



MindStormPhoto Portugal 2017

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Portugal 1 – Festival of St John of Porto



We arranged to come to Porto, Portugal in time for the annual street festival paying tribute to **St John the Baptist** (Festa de São João do Porto). This lively party has been held every year for the past six centuries (starting the afternoon of June 23rd and ending the sometime on the 24th), and is considered the city's most important festival, topping Christmas. The party starts around 6PM with families eating barbecued sardines and drinking wine together, and culminates for many with a major fireworks spectacle over the river at midnight. Teens and young lovers continue the party until dawn though, with bonfires and more dancing until past dawn. The city is absolutely dead the following day with most shops closed, while people recover from the festivities.



Hammers! Everyone has a hammer of varying size and colors, and everyone of all ages will gleefully hit everyone else over the head with it! Some of the hammers were as large as the children holding them.

Fortunately, they are soft plastic hammers with little squeaky whistles in them, so they don't hurt... the first few hundred times. By the end of the night, expect to go home and take some Ibuprofen though, for that simmering headache...



Hammers, dancing, concerts, and all-around fun dominated the entire evening. Chinese lanterns were launched into the skies all night.



The crowds were packed down near the Douro river, so much so that you could barely move forward. We chose to cross the bridge to the other side, where crowds were only slightly less jammed.



Fireworks were supposed to start at midnight, fired from barges in the river. An announcer told the crowd (in Portuguese) that they were delayed because some boats were too close to the barges, and had to be moved by police. It took half an hour until the fireworks started, and the crowd all stood peacefully during the wait.

Finally the street lights were turned off, and the crowd cheered. Music then blared in sync with the fireworks, and was one of the more sophisticated fireworks shows we have seen, lasting about 20 minutes.

, June 24, 2017

[Dance](#), [Event](#), [Fireworks](#), [Travel](#) · [Porto](#), [Portugal](#)

Portugal 2 – Porto, Part 2



We are now on our own, exploring Portugal. The star trail image above was shot from our apartment window in Porto, as we start to explore this country.

Our first impressions of this city were rather negative – based largely upon the very steep hills in our neighborhood. After a week here though, our impression has changed and we are rather interested in returning for a longer visit in the future. For one thing, we discovered that the steep hills surround the river area, but the neighborhoods nearer the Atlantic ocean are almost flat. Score one for Porto...

We enjoyed wandering the riverfront, while entertained by numerous musicians and street entertainers. Watch the video at the end of this post to get a feeling of what it is like to wander for one night along the riverfront. The number of tourists are substantially less than what we experienced in Italy.

We were also immensely impressed by the courtesy of the drivers! Seriously, we have never seen such polite drivers anywhere else in the world. Step off the curb, and every driver stops to let you cross. I tried to get out of a taxi one day, and traffic had backed up and blocked my door. The driver next to me backed up (and others backed up behind him to let him do so) until I could get out. I NEVER would have seen something like that in Cuenca, or even in Berkeley. We were stunned! (and that is only one of several similar instances in Porto)



As we mentioned, there was a constant stream of musicians on the riverfront our first night here. We walked down a few days later and did not find as many, so this may be more of a weekend or weather-related phenomena.



The neighborhoods were preparing for the annual party (see [here](#) for our story on it in St John Festival of Porto). As the center image shows, the Unesco old town is a rather steep hilly neighborhood. We saw very few elderly people here, and those we did see were moving very... very... slowly. Not sure our maturing legs and hearts will be able to maneuver these hills in the future...



We took a free walking tour of the central district. Eugenia, our guide (upper left), showed us the cathedral, the Sao Bento train station (center middle two images), a music shop where Fado is played (right-lower two images), crossing the upper rail bridge, and to... McDonalds! This is easily the most elegant McDonalds in the world, with an interesting history, which boils down to their agreeing to the city to keep the historic facade and interior intact (lower left two images).



Wandering down at the waterfront gave us a view of several entertainers in addition to the musicians seen everywhere. There were mimes that reacted to coins dropped in their cup (lower left), Neptune (upper right), a bubble blower who showed children how to create monsters (upper-left and center), and a train that drove tourists around the area (center-right). There's also a legal activity for people to climb across the outside of the bridge (middle left). Porto is known for their port, so we went tasting at the Calem cellars (lower right), which was complete with an interactive digital display.



Murals are not as universal in Porto as they are in Cuenca, but there are pockets of them in town. Above you can see some interesting ones, mostly concentrated around the art gallery part of town.

Portugal 3 – Porto, Part 3



Porto is a stunningly beautiful city, especially in the riverside neighborhood of Ribeira, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where we stayed. The riverbank is lined with restaurants and cafes on one side of the river, and port tasting rooms on the opposite side of the river in Vila Nova de Gaia. There are six bridges that cross the Douro river; one was designed by the architect of the Eiffel Tower, and another designed by a disciple of his. The bridge nearest to us is the iconic double decker, Ponte Dom Luís I. We've crossed both the upper span as well as the lower span of this bridge. There is a funicular, elevator, tram, and stairs that all get you from the bottom to the top (we took the funicular up, and the stairs down).



The Porto Cathedral, the Sé, is a Roman Catholic church located in the historical centre of the city and built between the 12th and 13th century. Originally a Romanesque church from the 12th century, it was rebuilt in a Gothic style 600 years later, then remodeled yet again by the famed Italian architect and painter Nicolau Nasoni. The architects each have their signatures on the key buildings.

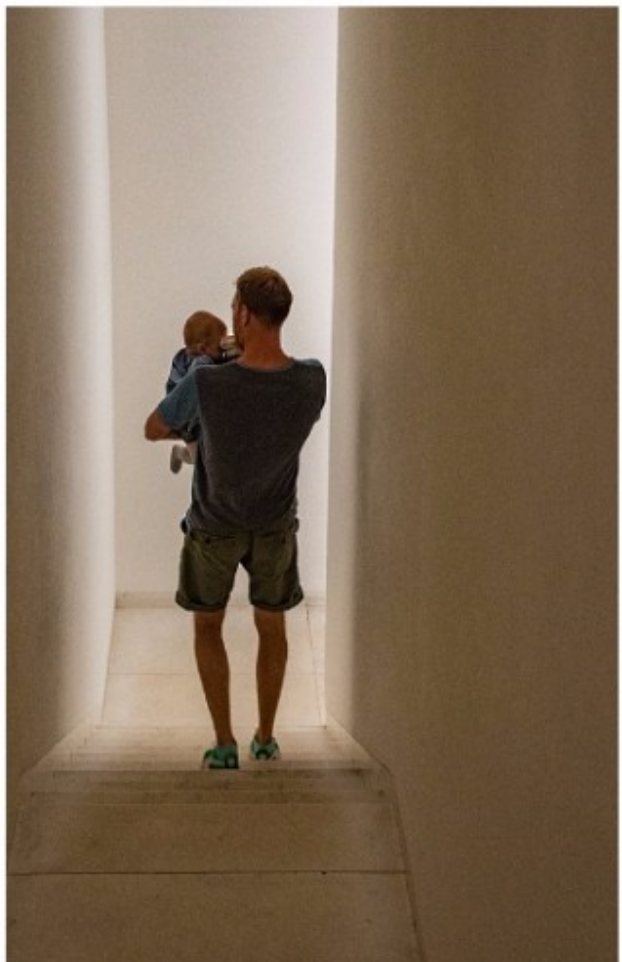
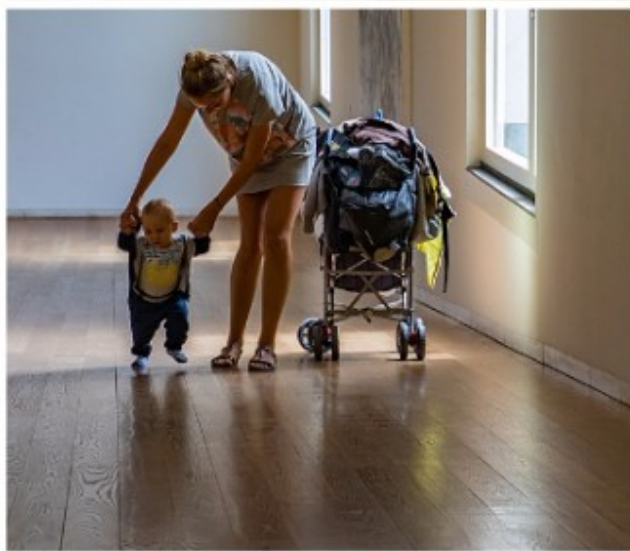


There are notable mercados in and around Porto. The one shown above is the Mercado do Bolhão, located in the commercial part of the city. It is filled with fresh fruits, bread, vegetables, as well as meat and fresh fish. The two-story, wrought iron structure shows signs of the ages.

The the Livraria Lello bookstore (bottom right) is where it was rumored that J.K. Rowling got her inspiration for her Harry Potter books. Tickets are sold for 4 euros just to enter the bookstore, which is quite a clever marketing ploy, as they now draw thousands of paying customers per day, while previously they were jammed with gawkers who were not generating income.



The fish market at Matosinhos is one of the most inviting ones we've seen. We would have no hesitation buying fresh fish here, as all the fish are on ice and appear fresh. A special treat is we can select a fresh fish from any vendor at this mercado, have the vendor clean the fish and the local restaurant will cook it on site, served with salad and wine. We bought a fresh turbot (center photo), and had our lunch with 2 former couples from Cuenca.



We also stopped in at the [Serralves Museum of Contemporary Arts](#) to see the latest exhibition. The artists are rotated regularly, and this time, the visitors were more photogenic to us than the exhibits themselves.



One of our day trips was a train ride starting from the São Bento train station in Porto, along the Douro river to the Pinhão station to see the tile paintings. We should have extended the trip to Pocinho, the end of the line to ride over the non-urban parts of the Douro river. Just a warning though, that the old train cars offer no creature comforts, and there are a lot of stops along the way, making this a rather slow trip with only marginal scenery along the way.



We stayed in Porto for 10 days, which gave us an opportunity to revisit our favorite places and observe them as the lighting changed. The weather in Porto is much like Portland, with many cloudy days sprinkled with sunny moments. The old part of the city is truly a photographer's delight.

, June 27, 2017

[Travel • Porto, Portugal](#)

Portugal 4 – Feira Medieval de Penedono



We are staying in the Douro Valley today, and our host told us that there is an annual festival this weekend in Penedono, a nearby town with a castle. We decided to check it out.

In Northern California, we have the Renaissance Fair every summer. This is very much like that, but only lasts the first weekend of each July, and we were told it celebrates the repelling of the Moorish invaders in Medieval times.



People dress in attire appropriate to the era, and entertain the crowds that come to enjoy the festival. Unlike in California, entry to this festival was free, which was a pleasant surprise. The quality of the vendors and entertainers was top notch throughout.



One vendor sold "magic sangria" for 1 EU (left column). When he poured the drink (lower left), it smoked like something straight out of Hogwarts. Looking into the cup (top middle), you could see small globules of what I guess to be magic ice.

There was a man making custom shoes at the festival (center column and middle-right), and customers seemed quite pleased with his work. I had a small leather piece that was wearing thin on my wallet, and he fixed it up on-the-spot very nicely for 1 EU.

The woman top-right is making a sculpture out of granite as the audience watched. She is using period tools, and the work is slow, but the two pieces she had on display were gorgeous. The man in the lower-right was a musician with fascinating period-style eyeglasses.



Lots of BBQ pork for lunch -- delicious and only 1.5 EU for a sandwich (center and top-right). Instead of barbecuing a whole pig like we see in Ecuador, the Portuguese combine several roasts, and don't eat all the parts of the pig. There were also some handicrafts for sale, all of which were presumably handmade by the vendor.



Upper-right gives an overview of the village. Plenty of people to keep the vendors busy, but not at all crowded until the evening, just as we were leaving.

There was a foot-powered merry-go-round for the kids. The kids in the upper-center and lower-left are riding it, with the big sister comforting her frightened little sister in lower-left. Tomorrow will have a second video, showing the merry-go-round in action.

The creature in the lower-right was some kind of gremlin. Rather out of character, but cute. A couple of them (apparently husband and wife) wandered the grounds, talking to startled tourists along the way.

Portugal 5 – Douro Valley



We spent two days in the Douro Valley. This was less than we had originally planned, but other parts of Portugal keep drawing us to visit too. We will probably return here at some point, and spend more time in this region when we do.

This is one of the primary port wine producing areas of Portugal, and vineyards seems to stretch on to infinity. In the 1860's a **small yellow mite** was inadvertently introduced from North America. The result was widespread devastation of whole regions, as wine making families went broke. These terraces are very expensive to develop and expensive to maintain. Even 150 years later, some fields can be seen laying fallow, having never been replanted (center).

We did see one such field being completely rebuilt to start growing grapes for new wines again (lower left). A few fields here and there have converted to vertical rows (bottom center), making it possible to harvest using machines. The purists feel the terraces and hand harvesting produce the best wines though.



Though we visited early in the grape growing season (harvest won't occur for at least another 3 months), there are small grapes on the vines, and some have already started turning color (center row). We understand that some vineyards still manually crush grapes with bare feet in this region.

Portugal provides almost **50% of all cork in the world**. We never had a chance to actually see the harvesting process, but we occasionally came across large amounts being hauled or stored (lower right).



We stayed at [Douro Yachts & Chalets](#) in Douro Valley, where you can see the train tracks and vineyards (top left). The train crossed the river very close to us, so we went over to the Ferradosa station to photograph the train bridge. On our second outing there, a train came through (they pass 8 times per day), so we were able to include that element.



Our stay here provided some of the darkest skies we have ever seen since getting digital cameras – once the local lights were turned off by the city at 2AM. I have been interested in night sky photography for awhile, but rarely find myself with clear, dark skies to experiment with.

The above image has the boat winch in the foreground, and star trails showing behind it. I am not completely happy with the results, but I have now have one more evening of experience. Maybe someday I will be able to polish this technique.

Portugal 6 – Minho Province



As always, friendly faces prevailed at the gigantic [Feira de Barcelos](#) open-air market. This market has been held here since the early fifteenth century, and is a must-see if you're in the area. It is the largest market in Portugal, and one of the largest in Europe.



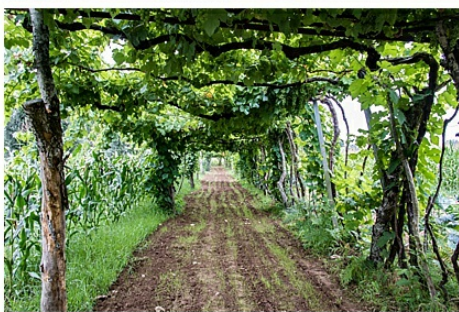
Every Thursday, the vendors fill the tree-lined Campo da Republica public square. The open-air market is filled with a plethora of fresh fruits and vegetables, flowers, live chickens and rabbits, bacalao, pastry, cheeses, cured meats, saddles, handicrafts and designer and counterfeit clothing. The Barcelos Cockerel (bottom right) is seen everywhere, in the form of cork wine tops, painted souvenir handicrafts, pot holders, coffee cups – and even live (bottom left).



The vendors are some of the friendliest we have met, with villagers hawking everything, including scrawny chickens, clothing, hand-embroidered linen, pots and pans, pottery, fruit, shoes, lingerie, and many other goods. The market is teeming with shoppers from neighboring countries as well as those from the region.



Situated in the heart of Minho, Braga is one of the oldest cities in the country and one of the country's main religious centers. Above are images from the Bom Jesus do Monte Sanctuary, just below our hotel, at sunset.



Minho is famous for their wine, called [Vinho Verde](#) (literally 'green wine', but which really means 'young wine'). We enjoyed this light and fresh sparkling variety at many of the restaurants from Braga to [Viana do Castelo](#). The vineyards here have a different growing style that is unique among the areas we have seen so far. The vines are grown high off the ground, letting the grapes hang below, protecting them from moisture and frost. Harvesting of these grapes looks fascinating, and we hope to return to Portugal in the near future during grape harvest time to witness it ourselves.

, July 10, 2017

[Travel](#) • [Portugal](#)

Portugal 7 – Aveiro



In between Porto and Lisbon, we stayed in [Aveiro](#), a town that boasts canals and is sometimes called the *Portuguese Venice*. Our first stop was the fish market around the corner from our hotel. Though small, with no more than 15 stalls, it had charm and the people were friendly. A vendor selling eels (center) particularly caught our attention, when we realized that the eels had already been gutted and cleaned... yet were still trying to wriggle away and seemed very much alive! (bottom center).



As evening set, we wandered around town and the few canals. The system of artificial canals was opened in 1808, and has remained largely unchanged since that time. The primary source of income for this town is tourism.



The next day, we wandered to explore other parts of the town. The boats ("barcos moliceiros") were decorated with elaborate paintings on their bow (lower left) and in the past were used to harvest seaweed. Now they carry tourists around the canals. There were also several murals around town (upper center and right), and many buildings had decorative mural tiles on their facade (the former rail station is shown in the lower center and right).



On our way out of town, we decided to stop by Salinas to see the salt producing flats. This was Sunday though, and work was shut down. We heard some music and laughing from a small hut, and were walking past it to reach the salt ponds (upper left and center), when we discovered a birthday party underway.

A group had gotten together to celebrate the birthday of the man above playing the accordion, who also oversees the salt pond as his day job. This group has been meeting here every Sunday for years for music, Portuguese stew and wine. Another man came over and offered us both a piece of cake and a glass of wine, as we were invited to join the fun. We ended up talking to a woman in the group whom had spent years in Canada and spoke excellent English, as she shared her story with us.

Portugal 8 – Lisbon Oceanarium

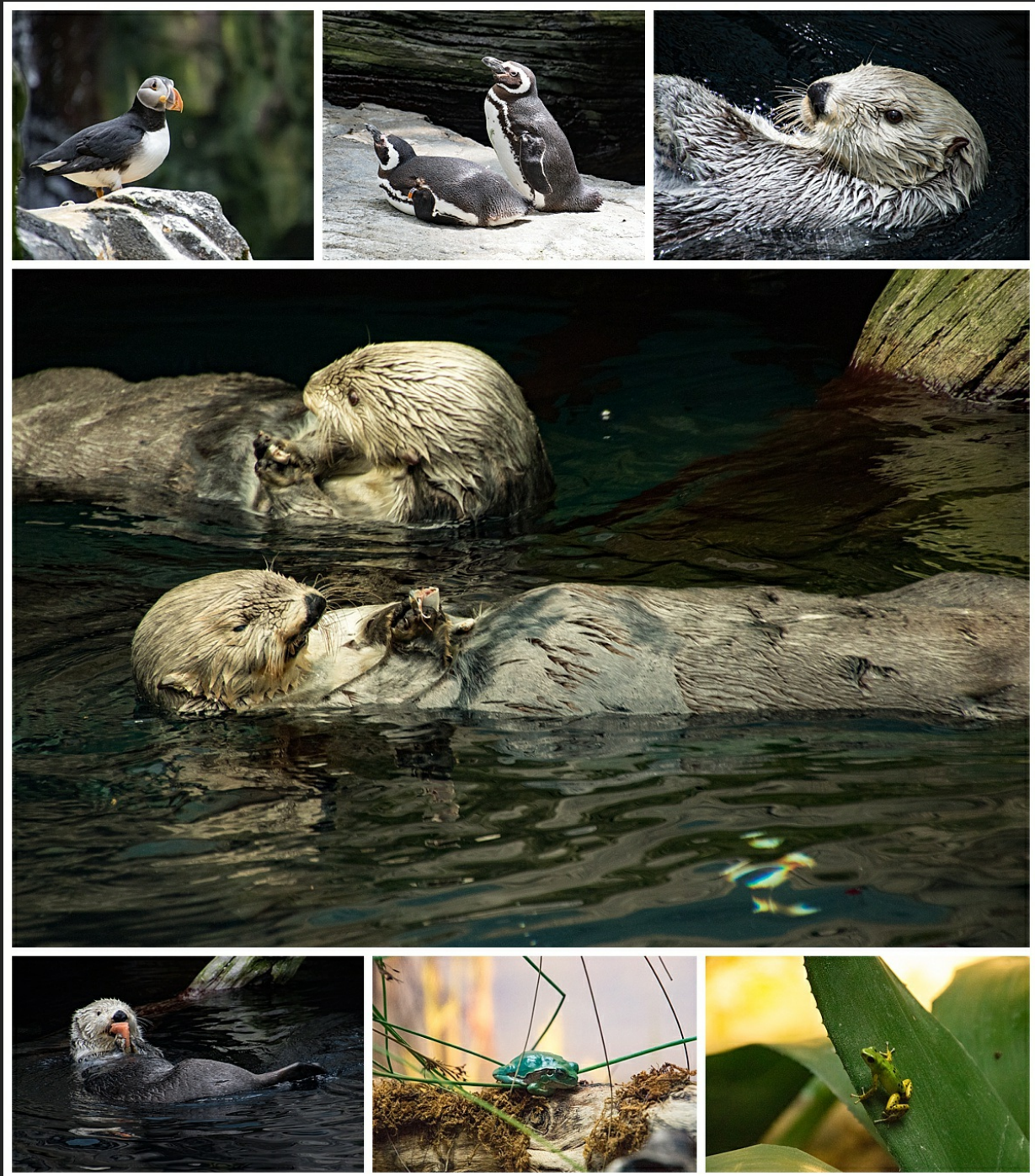


We went to the world-class [Oceanarium](#) in Lisbon today. We were joined by David and Debi Billings (right column), friends we knew in Cuenca who have recently moved to Portugal.

The Oceanarium opened in 1998, was the centerpiece for the World's Fair, and is the [largest indoor aquarium in Europe](#) with more than a million visitors a year. The free-standing building sits in an artificial lagoon (upper left), and has many educational exhibits promoting conservation of nature, including the whale made from plastic water bottles (bottom left).



Of course, in any aquarium, the main attraction is the large variety of sea life, from sharks, rays, seahorses to star fish and sea urchins. There is even a sunfish here (center), which is rarely kept in captivity, due to their unique requirements and demanding care. The main 23 foot high tank allows bottom dwellers (manta ray top center and right) to coexist alongside surface dwelling fish (barracuda top right).



Different habitats were created representing the Antarctic coast line, Indian coral reefs, to the Pacific kelp forests, which displayed puffins (upper left), penguins (upper center), frogs (lower center and right), and otters (remaining images). Surprisingly, the penguins on display came from the San Francisco zoo, while the otters came from Alaska.



In addition to the massive central tank, there were 25 thematic aquariums housing animals such as spiny lobsters (bottom center), jellyfish (center), moray eels, a very active octopus over 10' long (upper right), sea dragons and other impressive creatures. It was a well conceived design with many indoor and outdoor viewing areas on two stories. The ocean ecosystems were displayed in a very natural setting with well preserved coral and marine plants.



Exhibits like these are always enjoyed by families and school groups, and this was no exception. The kids were a joy to watch.

, July 13, 2017

[Animals, Travel](#) • [Portugal](#)

Portugal 9 – Lisbon



Our three month adventure in Europe and Central Asia is now over. This is our 37th and final blog entry covering this trip that has taken us to [Italy](#), [Uzbekistan](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Georgia](#), [Armenia](#), and finishing with a month in [Portugal](#).

On our last day in Lisbon, we decided to check out their zoo. We arrived just as the dolphin show was starting, so we quickly went to Dolphin's Bay to watch. It was excellent entertainment, and a good way to start the day. As it turned out, this was the highlight of the zoo.



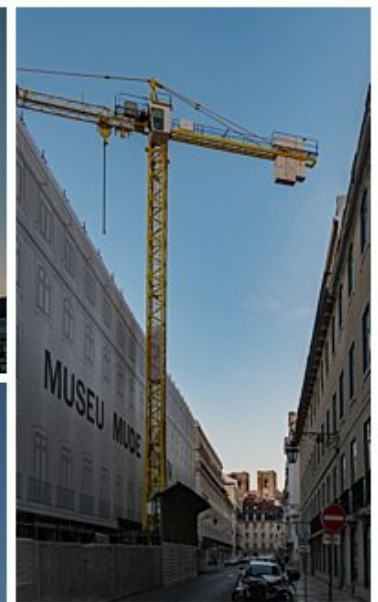
There was the usual cast of animals at the zoo, in fairly standard zoo enclosures. Many of the enclosures appeared empty at first, as the animals were sleeping. Later, many of them woke up and made an appearance. The white Siberian tiger (center) was the most unusual animal among the collection.



We often enjoy watching children at places such as this, and the zoo was no exception. There was an interesting standing cable car (center and upper-left) that circled the zoo property, giving an aerial view of the property. As expected, there were groups of school children (center left, bottom-left and right-center) having fun. Some people used public transportation, including the ubiquitous trams (upper and lower right), to reach the zoo.



Near the Airbnb in the Alfama district where we were staying was the [São Domingos cathedral](#), which is considered a national monument, built in 1241. We had seen so many cathedrals in the past three months that we almost passed this one by. We decided to walk in, on our way back to our apartment, and were glad we did. This one was quite different from every other cathedral we had seen. It was a medieval church that had been destroyed and restored several times. The stone columns showed the centuries that have passed (upper left), with signs of the fire in 1995 that gutted the church left intact.



Lisbon is a city undergoing massive change. Almost everywhere we turned, there were more construction cranes or facades under protective covering (center left) for new construction projects or renovation. Unfortunately, the river front is being transformed into a massive cruise ship terminal (bottom row). On some days, more than 10 cruise ships come into the Lisbon port already, as cruise ship companies are adding this city to their routes. This will not be a very pleasant place to visit in the next year or two when this all opens...

Lisbon is famous for **Fado**, a music genre characterized by mournful tunes and lyrics, and some consider this the soul of Portuguese culture.

There were at least a dozen restaurants within a few blocks of where we were staying that had Fado with dinner, so of course we had to sample a couple of them. In general, the music was very pleasant, but the food was poor and the prices were exorbitant. Here is a short clip that gives a feel of the music without the downsides...

Some say that the fado music in Porto is quite different from this Lisbon variety, and was originally sung by suitors below the balconies of the singer's affections. By tradition, a person is only allowed to sing Fado if they have attended the music university and have reached at least the third year of study.

Portugal is a country that loves music. We came across dozens of street musicians that were enjoyable enough to stop and watch for awhile... and video. We will finish our Portugal blog with this street performing group singing "I wanna dance with you," with a few of the zoo images interspersed.

Hope you have enjoyed reading about our recent travels as much as we have enjoyed experiencing – and writing about – them.