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by Neelam Gill

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# Escape Routes

RAISE A GLASS TO YOUR NEXT TRIP



THE OUTDOOR POOL AT SIX SENSES DOURO VALLEY: HANGOVER CURE, SORTED

## EXPLORE EUROPE'S UNSUNG WINE REGION IN THE DOURO VALLEY

Acting associate editor Lucy Foster jets over to Portugal to experience a tranquil spa hotel in the unspoilt wine region of the Douro Valley

Here's a question: where would you go in Europe for a wine-tasting break? Champagne? Bordeaux? The rolling hills of Tuscany? The answer, of course, is all of these. But if you're in the market for something a little less route one, you might find yourself pondering the many and varied grape-based delights of Portugal.

It's common knowledge that Portuguese cuisine is considered some of the world's best, but what isn't as freely shared is

that the country is awash with wine-making districts. The Douro Valley (pronounced Doh-ro) is considered the finest and that's where we're headed, having flown into Portugal's second city Porto and taken an hour-long taxi-ride to our destination – Six Senses' first European resort, a fully renovated 19th-century manor house, hotel and spa, nestled in fields of tiered vines, overlooking the meandering Douro river.

The region has a long established heritage of producing grapes for port (and the English have a long-established history of trading the finished product, hence the jarring 'Taylor's' and

'Croft' signage dotted on local farm buildings). But the wine and the region are gearing up for a new lease of life. It's one of the oldest demarcated wine regions in the world but is still deeply agricultural. The terrain is such that the vines can't be farmed by machine, so hand-picking is the only option, which although labour intensive, makes the area outstandingly beautiful (it was awarded Unesco World Heritage Site status in 2001).

Handy then, when we're shown into our room, that we're immediately struck by picture windows that frame a postcard-worthy





→ view of the valley. A carafe of port is on the side as a 'get comfortable' offering, which, despite being well before the cocktail hour, is gladly accepted. The bathroom is all black slate and white fluffy towels and basks in that pervading scent of essential oils – all toiletries are from the Organic Pharmacy – that comes with all spa hotels. Not that you'll spend a lot of time in your room.

The concept of the hotel is to have a holistically joyous experience, from having your knotted back pummelled into submission by a therapist (mine was so appalled by the state of my right shoulder following 15 years tapping over a keyboard, she makes me promise to seek help when back home) to amply sampling the wines of the region, eating produce from the hotel's organic gardens and letting your muscles slowly release sat poolside under the Portuguese sun.

And there's more than one way to physically benefit from the area's wine production. The spa offers full body treatments that use the antioxidant power of grapes and schist (a local stone vital in the creation of the region's microclimate) for warming massages and collagen-rich wraps. There's landscaped terraces for you to stroll through come sunset and fire pits are lit at night so you can keep warm while happily sinking a bottle. Or two.



RIVER VIEWS AT THE SIX SENSES DOURO VALLEY

Plus, there's more to do here than pad around silently in a towelling robe, although you can do that too – no-one judges. First of all, I recommend making the most of the hotel's Wine Library, where one of the knowledgeable staff will talk you through a wine-tasting with accompanying tapas, educating you on local wines such as the high mineral Rola de Branco (verdict: delicious) and the Quinta Do Ataíde, containing tinta roriz, the Portuguese name for tempranillo (again, not shabby). And with just a few words to the reception staff, you can find yourself supping from glasses in the tasting rooms of large-scale producers – we went to Symington Family Estate's Quinta da Bomfim in the nearby town Pinhão – or in



THE HOTEL'S WINE LIBRARY: READING GLASSES AT THE READY

the cellars of local farmers, who will happily take you through their wares. (If you leave with a souvenir, make it a port that you can lay down for a few years – Quinta de la Rosa's Vintage 2012 is a gem.)

Pinhão is also the embarking point for a leisurely cruise down the Douro river on a traditional rabelo boat – the wide, flat wooden vessels that were once used to ship port barrels to the coast. You're given a glass of port to do it (it's not just an after-dinner tippie here) and it's well worth the €10 it costs.

But as Six Senses is a resort hotel, and the nearest town is a 10-minute drive, we take most meals in the hotel's Vale de Abraão restaurant – there are tables both inside and outside, but let's be honest, for us Brits, breakfast al fresco is pretty special. But one night we spend a wonderful few hours watching the chefs in the open kitchen while being fed small plates of oysters and apple, squid and pea purée, and speck flatbread

while chugging contentedly on a biodynamic red (2012 Niepoort Bioma if you're wondering).

The next day, a little fuzzy, we decide a brisk douse in water will sharpen us up. The outdoor pool tends to be busier, so if you do actually want a swim, head to the indoor pool which is empty both times we visit (I grab 10 glorious minutes in the steam room too and emerge a better person, both inside and out).

In essence, everything in this place is geared for you to thoroughly enjoy yourself, if you consider fine wine, exquisite food, tranquil scenery and luxurious beauty treatments some of the finer things in life. And, to be honest, you'd have to be quite mad not to.



**Rates for a Quinta River room start from £350 per night on a B&B basis (sixsenses.com/douro-valley). Airport transfers cost £193 per car for two people, one-way, from Porto Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport**

## When wine and spas meet...



THE GRAPE ESCAPE: CAVAS WINE LODGE IN MENDOZA

### ARGENTINA

Cavas Wine Lodge, rated one of the world's best hotels in 2016, sits in the renowned wine region of Mendoza on a 55-acre vineyard and all 18 rooms have views of the towering Andes. The spa provides treatments such as the bonarda (red wine) bath, crushed malbec scrub and Torrontés wine wrap. Rooms from £302 per night; cavaswinelodge.com



WORSHIP BACCHUS AT THIS MONASTERY-TURNED-WINE RETREAT

### ITALY

The Relais San Maurizio in the Piedmont wine region began life as a monastery and dates back to 1619. Now a five-star retreat, you can spend the day truffle hunting, customising your own wine or trying out the grape press, then retreat to the ultra-luxurious Grotto del Sale, where you can bathe in mineral-rich pools overlooking the vineyards. Rooms from £345 per night; relaisanmaurizio.it



NO, THAT'S NOT CABERNET SAUVIGNON THEY'RE SWIMMING IN

### FRANCE

Les Sources de Caudalie is located 20 minutes from Bordeaux city centre, set against the expansive backdrop of the Château Smith Haut Lafitte vineyards. At the world's original vinotherapy hotel you can indulge in the crushed cabernet scrub, merlot wrap, barrel bath or winemaker's massage in one of the 20 treatment rooms. Rooms from £190 per night; sources-caudalie.com