

Friday May 25 home to London Kings Cross Inn

Usual preparations and leave home at 1130, earlier bus running late, 1247 Amersham to KX, check in at 1400 for £123, without breakfast.

Walk to Dishoom KX for a meal, good, with KDK and PMAG. Back to hotel for tea.

Saturday 26 London to Biarritz Mercure Plaza Biarritz-Centre

Decent night, better than last night!

Up at 5.30 for shower and checkout at 6.30, and to St P for a very busy check in after meeting Roger Marsden, the tour manager. I'm the only single. After a very long queue everything is smooth but there's no time for coffee before boarding, and a departure for the 7.52 twelve minutes late.

We're making good progress until the approach to Paris, when there are severe delays following a fatality at Saint-Denis and we eventually get in an hour and a half late. The coach transfer is efficient but there is a lot of traffic and we get to Gare Montparnasse with two minutes to spare. Luckily the train is 20mins late, and we're soon comfortable.

At Bordeaux it's a coach for a couple hours or so, arriving at the hotel in Biarritz at 8.30, a quick bath and dinner at nine at the Galion, a good meal with two fish courses and chocolate pudding. The sunset over the sea is spectacular.

Late to bed, but not too bad a night, but too short.

Sunday 27 Biarritz to Salamanca Catalonia Plaza Mayor

Up at 545 for a bath, packing and a good breakfast at 630, with departure at 720. For the coach transfer to San Sebastián, fifty minutes, and the train to Valladolid at 857. There's a lot of cloud and fog around, but some sun and views. We climb through the valleys up to about 500m where things flatten out.

Valladolid is warm and sunny and there is time to walk around outside the station and sit in the sun for a piece of cake and a banana. The train to Salamanca is a two coach local and about twenty mins late. A short transfer and we are at the hotel.

On unpacking I find that medicines are missing. A call to the hotel in Biarritz yields nothing and I go with Roger, the tour manager, to a 24 hour pharmacy where I get the two blood pressure tablets. An interesting walk around the city in the grey drizzly evening before a bath and dinner at the local restaurant, Don Mauro, on the Plaza Mayor, at eight. It's good with cured meats, cheese, sucking pig, ice cream and fruit. More veg would be good! I share a bottle of wine with Joy.

To bed soon after ten for a reasonable night with waking at three, but back to sleep and up eventually at 650.

Monday 28 Salamanca

Bath and breakfast at 730. Decent and leisurely.

We set out for our guided tour at nine with a good guide, but the weather is cool, grey and with drizzle. The guide, Carmen, is better than average, and we see a lot until about 1130.

Back for a rest, and then out to get provisions at Carrefour and lunch for which I eventually choose La Sastreria opposite the market. It's a good meal for €15 with Ravioli, cod with asparagus and cauliflower and chocolate cake and a small glass of wine. Back for siesta and bath before another walk to the river and the Roman bridge. It's a leisurely evening with podcasts, puzzles and packing.

Tuesday 29 Salamanca to Peso da Régua Hotel Régua Douro

Reasonable night, waking briefly at three and four after a nightmare. Up at 545 for a lukewarm bath and final checks before breakfast, good, at 645 with Roger for scheduled departure at 730.

We're away promptly and it's a couple of hours drive towards the border through an undulating and largely uninhabited landscape with thick clouds. As we cross to Portugal, we are in the valley of the river with steep slopes and an arid look to things. We are soon down at the landing stage and after ten minutes boarding via another boat, and soon settling down to another breakfast. There is plenty of room inside with tables for at least twice the size of party, but more restricted room outside at the front. It's quite windy but the sun does come out, although the wind means it's difficult with the hat.

We have a good lunch with soup, pork (few veg) and pudding with port and wine. The last bit of the journey is by coach as the last lock is closed. I have a good room overlooking the river, and after a time on the balcony with puzzles decide to go for a walk, but can't lock the window which I report.

When I get back I find the window is permanently locked and eventually change to another room, a suite. Dinner is a buffet and adequate. Good night.

Wednesday 30 Peso da Régua Hotel Régua Douro

Up and breakfast at 730. Overcast.

We meet at the station at nine for the short ride to Pinhão, where there is a port tasting, three sorts, white, ruby and tawny. I go for a walk along the side river, have a pick nick lunch and catch a later train back by myself, €2,85.

I spend most of the afternoon reading in the room. At 730 we set off for the short drive to the quinto, rather like an agriturismo. There's a walk around the estate, port and snacks, followed by a good dinner with pork, salad and potatoes, sweet and wine. We're back at about 1015, for a decent night.

Thursday 31 Régua to Porto NH

Up at 645 for breakfast at 730 and more reading. Station at 1030 for the trip to Porto, about a couple of hours. Drizzle for the transport to the hotel which is in a run down area, with rooms not ready. The guide book's recommendation nearby, the Café Majestic has queues on to the street. After an hour or so in the lobby we set out in a coach for a guided tour of the city, including a walking tour of the Bolsa. The cathedral visit is missing as the traffic is heavy with a religious procession, Corpus Christi.

A decent dinner in the hotel, with, of course, port and wine!

Decent night.

Friday June 1 Porto

Up for a good breakfast at seven with the only seat with a view of the square.

We set out at nine for coach journey at nine to Guimarães. It's a very built up landscape, with grey skies and showers. The weather clears up for our walking tour of the castle and the Braganza Palace before free time. I find the teleférique and have my picnic at the top with the huge view. Return for 4€ over 65. Bus to Bom Jesus and Porto.

Out at seven for a tour of the Taylor lodge, followed by a good dinner with soup, cod, chocolate cake, port and wine!

Back at ten for a decent night.

Saturday 2 Porto

Breakfast at seven looking out on a very nice sunny morning, a short walk and the. Back to bed before a shower.

Out again for a long walk around the city, finishing at the São Bento station for its decoration and the Majestic Cafe for an omelette and hot chocolate.

More rest and out again to the cathedral (underwhelming) and the Ribeira.

Sunday 3 Porto to Lisbon PortoBay Marques Hotel

Decent night. Breakfast at seven with Roger and out for a rather grey walk around the neighbourhood. Bath and packing ready for transfer at 1045 to the station for 1147 train to Lisbon. There's time to walk around the station area in the sun. An Indian restaurant (basic), but the bookshop has no maps.

The train is comfortable with a single seat by the window, facing away from the sea. The journey is about two and a half hours, with a possible lunch served, but I stick with a juice. It's sunny when we get to Lisbon, and the coach takes us a long way round to the Hotel which turns out to be very comfortable and I have a suite, with a front view; much better than Porto.

After unpacking there is plenty of time for a walk around the park where there is a big book fair. The store El Cortes Inglés fairly depressing with expensive brand after brand. Back down a street called Cardoso, but it's the wrong one.

There's time for a leisurely bath and rest before dinner at 730: soup, chicken and chocolate cake with plenty of wine.

Not such a good night.

Monday 4 Lisbon

Morning tram ride is quite interesting, but there is a jam and it takes almost an hour longer planned. Custard tart in Belém, a huge cafe: quite an industry. A couple of other sites and back to the hotel.

After a rest and lunch at the hotel (a good piece of fish, but an argument about the bill), a rather depressing afternoon walk through bairro to botanic garden. Everything is very dirty and down at heel.

Again, a modest night

Tuesday 5 Lisbon, Sintra

Plenty of sun. We set off together, walking to the Rossio station where we get a ticket for the trains and buses for the day, and just catch the train to Sintra, which takes about 40mins. There's a long queue for the basic bus, so I get the one to Montserrat which is an excellent botanic garden and palace. I walk back stopping off at Quinta da Regaleia, which seems like Disneyland, and aim down to the station, but take a wrong turning and end up at the bottom a 100m hill. A bus takes me round to the town station for a bus into Lisbon.

DWalk to Hotel, where there is dinner and another modest night.

Wednesday 6 Lisbon and overnight train

Up for breakfast at eight and packing. The main case is stored and again I get the train to Sintra, which is grey today, and I'm soon on the bus to Cabo da Roca. Lots of people there but the views and flowers are good. Then the bus to Cascais which is warm and quite sunny. I see six of ours finishing their lunch and I start mine, looking over the beach. The town turns out to be attractive, particularly in the old town, and an excellent museum. Train to Lisbon and a weary walk to the hotel.

There's some waiting in the lobby before we leave at 730 for the coach to Santa Apolonia station for the 925 train to San Sebastián (and Hendaye) which gives plenty of time to get provisions for the journey, including a 89 cent carton of wine.

The train leaves on time and compartment and bed are comfortable, if the latter is slightly short.

Thursday 7 San Sebastián Hotel NH Collection

I have a reasonable night's sleep followed by a modest breakfast in the buffet car. Then it's back to bed to watch the countryside going by. We're about half an hour late for our scheduled arrival time of 1053 and the coach transfer takes about half an hour going past the Hotel Londres from the last visit.

It's good to hear that the rooms are unexpectedly available immediately and so it's time for a shower and change in a comfortable room.

Out to a neighbouring bar for the Spanish equivalent of sausage egg and chips, glass of white, water and chocolate cake for around 15€. By now it's warm and sunny and I ride the funicular for the view over the bay, not much else!

Relaxing in a local park and an early night - pretty good.

Friday 8 San Sebastián Hotel NH Collection

Up and to a reasonable breakfast at 730.

Out by nine to warm, grey morning. The sun comes out later. A gentle walk to the front, along the promenade, around the headland and through the old town visiting a couple of churches. On the way back I see some of the gang having lunch and I join them for a glass of wine and creme brûlée.

Back to the hotel for a rest before reading in the local park.

Saturday 9 San Sebastián to London Kings Cross Inn

It's not an early start, so breakfast after a short walk and then down to the sea before completing packing and the bus at ten to Hendaye where it's a TGV duplex double deck and I have a separate seat in the other half of the train from the group. It's all very smooth to Montparnasse for the transfer to Nord which takes nearly an hour which leaves plenty of time for check in etc and boarding, and the Eurostar is right time into St P at 840, for the walk over to the Kings Cross Inn.

Sunday 10 London to home

Breakfast at Dishoom, bus 505 to just short of Paddington and Chiltern to Wycombe.

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