Lisbon is a town of many narrow winding streets. Each morning, our first adventure was to wander up and down hills and around crooked bends to find a little CAFE so that Uncle Wayne and Ms. Maureen could have their cappuccino and something sweet for breakfast. This was typically a long process - a sign that they are "getting old" and cannot function well before lots of coffee gets them started in the morning! One particular place - Leitaria Académica - became their "regular spot." It was owned by an incredibly friendly man who greeted them with a smile each morning. Of course, I got to know him well too, since I did most of the talking before the coffee "kicked in" and allowed my travel mates to act like sociable adults.
Actually, our ritual quest for good food and drink did not end with breakfast. Part of traveling through Portugal was tasting very different food than what Uncle Wayne and Ms. Maureen were accustomed to back home in the Czech Republic, or even in the United States, for that matter.

The Portuguese have a long seafaring history. In other words: they’re great sailors and fishermen and they have always depended on the sea. Through all periods of their long history, the Portuguese explorers, merchants, traders, and even CHEFS have looked to the ocean as their primary provider, and even today I discovered that the menus in most restaurants were filled with SEAFOOD options.

Fish of all varieties (some very scary... like Uncle Wayne’s little “snack” shown in the picture above), Shrimp, Lobster, Clams, Octopus, Squid, and anything else that SWIMS... All of these were common ingredients in typical Portuguese dishes.

Of course, Portugal is also famous for one particular ADULT drink made from many varieties of grapes that grow very well in Portugal’s dry and sunny climate.

Uncle Wayne and Ms. Maureen seemed to really like tasting all of these different Portuguese WINES. Of course, they only let me smell the wine occasionally - and that was enough to make me dizzy and send me out to the windowsill for some fresh air... where I sometimes made a new friend in the process.
One day we woke up and decided to travel to SINTRA, another old town that is only 30 minutes away from Lisbon, traveling quickly by train and the “Metropolitano,” Lisbon’s fancy underground subway system.

Though it’s a small town, it’s very old. Sintra has three huge castles - all from different periods of history! One of these, the moorish castle, was built by the Arab and North African cultures that occupied this territory over one thousand years ago.

Today, these Arab influences can still be seen all over Portugal and Spain - especially in the designs and intricate craftsmanship of their buildings.

We stopped at this fountain to get a drink of water. The same water has been flowing from natural Springs in the Mountains here since the very first days of the town. While sitting on the side of the fountain, I met a local man who assured me that he has been drinking this water all of his life, and that it has natural healing powers! He says it’s much better for you than the treated city water - that has lots of chemicals. As it turns out, most of the people of Sintra collect all of their drinking water from this special fountain.

After a few sips, I can’t say whether or not I felt HEALED of what ails me (for example, my flattened vital organs!) But the water sure was refreshing!
One of the castles still had its original furniture in place. It was so much like the movies, I had to keep poking my head out the window to see the Portuguese flag and remind myself that this place was a REAL town... and not a Hollywood set.

After wandering for hours, I relaxed a bit in the King’s throne. I likely appeared rather underdressed to play the role of the King for a day. (I personally don’t think that the Japanese tourists passing through the throne room were convinced of my power.) Being a King would be nice, since living in this castle was like having everything in one place. It had its own gardens, restaurants, ball rooms, living quarters, and even a chapel!
But the most magnificent castle was high on a hill overlooking the first. It was built by the first moorish settlers back in the 8th century. Today, it offers the most spectacular view over all Sintra.

I raced Uncle Wayne and Ms. Maureen to the top, and as you can see from the photo, I won! Winds were strong and the climb was difficult, but it was worth the effort to crawl into the ancient caves and along the old walls of this abandoned stone castle.
Another "side trip" from Lisbon included OBIDOS, a colonial town near the Atlantic Ocean. We stayed one night there as we headed Northward through the Portuguese Wine Regions. The entire town is surrounded by a gigantic wall that forms part of the castle, and it's much more quiet and peaceful than the bigger cities we had seen up until this point. The flowers were in bloom, the local food was wonderful as usual, and we enjoyed a lazy afternoon of wandering through the narrow streets and alleys of Obidos.
Though the sun shone strongly every other day of the trip, this day was covered with dark and mysterious clouds, which just made Obidos seem all the more magical.

To escape the rain, we ducked into a quiet side-street cafe and all ordered a huge cup of coffee (yep, they got me hooked, too) topped off with a thick syrup of wild berries and dark chocolate - the local beverage of this town. From our window-side table, we spent the late afternoon listening to elegant Portuguese FADO music playing on the radio and watching the world go by... slowly.
Back in Lisbon, we took a train out to the Northern Part of the City, the site of the 1998 World’s Fair. The park region along the Tagus River is home to the largest aquarium in Europe, "THE LISBON OCEANARIUM" The entire building floats over the water, is 3 stories tall, and has hundreds of tanks and exhibits, the largest of which takes up the entire center hall of the building. Here, we sat for hours watching sharks, manta rays, eels, and a wide variety of fish swimming by. On the upper levels, penguins and other birds from the world’s major ocean regions, along with some playful sea otters, kept us entertained... along with the rest of Lisbon. (That was the problem... the CROWDS were huge. We decided to leave when it got so crowded that Ms. Maureen threatened to throw some other tourists to the sharks.)