

One Trend Leads To The Next On Portugal's Douro River

by [Maria Lisella](#) / August 15, 2017



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When a number of trends intersect, beautiful things – and great new destinations – happen.

In Portugal, it started when Manorhouses in the northern part of the country flung their doors open to host the public as overnight guests. Soon river cruise companies, looking to add new ships and new itineraries, began to ply the Douro River. Add in a few glasses of local wine, and a new focus on wellness, and you have a growing tourism industry.

Stretching from Porto up to Barca de Alva, the Douro Wine Region Valley is among the oldest demarcated wine regions in the world. So it was only natural that a growing river cruise industry found itself at the confluence of another complimentary trend: culinary tourism.

Right behind these two complimentary travel trends is the burgeoning business of wellness. Both Emerald and AmaWaterways announced nods in this direction earlier this year; Emerald features daily yoga classes on the sun deck while Ama has added a series of wellness classes.

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. Porto, Portugal's second-largest city, is hilly and cosmopolitan, not unlike San Francisco. The places in between Porto and the end of the Douro include colorful, small, rural villages.

Lisa Norton, vice president of brand management for Emerald Waterways North America, notes, "The Douro has become an extremely popular river cruise destination for the epic beauty of the region – the drama evoked by the river's steep valleys lined with port vineyards and the idyllic towns that evoke old Europe."

The Douro features elements that appeal to both experienced river cruisers, and food and wine lovers, in particular, she added.

One expert on the Douro and Portugal is John McGlade, executive vice president of operations at CroisiEurope River Cruises. McGlade owned Pinto Basto Tours, a receptive operator specializing in Portugal and Spain, until he became general manager for Euro River cruises, and the GSA for CroisiEurope River Cruises in the United States and Canada. Two years ago, CroisiEurope purchased Euro River cruises.

“What makes the Douro Valley so attractive is that it has always been exclusively dedicated to winemaking, so it has remained gorgeous and it is just the kind of place travelers are looking for,” he said.

Since the 1980s, Portugal has been investing in its winemaking industry by adding modern equipment and improving cultivation techniques. Around the same time, Portugal loosened laws limiting Douro wine producers just as a crop of ambitious young winemakers began to take the helm at the region’s vineyards. Today, the region is making well respected, high quality wines and critics have taken notice.

Food & Wine Magazine called the region the “next must-visit wine country,” and the 2005 Douro wine *J. & F. Lurton* Barco Negro was ranked in the top 10 on 2015’s Wine Enthusiast “100 Best Buys” list with a score of 90.

Since the 1990s, river cruises have emerged as one of the most popular forms of travel not only for Americans but for Europeans as well. The *Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) State of the Cruise Industry Outlook 2017* report noted the rise in river cruise ships from 184 to 197, an increase of 7% over 2016. The 13 new vessels comprise about half of the 26 new ocean, river and specialty ships that CLIA members debuted this year.

The early river cruise products on the U.S. market were developed by Uniworld, KD Rhine and other pioneers that focused on the Rhine, Danube and Elbe rivers.

As the market matured, companies looked to other waterways that promised the stable, smooth sailings river cruise aficionados have come to know and love, as well as docks close to major sights.

Douro River products have a long cruise season, from late March into November, with highlights in harvest season, September and October; ideal weather conditions in May and June; and value pricing during shoulder season.

Among the companies that ply the Douro are: AmaWaterways, APT, Avalon Waterways, Croisi/Europe, Emerald Waterways, Riviera Travel, Scenic Luxury Cruises and Tours, Uniworld, Viking River Cruises.

European river cruise operator Riviera Travel launched four new ships this year and will add a fifth ship in the spring 2018, doubling the size of its five-star fleet. The Douro Elegance will sail the Douro River.

At the same time many tour operators – large and small – Abercrombie & Kent, Avanti, Central Holidays, Collette, Insight Vacations, Trafalgar and others – combine river cruises with their own land products.

"Sales on the Douro are brisk, to say the least. And our new dock right near the center of Porto, makes it even more attractive. There are still cabins available for 2017, but it really is important for travelers to book now vs. waiting until later." The dock is for the exclusive use by both Scenic and their sister company, Emerald Waterways river ships.

Back in 2016, Scenic launched the custom-built luxury Space-Ship, the Scenic Azure, as one of the only owner-operated river cruise ships on the Douro with sailings that begin and end in Porto. At 260 ft. long with just 48 cabins, this is the next-generation of river ships designed with only one purpose: to navigate the calm waters of the Douro and its short and narrow locks, and vineyard-covered gorges.

No sooner had CLIA's State of the Industry Outlook indicated that millennials are considering cruises as a vacation option than Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection developed U by Uniworld that targets the 21-45 age markets, which is scheduled to debut in 2018.