

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

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 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 they smelled 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-iri to share. Well, the chicken was poorly-poorly 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 San 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 (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 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 was 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 with 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.