Anja Mutić reflects on a journey through Portugal as this vibrant European destination savor its moment in the spotlight.
Lisbon booms with movement and action – new openings all over the city

Amanda Levete. I visit on a hot July afternoon, and though the sun is beating down, I can't get enough of the waterfront's beauty. I walk up to the gorgeous sloping roof that doubles as a park, taking in the river that flows out toward the ocean.

The building's outer layer, comprised of 15,000 glazed tiles, a shout-out to Portugal's heritage of ceramics, sparkles in the sun. Inside, the 75,000-sq-ft exhibition spaces, including the main oval-shaped gallery with video installations, showcase rotating exhibits by local and international artists. After leaving, I pop into Lisbon's counterpart to London's Tate Modern, a former electrical power plant next door to MAAT that has been turned into an exhibition space. Its giant turbines and pipes forming a perfect backdrop for art.

As an emerging capital of cool in Europe, Lisbon booms with movement and action – new openings all over the city, once-forgotten hillside neighborhoods getting a new lease on life – but it's this riverside revival that by far the most exciting. Food has followed suit to the riverfront as well. On one of my first visits to the city, I visited the old Mercado da Ribeira. Though filled with ambience and whiffs of times past, it was clear the food market struggled to sustain an incoming flow of business. Then it shut down and reopened in 2014 as Time Out Market. A buzzy food hall with more than 40 stalls headed up by Portugal's top chefs. Today, there's no place like it to get the lowdown of iconic Portuguese fare. You can chow down on breaded soft-shelled crabs at Pataniscas (a must), try the famed codfish balls at cod, or close my meal with honey and olive oil fried pudding as the final treat.

Cascais and Atlantic coast

While Lisbon's riverside revival is a joy to witness, the ocean calls – and it's so close. In less than an hour – the train from Cais do Sodré railway station takes 40 minutes, by car, at a time of day when the roads are clear, you can get there in half an hour – I find myself on the golden sands of Cascais. Upscale and grand, this chic town is where Portuguese royals rocked it for seaside fun on its fabulous beaches in the 19th century. According to local lore, it all started when King Luis I went to Cascais for a swim in 1870. Today, the town's palatial architecture, winding streets of pastel-colored houses, and verdant gardens blend charmingly with a fishing village vibe. On its southern edge below the 15th-century citadel, the exclusive Cascais Marina provides a harbor for sleek yachts to moor, and a scenic spot for a waterfront wander. To take in the Atlantic's mighty power, I walk along the shores of Cascais, watching the waves crash against the cliffs. To blend in...
a tangled streetscape of colorful rooftops and peeling façades. Here, Porto rises up from the north bank of the Douro river in Portugal's cultural powerhouse that showcases changing exhibits of contemporary Portuguese artists. Dotted with sculptures, fountains, and art installations, a 44-acre garden surrounds the spectacular building designed by Porto's starchitect Álvaro Siza Vieira. On a recent afternoon, as I strolled along the cobblestoned riverside, my senses were assaulted by the perfume of flowers and the mesmerizing sounds of the Atlantic. While here, don't skip a tradition — a glass of vinho verde (clams) at one of the many pataniscas; a favorite of Porto's foodie crowd.

With the cultural attractions explored and nature diversions on hand, it's easy to lose yourself in Porto's labyrinthian passageways. As a streetscape introduction to Porto, I hop on a bicycle for a short ride to Boca do Inferno (Hell's Mouth), a cave chiseled out by the ocean's pounding waves. For a close-up look, you can take a pathway down the cliff and hear the mesmerizing sounds of the Atlantic. While here, don't skip a tradition — a glass of vinho verde and grilled catch of the day at Mar do Inferno, a family-run tavern and a local favorite. If you want action that goes beyond dipping your toes in the sand and cycling along the shoreline, rent a surfboard and head to a beach (praia), just like the surfers who make their pilgrimage to Guincho, one of the most gorgeous beaches on the Lisbon coast. Cascais has a surprisingly rich cultural tapestry to explore. In the Cacilhas Museum Quarter, peek inside the eclectic collection of Conde de Castro Guimarães Museum and wander around its magnificent gardens. Check out what's on at the bright pink Centro Cultural de Cascais, housed in a former convent, or get the low-down on lighthouse technology at the Lighthouse Museum inside the Santa Marta Lighthouse.

Soak up the wistful ambiance of Porto's Ribeira waterfront, a quiet UNESCO-protected riverfront quarter. A compact city with most attractions within walking distance, it's easy to lose yourself in Porto's labyrinthian passageways. As a streetscape introduction to Porto, I hop on a bicycle for a short ride to Boca do Inferno (Hells Mouth), a cave chiseled out by the ocean’s pounding waves. For a close up look, you can take a pathway down the cliff and hear the mesmerizing sounds of the Atlantic. While here, don’t skip a tradition — a glass of vinho verde and grilled catch of the day at Mar do Inferno, a family-run tavern and a local favorite. If you want action that goes beyond dipping your toes in the sand and cycling along the shoreline, rent a surfboard and head to a beach (praia), just like the surfers who make their pilgrimage to Guincho, one of the most gorgeous beaches on the Lisbon coast. Cascais has a surprisingly rich cultural tapestry to explore. In the Cacilhas Museum Quarter, peek inside the eclectic collection of Conde de Castro Guimarães Museum and wander around its magnificent gardens. Check out what’s on at the bright pink Centro Cultural de Cascais, housed in a former convent, or get the low-down on lighthouse technology at the Lighthouse Museum inside the Santa Marta Lighthouse.

Left to right: Cascais boasts a dramatic coastline; the crumbling charm of Porto reflected in the River Douro; Porto is Portugal’s cultural powerhouse that showcases changing exhibits of contemporary Portuguese artists. Dotted with sculptures, fountains, and art installations, a 44-acre garden surrounds the spectacular building designed by Porto’s starchitect Álvaro Siza Vieira.

PORT TASTING IN PORTO

Cross the river for an afternoon of wine tasting in Vila Nova de Gaia, a quick ride by river taxi. Famous for the eponymous sweet fortified wine that’s produced here, this city on the south shore of the river is home to numerous wine lodges, most of which offer informative tasting tours of their facilities. The choice can be overwhelming, so visit at least two to learn how port is made and aged, and the important role it has played in the history of Porto. • Graham’s (graham-port.com) atop a single harvest aged teny, while marvelling at the impressive view from Graham's tasting room. • Taylor’s (taylorport.com) the museum circuit on an audio-guided visit, learning the story of port and the cellars. • Ferreira Cellars (sograpevinhos.com/visitas) stroll the cellars and learn all about one of the Douro’s most iconic figures, Diogo António Adeladada Ferreira, and visit the 19th-century tasting room.

The One Palace de Anamalica, Lisbon Located in the exclusive Bairro Alto neighborhood, this gorgeous newcomer is housed in a former 18th-century palace. The original architecture has been beautifully preserved and fused with a sophisticated interior design. The hotel features elegant amenities and within the grounds guests can enjoy the exclusive outdoor pool and 26,000 sq ft of gardens. The Portuguese are big meat eaters, too — try the traditional tripe stew with sausage, chicken, and beans. For a globally inspired take on Portuguese fare, book a table at Mini Bar by João Alvez, the chef’s second opening in Porto after the cozy Cantinho do Alheir. It features DJ-open manic on weekends and small bites made for sharing — think Algarve prawns in ceviche, tempura avocado with dehydrated kimchi, and Thai-flavored pan-seared scallops. Porto has taken the best from its past, blended it with what’s edgy and new, and crafted a heady mix that pleases the palate — and the soul.