



PORTUGAL'S SECOND BIGGEST CITY GROWS ON YOU. IT HAS HISTORY, PERSONALITY, CHARM AND EXCITEMENT, AND IT GETS MORE INTERESTING EVERY DAY. IT MAY BE SECOND IN RANKING, BUT IT'S NEVER SECOND BEST. HERE'S JUST A TASTER

Words: SANDRA GATO

Oh Porto

This page: The extraordinary meat, mushroom and truffle rissole at Brasão. Opposite, top left clockwise: Pinks and reds for blossoming romance, at Torel Avangarde; Chef Vitor Matos of Blind takes you on an adventure of flavours, textures and surprises; Brasão decor is warm and inviting; Village by Boa is an island of what was once workmen's cottages



IT WASN'T LOVE at first sight for me. Not because of the weather – more similar to north European shores like the British ones (and, according to some, one of the reasons why the city has long had a special relationship with Britain – Port wine, for starters) – but because it has a kind of brutal honesty that can be felt as rudeness when you're young, and a bit superficial.

But when you allow yourself to go a bit deeper, you cannot help loving a city where you are welcomed with open arms – even, as in my case, when you are from Lisbon (the eternal rival!) – and where you discover friends for life.

Porto is real, an 'in your face' kind of city that keeps you coming back for more. It bewitches you and makes you promise you will never leave. You do leave, but already making plans to come back as soon as possible.

And then, as with any place or person you love, you have rituals, special moments that you like to revisit. But that doesn't stop you from falling in love with new inspiring projects and ideas that seem to appear out of nowhere everytime you go away.

Not so many years ago, there weren't many incredible places to stay in Porto. One of the first ones to open, in 2017, with a totally different approach was **Torel Avangarde** (Rua da Restauração, 336. Tel: 220 110 082). Located in a privileged location, with top views of Douro river, it has a classical exterior but a very modern heart.

Each of the rooms (60 in total) is dedicated to a famous personality within the art world, be it fashion, film, writing, design or dance. This time round, I was lucky enough to stay in another building, with 11 rooms, that was added to the original one – namely the suite dedicated to the actress and inventor Hedy Lamarr, born in 1914.

Decorated in dark, warm colours with splashes of femininity (like the pink sofá in the living room), it

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Left: Porto boasts six bridges, the most famous being the Ponte Dom Luís. Left below: By the pool of the Torel Avangarde, with views down the Douro. This page: Below: A sandwich like no other at Casa Guedes. Bottom: The Batalha Centro de Cinema

has a big bath tub next to the windows that deliver Porto at your feet.

This is the kind of hotel that is relaxed but royal at the same time. And, believe me, although you're surrounded by art, the view – boats up and down the river, the change of light throughout the day, the rooftops of the old traditional houses – is more than enough to keep you mesmerized.

But because Porto can be so many things, it's impossible not to fall in love with a new kind of accommodation in town, **Village by Boa** (Rua do Bonjardim, 541. Tel: 910 985 706). Right in the middle of the city, in the Trindade area, it used to be known as Bairro do Silva, a so-called 'ilha' (a housing complex where industrial workers used to live). It is believed that these 'islands' were inspired by British back-to-back style houses.

At Boa, five entire buildings were transformed into 40 apartments that give you all the comfort you can ask for, but keeping the 'ilha' feeling.

The idea is that this is your home away from home. There is no reception, you are given a pin number to enter and you decide, online, at what time you want breakfast to be delivered at your door in the morning. There is also a penthouse on the last floor of the tallest building, called The Space by Boa that can be rented for special occasions (meetings, birthday dinners, etc). Soon there will be a food store with local products so you can cook your own meal (all apartments include a fully-equipped kitchen).

But if cooking is not in the plan, Porto has an immensity of options (one of the other reasons I take the train up north so many times), traditional or not.

Last time, I tried **Blind** (Rua de Entreparedes 40. Tel: 226 001 580). As the name implies, you

must let yourself go, not ask too many questions beforehand, eyes wide shut so to speak.

You can choose between a ten- or 12-moments menu and chef Vitor Matos (Michelin star in another restaurant in town and, in my modest opinion, another will be coming very soon to this one) and his team will take you on a wonderful journey of flavours, textures and surprises. With suggestive names like Candlelight, Under the Skin, Marine Garden or Memories from my Childhood, brace yourself for one of the most intense gastronomic nights of your life. Provocative, experimental, sexy.

But if you just feel like tasting one of the best Francesinhas (the famous dish made of a very rich meat and egg sandwich covered in a thick hot sauce) in town, head for **Brasão** (there are already five around Porto: Aliados, Coliseu, Foz, Salgueiros e Antas. I went to the most recent opening, in Avenida Fernão de Magalhães 1530. Tel: 913 807 372).

The purpose here is to get past and present (flavours, dishes, ambiences) to meet in an easy way. Besides the already mentioned bestseller, the Francesinha (well balanced and delicious), there's the rissóis – the meat, mushroom and truffle is an absolute must – the fried onion and the rice chips with hot sauce that taste even better with a craft beer (many great ones to choose from in the menu). ☺

Heading for Porto? We've focused on food here but there are so many must-visit sights in and around this glorious city. Check out visitporto.travel and also introducingporto.com and Viator.com – all of which detail the key highlights and the many sightseeing and side trip options to, among others, Guimarães and Braga, Coimbra, Aveiro and the Peneda-Gerês National Park.

New passions, old loves

CASA SÃO ROQUE - ART CENTRE

It is a new find for me – and already on top of my favourites list – but has been there for a while, since 1759, to be precise. Part of Quinta da Lameira, it was built as a manor and hunting house and later it became the property of one of the Port wine families and got the name Casa Ramos Pinto. Now it is an art centre. Until September there's an Emily Wardill exhibition (*Hourless and at Large*) showing, but what I truly love about this place is the house itself, full of amazing details, and the beautiful gardens, with a maze included. **W:** casasroque.art

MUSEU ROMÂNTICO

Part of Museu do Porto – they call it the Romanticism Extension – this is a place I like to go just to see beautiful things and think of nothing (we all have those kinds of days, right?). Located near Palácio de Cristal and with beautiful river views gardens, it is an old country house, built in the 18th century. It became a museum in 1972 with the purpose of showcasing the ambiance of a 19th-century bourgeoisie home. You can visit all the furnished rooms and get the feeling how it was to live in times that were more romantic. **W:** museudacidadedoporto.pt



CASA GUEDES

This is the place to go when you just need a delicious boost to keep you going for a couple more hours walking around the city. It's famous snack is a sandwich (can be eaten with fries or not) made of pernil (pig leg) and Serra da Estrela cheese. A weird combination? Only before trying one! This is the kind of traditional delicacy that will make you go back to Porto time and time again! **W:** casaguedes.pt

BATALHA CENTRO DE CINEMA

It has been a film centre for decades with a complex and, at times, sad history that saw it close its doors many times. A beautiful building now totally restored, you can go and watch historic movies in a very special environment for cinema lovers. A wonderful plus: the Júlio Pomar paintings (that were sadly once covered) are again visible and honoured as they should be. **W:** batalhacentrodecinema.pt

