



EXPLORE



[Home](#) > [Destinations](#) > [Portugal River](#) > Douro River Cruise Tips

Douro River Cruise Tips



By Carolyn Spencer Brown, Editor in Chief



Ports of call on a Douro River cruise may not have quite the same pull to them as stops on other European rivers, like the [Rhine River](#) or [Danube River](#), but what gives this largely pastoral waterway the most beautiful scenery of any in Europe is its mostly rural terrain, not to mention superb wines, from port to Muscatel.

For cruise travelers, the Douro stretches from the Atlantic Ocean and the port city of Porto, all the way east and south to Spain's Vega de Terron (essentially a docking station where passengers head to the gorgeous golden city of Salamanca). Porto, Portugal's second-largest city, has some 2,000 years of history behind it. While it's best known for the production of port wine (wine that's fortified with the addition of brandy), it's a bustling, cosmopolitan metropolis. Being so close to the ocean gives Porto a bit of a San Francisco feel; it's every bit as hilly, street life is colorful, and occasionally a dense fog rolls in off the Atlantic.

Once you leave Porto, everything changes. For the rest of the trip, you'll be stopping at places like Bitetos, Regua, Pinhao, Barca d'Alva and Vega de Terron -- small rural villages that you've likely never heard of. Some of the places in which you'll dock are actually nothing much but piers with access to a place to board the motorcoaches.

What's most heartening about a cruise on the Douro is the small surprises. The tiny town of Pinhao, which lies at the heart of Douro's wine country, reminds you of a cross between California's Napa Valley and Italy's Tuscany (only far less touristy). It's simply gorgeous country, whether in the lush vineyard regions closer to Porto or in the wild, craggy landscapes to the east, near the border with Spain.

The only motorcoaches you may see on the twisting winding roads are those from your own ship. Souvenir shops outside the city of Porto are rare, and locals, perhaps because tourists are still a relative novelty, are friendly, welcoming and warm. Visits to a range of *quintas*, the Portuguese term for wineries, mostly focus on the region's famed port wines, but the winemakers in the Douro region also produce beautiful reds and whites.

All in all, a Douro River cruise comprises so many small discoveries, small pleasures and such a generous amount of time sailing on a riverboat that you'll be lulled into a relaxing rhythm that's far away from frantic sightseeing and over-scheduled days. Chances are, you'll be dreaming of that Douro magic long after you get home.

Best Time for Douro River Cruises

The Douro has a long cruise season, typically beginning in late March and running into November. Though there's no Christmas markets season, Viking River Cruises offers sailings through December, as well.

The premier times to visit the Douro are in springtime, May and June, and then again during harvest season -- in fall months of September and October.

For the best value pricing, shoulder season months, like March to early May and then again in November, offer the cheapest fares, but weather can be cool and rainy. Mid-July through August is another good time for snagging deals; the region can be very hot then.



Douro River Cruise Lines

The Douro has become more popular, with more lines offering Douro itineraries. These include [AmaWaterways](#), [APT](#), [CroisiEurope](#), [Scenic](#), [Uniworld](#) and [Viking River Cruises](#). [Emerald Waterways](#) is adding a ship, *Emerald Radiance*, in 2017.

In many cases, ships are actually operated by DouroAzul, a Portugal-based company that owns much of the region's cruising infrastructure, from docking facilities to motorcoaches. Each company does have input into their own operations, whether it's menus, tours or onboard ambience. And they have input to a degree into their own ships; [AmaWaterways](#), for instance, has incorporated its popular balcony/picture window suite design, and [Viking River](#) has its "Longship"-style two-room suites. Dining rooms, lounges and sun decks, however, are all similarly laid out, with the only difference being their furnishings.

[CroisiEurope](#), [Scenic](#) and - in 2017, [Emerald](#) - fully own and operate their voyages.

Douro River Cruise Itineraries

Itineraries vary very little between cruise lines. Typically, 10-night trips begin with land tours in Madrid or, on the reverse, in [Lisbon](#) before passengers are transported by motorcoach to their ships. The seven-night cruise itself travels between the delightful UNESCO World Heritage city of Porto and a tiny village, just over the Spanish border, called Vega de Terron; the latter is the jumping-off point for the two-hour bus ride to Salamanca.

You will find most of the itinerary highlights on all the lines. Bookended by two genuinely intriguing cities -- Spain's Salamanca and Portugal's Porto -- a fair portion of the weeklong itinerary is actually pastoral and laid-back. While there's plenty to do, one oddity of the Douro experience is that there's no night navigation, so ships must cruise from sunrise to sunset. The good news? For those who love being "at sea" on the river, there's plenty of time spent cruising.



Douro River Cruise Port Highlights

Porto: After Lisbon, Porto is Portugal's largest city and serves as a port of embarkation and/or port debarkation for Douro cruises. The ancient city, one of the most historic in Europe, dates back to the Roman Empire and also has influences from periods such as Gothic and Baroque, tucked within Romanesque city walls. The old town of Porto, which is registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is Ribeira, and it's home to the gold-laden Sao Francisco Church, its most elaborate. It's also where you'll find the almost spare Se Cathedral, built in the 12th century to serve as fortress as well as church. Don't miss the train station at Sao Bento for its lively tile murals depicting the Portuguese people working, playing, living. The Dom Luis Bridge, which you can cross by tram, car or on foot, was designed by a disciple of Gustave Eiffel.

On a somewhat smaller but no less enchanting scale, the city's Clerigos district is home to one of the world's most famous bookstores. The Gothic-esque, multistory Livraria Lello was the inspiration for J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. (She was teaching English in Porto and spent a lot of time there.) And while there are tons of souvenir shops scattered all over the old town selling magnets and such, don't miss A Vida Portuguesa for high-quality, handmade products that are designed and crafted in Portugal. (These include shoes, soaps, pretty notebooks, hand-painted tiles, etc.)

Vila Nova de Gaia: This city lies across the Douro from Porto, and it's where ships dock. Also hilly as it rises off the river, this area is best known for the port houses that stud its mountainside. Our ship featured a tour to Grahams, a gorgeous facility that included a visit to the winery in addition to a tasting. It boasts a fantastic view of Porto across the river, and it has a fabulous bar and restaurant.

There are lots of options for tasting port in Gaia. Other major houses include Taylor's, Ferreira, Sandeman and Callem. What's also fun is simply wandering around the waterfront and checking out less well-known tasting houses. (Look for Kopke, which matches chocolates to its ports.)

Scenic cruising: Because sailing takes place during the day, several mornings and afternoons are spent on the river. (Tours often leave one dock in the morning and return for lunch at another as the ship moves from place to place.) This makes for a relaxing, easygoing vibe onboard, and the scenery is magnificent, including an intriguing series of locks. (One of the five we went through, Valeira, represented a drop (or rise) of 109 feet.)



Pinhao: Most of your time docked in Pinhao, part of the gorgeous Vila Real district, will be spent on excursions to places like Quintana do Seixo (part of the mighty Sandemans conglomerate) to taste port and learn how it was made. You'll also likely visit Mateus Palace, known for its gorgeous gardens. Some cruises spend overnights there, giving you time to explore the waterfront, which is tons of fun, with cafes and wine bars; on a nice night, it feels like half the town is out, strolling, singing and drinking.

Salamanca: An absolute highlight of a Douro cruise, Salamanca, northwest of Madrid, is one of the most gorgeous cities in Spain. Dating back to the Roman Empire, it's first and foremost a university town since the 12th century. The city, home to about 230,000 residents, is also known for its historic Old and New cathedrals (Renaissance and Gothic, respectively), which sit side by side. Casa Lis, an art deco and art nouveau museum, is housed in a palace with stained-glass ceilings and windows. Saving the best for last, the Plaza Major, the heart of Salamanca, is an 18th-century square, completely surrounded by golden limestone buildings and ringed with alfresco cafes.



Douro River Cruise Tips

Time is limited in Porto. While most cruise lines offer a handful of tours showcasing the attractions of Porto and, just across the river, the city of Vila de Gaia, it's a fascinating place to visit. The cruise-ship tours, while good overviews of the making of port and the history of the area, are by no means satisfying enough. While most of the cruise lines do offer pre- and post-cruise trips to better-known cities like Lisbon and Madrid, consider spending a few extra days there.

Be prepared for a ride. One of the benefits of a mostly rural itinerary is that you're not cruising through industrial regions. One of the downfalls? Most of the attractions are well off the river, requiring motorcoach transportation that averaged about 45 minutes per place. (Salamanca was the farthest away, some two hours drive.) The good news is the scenery is just gorgeous and varies throughout the region, so there's a lot to look at. The motorcoaches are new, clean and comfortable (with bathrooms onboard, if necessary). Still, be prepared, as the most interesting places to visit are not accessed by simply walking off the gangway.

Communication is key. In Porto and in Salamanca, where the primary languages are Portuguese and Spanish, respectively, English-speakers can get around well enough. In the more rural stops, however, English isn't necessarily understood away from your group and guide; a phrasebook comes in handy.

Dress for the occasion. Climate varies; Porto can be cool, due to its location right off the Atlantic, but the further inland you travel, the warmer it gets. So pack in layers, and don't forget your bathing suit. Most of the ships that ply the Douro have small swimming pools on their sun decks.