

Liquid gold: Portugal's stunning Douro river region

By Paul Ames, for CNN

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Photos: Liquid gold: Portugal's stunning Douro river region

River of gold - Snaking 200 miles through northern Portugal, Rio Douro (or "river of gold" in English) is the world's most beautiful wine region.

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(CNN) — Rio Douro roughly translates from Portuguese as "river of gold."

When the setting sun catches it right, you can see why.

The waters gleam like liquid bullion bars.

The Douro cuts across northern Portugal, snaking 200 miles from rugged wilderness on the Spanish frontier to the old city of Oporto and the Atlantic beyond.

Grapes grown on its steeply rising banks have been sending forth legendary port wines for centuries.

It may be the world's most beautiful wine region.

Not enough?

It's also got spectacular landscapes and a scattering of World Heritage sites.

Here's the best Portugal's golden river has to offer.

1. Tripe and tradition in Porto



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Cafe Majestic: Beautiful venue. Awesome cinnamon toast.

From the upper deck of Dom Luis I Bridge, Porto presents a stunning urban landscape.

Its heart is a UNESCO Heritage site centered on the quayside Ribeira district's cluster of brightly painted houses.

In winding alleys, restaurants serve the local delicacy: stewed tripe with beans.

Churches shimmer with blue tiles outside, gold within.

Bolhao market is a foodie delight.

Downtown overflows with stores unchanged for generations.

Cinnamon toast at the 1920s [Majestic Cafe](#) is hard to resist.

[Cafe Majestic](#), Rua Caterina, Porto Portugal;

2. World's oldest graffiti?

In the 1980s, archeologists made a startling discovery where the Coa River joins the Douro.

Rocks in the lush valley carry thousands of carvings: deer, goats, horses, horned aurochs -- ancestors of modern cattle.

The 30,000-year-old prehistoric graffiti is perhaps mankind's oldest outdoor art.

Plans for a dam to flood the valley were scrapped and it's now a UNESCO site.

A [striking hilltop museum](#) decodes the Stone Age art and runs tours to the engravings.

There's relaxation nearby at the [Longroiva spa hotel](#).

[MORE: Portugal: Europe's best-kept foodie secret](#)

[Longroiva Hotel Rural, Lugar do Rossio s/n, 6430-071 Portugal;](#)

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Dry whites are great for aperitifs and cocktails. Rubies and tawnies go with cheese or chocolatey desserts.

Then come vintages, LBVs, colheitas, reserves and other superior nectars.

Port knowledge can be perfected with visits to the venerable lodges where the wines mature in Vila Nova de Gaia.

Or upriver at the source of port in vineyard estates -- quintas -- scattered across the Douro hills.

4. Riding the river



This might just be the best way to see the river.

Narrow barco rabelo sailboats no longer race down Douro rapids laden with wine casks.

Still there are plenty of ways to get afloat.

Sleek floating hotels provide week-long cruises punctuated by plenty of wine-estate tastings.

Ferries chug upriver for cheap and cheerful day trips from Porto complete with hearty on-board lunches and return by river-hugging railroad.

Private yachts and historic launches offer bespoke romantic sailings.

All give unforgettable views of vine-covered terraces emerging from the meandering river.

5. "Buonos dies" to Miranda do Douro

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Remoteness allowed clifftop Miranda to preserve its language, medieval architecture and unique traditions.

Menfolk perform a war dance dressed in frilly skirts and stripy socks.

Locals venerate a statue of Jesus sporting a top hat.

It's famed for steak -- at Restaurante Balbina they barbeque it on the fireplace.

[La Balbina](#), Rua Rainha Dona Catarina 1, Miranda do Douro 5210-228 Portugal;

6. Dining on lamprey

Douro delicacies include lamprey (parasitic, eel-like river critters) cooked in red wine with rice; pork innards in blood (papas de sarrabulho), baby goat (cabrito), fried octopus (polvo frito), salt-cod pie (bolo de bacalhau) and wonderful smoked sausages served with broccoli raab (alheiras com grelos).

Food is big here, whether in gourmet hangouts like [The Yeatman](#), [Largo do Paco](#) and [DOC](#), or rustic restaurants serving gargantuan portions -- as is the case at [Tasquinha do Fumo](#) near Baião or the belt-busting [O Sapo](#) in Penafiel.

[READ: 20 of Europe's most beautiful hotels](#)

[The Yeatman](#), Rua do Choupelo (Sta. Marinha), Vila Nova de Gaia 4400-088 Portugal;

7. Atlantic state of mind

Porto's posh beach suburb of [Foz do Douro](#) is where the river meets the sea.

It has palm-shaded promenades, Atlantic surf and super-cool beach bars.

Sunsets are wonderful.

Sunny days see joggers, cyclists and strollers pass seafront parks, historic fortresses and a string of sandy beaches.

8. Staying in palaces, quintas, manors or grain silos



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Quinta da Pacheca is a boutique hotel on a wine estate with river views.

There's a dazzling array of distinctive accommodation along the Douro.

Urban palaces like [Palacio do Freixo](#), charming, family-run mansions like [Solar Egas Moniz](#), even luxuriously converted grain silos.

Welcoming wine estates blend old-world elegance with modern design.

[Quinta do Vallado](#), [Casa das Pipas](#), [Morgadio da Calcada](#) are worth looking out for, as are the staggering views from [Quinta Nova Winery House](#).

[Pestana Palacio do Freixo](#), Estrada Nacional 108, 206 Campanha, Porto 4300-316 Portugal;

9. Hopping on the Pocinho express

Trains take three hours from [Porto to the end of the Douro line at Pocinho](#). Time will fly.

The track clings to the riverbank, with breathtaking views at each curve.

Tickets cost €13 (\$14).

Along the way are riverside stations brightly decorated with azulejos -- painted ceramic tiles.

Special trains with historic carriages run in summer.

Through April, €350 bought luxury rides on Portugal's [former presidential train](#), including lunch by Michelin-two-star chef Dieter Koschina. They may run again in September.

10. Getting into the red

The Douro has been famed for port over 300 years. Now its table wines -- especially robust reds -- are generating international buzz.

Wine Spectator placed two Douro reds in its 2014 world top four (a port was No. 1).

Last year, it ranked Porca de Murca red as the best buy under \$20.

Touring the vineyards is a treat.

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11. Eye-to-eye with soaring vultures

For 80 miles, the Douro forms the frontier with Spain. It's wild.

The river cuts deep canyons through a boulder-strewn plateau.

Both banks are natural parks with viewpoints (miradouros) giving sweeping vistas.

Big birds are an added attraction, especially at [Penedo Durao](#) -- a raptor hangout.

Griffon vultures glide by on nine-foot wingspans, eying your picnic.

Among smaller feathered friends: shaggy-headed Egyptian vultures, eagles, black storks, pink hoopoes and blue rock thrushes.

12. Banishing small-town blues



Amarante's stone bridge is said to have been built by Saint Goncalo de Amarante.

If you need a break from all the beautiful countryside, the region holds some enthralling small towns.

Peso da Regua is a wine trade hub hosting the new [Museum of the Douro](#).

Historic Lamego boasts a [hilltop church](#) atop a 686-step baroque staircase.

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They say the upper Douro has "nove meses de inverno e tres de inferno" (nine months of winter and three of Hell).

Summer temperatures broil over 40 C.

In winter, expect snow on the hills. By February they'll whiten again with almond-tree blossoms.

Spring is wonderful: vines shoot, wild flowers carpet the fields.

Autumn brings reddening vine leaves; harvesting of grapes, olives and chestnuts; boar and partridge on menus.

14. Discovering cool Porto

It's not all old stuff. The nightlife and creative scene make Porto a prime hipster destination.

Much of the action centers around the galleries, boutiques and bars on rua Miguel Bombarda.

Architecture fans should check out the [Serralves modern art museum](#) or a concert at [Casa da Musica](#).

Bands who played 2016's [NOS Primavera Sound festival](#) include Deerhunter, Protomartyr, Parquet Courts and Brian Wilson.

[READ: Endless highway: How to drive the ultimate American road trip](#)

[Casa da Musica, Av da Boavista 604-610, Porto 4149-071 Portugal;](#)

15. Driving the 'world's best drive'

The N-222 road linking Regua and Pinhao is scientifically the world's best drive.

It beat the likes of California's Highway 1 and Australia's Great Ocean Road in tests last year by a quantum physicist, race-track designer and roller-coaster expert tasked by rental company Avis to evaluate the thrill factor of scenic routes around the world.

Winding through the wine terraces along the Douro's north bank the N-222 is just one of the region's stunning roadways.

Just don't do any wine-tasting first.

16. Grabbing some history



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The Rota do Romanico covers 58 monuments in the valleys around Douro.

The [Rota do Romanico](#) route connects dozens of churches, castles and bridges dating back to the 12th century when King Afonso I founded the Portuguese kingdom around here.

Even older is the Citania do Monte Mozinho, a Celtic hill fort that gives an insight into life before the Romans.

There are networks of historic villages linking places like Provesende with its 15 quintas; stone-built Quintandona; or Favaios which produces unique sweet wines.

Many contain excellent places to eat, sleep or drink wine.

17. Uncorking a lighter wine

Portugal's light, bright and mostly white Vinho Verde wines are generally associated with the green Minho region further north, but the growing region extends down to Douro.

Estates in this verdant area are also a pleasure to visit. Most organize tours and tastings, but may require booking in advance.

Among the most tempting: [Quinta de Covela](#) whose sophisticated wines are produced within sight of the Douro; or [Quinta da Aveleda](#), featuring an ivy-covered mansion, lush, tropical gardens, superlative brandy, and a wine ranked third in Wine Enthusiast's 2015 global best-buy list.

[Quinta da Aveleda](#), Rua da Aveleda n0 2, Penafiel 4560-570 Portugal;

18. Biking, hiking, rafting

There are endless options for energetic activities.

Kayak through the canyons in the "international" Douro between Portugal and Spain.

Biking or hiking tours can be taken from boutique hotel to wine lodge.

Mountain trails can be ridden in four-wheel drives.

There's also white-water rafting down fast-flowing rivers running into the Douro.

19. Ethnic fashion

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One-nomored Douro designs cutting a fashionable dash include Claus Porto luxury soaps or the old-school goodies sold at [Porto's A Vida Portuguesa store](#).

[A Vida Portuguesa, Rua da Galeria de Paris, 20, Porto 4050 Portugal;](#)

20. Porto's 'little French girls'

The world's greatest sandwich?

Porto's favorite snack comprises doorsteps of bread filled with ham, sausages and steak, wrapped in cheese, drenched in a spicy sauce.

Created in the 1950s by a returning emigrant who named it the francesinha -- or "little French girl."

According to legend, that's because the sauce was as piquante as his memories of Parisian mademoiselles.

Devotees recommend [Cafe Santiago](#).

READ: [Big thrills: 50 ways to be a daredevil](#)

[Cafe Santiago, Rua Passos Manuel, 226, Porto 4000-382 Portugal;](#)

Freelance journalist Paul Ames has been hooked on Portugal since visiting as a kid in the 1970s. He lives in Lisbon but remains a frequent visitor to his wife's home village in the heart of the Centro region.



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