

There's plenty to see and do on an intimate and relaxing cruise which takes you right into the heart of Portugal's stunning cities

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# Take me to the river



**GRACEFUL SCENE** Beautiful city of Porto



**WINE SCENERY** Vineyards along the river



**GO WITH FLOW** On Portugal's Douro River

*'It's a picturesque river valley with dramatic cliffs'*

## River cruising is becoming an increasingly popular way to spend a holiday.

More than 100,000 Brits took one last year – and yours truly has taken two this year alone.

The leisurely pace of exploring Europe on a vessel carrying around 100 guests makes it way more relaxing and far more intimate than an ocean-going cruise.

You soon feel like you're on a floating house party as you get to know your fellow passengers.

A river cruise ship docks right in the heart of a city, so there aren't any long transfers to reach the different attractions along your route. You just stroll off the ship and you're there.

I took myself off to Portugal on a Viking Cruise and spent 10 days on their Douro River Cruise.

After two days in lovely Lisbon, enjoying fabulous sightseeing and fine food, we took a coach to Porto to board the boat.

Viking Osfrid is a new vessel and a real stunner. With a small swimming pool on the sun deck, a spacious restaurant, panoramic lounge and bar – and a good variety of staterooms for different budgets – it's a great base for a week.

The beds are comfortable, the showers hot and the food is especially good. And the service is exceptional – the staff can't do enough for you, so you feel thoroughly spoiled.

Good news for Scots is that regional flights are included in the overall price – as are all meals, local wines,

beer and soft drinks with meals, teas, coffees and 11 guided tours, including four in Unesco World Heritage Sites.

But why choose the Douro itinerary over others? Because it's a hugely picturesque river valley with dramatic cliffs, lush hillsides, medieval walled villages and beautiful vineyards.

A cruise down the river transports you deep into one of the most unspoilt corners of Europe.

And if wine's your thing, you're going to love this cruise. You'll see how table wine and port is made ... and be able to taste it every day.

Our first visit was to the stunning university at Coimbra, which is one of Europe's oldest and most prestigious.

The students wear traditional black capes – inspiring JK Rowling's choice for the Hogwarts pupils in Harry Potter after her time living in Portugal.

Lunch here came complete with a fado band – the traditional, melancholic music of Portugal – setting the tone for a wonderful cruise.

The next day we got to visit shabby-chic, full-of-character Porto.

Portugal's second city has graceful bridges, baroque cathedrals and wonderful historic buildings, all set among narrow cobbled streets.

Highlights in the next days came thick and fast. One was a visit to the Mateus Palace and Gardens.

The stunning residence of the family behind the rosé wine so popular in the 70s and 80s has a pinnacle façade, antique-strewn interiors and exquisite sculpted gardens.

Castelo Rodrigo is another gem – a hilltop village with 16th century

houses and remnants of the Jewish community who established a home here when exiled from Spain.

A definite red-letter day was the trip to Salamanca in Spain. This ancient city is like a Middle Ages living museum.

Home to a world-famous 13th century university and two magnificent cathedrals, this is one of Spain's most beautiful cities with the finest square in the country.

One of the lovely things about being on a river cruise is that you gain access to some pretty special places.

Our lunchtime visit to a small family bakery and local winery in Favaios, deep in the Douro Valley, was one of many occasions when you felt like an honoured guest, not a tourist.

The biggest surprise of the trip was the last day in Lamego, a small town I'd never even heard of despite many visits to Portugal.

The baroque Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies, which dates back to the 14th century, is one of the most stunning shrines I've seen.

It has beautiful blue and white traditional tiles decorating the nine terraces that take pilgrims up to the church.

It's 686 steps up to the church – and they do it on their knees – so I was pretty glad that a coach dropped us off at the top so we could see the shrine and then just walk down.

It was a fine end to a relaxing, fascinating trip that I would thoroughly recommend.

But it books up early, so get the diary out well in advance.

## Travel info

■ Viking River Cruises offer a 10-day river cruise starting in Lisbon and ending in Porto. For details, go to [www.vikingrivercruises.co.uk/cruise-destinations/europe/portugals-river-gold/2016-porto-pinhao-porto/index.html](http://www.vikingrivercruises.co.uk/cruise-destinations/europe/portugals-river-gold/2016-porto-pinhao-porto/index.html) or call 0800 319 66 60. Prices start from £1695 (December 12, 2016 departure).

**SCENIC START**  
Douro River Cruise begins in Porto city

