived in Europe Portugal was a dictatorship (it was not until 1976 that a democratically elected Prime Minister took office), but for whatever reason, I had not visited. Given that I had some personal business to take care of in the Netherlands and I had three weeks to spare, my wife and I decided to drive from Amsterdam down to Portugal and cross another activity off the “bucket list.”

In total, we drove over 3,000 miles during our 15 day trip to Portugal and saw sights in the Netherlands, France, and Spain along the way. Our trip south began on Monday, March 27th when we drove from Tilburg, a city in southern Netherlands where I worked as a consultant in the 1980's and we reached the outskirts of Paris right around rush hour (all roads in France seem to go through Paris). Given that we had experienced rush hour in Paris on an earlier trip to Europe a few years back, we knew enough to book a hotel on the outskirts of the city. The next morning we left Paris and drove to Bordeaux where I had booked a room at the Intercontinental using a free night (except for the five euro city tax) I received for renewing my IHG Mastercard (annual cost of \$49). Because holders of the IHG credit card are given Gold status at IHG hotels, we were given a two room suite at the hotel which normally costs more than 600 euros. The hardest part of that day's journey was finding a way to drive to the hotel. As it is in the historical section of Bordeaux, we could not drive on the streets our GPS told us to take. We finally parked the car in an underground parking garage close to the hotel. While Gordon Ramsey has a restaurant at the hotel, we elected to do some walking along the Garrone River and then eating at a bistro along our route.

The next day we departed France for Bilbao, Spain, home to the Guggenheim Museum. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is, in a sense, similar to the Guggenheim in New York City as the design of the museum overshadows the art work that is contained therein. We left the next day for Portugal, arriving in the town of Porto in the late afternoon. The town of Porto is quite hilly and driving through narrow streets when one does not know where to go can be a challenge. Porto is on the coast and we had dinner at a nearby seafood restaurant recommended by the hotel.

The next morning we drove to Coimbra, famous for being the home of the University of Coimbra, the oldest academic institution in the Portuguese speaking world. The university is perched on a hill above the city with a beautiful library and interesting academic buildings. After touring the science building I asked one of the student guides if he could recommend a restaurant for dinner. He mentioned Ze Manel dos Ossos, about a fifteen minute walk from the university and not far from our hotel. When we reached the restaurant there were about twenty people waiting by the front door as the restaurant had not yet opened. We were told that the restaurant had only seven tables so we may not get in with the first group of dinners. Fortunately, they were able to fit my wife and I into a small table near the rear of the restaurant, but as they only had one menu, we had to wait to order our food. This turned out to be advantageous as we could not understand the menu and ordered by looking at what others were eating. I had a delicious pork and mushroom dish that the people at the next table had ordered while my wife had sea bass. Both meals were delicious and the entire dinner was less than \$30 for the two of us.

We left the next morning for Lisbon. There we stayed at a Holiday Inn near the subway line so getting into downtown was quite easy. We did a walking tour of Lisbon and in talking to people on the tour, we learned about Sintra, a town about 20 miles from Lisbon that was the site of the Sintra National Palace (used as the summer royal castle), Quinta da Regaleira (a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most interesting parks I have ever been to), the Park and National Palace of Pena, and the Castle of the Moors (for pictures see [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g189164-Activities-Sintra\\_Sintra\\_Municipality\\_Lisbon\\_District\\_Central\\_Portugal.html#ATTRACTION\\_SORT\\_WRAPPER](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g189164-Activities-Sintra_Sintra_Municipality_Lisbon_District_Central_Portugal.html#ATTRACTION_SORT_WRAPPER)). We could walk from our hotel, the Sintra Bliss House, to the Park and Palace of Pena and the Quinta da Regaleira, for the other sites one needed to take a bus.

Unlike Spain, where, according to My Fair Lady, “the rain stays mainly in the plain”, there were few plains or other level areas in the places in Portugal we visited. The hills were not too extreme, but good walking shoes are a must. Our hotel in Sintra was centrally located and right across the street from Incomum by Luís Santos, a highly rated restaurant in town. We had dinner there and, since I did not know when or if I would be returning to Sintra, I decided to order their tasting menu. This consisted of wild mushrooms cream with coconut milk,

scallop carpaccio w/ algae vinaigrette and Asian essence, confit cod with samphire, Iberian pork loin w/ clam polenta and spinach, and a dessert to be chosen from the menu. The entire dinner was under \$45 and could be paired with a set of wines for an additional \$18.

The next day we began our sightseeing in Sintra at the Palace of Pena and from there walked to the Quinta da Regaleira. While the Quinta da Regaleira was not a large park, exploring the buildings, statues, lakes, caves, and underground walkways easily occupied two hours. By the time we boarded the bus to the Sintra National Palace it was getting late in the day and we decided to pass on the Castle of the Moors. Given that we were there less than two weeks before Easter, there were many school children on holiday as well as tour groups from EU countries so at times there were slow moving lines when going through the palaces.

From Sintra we began our journey back to the Netherlands. Our first night's stop was in Palencia Spain. We arrived there around 4 pm and, after checking into our hotel, went out to look around the town and find a restaurant for dinner. The hotel desk clerk recommended Bar La Mejillonera for dinner. While we had the address and could find the street the restaurant was on, we had a difficult time finding the restaurant as it did not have an obvious sign on the door. When we finally got in we asked one of the waiters what time dinner was served and he said 9 pm. We then decided to walk around the town and did a short walk along the river the town is on. When we finished the walk and it was only 8 pm, we decided to see if the restaurant could serve us early. While we were still too early for dinner, the restaurant was able to serve us a couple of extremely tasty dishes in the bar area. I had a large plate of fried calamari, shrimp, and fries while my wife had an egg dish that she found tasty even though we did not know what was in it.

We left the next day for France and decided to spend a couple of days in the Loire Valley. We visited the Chateau de Chambord and the Chateau Chenonceaux, while spending the night between the visits in the French town of Blois.

Following our chateau visits, we headed north and again got stuck in rush hour traffic in Paris. Our destination for the night was the French town of Bruay-la-Buissiere. While in Bruay-la-Buissiere I had my third steak dinner in France and all three times the meat was tough and difficult to chew.

From Bruay-la-Buissiere we headed back north to the Netherlands with the goal of reaching the Abrona Hotel Restaurant in Oudewater. Oudewater is a small town on a canal and a short drive to Amsterdam. We encountered a small problem however getting there as the police closed one of the roads that our GPS wanted to take us on. After driving around for about an hour, we finally found a way around the closed highway. Upon reaching Oudewater, we made reservations for dinner in the hotel restaurant and had time to tour the town. As our goal for the next day was to reach the tulip festival in Keukenhof, one of the hotel employees was able to give us directions on how to get around the closed in order to get to the festival. The Keukenhof venue is a gorgeous place and we spent several hours learning about tulips and looking at some beautiful flowers. From the tulip festival we drove to Amstelveen, a suburb of Amsterdam where we had a room reserved at the Grand Hotel Amstelveen. Within walking distance of the hotel was Fussia, an all you can eat restaurant, serving Asian fusion dishes in five courses. Each diner is given an ordering sheet broken down into twelve categories of food (for the food choices please see <http://www.fussia.nl/images/menukaart.pdf>). For each course one can specify four dishes to be served. Hence, one can conceivably get twenty different items (not including an open desert bar). The food was excellently prepared, but one would be hard pressed to consume 20 different dishes. We gave up around 12.

The next day we drove to Schipol for our last night's stay in Europe (at a Hampton Inn). The staff at the Hampton Inn were quite nice and although the room was quite small compared to Hampton Inn properties in the US, it was well appointed.

#### Observations.

- While I knew that gasoline in Europe cost more than in the US, I was surprised how many of the roads had a toll on them and how expensive the tolls were. As one of my European friends told me when he drives in Europe he budgets as much for the tolls as the gasoline.
- There have been many new roads constructed over the past seven years. We brought with us a GPS that we used when we were in Europe seven years ago and sometimes it deviated significantly from the GPS that was in the car we had rented.

- The Internet is readily available. Every hotel we stayed at and most of the restaurants we ate in had access to the Internet. I thought about purchasing an inexpensive smart phone in the Netherlands and am glad I did not as it was easy to get access to the internet through WiFi.
- Food and hotels were quite affordable. We spent an average of less than \$100 per night for lodging and rarely more than \$50 for dinner for the two of us. Breakfasts at the hotels we stayed at were quite substantial. We found we could get by with just breakfast and dinner and a protein bar for our midday snack.
- People were quite helpful. When we could not find the restaurant in Palencia, one woman who was on her way home changed her direction to help us find the restaurant.
- Early spring is a good time to go to Europe. The hotels and restaurants were not crowded and the airfares were quite reasonable. While we flew using frequent flyer miles, it was not difficult getting seats in business class on our outbound flight (given that we were returning during the day, we decided that we would try going coach on the return flight (no comparison to business class).
- We took out travel insurance and were glad we did not have to use it. One of my friends from graduate school got sick on a European trip and incurred thousands of dollars in medical and travel expenses due to his illness.
- Several credit cards do not have foreign transaction fees. I used my American Airlines MasterCard and my Hilton American Express card to charge meals and lodgings and neither one had a foreign transaction fee. The only problem I incurred is that for the American Airlines card the bank put a lock on my account as I had not notified them that we were going overseas. After I called the bank from Tilburg, the situation was rectified.
- We did not take out insurance on the rental car. Our Costco Citi credit care included car insurance in Europe if you charged the rental car on your Costco card. While the Citi card has a foreign currency charged, it was far less expensive to pay this charge than to pay for the car insurance.
- Hotels in Europe generally do not have wash cloths (only two of the hotels we stayed in had them available) so if you are accustomed to using one in the shower, you should bring your own.