

Anne and Dave's Christmas Letter for 2017

C. UK and Portugal, Sep-Oct 2017

Dave in London: From Jersey, we flew to Gatwick where Dave was whisked off to London for the weekend by his niece Val to meet the rest of the remaining Johnsons. The drive from Gatwick went through the lovely town of Westerham, the birthplace of Major General Wolfe, who died at the battle of Quebec in 1759.



Statues of Major General James Wolfe (1727-1759):
in his birthplace at Westerham, Kent (left), and in Greenwich Park, London (right)

Val and Dave then went on a lovely walk in the Box Hill National Trust area of the North Downs. The Juniper Top Walk has wonderful views to the south and goes over the hill before returning to the starting point via Happy Valley – a nice variable and rewarding ramble. That evening Logan showed off his many acquisitions that he had made in Stratford at a sale of theatrical items no longer required by the Royal Shakespeare Company.



Box Hill National Park: view to the south east (upper left), parts of the Juniper Top walk (upper right and lower left),
and Logan and Val with theatrical items bought at RSC sale (lower right)

On the next day many Johnson's (Jenny, John, Val, Chris, Sam, Logan and Dave) enjoyed a lovely lunch at a restaurant converted from an old shop of Burton's the Tailor. Before lunch the group strolled the streets of Greenwich and afterwards explored the park all on a lovely sunny day.



Johnson's lunch at Burton's the Tailor Restaurant:
Val, Chris, Dave, John, Jenny and Sam (Logan took the photo) (left),
and Logan, Val and Chris in heavy discussions (lower right)



Greenwich Park: a very popular place on a fine day (upper left),
Johnsons and others walking in the park (upper right), and restored Thames Barge (lower left and right)





Chichester: Nicola, Clare and Sean with William on his bike (upper left), Nicola's garden (upper right)
South Downs walk: Nicola and William (lower left), and some sheep (lower right)

Anne in Chichester: Meanwhile Anne and Nicola caught the train to Chichester to catch up with William and Peter, and also Derek's younger son Sean and his wife Clare who drove down from London for the day. Explorations of the nearby boat park, a walk on the South Downs, as well as lots of talking occupied the time quite successfully.

It was wonderful to be able to see so many family members in the short time available before we all met back at Gatwick for a farewell before we set off on the rest of our trip, the first leg of which was a flight to the city of Porto in northern Portugal.

Dave and Anne in Porto: We gave ourselves one free day in Porto to explore the old walled city spreading up-hill from the river Douro – a fascinating steep-cobbled and lane-veined town with many gilded historic buildings and monuments to visit and crowded with many tourists. Our hotel was located right in the middle of the Ribeira (old town) and really handy to lots of interesting places.

Dave crowned the evening by taking an unexpected dive down the uneven paving to be rescued by passers-by, ending with a taxi ride to the general hospital to be assessed and receive stitches to his battered small finger. Treatment took two hours, no-one spoke much English but the process was normal, so we eventually emerged at 9.30 pm to continue our quest for dinner!



Porto: narrow Porto steep streets (left and middle) – note religious niche, and view of our hotel from above with blue-tiled hostel across road (right)



Porto Cathedral: monument on Cathedral plaza and old tower behind (left), Cathedral interior (middle), and Cathedral exterior (right)



Painted tiles at São Bento Railway Station



Equestrian statue of Vímara Peres (820-873) outside Porto Cathedral (left), St Anthony Church (blue tiled building) with São Bento Railway Station on the right (middle), and statue of Prince Henry the Navigator in front of the Stock Exchange (right)



Rooftop views of Porto with sea fog on the River Douro: view across the Douro with the Stock Exchange in foreground and port wineries on opposite shore (left), and towards higher parts of the old town (right)

Douro cruise day 1 - Porto: The next day we checked out of our nice little hotel (with lots of stairs) and taxied to the waiting vessel which was moored at Cais de Miragaia, a little distance to the west but still in the old town area. The River Douro cruise takes us up the river to the Spanish border, and back with several side trips. Everything was impressive on board including meals, cabin and service. We were not expected to vegetate for seven days admiring the scenery – twice daily expeditions had been planned to visit wineries, quaint old villages and ancient terraced wine growing valleys to sample their wares, interspersed with talks, cooking demonstrations and folk dancing. We spent the first day on our vessel, the Scenic Azure, exploring the facilities and receiving our welcomes and briefings.



Leaving Porto:

Old Porto Ribeira (where we had dinner and Dave had his fall) (upper left), with part of city wall (upper right), south bank with cruise boats and port wineries (lower left), and on our way up the Douro (lower right)

Douro cruise day 2: We left Porto early after breakfast with the sea fog persisting and surprisingly cool. The views along the Douro changed gradually as we got further from Porto. The banks of the Douro are filled with terraced vine plantations and wineries, as well as small towns where presumably the winery workers lived.





Douro scenery: vineyards (above), and wooded section of the valley (below)

There are five dams on the Portuguese section of the Douro built during the 1970s and 1980s, thus making the river navigable for the first time – a boon for tourism and trade. The first of these, the Crestuma-Lever Dam, which was completed in 1985 (the most recent) and has a water level difference of some 14m.



Crestuma-Lever Dam: approaching the dam (above), entering the lock (lower left), and in the lock waiting for the downstream gates to close and the lock to be filled (lower right)

The second of the dams we encountered was the Carrapatelo's Dam, which was the first to be built and was completed in 1971. It has a water level difference of some 35m making it one of the highest dams in the world supporting river traffic.

Going through the lock gates of these dams is quite an experience as the cruise boats are built to be just slightly narrower than the lock width - to our eyes the clearance on each side seemed to be only a matter of a few centimetres! The cruise boats require expert steering to get through the locks and crews with eagle eyes for spotting potential problems.



Carrapateiro's Dam: converted Rabelo leaving the lock (above far-left), cruise boat leaving the lock (upper mid-left), upstream lock gate (upper mid-right), downstream lock gate (upper far-right), approaching and leaving the dam (lower left and right)

Our next stop was at Peso da Régua to visit the regional Douro Museum with an impressive display of memory, culture and identity of the World Heritage Douro wine region. We were treated to a lovely performance by two local guitarists and a welcome drink of the local product. Outside the Museum is an original Rabelo boat in quite reasonable condition - although this area is shared with some fierce-looking roosters and hens who seem to have the run of the place.



Peso da Régua: Old Rabelo boat outside Douro Museum (above left), rooster and hens outside Douro Museum (upper left), and painted tile murals in the town (lower)

After our museum visit we travelled by bus to our overnight location at Pinhão, a lovely town situated in the heart of the Douro wine region. Our vessel had embarked earlier to negotiate the Bagaúste Dam (the third one on the Portuguese section of the Douro) and get to Pinhão in time for our arrival. We were treated to more guitar music by the duo from the Douro Museum.



Pinhão to Peso da Régua along the Douro (pictures taken from the bus on the way to Lamego):
view of the north bank of the Douro (above),
new A24 motorway bridge (left), and railway bridge (right) – both crossing the Douro near to Peso da Régua



Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Sanctuary, Lamego: staircase and sanctuary (left),
twin towers (above middle), front (above right), statues in gardens (below middle), and detail of front (below right)

Douro cruise day 3 - Lamego: On the next day, we took a long bus ride back down the Douro to Régua and then up the hill to the town of Lamego – famous for the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Sanctuary with its impressive set of stairs up to the hilltop site above the town.

We also explored the impressive Lamego Museum as well as the nearby parts of the town where Dave bought a cap made of cork, surprisingly comfortable and durable.



Lamego Museum: main entrance (left), and tapestry (right)

We returned by bus to the vessel which was waiting for us at Pinhão where we had lunch while the vessel continued its way up the Douro. This part of the valley is much drier than lower downstream and often has steep rocky sides. Parts of the river appeared to be very shallow and narrow. We made our way up through the remaining two dams, the Valeira and the Pocinho, and finally arrived at our destination at Vego de Terron on the border with Spain.



The Valeria Dam from its upstream side



Douro: cruising through drier terrain (left), and steep narrow section with rocky walls (right)



The Pocinho Dam: approaching the dam and railway bridge (left), and inside the lock (right)

Douro cruise day 4 - Salamanca: After our overnight stop on the Spanish border (with a special dinner), we were taken by bus for a day exploring Salamanca – a lovely old Spanish town spoiled by overcrowding, closures of public buildings and a frantic guided itinerary.



Salamanca: La Plaza Mayor (upper left), with end of Spanish Unity demonstration (upper right), the Shell House (mid left), university and hotel buildings on old town street (mid right), and various university buildings (lower)



Salamanca Cathedrals: main entrance to new Cathedral (left), dome of new Cathedral behind the tiled dome of the old Cathedral (middle), and interior of the new Cathedral (right)



Salamanca culture:
statues to Father Luis de Leon (above left), Maestro Salinas (above middle),
elephant sculpture by Miguel Barceló (above right),
and the Museum of Art Nouveau and Art Deco Casa Lis (below)

Our visit to Salamanca was quite disappointing as there is much to see in this famous place, including a Roman bridge across the river which we missed. We were pleased to board the bus to return to the peace of the river and our vessel which had moved a little further downstream for our overnight stop at Barca d'Alva.

Douro cruise day 5 – Coa Valley: An early morning cruise took us back to Pocinho where Anne joined the Coa Valley bus tour. Dave decided to stay on board to recuperate from the Salamanca trip and various aches resulting from the fall.

The highlight of the bus trip was a visit to the small town of Freixo de Numão and Casa Painova, where visitors are treated to a sweet almond workshop and a tasting

of its almond, olive and fruit products. Anne brought back some sugared almonds which were a great hit.



Freixo de Numão in the Coa Valley: Pelourinho (monument) in town square (upper left), the main town square with Maria (our encyclopaedic guide) and some of our group (upper middle), house of Dr José Silvério de Andrade - discoverer of the Coa Valley rock art (centre), narrow cobble streets (upper and middle right), Igreja Matriz dating back to 1680 (lower left), Chapel of Our Lady of Conception (lower middle), and inside Casa Painova (lower right)

Back on the vessel we were treated to a Portuguese Barbeque on the upper deck with singing and dancing and the occasional cruise boat going up the river.



Passing other cruise boats on the Douro

We were able to enjoy the wonderful Douro scenery as we proceeded down the river through the Pocinho and Valeria locks to arrive at our overnight spot at Pinhão (where we had stayed on the way up the river).

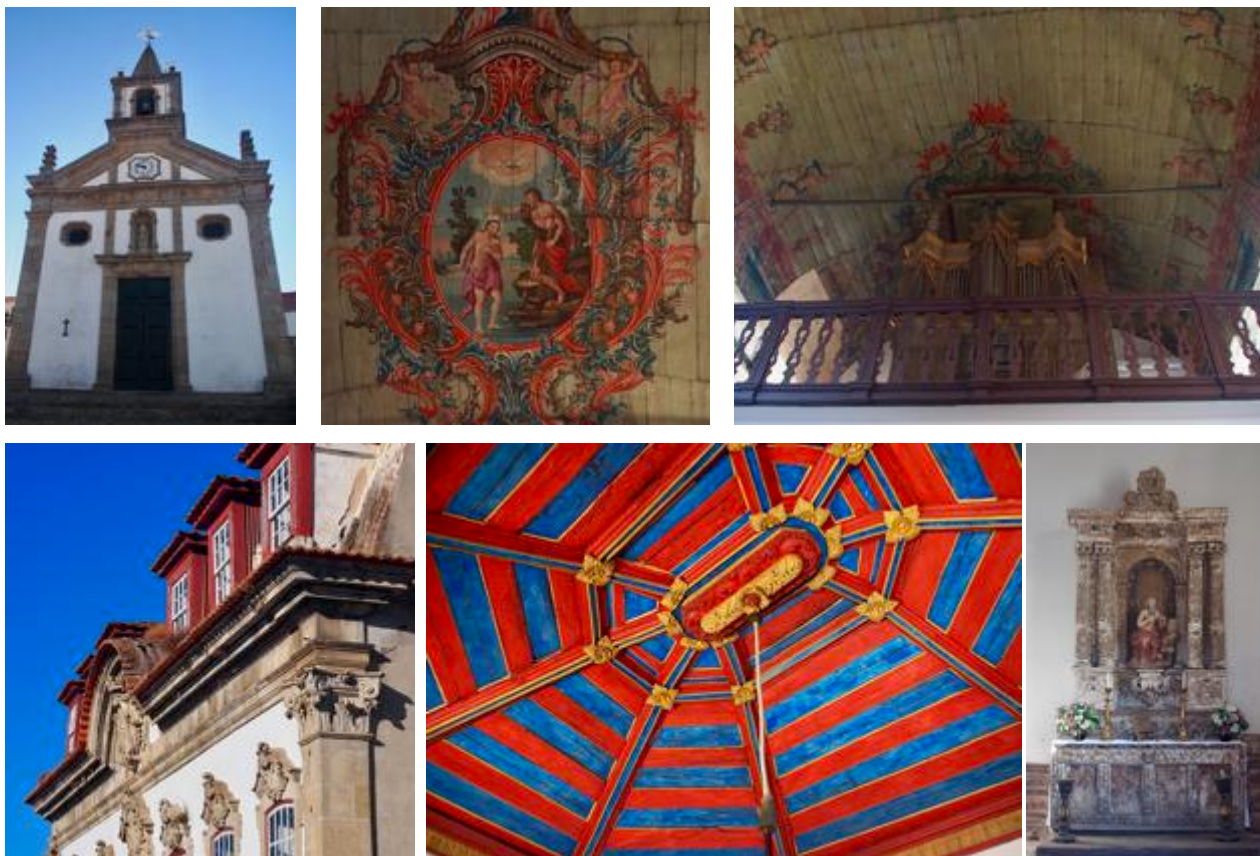


Douro scenery (above), and vineyards: new terraces (lower left), more mature terraces (lower middle), and new style of planting with rows going up and down the hill (lower right)

Douro cruise day 6 - Provesende: On the next day, we took the bus tour to Provesende, a beautiful small town up some very steep and winding roads but well worth the journey.



Beautiful views on the way up to Provesende (upper left), and on our return (upper right), market cross (lower middle), and nicely restored old buildings with lovely views (lower left and right)



Igreja Matriz (town church) and Morgadio de Calçadas (manor house):
front of church (upper left), interiors showing the painted ceiling (upper middle) and organ loft (upper right),
front of the Morgadio de Calçadas (lower left), painted wooden ceiling (lower middle),
and an old chapel altar (lower right)

There are a number of very nice buildings in the town including the Igreja Matriz (main town church) and the beautifully restored Morgadio de Calçadas (manor house) now used as a hotel, museum and also makes very good wine (which we were allowed to taste!

For some of us the highlight of our visit to Provesende was the Café Bar Arado which apart from serving good coffee (and other drinks and eats) has an amazing collection of craftwork made from local materials including some interesting sculptures!



Café Bar Arado: gent with pot carrying traditional grape harvest basket (left),
well-developed lady pushing her barrow of pots and pans (middle),
and a handy transportation device (right)

We left Provesende and continued by bus across the top of the plateau and down again to the Douro at Régua where the vessel had moved to refuel and await our arrival. We then proceeded downstream to our overnight spot at Lixa just above the Crestuma-Lever Dam (the vessel was not permitted to go through the lock until the next day).

Once in Lixa we took off again by bus, all dressed up in our finery, for our special dinner at Taylor's Fladgate in Villa Nova de Gaia on the south bank of the Douro opposite the old town of Porto. The view from the balcony was lovely in the early evening light – the meal, wines and music were pretty special too!



Taylor's Fladgate Restaurant, Villa Nova de Gaia:
proudly displaying their coat of arms and longevity of the port winery (left),
and Anne and Dave on the balcony with the Mosteiro Serra do Pilar behind (right)

Douro cruise day 7 - a) Porto: The next morning saw us depart early from our overnight stop at Lixa to travel downstream to the pier at Cais de Miragaia, near to the old part of Porto and where we got on the vessel a few days earlier. We then took a morning bus tour of Porto to fill in some of the gaps from our earlier visit.



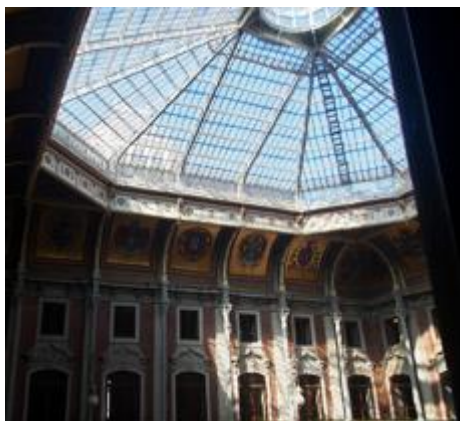
Porto old and new: Torre dos Clérigos Church (bell tower) (left), Soares dos Reis National Museum (upper middle),
Mercado Ferreira Borges (originally an old market now a night club and restaurant (upper right),
Casa da Música (lower middle) and interesting trees in Jardim da Cordoaria (lower right)

The bus trip drove around Porto to see many of the main old buildings of the city (including the Clérigos Church with its iconic bell tower) as well as some new ones (including the music hall Casa da Música). Porto is hilly and crowded with tourists and our bus driver seemed to manage the traffic and narrow streets quite easily.

The highlight of the Porto bus tour was an extensive visit to the Palácio da Bolsa (the Stock Exchange Palace) which is a magnificent building full of works of art on the walls and ceilings (the floors were pretty good too!) as well as furnishings and sculptures. There are many gorgeous rooms in the building with the famous Arabian Room being probably the most exquisite.



Palácio da Bolsa (Stock Exchange Palace): the Arabian Room (above), ceiling mural (lower left), and corridor ceiling (lower right)



Palácio da Bolsa (Stock Exchange Palace): glass roof to internal courtyard (left), and murals depicting the work of the Stock Exchange (middle and right)

Douro cruise day 7 - b) Quinta da Aveleda: After lunch, we took another bus trip to Quinta da Aveleda, near to the town of Penafiel. This is a winery with a wonderful luxuriant display of plants, trees and flowers together with quirky buildings and monuments. It was quite a hot day and it was nice and cool wandering around the gardens and afterwards we enjoyed some of the wineries products!



Quinta da Aveleda: main building (upper left), sculpture in front of building (upper middle), flowers and vines covering winery building (upper right), tea house in gardens (lower left), swan in lake near tea house (lower middle), and fountain with swan near tea house (lower right)



Quinta da Aveleda: goat house (note circular ramp) (upper left), resident goat (upper middle), winery guard peacocks (upper right), Maria and some of our group outside the barrel building (lower left), and winery building (lower right)



Quinta da Aveleda: covered walkway in the gardens (left), red flower (middle), and our favourite wine! (right)

Douro cruise day 7 - c) Farewell: We then returned to our vessel at the Cais de Miragaia pier in Porto to prepare for our much too early start the next day when a group of us flew via Lisbon to Madrid for our Spanish extension to the Douro cruise.



Cais de Miragaia pier in Porto: buildings along the road adjacent to the pier parking area (above), and Anne waiting to get back on board the Scenic Azure (below)

We thoroughly enjoyed Portugal (although we could have done without Dave's fall) and the Douro cruise exceeded expectations – many thanks to cruise director Raquel, tour guide extraordinaire Maria, captain Emanuel, and all the crew who did their utmost to show off their lovely country.

The next part of this Christmas letter saga includes the rest of our European holiday in Madrid, Barcelona and a brief stopover in Dubai on our way back to Sydney, Australia.