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A Road of Rediscovery



After a breakup, a heartsick writer drives the length of his adopted country, Portugal, to see if he can still bring himself to call it home

By J.R. Patterson

A relationship ends, and the apportioning of goods begins. My books, your bookcase. My painting, your frame. My bowl, your spoon. My blanket, your pillow. My home, your home.

After nearly a decade, it was over. The world my partner and I had made together lay fractured on the ground, like a vase dropped and smashed; all the pieces still there but irrecoverable, the floor wet, the flowers crumpled underfoot. In our time together, we'd

traveled the world, been happy, made important decisions, and moved to Portugal, her native land. It was there it ended, with me an émigré of only a few months.

I didn't want to extricate myself so soon, but it felt wrong to be there. The nation, and everything in it, seemed to belong to someone else. The sadness and contempt I felt in the present threatened to eclipse past happiness with gloom. Living in Porto, I already

had friends, a favorite café, a place in an orchestra. Leaving meant giving up suppers at Cervejaria Diu Palace, music rehearsals with friends, afternoons reading in Virtudes Park, walks along the Douro River. Yet everything seemed complicit in my misery—the birds, the people on the street, even the street itself. Homesickness had ceased being a casual malady and become a way of life.

I had a tendency, when love soured, to turn my back on a

Above: a road through the terraced vineyards of the Douro Valley

Andreas Harbarth/Alamy/Stock Photo



place forever. Capri: toast. Calgary: never again. San Luís: I'd rather die. I had burned so many places, my Carthaginian exit laying waste to memories good and bad. I knew if I kept living that way, there would soon be nowhere left on earth to go. I needed to fortify myself, to hold the fire ahead of me rather than putting it to the bridges I'd crossed.

I made a list of things I loved about Portugal: oranges, wine, seafood, sunshine, coffee breaks, dark bars, tile mosaics, the blithe chaos that ruled public life, and the good manners, modesty, and amiable fatalism of the people.

I had given years to the country. It felt wrong to abandon it. I loved it in all its laconic and gimcrack charm. Watching New Year's Day fireworks flash over Porto with friends, I resolved to give the country another shot, to try and make it my own. I would do this by driving the Estrada Nacional 2, or N2. Its length—nearly 500 miles,

from the northern town of Chaves to the southern Atlantic coast—would either allow me to reclaim Portugal or give me one last good taste of it. And, if it turned out this were to be my ultimate journey, I wanted to do it with a bit of aplomb.

I arrive in Chaves on a gray day and make for the tourist office, where I pick up a yellow N2 passport, its two-dozen blank pages ready for the ink stamps offered at certain locations along the way—tangible evidence of my trajectory. Rain falls softly, and at the trailhead of the highway I dip into the KilometroZero bar, where I have a beer to consecrate the journey. I flash my passport at the bartender, who hallmarks it, giving me a mawkish sense of achievement.

This page, from top: a cobblestoned street in Chaves, the first town on the route; the author's N2 passport; opposite page, from top: an N2 route marker in Lamego; historic buildings in Coimbra

The Romans called Chaves *Aquae Flaviae* (yellow water) in reference to the flinty waters that flow from the surrounding hills. The supposed healing power of the water was known throughout Europe, its minerality being even higher than that of the famed waters of Vichy, France. In the early 20th century, Portuguese King Carlos I commissioned an extravagant palace at a natural spring outside the nearby town of Vidago. He was assassinated before its completion, but the regal comfort carries through at the Vidago Palace Hotel. On my first evening on this trip of reclamation, I stay there, swimming in the miracle water of the marbled spa and sweating on the cedar steps of the sauna. "People from all across Europe used to come here for healing," José Oliveira, a manager at the hotel, tells me. "There's something rejuvenating about the palace. It signified a fresh start for the injured."

That night, a cold fog settles deep into the pine forest on the palace grounds. Standing by the pond, I feel myself getting chilblains. The thick brume is still there in the morning, the grass covered with a layer of silver frost. Steam rises from the hood of the car as it warms. The cold, the rising sun, and the fog combine to give the air a burnt quality, like the top of a *crème brûlée*.

Outside Vila Pouca de Aguiar, I fall in behind a GNR police car in which the two occupants are engaged in a wildly gesticulating argument. I follow them for the better part of the morning,



Edgar Pimentar/Unsplash (Chaves); J.R. Patterson (passport)



curious to see how the entanglement will end. Anyway, I am in no rush—the N2 doesn't allow it.

Portugal has no shortage of high-speed superhighways—it's possible to drive the country north to south in a matter of hours, rather than the eight days I have put aside—but those roads are dystopian, bounded by concrete. Driving them is like traveling in a trench. The N2 curls around these main highways, passing over them in some places, ducking under them in others, like a snake around the caduceus, the staff of the Greek god Hermes.

From time to time, white markers of the N2 appear on the roadside, the numbers rising as I drop from the mountains down into the Douro Valley and the trade town of Peso da Régua. Once upon a time, barrels of port wine were carried downstream by *rabelo* boat from the vineyards here to the cellars of Porto. André Valentim Almeida's wonderful film *Giants of Douro* shows historic footage of the laden boats running fierce rapids, with stoical men at the helm. Today, the river is dammed, and the only boats in the gray water carry rubbernecking tourists.

In Peso da Régua, I stop into the Museu do Douro for my stamp and am easily coerced into a port tasting. When I reach the tasting room, it's empty, save for a grand piano and the bottles of wine on the walls. I sit at the piano and play a few Beethoven variations as an invitation for someone to arrive and tell me to stop. A man does arrive, but he gives me no such instruction—only a second

Nazar/Adobe Stock (Lamego); Egor Kumovskiy/Pexels (Coimbra)

glass of tawny port at the end of the impromptu recital. "One for the visitor, and one for the pianist," says the wine steward. "This port," he continues, "you'll find resembles Brazil in sweetness and India in aroma." That breadth of Portugal's colonial spread means hits of honey, walnut, and cinnamon.

I wait a few hours for the fog to burn off, but it remains, shrinking the world with its sludgy embrace. I drive south with a moody gravity. My soul hurts, and I'm lonely.

The fog hounds me for two more days, through the towns of Lamego, Castro Daire, and Tondela. Outside the latter I make a jog off the N2, reaching the university city of Coimbra on a cold, clear night.

Breakups are all the worse for their solitude. While every other ill, small and large, fades into the distance, the world carries on as though nothing has happened. It's a second abandonment, this time by friends and family, who can see your heartache but can't share in it.



"When the barman takes the booklet to stamp it, he bursts out laughing and playfully cuffs me on the shoulder."

In Coimbra, I'm visiting friends, but they were "couple-friends," and I'm not sure how my visit will be received, "my friends, your friends," being another side effect of partition. However, the chill is only meteorological, and I am met with soup and wine. That evening, as we walk through the city center, the lights don't disturb the stars, which shine through the

dew-leaned air. "Where will you go?" they ask. When I admit I don't know, they say, "You can always just stay here."

We can lose our humor, too. Just like our sense of camaraderie, it's through others that we get it back. The next day, outside Sertã, I stop into a café hanging

the N2 shingle for a *bifana* sandwich and a drink. Above the counter is posted a sign whose words I write into my N2 passport: "*Por causa de alguém, não se fia a ninguém.*" ("Because of someone, no one is trusted.") When the barman takes the booklet to stamp it, he bursts out laughing and playfully cuffs me on the shoulder. "*Obrigado! Boa Viagem!*" he writes beside my scribbles.

There are parts of Portugal so devoid of tourism that a traveler passing through them can feel on the verge of discovery. A dive into the heart of most places, even small ones, can reveal just how immense any place can be. Portugal is a world, each region distinct in character, each equally proud of its unique goods, and each astonished you have never heard of its particular bread, cheese, clay-craft, or sweet. These things are pressed upon you.

In Vila de Rei, I get my passport stamped at the tourist office and lunch at a nearby *churrascaria* filled with men. The staff work with the fervency of wartime medics, throwing down dishes of bread and olives and doling out soup from large metal tureens with a concentrated rush. They recommend the *bucho recheado*, which is new to me. I'd have stuck with something familiar had I known this was a large slice of offal-stuffed tripe; when it arrives looking like a cross-section of a human leg, my appetite heads further down the road. While I poke at it, the men, finished with their half-liters of wine, go back to work operating heavy machinery.

Passing from northern to southern Portugal, there is no hard line, but a series of collective conversions. As I cross over the Tagus River, from Ribatejo to Alentejo, the land flattens and spreads to a distant horizon. Red dirt supersedes brindle rock, and the air takes on a ripe, tart quality. Bullrings appear. Stony smallholdings stretch into estate farms. The land is perfect for wheat and wine grapes.

As evening falls, I leave the N2 and travel a few miles east, outside the city of Évora, to the Convento do Espinheiro, now a hotel. That night, in the hotel restaurant, the sommelier goes through the wine list like it's a catalog of old lovers. "This one I'll never forget," he says, his fingertips dancing on the tabletop. "I was at a wedding, and this beautiful Douro white graced my lips. I knew I had to have it..." It had been a romance without suffering; there would always be another bottle.

"At last, I cross into the Algarve, where the sunlight seems to enter one's breast with each breath."



Above: the wine bar at the Convento do Espinheiro hotel

I want someone to look at me the way that sommelier looks at the *Mirabilis*, I think; instead, I eat alone, chickpeas with seaweed and a roll of swordfish, before retiring to my room like a monk, sitting in silence, sipping wine and reading. I'm in the suite where the 16th-century poet Garcia de Resende stayed when visiting the convent. I have his poem "Não Receeis Fazer Bem" in front of me, and read: "Have a very tender heart/And your favors will soon see/The great benefits of good come."

Driving south the next day, I pass a field of arch-horned cattle. When I stop to take a photograph, a flock of white egrets rises from the field like a handful of daisy petals thrown into the air. There are other singular images: a shepherd sitting on a brick watching over three lambs. A man waiting at a bus stop so desolate it seems unlikely he will ever catch a ride. I stop to offer one, but he waves me on. "Something always comes along," he says.

All the time I have been moving south, the weather has improved. At last, I cross into the Algarve, where the sunlight seems to enter one's breast with each breath.

I reach Faro—the final N2 stone marker at kilometer 738—but I don't want to stop. The snarl of traffic in the city contrives to keep me away from the sea, away from the open space I crave. I turn west and drive along the coast until Porches, where I stop at the Vila Vita Parc resort. After my

travels, I want to appear aloof, but the sumptuousness of the property is overwhelming. It's like a country in miniature, with people zipping around on golf carts, fountains in the ponds, rock gardens, and domed white villas with views over the private beach. In my room are clothbound copies of English classics. I pick up *Pride and Prejudice* and read, "The distance is nothing, when one has a motive."

The end has come at the right time. I'm ready to stop driving. I've almost worn out my CD of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and I'm unsure how much longer I can go on drinking six espressos per day. I play out the last days of the trip in the Algarve, eating clams and beef and drinking port with tonic, sleeping with the patio doors open, listening to the ocean waves and the palm fronds clacking together. The sea is the color of sugared absinthe, and the cliffs are yellow and crumbly, like slices of *pão de ló*.

I feel that I've crossed the shadow-line of emotion. I have a surging desire for life, a longing for everything to be simple and amusing. The mountains, the sea, every beautiful melody of this country—I needn't forsake them. We don't find a home so much as one is given to us. Like a gift, the messages and well-wishes I receive while on the road let me know I have friends here, that I am loved and welcome. I'd meant this trip to be an act of recollection, like walking backwards, but I'm already making plans now, looking ahead rather than behind.

Courtesy of Convento do Espinheiro

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