



WINING & DIVING Portugal

NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN
continue their Wining & Diving tour of
Europe, this time exploring the dive
sites and vineyards of Portugal

Photographs by FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY

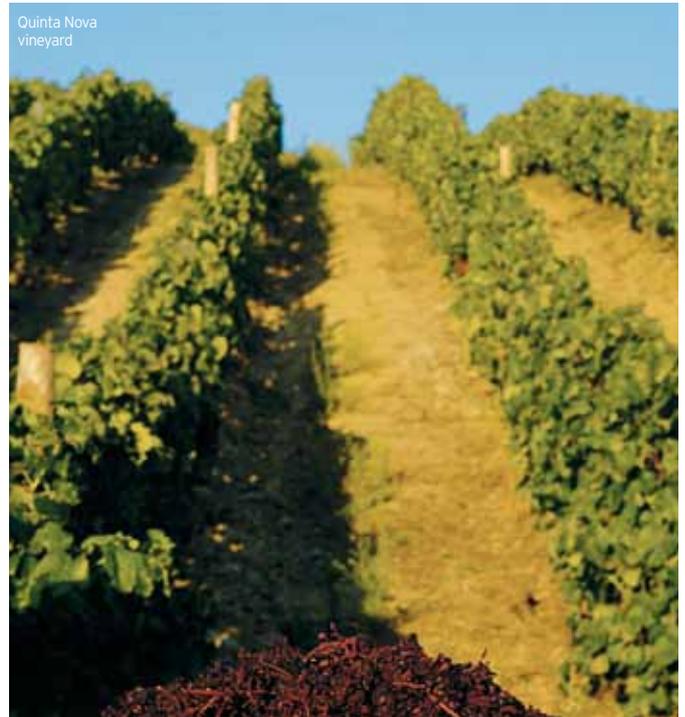
Neither of us had even been to Portugal before and so we were both excited to be taking our first Wining & Diving group trip, organised by Paul from Hidden Depths Dive Tours. The trip would take in the beautiful city of Porto, two contrasting vineyards on the slopes of the Douro Valley and then, finally, diving the wrecks of Ocean Revival and the local reefs on the Algarve. Our tour started in Porto, for an evening exploring the vibrant waterfront and a morning wandering along the river, famous for its old port houses and beautiful buildings. Then it was time to gather our small group together and head to the railway station and towards our destination for the 'Wining' part of the trip. The train ride, for the first hour, is somewhat unremarkable, but pleasant enough, however the second hour of our trip is breath-taking. The yellow diesel follows the Douro River, sometimes butting up right onto the shoreline, with the terraced vineyards snaking their way up the steep banks. It was stunning and we were almost disappointed when our train pulled up at our first stop - Ferrão.

Quinta Nova is an idyllic, quiet vineyard, who specialise in hosting travellers interested in discovering Portuguese wine. Our rooms, lounge areas and the lovely (very chilly) pool over-look the vines sloping down to the river. Once settled in, we were given a tour of the 250-year-old vineyard by Tiago, who explained the wine-making process, and then led us to the tasting room, where we were able to try out the wines and ports made on the estate. The vineyard has several walks mapped out, so that you can select easy going to medium level walks to fill your morning, before having a picnic lunch. Our afternoon was spent blending wines, to create a bottle of our own blend to cork, label and take home with us. All too soon, it was time to leave, catching the train just a handful of stops back down the line to Régua.

“As a full package, visiting the vineyards of the Douro Valley and then diving in the Algarve, it was a sensational trip”



Our group treading the grapes after harvest



Quinta Nova vineyard

Here we were transported to our next vineyard, Quinta da Pacheca. This was a bit more of a tourist hotel and vineyard, with visitors rolling in aboard starship-sized buses to go on tours and eat in the restaurant. But this was still a great place to stay. With Régua only a 30-minute walk away, you can stroll in for dinner and to try out more local eating and drinking establishments. Paul had organised us to be a ‘winemaker for the day’ and so we met up with our guide at 10am to start off with a talk on the history of the vineyard, the wine-making process and a ‘snack’ to get us going. This traditional start to the harvesting day was followed by a ride on the trailer to the wines that were being harvested that day. The real workers were already hard at work as we were handed our shears and buckets and told how to cut the bunches of grapes. We spent a happy hour, in the baking sunshine, working slowly while chatting away. Back at base and it was time for lunch, with more wine, to recover from our strenuous activities of the morning! Fortunately there was then a few hours for a snooze before re-gathering in the Old Winery for dinner. The next day it was time to pack up and head back to Porto for our flight south to the Algarve. We had a late afternoon and early evening to do a little more exploring in Porto, taking the cable car over the port houses, and stopping for dinner alongside the river, before heading to the airport and getting our flight to Faro.

We were diving with Subnauta, who are based in Portimão, which is about a 40-minute drive from the airport. One of the Subnauta team picked us up from the hotel in a six-seat golf buggy and took us on a short ride up the hill to the dive centre. And wow, what a dive centre it is! Spacious, well organised, and full of equipment that all looked brand new. This is a dive centre that truly sets the benchmark. Gear hire is included in the price of diving, so you do not need to worry about luggage allowances on this trip. Once we had analysed our nitrox fills and made sure we had all the equipment we needed, we had an impressive 3D-animated briefing of the two dives we were to make on our first day. Our main aim of the diving portion of this trip was to dive the four shipwrecks that make up the Ocean Revival project. These four Portuguese warships have been sunk deliberately to create an artificial reef just a short, 15-minute boat ride from the harbour at Portimão. Briefing over, we hopped back onto a golf buggy to be taken down to the boats. The resort is full service and no-one has to do anything other than roll off the

side and dive. Subnauta have a well-equipped RIB and also a good-size catamaran that can be used as a liveboard. We dived from both boats over the five days of diving we did, and both work really well.

Our first two wreck dives, in the Ocean Revival marine park, was to be on the frigate *Hermenegildo Capelo*. This 102-metre ship has landed perfectly upright in 30m of water. A mooring line has been installed at the bow (as it has on all the Ocean Revival wrecks) for divers to make their way down to start the dive. While we were not very lucky with the visibility on our trip, the sight of her looking out of the murky green water was still impressive. One of the first features that catches the eye is the huge gun still mounted on the bow. The second thing that crosses your mind on this dive is that you are going to need more than one dive to get the maximum enjoyment out of this wreck. There is a lot to explore, and so we decided to stick to the outside to start off with, heading along the starboard side, past the mast and radar and then back along the port side until we reached the bridge. Here we did decide to go in and have a look around. As these wrecks were all sunk deliberately for divers, plenty of large holes have been cut to allow easy entry and exit points, but other than that, all the ‘furniture’ that was on-board when she was afloat (within reason) is still there for you to explore now. This wreck was sunk



Caroline exploring inside a wreck

on 15 June 2013 and already has marine life covering all her surfaces, with schooling sardines darting around the structure to avoid the numerous predators that pursue them. Octopus and conger eels hide in many of the small holes, and we even saw octopus out in the open on deck. This frigate makes for a great dive profile too, as you can start at 30m exploring the lower sections and slowly circle your way up to 15m and still be on the wreck before heading back to the line.

Our second dive was to be on the hydrographic ship - the Almeida Carvalho. Again this wreck has been sunk perfectly upright in about 30m of water. Our guide, Rui, had told us that inside, we could find a table football rack, with the figures still intact, and with anemones and coral starting to inhabit the table. A storm had blown the top part of the table off the legs, but it is still there, ready for a game! She was sunk in September 2013 and is 64 metres in length and so is a more-manageable wreck for a single dive. This ship has an external prop and rudder still attached, which is a nice place to head to about halfway through your dive. Triggerfish patrol here, and we thought that they must also be nesting here, due to the ferocity in which they 'greeted' us and followed us up the line at the end of the dive.

The water temperature on these deeper dives was about 14 degrees C, so a thick wetsuit, hood and gloves were the order of the day. On heading back to the dive shop, we were delighted to discover the amazing hot showers that await - a real treat - with spacious cubicles and fresh towels. Subnauta deal with all the equipment and so, if you want them too, they will set-up your equipment, carry it for you and rinse it off at the end of the day, ensuring it is dry for you the next.

On our second day of diving we decided to explore a local shallow reef, Jardim dos Nudibranchios (Nudibranch Garden), as well as revisiting the frigate ship. Having already dived it once, we planned a few photographs we wanted to try on this dive. The reef dive was also a revelation, with octopus on nearly every rock we looked at! Nudibranchs are also plentiful with reports of over 15 species being found on a single dive. We only managed seven different species, and marvelled at their different colours and sizes. The wrecks and reefs also have plenty of blennies and scorpionfish to watch out for. We were really enjoying the diving so far.



Caroline uses the wreck to get an eye to eye position with a nudibranch

"While we were not very lucky with the visibility on our trip, the sight of her looking out of the murky green water was still impressive"



Exploring the corvette Óçô the Oliveira E Carmo



Wonderful nudibranchs can be found on the wrecks and reefs

We still had two more wrecks to explore and so on the next two days, we did a mixture of wrecks and reefs on each day. The boats go out for the two dives and so the crew provide you with water, coffee/tea, and a sandwich and muffin between dives to keep you going. Alas, our visibility was not going to get any better, and conditions got a little more challenging with swells and current too. But we were not to be put off ensuring that we dived the full complement of four Ocean Revival wrecks - they really are worth it.

Our third wreck was the corvette - the Oliveira E Carmo. This was the first of the wrecks to be sunk in October 2012. We explored the canteen, kitchen and wheelhouse, as well as an easygoing tour of the external features on this dive. The stern has broken away in a storm and now lies some 200 metres away from the rest of the ship. Our final wreck of the trip was the ocean patrol ship called the Zambeze - sunk on the same day as the corvette, it is now covered in life. It is the most wreck-like, and possibly our favourite of the four, as it has been sheared in two by the power of the waves and also lies on its side. Huge entry holes allow for access to many rooms with ease and it lies right next to a reef of colourful sponges and gorgonians.

For our final dive, we visited another reef called Pedra do Mariano (Mariano's Stone), and were amazed by the life. Each of us signalling and calling each other to show off a nudibranch, octopus or such like throughout the shallow dive. The site is a large rock wall ranging from 12-16m, full of cracks and overhangs to explore. All too soon it was time to ascend, return to our hotel, pack up and go home. As a full package, visiting the vineyards of the Douro Valley and then diving in the Algarve, it was a sensational trip. It gave us the chance to soak up local culture, before spending a lot of time underwater too. For those only interested in the diving, it is perfect for wreck lovers that are used to UK-style conditions underwater, but with wonderful sunshine to greet you every time you surface. ■

For more information on the wrecks, please visit: www.oceanrevival.org