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OF ALL THE TRAVEL clichés, it must be among the worst: the announcement that – brace yourself – certain food and drinks are quite a lot better in their place of origin. Guinness is delicious in Dublin? Who’d have thought it? Croissants have a certain *je ne sais quoi* in the 10th arrondissement? *Pas de merde*, Sherlock. There’s nothing like a Turkey Twizzler in Great Witchingham? Stop, you need help.

It is through gritted teeth, then, that I must add one more to the list. Port: you haven’t had it until you’ve had it near the banks of the Douro.

We followed the river from its outlet in Porto up the vineyard-filled valley it carves through northern Portugal for almost a week, and although we must have drunk enough of the stuff – ruby, tawny, white, rosé – to give a rhino gout, still we weren’t sick of it. In Britain, on the other hand, it takes one musty glass.

Happy valley

Lazy days and port drinking on the banks of the Douro

Portugal’s excellence for a quick holiday has been noted of late. Visitor numbers rose by 12 per cent last year, but tourism hasn’t ruined its second city just yet. Like us, you should lose – but not waste – a day wandering the riverbanks of Porto’s historic, Unesco-approved centre, stopping for a *pastel de nata* or 10 (you find these custard tarts all over the country), or a lunch of *francesinha* (a thrombosis-inducing ham, sausage and steak sandwich covered in melted cheese, served with a tomato and beer sauce and chips), or

simply ordering a white port and tonic and listening to a fado singer in a bar.

You should then sleep in the absurdly central Armazém Luxury Housing, a 19th-century iron warehouse converted into an intimidatingly stylish 21st-century hotel. Across the water, in the neighbouring city of Vila Nova de Gaia, familiar names of port houses yell from the hillside. Taylor’s, Croft, Fonseca... They’re worth a visit, but you may as well go one better and get a boat, train, bus or car into the Douro Valley, where the grapes are actually grown.

Good manors The sprawling Six Senses Douro Valley hotel



Port can only be called port if it is produced in the Douro, and it’s probably the best-looking wine region in the world. As you follow the river upstream, the steep, rolling banks on either side are covered in neat rows of vines, peppered occasionally with farmhouses or a rogue olive tree.

Go at harvest time, in September. Every mile or two, an estate (most have been in the same family for centuries) is sign-posted, and almost all, including some now producing excellent table wines, are open for tours and tastings.

It makes for an elegant pub crawl, but the lack of hotels has historically made such trips tricky. Not so these days. A renovated 19th-century manor house, the superb Six Senses Douro Valley has a spa, two pools, a herb garden, a ‘wine library’ (for tastings, obviously) and two exceptional restaurants.

You won’t want to leave that property, but do try. Inland slightly, the Solar Egas Moniz, a small white B&B between the main river and its tributary, the Sousa, is charming, homely, and a quieter side to an already idyllic corner of Europe.

By the end of our fifth day and seventh tasting, all we could do was stare out over the hills, take a sip and sigh. You know, perhaps it’s not just the port; perhaps everything is better in the Douro.

- 1. SIX SENSES DOURO VALLEY From £250 per night in an entry-level Quinta Superior room (sixsenses.com).
- 2. ARMAZEM LUXURY HOUSING From £175 per night (armazemluxuryhousing.com).
- 3. SOLAR EGAS MONIZ From £70 per night, B&B (solaregasmoniz.com; welovesmallhotels.com/hotels/history/solar-egas-moniz/85/)

