

# painting but a real masterpiece

row multi-storey building of haphazard shapes and sizes, with mismatched tiling, identical windows and doors, all looking rather 'worn' and many have (not-so) attractive corrugated iron sheet exterior finishings on walls and roofs.

In fact, corrugated iron seems to feature heavily throughout the city, something the locals don't seem to notice. I found this out after asking a presumably knowledgeable city employee why so much corrugated iron was used in local construction, only to be answered with a rather confused gaze and the question "what iron?"

There is a very fine line separating charming and quirky from degraded and neglected.

However, taking into account that Oporto was in fact, at one point in Portugal's history, the heart of national industrialism and boomed with productivity, mainly in the textile trade, the number of abandoned warehouses should come as no surprise as over the years productivity dwindled and imports from Asia proved strong and more affordable competition.

Nevertheless, the City is fascinating, if not somewhat bewildering.

Contrary to what immediately greets the eye Oporto in fact covers a huge area.

With a population of over two million people, the Greater Metropolitan Area of Oporto is divided into various districts and parishes, the most famous of which – its historical quarter – is classed a 'World Heritage Site' by UNESCO.

Navigating the city is quite a mission as the roads don't seem to follow any basic system and one-way streets are, reportedly, inverted on a regular basis. Traffic is intense most of the day, and a GPS system is strongly recommended. Not for the faint-hearted or timid drivers.

Nevertheless, Oporto is home to some of the country's most characteristic and wonderful traits; people are genuinely welcoming as mainstream tourism has not manipulated hospitality, there is a real sense of history and culture, and, on the whole, a pretty laid-back feel.

Taking a cruise along the Douro, whether for an hour, a day or a week, can prove a very relaxing experience and offers some incredible views along the river banks. Northern Portugal is rife with greenery and even in the built-up metropolis this is evident.

Oak trees replace the Algarve's palms, being particularly beautiful when the leaves turn a stunning red and gold, contrasting with the region's lush, rich



Pictured above: A colourful 'hotch-potch' of houses clinging to the rock face above the River Douro, and below: An ancient church on the river side displaying the cross of the Crusaders and a traditional mural of typical blue and white Portuguese tiles 'um painel de azulejos'. Opposite page - top: One of the traditional boats used to transport casks of port wine along the River Douro; middle: A view from the *Câmara de Porto* (Oporto City Hall) in the centre of the city; bottom: Three of the six bridges, ancient and modern, that span the river from Vila Nova da Gaia on the southern bank to Oporto on the northern bank. (Photos: Carrie-Marie Bratley)



green fir trees.

On the opposite side of the river, in Vila Nova de Gaia (or just Gaia) it is the region's history of Port wine production that dominates, with tours round some of Portugal's most famous caves and wineries available all year round.

Oporto also offers some of Portugal's most unique gastronomic experiences. Whilst visiting the city, be sure to try a 'Francesinha'.

Literally translating as 'Little French Girl' in Portuguese, a Francesinha is a traditional Oporto delicacy, a 'doorstopper' sandwich stacked with wet-cured ham, linguica (spicy cured sausage), fresh sausage, steak or roast meat, covered with melted cheese and a hot thick tomato and beer sauce.

Nightlife is one of Oporto's fortes and ranges from quaint riverside haunts to modern nightclubs. Plays, concerts and other theatrical events are hosted all year round.

Oporto is a generally very safe

city to enjoy.

Whereas the Algarve is all about leisure and is generally tourism-based, Alentejo lives off agriculture and Lisbon is the sophisticated business centre of Portugal, Northern Portugal has little more to offer than the essence of nature, the roots of Portuguese History, and a unique identity to which few are left indifferent. Not what I expected, but certainly worth the trip.

For more information on what to do and see in Oporto, or how to get there, go to: [www.portoturismo.pt](http://www.portoturismo.pt).

(For a suggestion on where to stay in Northern Portugal, and be pampered at the same time, see next week's edition of The Portugal News.)

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