

PASTEL DE NATA: THE 2024 TOUR (NOTES FROM PORTUGAL – THE ALGARVE AND LISBON – 2024)

2025 UPDATE ON PAGE 5

The vacuum hoses and wands lay across the hallway where the staff had dropped them and walked away. It was mid-afternoon and the rooms were dark. The elevator sat idle. The power was out.

One hour, maybe more, the hotel attendant let me know. What about the Wi-Fi, I asked, because the Wi-Fi hadn't been working since we checked in some 21 hours earlier.

"It is fixed," she smiled, but then the smile turned serious. "But the power is out so you cannot have the Wi-Fi".

Day 9 of the 10-day stay, no power, no wifi.

But I get ahead of myself. This is the pastel de nata tour. Let's rewind to day 1.

The trip was 10 nights, 7 in the Algarve in the south of Portugal, and 3 in Lisbon, and this pastel de nata tale should really kick off several hours into day 1, after landing in Lisbon and picking up the car rental and driving an hour or so on the highway. It begins with stop number one, the roadside gas/restaurant/rest stop. The café has a display of what food is being offered and a whole section is dedicated to nothing but pastel de nata. Clearly I am not the first traveler with a craving for custard tarts. These are not your Canadian grocery store custard tarts. No, these are a historic recipe of velvety rich egg custard in a crust so flaky that it will decorate your shirt and possibly your neighbour's shirt as well. My eyes must have lit up because despite me not speaking Portuguese and the lady who was serving me not speaking English, she upsold me from one tart to a box of 6. I think I ate one before I got to the table. Another at the table. The rest barely made it to our destination in the south of Portugal.

Our Airbnb in the small town of Tavira is fantastic. Three levels (one being a rooftop patio with deck loungers and a small pool) holding one bedroom, 2 full bathrooms, and two more outdoor sitting areas, one each on the ground and second floor. The kitchen is more than big enough, and we made some pretty fine dinners there every second night. Tavira is old, our home is old on the outside but modern on the inside (the same as I describe myself some days!). The Airbnb owner, Derek from Belgium, gave us many good suggestions. We are a five-minute walk from the castle, ten to the main square and scenic 7-span footbridge. Churches, markets, interesting restaurants, all within an easy stroll. I did a morning power walk every day, along the river and across the downtown cobble streets, always ending at the French boulangerie for the daily baguette.

The first time in the bakery I was greeted in French and surprisingly felt a wave of relief that I could now converse in a language that I know only slightly rather than a language I don't know at all other than the words for yes, no, please, thank you and chicken.

As mentioned, the castle was just down the cobblestone street. It's just a shell now but the walls give some great views and there were flowering trees crowded one by one every few feet around the courtyard. The fragrance was strong as we wandered among the trees one morning but what I smelled from the trees gave me pause. One smelled like wet socks and another like urine. Honest! I'd have preferred them to smell like carrot muffins or hand cream.

Arran had more trouble adjusting after the jet lag than I did. For whatever reason I always sleep better when I travel. It doesn't make sense but I do. The bed often seems suspect (too soft, what is with these sheets?, not enough pillows, too much light...) but then I'll have a good first night and all my concerns, and jetlag, will be for nothing.

The first night in Tavira is a good example. I'd had three naps of no more than 15 minutes a piece over the past 40 hours, two of which were on the overnight flight and the other on the roadside of the highway to the Algarve when I was in danger of falling asleep at the wheel. I was ready for a decent sleep, no matter the number of pillows. And sleep I did. 9 ½ uninterrupted hours. Perhaps the most amazing thing of 9 ½ hours is that, at my dubious age, I didn't have to get up to pee once. Though when I finally did, I wondered if I would stop before lunch.

Even in the small towns of the Algarve we heard far more English spoken than we expected, more in an hour at a market than I heard in a whole 2 weeks when I was in Bretagne France a couple years ago. It's disappointing on the one hand but makes life easier on the other. The few times I met a shop owner who spoke no English while I was trying to, for example, perhaps, maybe buy another pastel de nata, I just held out my hand with change and they took what they needed and we would smile simultaneously to acknowledge it as a fair trade. Of the North American English we heard, the vast majority were Canadian and not American, over to spend a few months away from the winter back home.

Menus always had English so we knowingly ordered the pork cheeks, the bull tail, and stayed clear of the octopus burger. The best pizza we had was in an Indian-Italian restaurant in Tavira (such an obvious combination isn't it??) and naturally I went for the tikka chicken. Food, whether in restaurants or grocery stores, was significantly less expensive than what we are used to in Ottawa. We saw the same thing with clothes, especially at the malls.

Not every meal was memorable for the fine food. Our first night in Tavira, a Sunday, our restaurant choices were limited. We found ourselves in a tiny café. This was on the main drag along the river so we assumed it was a busy spot but the waiter ushered us into a room empty except for three men in a corner watching the television on the opposite wall. A football match was beginning. They weren't seated, it looked more like they were loitering with drinks and he shooed them from the room. They didn't look happy. I said to him that it was fine if they wanted to stay but was told no, they must go to the outside tables (it was a bit chilly that evening) but that is all right as one was his brother. Or something like that. So we settled in and ordered a plate of potatoes bravas, also padrao peppers and a dish of chicken piri-piri to share. Well, the chicken was poory-poory and the potatoes bravas came with tarter sauce and ketchup! Like we were tourists! But the peppers were great, Arran liked her wine and my Super Bock beer, a stout, was just awesome enough to keep me from leaving a detailed assessment of the dinner for the staff. That and my lack of speaking the language.

I can't say enough good things about Tavira. Small, quiet and picturesque, we got to know it fairly well over the week we were there. From Tavira we made multiple day trips:

Silves, a beautiful town and the best castle in the region. Park in the carpark along the river and where the town name is spelled out in huge letters and walk uphill through the narrow streets until you get to the castle.

Faro, a nice old town with typical narrow streets, good walking

Lagos is bigger and and we were told it has more nightlife but we went there for the nearby trails along the cliffs to Ponta de Piedade ... **wow** ... crazy gorgeous views, and a few places to take stairs down to the water level way below.

Olhão (pronounced something like the French pronunciation of Orleans but without the “r”), a cute town and also where we caught the ferry to the island of Armona and the beach on a sunny wind-free day.

Loulé, especially its Saturday market on the town centre streets and market buildings

Santa Luzia, especially the Praia do Barril (Barril Beach) that's a bit of a hike but there's a small train if you need, and at the beach is the coolest graveyard you could ever expect to not see on a beach, or anywhere else for that matter. Hundreds of large anchors are spread throughout the beachgrass looking out over the Gulf of Cádiz. These are the anchors once used to hold down the huge tuna nets that supported the economy of this region for generations. The tuna industry fell off, tourism became the dominant industry, and anchors were placed as a tribute of sorts to a time gone by. It's quite a sight.

We planned to check out a shopping centre or two and Centro Vasco da Gama, on the waterfront in Lisbon (and a place we had gone with the boys on our last visit in 2013) was on our list. But Derek mentioned a shopping centre right in little Tavira so on one of our drives we decided to check it out. We found it no problem, we knew we were at the right place, and there certainly was a structure large enough to contain multiple stores, but we didn't see a way in. The only access is to drive (or walk down the ramp as we did after parking nearby) into the underground car park. With no ground floor access, the shopping centre would easily be mistaken for a long, three-story apartment building.

We didn't see a lot of wildlife on the trip and indicative of this would be seeing only two (unidentifiable) examples of roadkill in the whole eight days we had the rental. This tells me one of three things: the animals here are smarter, or they are less plentiful, or European drivers have faster reflexes. Those two roadkills were probably done in by North American drivers.

Driving in Portugal takes a certain acceptance that you won't get everything right but hopefully just enough to not leave any costly dings on the rental car. Despite google helping us, and we know how infallible our good friend google can be, we got lost a few times. And we drove down roads bumpy enough to shake your fillings loose, and through incredibly narrow streets, narrow because that's just the way it is on streets created hundreds of years ago, and because double parking is clearly not a concern in most of these little towns. You do the best you can and every 10 minutes or so I would remind myself to exhale.

Once we (sadly) left Tavira and the Algarve, we drove back to Lisbon, found our hotel to check in and drop off our stuff, then returned the car to the airport in, thankfully, one unscratched piece. As we walked away from the car rental area, on our way to the metro, I felt lighter, happier, ELATED!! to not be stressed behind the wheel anymore. Could this mean that one day back home in our great nation's capital that I will also be happy to turn in my keys and rely on the public transportation miracle of light rail as a better and happier alternative?

We did take the subway a few times, and a city bus so Arran could get to the Museu Nacional do Azulejo (National Tile Museum, she said it was excellent – I didn't go, I went for a 90-minute stroll instead to work off a few calories and ended it by rewarding myself with a pastel de nata at a pastelaria on the

corner). But mostly we walked. We had walked a lot in the Algarve, topping 20,000 steps every day. I know because Arran wears a gadget that tells her how many steps she has taken. It motivates her to do just a few more to round it off at a nice even number. If she was at 19,800, she would want to do another 200 steps. I asked what she would do if she was at 20,200 ... perhaps walk backwards around the bed until she was back at 20k and could lay down for the night. Arran isn't always as amused with my suggestions as I am.

Walking somewhere in the 20-thousands takes its toll and her hip and my feet were tired to be sure, but there is just so much to see, all so unfamiliar and interesting, that you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and worry about popping Advil/Tylenol/Naproxen later. But once we got to Lisbon the totals got higher. We topped 30,000. Arran needed a break in the afternoon so I would go out to wander the narrow, up and down, steep streets of the Alfama on my own and did somewhere around 35,000 which google (my reliable friend!) tells me is about 25 kilometres. The next time I need something at St Laurent shopping centre I think I'll just walk it. Of course, it's another 25 kilometres back to Kanata which I wouldn't be crazy enough to walk again! No, I'll take the light rail. Get home in no time.

Our hotel, Lisbon 5 as it was known, on Rua da Palma right by Praça Martim Moniz, was close to everything. I booked it as much for the breakfast buffet that was included as anything else, and breakfast buffets at European hotels are one of my pleasures in life, so when I was sent an email by the hotel a few days before checking in that the dining area was under reconstruction and breakfast would instead be a bagged affair dropped off the night before (and in practice was actually more like early afternoon before, leading to some staleness of the bakery items which included some mini pastel de nata, the only less than stupendous samples I had on the trip), I was not a happy traveler. But after some well-chosen cuss words and a moment or two under the Algarve sun, I got over it and, in the end, it wasn't awful. Is that a compliment, to say the breakfast wasn't awful? I suppose it is.

In truth the location of Lisbon 5 made up for the breakfast, wifi and power issues. There were lots of restaurants on our block and a Continente grocery store across the street. In fact, and this was common, despite having a big grocery store across the street we also had 2 market stores, both bigger than your average corner store here in Canada, and with fresh produce and meat and wine and beer and everything, *on our block* as well! You wonder how they all survive economically but apparently, they do. The Lisbon 5 was less than 10 minutes to Praça da Figueira (comes alive at night with food and drink stalls), Praça Dom Pedro IV / Praça Rossio with its cool tiles that look like waves, another 10 max to the waterfront and Praça do Comércio, or 10 to the century old outdoor elevator that can be your shortcut up to the heights of the Barrio Alto. The Castelo de São Jorge is also only 20 minutes away but it's all uphill (or take the tram) but is well worth the visit and the views out over the city and the bridges crossing the Tagus River are spectacular. They also have a couple of dozen peacocks wandering freely around the castle grounds, an interesting sight. They strut their stuff and there seems to be one designated area for the grand tail feather display where the peacocks show up for their turn to impress the tourists (that's the end of my shift Bill, you're up. By the way this Canadian couple is easy to impress...). Before we saw them though, we heard them. Have you ever heard the sound a peacock makes? Their cries sound like a cat whose tail is being stepped on over and over.

I remember that 11 years ago Jackson and Drew (age 9 and 11 at the time) liked the castle and especially the peacocks. They were not with us on this trip so in their absence our snacking tended to be peanuts, pistachios, hazelnuts and cashews, all the things they are allergic to! We ate them from bags, we had

them in ice cream, they were part of the granola for breakfast. They were delicious and my memory of them shall be just that, a memory, until the next trip away from the boys.

On one of my solo walks in Lisbon, I spotted a restaurant worthy of mentioning to Arran when I got back to the hotel. I guess it was more of an announcement that I had found where we should eat supper. It was 10-15 minutes away and only some of it was uphill. We arrived a bit before 7, just before it got packed, and were lucky enough to score the table at the window. Many people walking up the hill on Calçada de Santo André that night had a fine view of Arran and me eating bhujia chatpat, fried momos, chicken thukpa, garlic naan and thakali khana. So tasty!! The restaurant is The Yak and Yeti and the food is Nepalese, as were the staff. Later we read that the restaurant is recommended by TripAdvisor and we agree with that. We left full but not stuffed, extremely happy, and my Visa statement tells me that even after the exchange from the Euro, it set us back \$64.

An even less expensive morsel was my (once, twice, thrice?) daily pastel de nata. The more touristy the area, the more expensive it was. On average they were each between a Euro and 1.50. The most expensive pastel de nata I had was the last one, at the Lisbon airport shortly before heading to the gate. The least were in the bakery section of the Lidl supermarket in Tavira, at 35 cents each, and as good as any other. Maybe better when you factor in my cheap side. I enjoyed every single bite, savoured each and every one, and welcome the next pastel de nata tour, hopefully very soon.

Nov/Dec 2025 Tour Update

I'm back on tour!!!

For another 10 days and 11 nights in late November and into December, my eldest son Jamie and I are in Portugal. We start with two nights in Lisbon, then seven in Tavira, one more in Lisbon. Wait, check that ... we START with two pastel de nata each as soon as humanly possible once arriving on the overnight flight to Portugal. My sleep-deprived taste buds woke up like they'd been hit by a double-caffeinated espresso laden syrup of Redbull. And then some. Or I could describe them as delicious. Same thing.

We decided to do Lisbon first, partially to save until two days later a drive to the Algarve made dangerous by a lack of sleep. The metro was an easy 30 minutes to our hotel right beside Rossio Square (Praça do Rossio), one of the coolest anywhere I am sure due to its tiles that are set in a way that gives the appearance of waves. It does, it doesn't look flat. It looks like black and white waves. But it is, actually, flat. On this trip, however, the majority of those interesting tiles were covered by dozens of huts there for the Christmas market (it seems counterintuitive to throw all those huts over the beautiful stone, but that's what the city has decided to do). Both there and neighbouring Praça do Figueira were many booths of Christmas crafts, and more importantly, Christmas food and drink. Samples of sheep's cheese, prosciutto, beer nuts and more were generously available. It hadn't occurred to me that on November 23rd Christmas would be in full swing. Crowds gathered on a pedestrian street for loud piped music that played in sync to the flashing lights all the way up the hill toward the Alfama. Queen: Don't Stop Me Now. Corny but impressive. We were almost as impressed at the very large Christmas tree in Praça do Comercio, the main square by the water, then realized that people were walking *into* the tree. We followed. It was after dark and the thousands of lights that adorned the tree and that had looked so

nice from a distance on the outside were now stunning on the inside, looking up at them circling us. Pretty cool. At that moment I'm okay with Christmas kicking off in November.

A return visit to castle was a necessity of course, my third time but Jamie hadn't been here before, and it was good. The peacocks were as active as ever. The views tremendous. Another visit to the Yak and Yeti for Nepalese food was also a necessity.

Once our third morning in Portugal arrived, and a fine buffet breakfast at the Hotel Inn Rossio was consumed, we dragged our luggage by Metro back to the airport and picked up our car which would ferry us about for the next 8 days. By the end of the 8 days I was handling the roundabouts like a veteran, knowing when to speed up and when to pause, when to get to an inner lane and when to exit. At the beginning, however, and let me tell you that the beginning is about 22 seconds after leaving the rental car parking garage, I am expected to navigate a super busy, 4-laned swirl of cars entering, leaving, changing lanes and generally understanding the rules of this structure which I, sadly, am fumbling in my reflex memory to recall. I've forgotten since the last trip. All we had to do was circle approximately ¾ of the way around and I did, though it involved not getting into an inner lane when I should, then changing without signaling, two honks from drivers swerving past my uncertain car-butt, and the panicked voice of my navigator saying "this one! This one!". In other words, no problem at all. The next 2 and a half hours were a completely relaxed highway drive through the remote interior and it was somewhere near the end of that when I was able to unclench my hands from the wheel.

Then we arrived in Tavira. Familiarity. Calm.

Oh Tavira. What a town. Not everyone will like it as much as I do, but Jamie did also and we enjoyed, no, cherished every moment of time we spent there over the next seven days. The sites are great and only a little less grand. Along with that are fewer people, and they tend to be locals and fewer visitors. And there is a slower, quieter vibe that feels more like you are visiting a town in another country versus joining the mass of tourists shuffling from one must-do site to another. I felt like I was only visiting Lisbon but I felt like I was living in Tavira, even if just for a week.

It may be quieter and slower but I am not selling Tavira short on things to do and see and love. Our home away from home at 23 Rua das Olarias was once again perfect, as it had been 21 months earlier. And it is situated close to the heart of town. The castle two blocks away. The main square and Roman bridge just beyond. The streets whose cobblestones challenged our knees and endurance, which it would at an average of 24,000 or so steps a day, but if you give in to the temptation of wanting to know where you are going, and just trust your instinct for laneways you haven't been and choose random directions at crossroads, you welcome a new surprising view or shop or square or whatever every few minutes. It is a town of just 26,000, and is quite concentrated around the Gilão River. It's easy to get lost in the nooks and crannies, and just as easy to find yourself back on a familiar street thirty seconds later.

City workers were busy putting up Christmas lights and decorations when we arrived on Tuesday and by the weekend the town was lit up splendidly. With the early darkness this time of year it added a cheeriness to evening strolls. And like last year when a cycling race and hundreds of cyclists appeared out of nowhere for an unexpected course through the heart of the old town, this year we had two such surprises. A car rally happened on the weekend. At one point the participants, roughly 50, had their cars all parked in the main town plaza, ready to leave one at a time for time trials. There were different segments of the racing all weekend. And then on Monday morning, while walking to the heart of town

and not expecting much but a sleepy town recovering from the weekend, a 40-person marching band came down the main drag with instruments doing their best to wake any later sleepers up. We were told it was a civic holiday and that was as much explanation as we got, but it was more than enough.

On the 2024 visit I had hoped to see what goes on at the Camera Obscura, situated beside the castle, but it was closed for renovations. This time it was open and for a small entry fee (\$8CAD each) we had a “tour”. It is located in the old watertower, and when it was no longer needed in 2004, a proposal to convert it to a camera obscura was accepted. Using a single, very thick reflective lens, the entire town is reflected on a “bowl” (for lack of a better term) which is roughly 6 feet across. Using levers which raised or lowered the bowl, right in front of us separated only by a rail, the operator could zoom in and/or focus. The operator, and narrator / storyteller, was an older Brit who had done the conversion from watertower to camera obscura two decades earlier. He used the lens and bowl to show us the whole town which included a history lesson on the many buildings, sites, floods, and naughty things people did in the castle when they thought no one could see. I assume he was watching from through his thick lens and unbeknownst to the people doing naughty things, getting his jollies, which he was now trying to wink-wink, know-what-I-mean, share with us. He was goofy and silly and mostly harmless and his talk was really terrific, and the 10 of us or so that were there really liked his unpolished but very earnest show. Except perhaps the lady from Hamburg Germany who he would actually nudge at those wink-wink moments and after the third time of that she moved on the premise of getting a better look on the other rail that surrounded the bowl. The talk lasted 30 minutes and gave us more sites to go searching for on our next meandering about town that afternoon.

A bonus when returning to a travel destination again is that you can repeat the pleasures of past visits. One of those rituals was the daily first-thing-in-the-fresh-air-of-the-morning stroll to la Boulangerie for une baguette pour moi sil vous plait. It's very satisfying ... the baguette but also the ability to slip into French. Perhaps I slip on my French more than slip into it, but I give it a good try. I know way more French than Portuguese. As I was leaving the shop our second-last day, I almost bumped into a fellow on his way in and without thinking I said ‘je m'excuse’. He replied ‘no problem’. He spoke English. He understood French. He was probably Canadian! And I hadn't asked, I just blurted one of the 78 phrases I know in French and passed myself off as such.

He might have been from Toronto, maybe even Woodbridge like me, and he might have been a baseball fan and then we certainly could have commiserated together over the Jays losing the World Series a month before. But I didn't. I was still on the threshold of the Boulangerie. My brain stayed French. Oh well, c'est la vie.

The Boulangerie was also Jamie's morning coffee place, where he could sit and chill and observe the comings and goings of those getting their baguette, or pain d'épices, or croissant.

Tavira is part of the eastern Algarve, only 20 minutes to Olhão and 40 to Faro. It's a good base to visit the many interesting towns and we did all of the same ones as Arran and I had seen in early 2024. Olhão (waterfront and winding, narrow streets of shops) and Faro (the old town) as mentioned, but also Silves for the castle, Loulé for its Saturday market which felt like the whole town was at, and just past Lagos for the Ponta da Piedade walk along the breathtaking cliffs.

Wanting to discover some new places, we also visited:

Caldas de Monchique in the hills north of Lagos. It's a small spa town, not a lot to see but the drive was worth it for the pão com chouriço, a warm crusty bread roll, filled with chorizo. We had those at O Tasco, just off the main square, where the snack is served directly from the wood-fired oven.

NanoBrew Fuzeta, a microbrewery operated by Norwegians now living in the Algarve. It's in the fishing village of Fuzeta, between Tavira and Olhão so only a 10-minute drive from our Tavira abode. With a couple dozen beers to choose from for our flights of 4 samples, Jamie and I chose very different beers. His were IPAs and lagers, mine were browns and sours. A nice find.

Cacela Velha was a recommended stop in the binder at our house which is left as a guide for guests. With only a few hours available on our last afternoon we decided to check it out since it was only 10 minutes away, to the east. It hardly seemed worthwhile, a tiny little place. But what was packed into its 4 or 5 streets was quite interesting. Situated above the sea, we took the cactus-lined stairs down to the water to see the boats moored off the sandbar and see the town from below. Once back up the stairway, we stumbled into a cemetery that was a series of walls really, each one containing rows and columns of graves, perhaps a couple dozen wide and a half dozen high, like an oversized cabinet, each grave being not much larger than the headstone / plaque which typically had a photo of the deceased. The rest of the town were the aforementioned 4 or 5 streets that went in different directions and curved around this building or that small square or that other church, until you stumbled out into something you'd already been to and weren't quite sure how you got back there again. Cacela Velha small side trip with a bigger than expected payoff.

Tavira is also close to the Spanish border and Sevilla is only an our and three quarters away, so that became a day trip again. The city has architecture worth new and old that is worth seeing. The Barrio de Santa Cruz is an awesome little neighbourhood to get lost in. And we did. I accidentally found the hotel we stayed at in 2008, our first visit to Spain. And we picked a hole-in-the-wall restaurant for a tapas lunch of patatas bravas (potatoes in a spicy paprika sauce) and padron peppers along with drinks. It was the first tapas meal for Jamie, I'm predicting it won't be the last. One of our favourite meals on the trip.

After seven nights in Tavira we drove back to Lisbon airport to return the car (I know I keep beating this theme to death, but the exhale after arriving accident and damage free set a personal record and lasted longer than some Supertramp songs). The Metro ferried us to our next hotel and after an evening of wandering the streets and markets of Lisbon one last time, we returned to Ottawa the next day.

One's travelling companion on trips can make or break the enjoyment so before I close, I wish to say that the fart jokes, silly observances, corny puns and general childish behavior went on the whole bloody trip!! Fortunately, Jamie's jokes, observances, puns and behavior were the same, so we got along just fine. It was the first trip of just the two of us in more than 25 years and it was long overdue. I'm grateful he joined me for this trip.

And the final word should come back to food. It must. You, dear reader, don't need a full account of everything we ate on the trip, but I feel I must relate the extent to which we indulged in the extraordinary treats of the title of this tale. One, so that you know we truly honoured the "pastel de nata tour" purpose of it all, and second, so that you know I was not a glutton and left some of the gems for the next hungry visitors. We each had two the day we arrived, two the day we left, and one each day in between. That's 13 in 11 days. Thirteen moments of "it doesn't get any better than this". Does it? Pretty hard to top.