



Cruising the Douro

Wine, gardens, history and architecture from Porto to the Spanish border

15–22 October 2026 (MM 218)

8 days

Lecturers: Dr Gerald Luckhurst & Martin Symington

A cruise of immense beauty through the vineyard-clad Douro valley, one of the most secluded and scenically spectacular corners of Europe.

We are accompanied throughout by two experts who give talks on the history, gardens and wine-growing heritage of the region.

Exclusive charter of a first-class ship, the MS *Estrela*, launched in 2024.

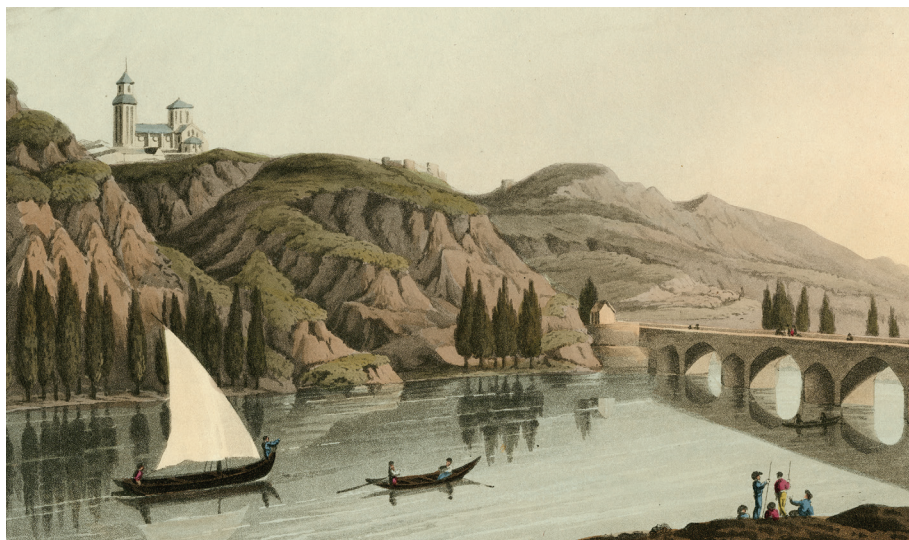
Visit hill-top towns, castles, *quinta* estates and gardens.

Option to spend two additional nights in Porto before boarding the ship.

The upper reaches of the river Douro in northern Portugal present a landscape bewitching in its splendour and scenic drama. The banks rise steeply into mountains whose flanks have been hewn and blasted into terraces of vineyards, silvery olive groves and glossy citrus orchards. Tightly-packed villages and landscaped *quintas* (wine-growing estates) are interspersed with patches of wild *mato* vegetation.

Other than for leisure purposes, there is virtually no commercial river traffic on the Douro, which until recently was one of the least accessible regions of western Europe. Nor is there any more entrancing way to experience the region than on a voyage into mountains that begins at Vila Nova de Gaia facing Porto (Oporto) across the river near its mouth. Along the way, the history of this most spellbinding of wine-growing regions will unfurl as a main theme. Starting more than three centuries ago, pioneering British merchants first ventured in the upper Douro in search of alternatives to the wines of Bordeaux, which wars with France were denying their customers. Thus was born the port wine trade. Descendants of these venturers are still involved in the trade today.

We are accompanied by two experts who both have deep knowledge of Portugal. Martin Symington was born in Porto and his ancestors were among the early pioneers of the port wine trade. He maintains close contact with his homeland where his family remain port producers and shippers. Gerald Luckhurst is



The river Douro, lithograph 1813.

a landscape architect and garden historian who has lived in Lisbon for the past 30 years. His broad interest in Portuguese history and culture spans historic palaces and botanical gardens to contemporary designs.

Itinerary

Day 1: Porto. Fly at midday with TAP (Air Portugal) from London Gatwick to Porto. Board MS *Estrela* and remain moored in Gaia overnight. Introductory talk before dinner on the river, the region and its transformation.

Day 2: Porto to Régua, Vila Real. Sail in the morning to the town of Régua through the Carrapatelo lock, the deepest in Europe at 35m, into increasingly rural and beautiful countryside, with vineyards and *quintas* clinging to the hills. Morning talk in preparation for a visit to the Solar de Mateus at Vila Real, an 18th-century manor house with exquisite furnishings and gardens; a Nasoni design made familiar by the rosé wine label. Evening talk on the port industry and the British legacy in Northern Portugal. Sail in the early evening to Pinhão, the heart of the wine-making area.

Day 3: Pinhão. Visit either the Quinta de Bomfim or Quinta de la Rosa, two of the valley's finest vineyards for a tasting. Continue upstream to Pocinho in the afternoon, through the impressive Valeira Dam. Evening talk on the history of Portugal.

Day 4: Vega de Terrón, Castelo Rodrigo, Ciudad Rodrigo. Sail in the morning to the Spanish border. All-day excursion to the walled, medieval village of Castelo Rodrigo with its ruined castle and rich historical heritage. Then continue to Ciudad Rodrigo in Spain above the rocky bank of the Agueda. Lunch is at the Parador, which occupies a castle rebuilt in 1372 by Henry II of Castile after he conquered the city from the Portuguese. Evening talk on São João de Tarouca and Lamego.

Day 5: Pinhão. Sail in the morning back to Pinhão for a visit and tasting at either the Quinta de Bomfim or Quinta de la Rosa. Sail in the afternoon to Régua where we moor overnight. Evening talk on the gardens of the Quinta da Aveleda.

Day 6: Régua, São João de Tarouca, Lamego, Porto Antigos. In the church of São João de Tarouca there are paintings by Grão Vasco (1506–42) and Gaspar Vaz (1490–1569) beside which are the ruins of the first Cistercian abbey in Portugal (1169). Continue to the busy little town of Lamego, replete with Baroque mansions and dominated by the pilgrimage church of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios atop an astonishing baroque staircase. Time for the cathedral, largely Renaissance behind a Romanesque belfry. Sail in the evening to Porto Antigos. Evening talk on the Fundação de Serralves.

Day 7: Entre Os Rios, Peñafiel, Porto.

Cruising the Douro continued

Continue sailing to Entre Os Rios. Morning excursion to the Quinta da Aveleda in Penafiel, home to the largest producer of vinho verde in Portugal, whose woodland gardens are famous for their follies and camellias. Sail in the afternoon to Porto, viewing the city's six bridges including the celebrated Dom Luís I double-decker. Afternoon lecture on 20th-century Portugal. Evening tour, tasting and dinner at Grahams Port Lodge located high above the river with spectacular views.

Day 8: Porto. Excursion to Fundação de Serralves where Jacques Gréber's modernist garden complements the clean lines of an Art Deco house built in 1935 and Álvaro Siza's Museum of Contemporary Art. Elsewhere are modern sculptures including 'Sky Mirror' by Anish Kapoor and remains of the pre-existing 19th-century garden. Either spend all day here, or drive to the centre of Porto for some free time. The TAP flight to London Gatwick arrives at c. 8.30pm.

Lecturers

Dr Gerald Luckhurst. Landscape architect and garden historian based in Lisbon for the past 30 years. His work is based upon the restoration of historic palaces and botanical gardens, but also includes contemporary garden design in Portugal and overseas. His writing reflects an interest in Portuguese history and culture, as expressed through gardens and other monuments, and includes: *The Gardens of Madeira*, *The Gardens of the National Palace of Queluz* and *Sintra: A Landscape with Villas*.

Martin Symington. Travel journalist and author who was born and grew up in northern Portugal. He contributes to many national newspapers and magazines, and has won awards across the English-speaking world – including The British Guild of Travel Writers 'Travel Writer of the Year'. His books include the *Dorling Kindersley Portugal Eyewitness Guide* and *Sacred Britain: a Guide to Places that Stir the Soul*. He has also taught courses in travel writing at the University of Bath, been Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at the University of Reading.



MS Estrela



Upper deck: owners suite



Upper deck: Large French balcony cabin



Upper & Main deck: Standard French balcony cabin



Lower deck cabin



Practicalities

Flights. It is not yet possible to hold seats for October 2026. We hope to secure enough seats on the direct TAP flights mentioned but may need to offer an indirect option.

Included: travel by private coach; ship accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 5 lunches and 7 dinners (of which 2 are in restaurants ashore) with wine, water, coffee; tastings as indicated in the itinerary; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; lectures onboard by two experts; an experienced team of Martin Randall Travel staff; a printed booklet including practical details, maps and background information.

Ship: *MS Estrela* ([aptouring.com/en-gb/our-fleet/ms-estrela](https://www.martinrandall.com/en-gb/our-fleet/ms-estrela)): a first-rate, 60-cabin river cruiser, launched in 2024. The multinational crew is dedicated to the highest standards of service.

All cabins have windows to the outside and are equipped with the facilities one would expect of a first-class hotel such as adjustable air conditioning, television, telephone, safe and hairdryer. Bathrooms have showers only.

Those on the upper two decks are the largest and most desirable with floor-to-ceiling windows which open and better views. Cabins on the lower deck have smaller windows which do not open. There are no single cabins as such but we are allocating some for single occupancy.

Public areas are generous with an air-conditioned dining room and lounge which opens onto a terrace. The sundeck has ample seating with a shaded area, an additional bar and a swimming pool. There is a lift to all floors except the sun deck.

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is necessary for the visits to small towns where coaches can not access the centre and steps, cobbled streets and hills are standard.

Group size: a maximum of 104 participants.

Cruising the Douro: Porto extension

13–15 October 2026 (MM 218)

3 days

Lecturer: Martin Symington

Two days to explore the history, art and architecture of delightful Porto before boarding the ship.

Exclusive dinner at a club of British port wine traders, hosted by the lecturer.

Porto (Oporto) is the vibrant capital of northern Portugal and the country's second city. It retains a jumble of historic architecture on the steep – in places even precipitous – banks of the Douro River. It is also a city of parks and gardens and the occasional flash of ultra-modern architecture.

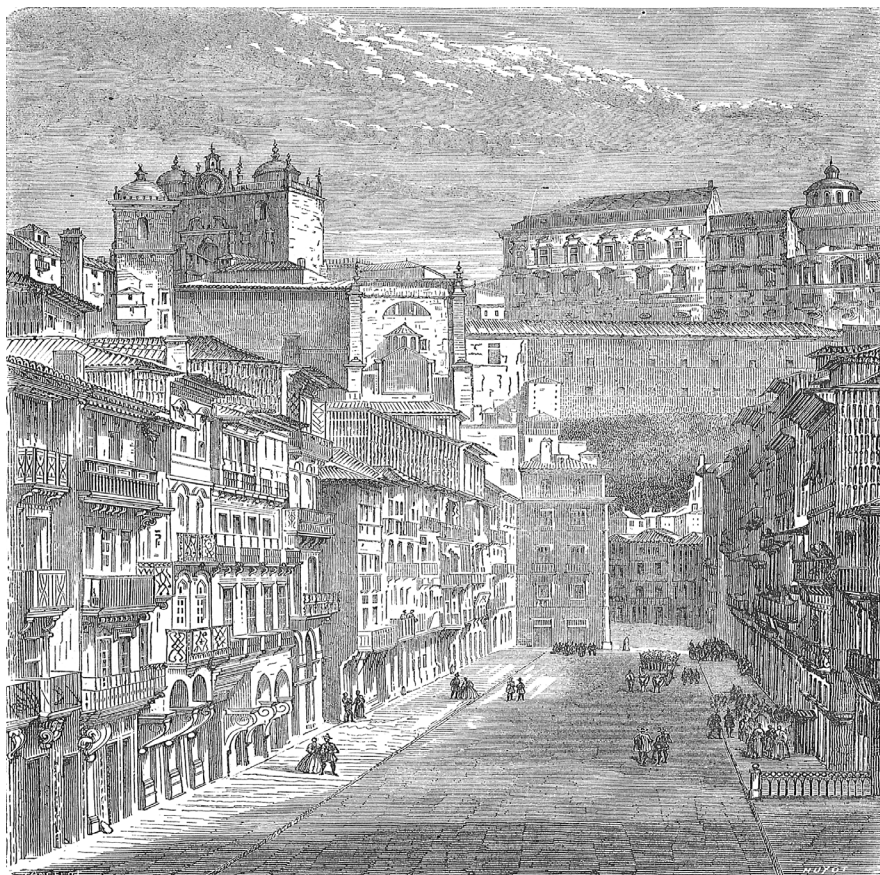
Porto, and its twin city Vila Nova de Gaia, is also synonymous with the port wine trade, which since the 18th century has been dominated by the British. Hence an architectural peculiarity of Porto: the serene Neo-Palladianism of buildings by John Carr of York and his imitators cheek-by-jowl with the lavishly gilded Baroque style of churches and public buildings. Baroque was introduced by another foreigner, the Tuscan painter-architect Nicolau Nasoni who had a hand in the design of many churches and houses in the city and along the Douro.

This two-night extension offers a chance to explore Porto in more detail with Martin Symington and a local guide.

Itinerary

Day 1: Porto. Fly at midday with TAP (Air Portugal) from London Gatwick to Porto. Settle into your hotel before dinner.

Day 2. Begin at the cathedral, basically 13th-century with later embellishments, many by the painter-architect Nicolau Nasoni. The Clerigos Church with its wonderful Baroque tower is also by Nasoni, the church of the Misericórdia has good Flemish paintings and São Francisco has an amazingly rich carved and gilded interior. Also see the magnificent decorative tiles, *azulejos*, in the railway station. Visit the Factory House (by special arrangement), a club of British port wine traders founded in the 18th century for a tasting and dinner steeped in ceremony and tradition.



Porto, wood engraving c. 1870.

Day 3. Walk through the gardens of the Palácio de Cristal, with far-reaching views across the city, to the nearby Museu Romântico in the Quinta da Macieirinha, with a garden and 19th-century furnishings. Some free time before boarding MS *Estrela* in the late afternoon.

Practicalities

Flights: should you choose to take group flights, these are included in the cruise prices.

Included: travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, and 2 dinners with wine, water, coffee; tastings as indicated in the itinerary; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; lecturer and tour manager and local guide.

Accommodation. **Pestana Vintage, Porto** (pestanacollection.com): a small, 5-star hotel excellently situated on the Douro river bank in a series of historic houses.

How strenuous? Visits in Porto are on foot and uphill (via some flights of steps and steep, cobbled terrain). A good level of fitness is necessary.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.