

October 20, 2004

Before flying home to Florida for the holidays on October 19, 2004, we spent six memorable days exploring Portugal, three days on the road and three days in Lisbon. We drove from Lagos to Evora the first day, from Evora to Tomar the second day, and from Tomar to Lisbon the third day. As we traveled by car along the back roads of Portugal from Lagos to Tomar, we saw groves of olive, eucalyptus, and cork oak trees. Especially interesting were the cork oak trees, all at different stages of harvesting. The number on each tree indicated the year of the last harvest. Trees whose trunks were red in color had just had their outer cork bark stripped. The cork tree took 25 years to mature before the first harvest. Once stripped, it took 9 years for the bark to regrow with each cork tree continuing to produce for over 100 years.



Our first major stop was the town of Evora. Still surrounded by much of its medieval walls, the historic center of Evora was considered one of Portugal's most important landmarks having been a cultural hub for almost 2000 years from the Romans (2nd century B.C. to 4th century A.D.) to the Moors (8th to 12th centuries) to the Portuguese kings up until the 16th century. Of particular interest in Evora was seeing the well-preserved ancient Roman temple, the 12th century cathedral with one tower Romanesque and the other Gothic, and the Church of St. Francis and the Chapel of Bones. Inside this macabre bone chapel, all walls were completely lined with bones and skulls, all unearthed from nameless graveyards. Supposedly three monks concerned with the ills of their day thought that this chapel would provide a helpful place for the people to meditate and reflect on the shortness of their material life and the inevitable presence of death. Before leaving Evora, we walked the street where Vasco da Gama had once lived and imagined ourselves back in that era.



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Our second major stop was Tomar. This medieval town was known as the headquarters for the 12th century Knights Templar and later the Order of Christ. In 1420, Prince Henry the Navigator became the Order of Christ's first administrator general. This allowed him control over the Order's revenues which, in turn, helped support financially his voyages of exploration. While in Tomar, we visited the 12th century Castle of the Templars and the Convent of Christ, both very interesting sites.



From Tomar to Lisbon, we drove through Fatima, Batalha, Alcobaca, Obidos, Mafra, and Sintra, all historic cultural sites. Only the hours in the day limited us as to what we could visit. In the morning we chose to visit the 13th century Cistercian Monastery of Santa Maria in Alcobaca where the abbey church represented the best Gothic building in Portugal. At the front of the church rested the tombs of King Pedro I and Ines, Portugal's most tragic romantic couple. At lunchtime, we stopped at Obidos, the "wedding village", as this little town had been traditionally given to the Portuguese queens by their husbands since the 13th century. This medieval walled village was now preserved entirely as a national monument, and as such, it was "picture perfect". Walking down its narrow lanes was like being on a movie set. In the afternoon we had time only to visit the National Palace in Mafra with its beautiful palace, monastery, and basilica before heading into Lisbon to turn in our rental car.



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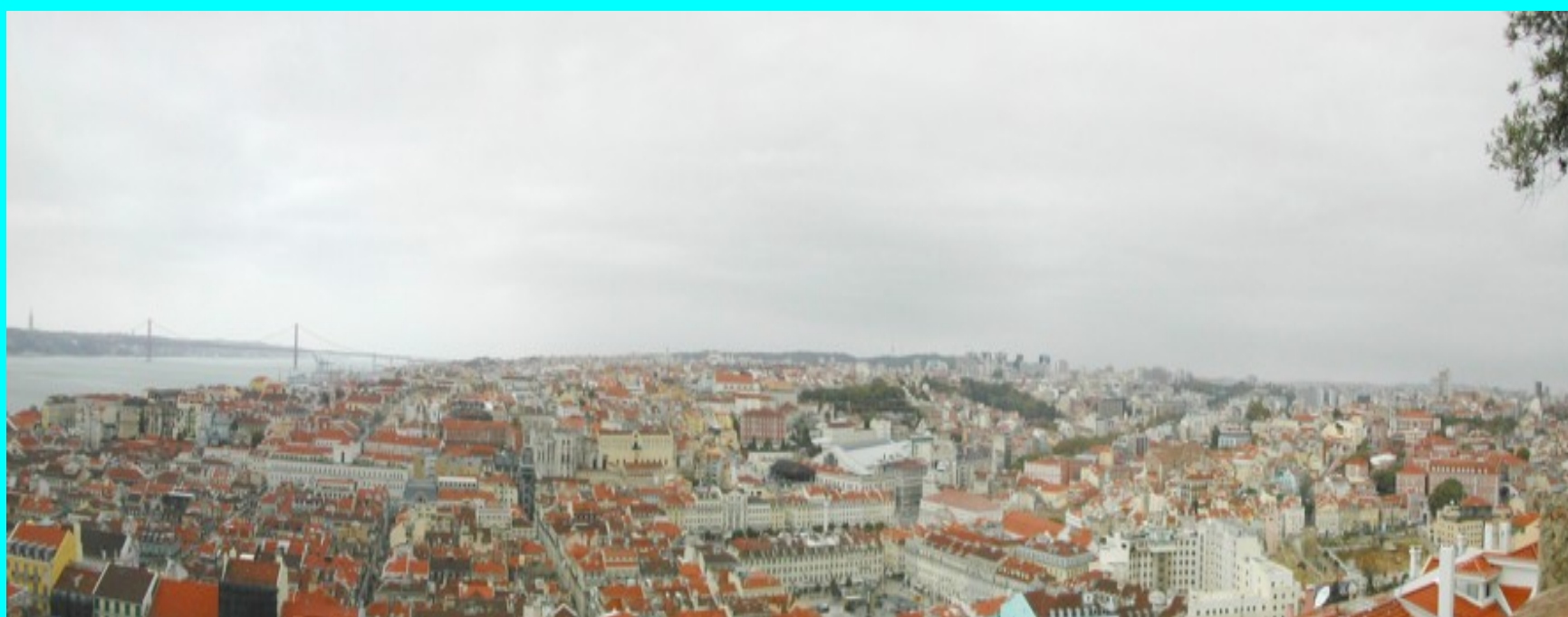
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During the next three days we explored Lisbon. The first day was spent in the Belem district where most of the Age of Discovery sights were located. The Monastery of Jeronimos and the Belem Tower displayed beautiful examples of the Portuguese Manueline architecture, an ornate and decorative artwork using nautical motifs throughout its designs. Vasco da Gama prayed in this church prior to each of his passages, his sail to India launched Portugal's Golden Age, and his tomb rested in the monastery's church. The Maritime Museum presented excellent displays showing the development in navigational tools and other items throughout Portugal's seafaring history. Before leaving Belem, we climbed to the top of the Monument to the Discoveries affording us excellent views of both the Belem district and Lisbon.



During the last two days in Lisbon we visited the Gulbenkian Museum, the Coach Museum, and the House of Fado and Portuguese Guitar. Also, we walked through the historic Lisbon districts of Bairro Alto, Baixa, and Alfama and up to the Castle Sao Jorge, unfortunately walking part of the time in the rain. The following day we flew home to Florida for the holidays.



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