

How to Be Portuguese Without Really Trying

Seven Essential Tips



TRICIA PIMENTAL

INTRODUCTION

My husband and I moved to Europe in September of 2012. Our plan was to stay for six months to a year to see if we could really live abroad. We considered France—too many strikes—and Spain—no one returned our inquiries regarding a rental. We opted for Portugal.

One factor in choosing it was we had friends who lived in the north of the country from whom we could lease a house. Another was, my spouse's ancestors were born in Madeira and the Azores, and so we thought we would have an “in” with the locals.

We were actually quite “out.” So we started to pay attention to their daily life patterns and soon began to act and feel Portuguese. You can, too.

Main tips are:

1. Speak at least some of the language.
2. Develop an appreciation for coffee, fish, pastry, sunny beaches, and *futebol*.
3. Be polite.
4. Drive aggressively, but with care.
5. Wait your turn.
6. Celebrate life (and everything else).
7. Honor the past.

In the following sections I explain these points and share additional information to help you understand a bit about Portugal and its people.

Language

American author Louis L'Amour said, “When you go to a country, you must learn how to say two things: how to ask for food, and to tell a woman that you love her. Of these the second is more important, for if you tell a woman you love her she will certainly feed you.”

Assuming you're not going to rush into a romantic liaison in order to have breakfast, there are certain things you should know about the Portuguese language. One is, there's a perception that "It's kind of like Spanish or French," so you don't need to learn it. True? Yes and no.

On one hand, there are similarities. "*Bom dia*" sounds a bit like "*Buenos dias*." If you ask for *café*, you'll certainly get coffee, although it will be an espresso, not American coffee. For that you will have to ask for an Americano or *abatanado*.

On the other hand, there are substantial differences, especially with respect to names of foods and clothing. Also, while in Porto, Lisbon, and the Algarve, English is widely spoken, if you're traveling in the countryside, often you will find there is no English (or French or Spanish) spoken, so you'd better be equipped with at least a few words and expressions.

The natives have mixed feelings about your attempting to speak their language, one which author Barry Hatton likens to the sound of "wind surfing between consonants." They may stare in confusion if you've mixed up *dois* and *duas*, the masculine and feminine ways to say "two." You may have to hear more than once how much harder Portuguese is than English. (It's not.) Often they will say, "English? Speak English." If you want to practice your Portuguese, you will have to insist that they speak it with you. But they will encourage you when they can, rather than snicker and snort at your fledging attempts to get a word or phrase correct. That behavior is reserved for residents of other countries we've visited, which shall remain nameless here.

Always greet people. Before noon, it's "*Bom dia*." In the afternoon, say "*Boa tarde*" and later, as evening becomes night, "*Boa noite*." "*Adeus*" is "good-bye" if you think you won't see the person again, or for a long time. If it will only be a little while, it's "*Até já*." "Please" is "*por favor*" or my preference, "*se faz favor*," and thank you is "*obrigado*" if you're a man and "*obrigada*" if you're a woman. If you bump into someone accidentally, say "*Desculpe*," and if you want to pass by someone, saying "*Com licença*" is a polite way to do it.

The phrase book referenced at the end of this booklet includes a helpful pronunciation guide.

Eating

Tabernas are old-school, rustic establishments, meeting places for a cup of coffee or a *cerveja* and snack in a pub-like atmosphere. Here you'll get a sense of an authentic Portuguese watering

hole, the kind of place where you might find a sign on the wall that says, “*Se bebes para esquecer, paga antes de beber*” which means “If you drink to forget, pay before drinking.” It costs about 70 *centimos* for a cup of coffee, the beverage which is ingested all day from morning until night. It’s astonishing how tranquil and agreeable these people are, given their caffeine consumption. A glass of wine runs about 70 *centimos* for a small serving in a casual place up to three euros for a larger pour at a more upscale establishment.

Snack bars typically offer coffee, tea, bottled water and sodas, wine, port, and more to drink. Snacks may include bags of chips and nuts and candy, and in a display case, the tasty little pillows of cod and potato called *pasteis de bacalhau*. There will also be a modest selection of sweets, including the national favorite, a custard concoction called *pastel de nata*. The Portuguese adore their pastries.

Padarias and pastelarias feature freshly-baked bread and—surprise!—an even larger selection of sweets. Sometimes there are little circles of pre-cooked pizzas, and *tostas*, grilled sandwiches of ham, cheese, or ham and cheese combined, which are *tostas mistas*.

In a café you can get a simple meal of soup, main course, dessert and beverage, often for about seven to ten euros. One standard soup on every menu is *sopa de legumes*, made of puréed potatoes and carrots, sometimes with green beans or asparagus or broccoli blended in. I’ve never had a bad bowl of vegetable soup in Portugal.

Restaurants obviously have fuller menus, with appetizers (*petiscos*) in addition to salad courses, an extra soup choice or two (usually fish-based), main plates, side dishes, and of course, *sobremesas*—desserts.

In general, you’ll find the Portuguese enjoy breakfast at home, take lunch between 1:00 and 2:30 (13:00-14:30, as the 24-hour clock is in general use) and dine at 20:00 or 21:00 until 23:00.

Shopping

There are lots of *hypermercados*. Continente, InterMarché, Pingo Doce, Lidl, and Jumbo can be found throughout Portugal, in addition to smaller chains like Mini-Preço and of course, mom-and-pop enterprises. Selections of fresh meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit are ample, as are

household products and personal items. If you can't find a brand you know—which you often can—you are sure to find something similar.

Toward the south, in the region called The Algarve, beautiful beaches lure the sun-loving Portuguese to their shores during the August *férias* period, when it seems like all of Europe is on vacation. The British have a special fondness for this area. There, a small (three store) chain called Apolonia offers a variety of high quality goods.

The gold standard for food shopping is SuperCor at the department store—think Neiman-Marcus, Galeries Lafayette, or Marks and Spencer—called El Corte Inglés. My husband gets lost for hours buying groceries there. I stopped being impatient while waiting for him when I discovered I could pass the time by getting our car washed, dog groomed, and catching a film in their Cineplex. If he still isn't done after all that, I can have a glass of wine and a bite to eat in one of ECI's several restaurants. Or I can join him at the sparkling wine and snack bar inside SuperCor, which he had been keeping a secret for a while.

Two things to keep in mind: because the Portuguese stay up late, if you hit the store with your grocery list in the morning at 9:00, it will be a breeze. Friday afternoon at 17:00 is a situation to be avoided at all costs. Since many stores and malls are open until 23:00, you're sure to find a good time to shop. The second thing to remember is, don't expect someone with a fully-loaded shopping cart to turn to you, holding your measly three items, and say, "You can go ahead of me." Nope. You will stand there and watch all 83 articles pass over the scanner before that happens. That's not to say you can't ask permission to do so. In fact, I did once, and was graciously told it was okay. But it's not "the done thing."

Transportation: Planes, Trains and Autobuses, and the Autoestrada

Main airports of Porto, Lisbon, and Faro are organized and quite easy to navigate. I always hit Starbucks for a latte in Terminal 1 in Lisbon when I take my husband to the airport.

There's a good train system (<http://www.eurail.com/europe-by-train/portugal>) and I've been surprised to find big beautiful municipal vehicles that look like tour buses traveling from main cities into the countryside.

Highways and roads (*Estradas Municipais or Nacionais*) are clearly marked, and rotundas are everywhere, making for free flow of traffic. Of course, Porto and Lisbon are busy cities with plenty of congestion just like any other major city, European or otherwise, so plan on workday rush hour slowdowns. And if a *feira* is scheduled in a large city, leave your car at home and take the *metro* or other public transportation.

The *autoestradas* are in excellent condition, if a little pricey. That's the good and bad news. Many Portuguese either don't have the disposable income to make regular use of them, or prefer to be frugal, or prefer the sweetness of passing through small towns. That leaves these toll roads wide open, for the most part. I've driven for twenty minutes sometimes without seeing another car, depending on the day and time of day. Many tolls are paid in booths, but some are simply registered overhead as you are zipping along at 120 kilometers per hour. If you are driving a rental car, these charges should be recorded, assigned to the license plate, and included on your final bill. Check with the company about their policy. If you are driving a non-rental car, the fees must be paid at a post office within five days. If you become a resident, the *Via Verde* option is your simple solution.

As far as the Portuguese driving style goes, it can seem a little wild to the uninitiated. For instance, after a vehicle in the far left, "fast" lane passes you, it will often slip back into the lane in front of you in a manner that suggests the rear right bumper of that car will graze your left front. Relax. It's just that they are anxious to get out of that lane, which is only for overtaking other cars. Just maintain your speed and breathe, and you'll be fine.

Meeting People

The Portuguese are very warm, yet generally reserved. This might sound like a contradiction, but when you see it in action, you'll understand.

Children almost always will kiss adults on both cheeks when introduced to them and at subsequent meetings. Adults do the same under most circumstances.

The common greeting to a friend or acquaintance is "*Olá*" followed by "*Tudo bem?*" meaning "All good?" which in turn is answered with "*Tudo!*" A cheerful countenance is *de rigueur*.

If you are meeting someone with whom you will have a more formal relationship, a doctor for example, you simply say “*Bom dia*” or other phrase depending on the time of day, and extend your hand to shake.

Writing People

Rules for correspondence, even in an email, can be overwhelming. When we studied Portuguese at the University of Coimbra several years ago, the titles used to address people seemed like overkill, roughly translating to “the most extreme honorable excellent doctor” and so on. Even our utility bills come with this verbiage, making me feel very privileged and educated, even if they’re just trying to get me to pay for electricity.

I use the Continental Portuguese equivalents of Mr. and Mrs. which are *Sr.* and *Sra.* followed by the first and last name of the individual. Unless you are writing to a doctor or a diplomat, my simple formula works fine.

Social Etiquette

While we are on the subject of addressing people, those who do a service for you, household jobs, for instance, will call an employer *Dona* (lady) followed by her first name. I am “Lady Patricia” to our cleaning woman. When I tried to turn it around and use *Dona* plus her first name, she shook her finger and head and said no. That breach of station was improper.

More often than not at supermarket counters, bakeries, and service providers like Verizon, machines dispense numbered tickets to keep track of arriving customers. Look for one if it’s not in evidence, because if you don’t get a slip when you arrive and others come in after you, you will have lost your place when you finally locate it and take a number.

Having said that, if there is no such provision, you will find that people go out of their way to determine who is officially entitled to go next. First come, first served, and let’s be sure we are fair. That mentality, of course, is what results in the horse-blinder behavior in line at the supermarket. They were there first. Period.

To illustrate this, some of the most endearing experiences we’ve had are in parking lots. Once in the medieval town of Óbidos we were struggling to find a space. A festival was in progress—as usual—and we were slowly weaving through a lot when suddenly a car began to pull out from a

space we had just passed. What did the car behind us do? It backed up and waved us into the spot. This was not a one-off occurrence. It is the common courtesy extended to others because you were in front of them: you go first.

An adjunct to this principle is a well-developed ability to wait. People will stand, tickets in hand, waiting for their turn with no complaint. They will also contentedly wait for service in a restaurant with no acknowledgement of their presence, and therefore no food or beverage, for as many as ten minutes before finally greeting a server with a warm smile.

It's almost a universal occurrence to have the person in a pedestrian crosswalk for whom you have stopped your car, wave, smile, or nod in thanks. I've seen policemen (the GNR, or *Guarda Nacional Republicana*) do it.

In case it still isn't clear, the Portuguese are a very polite people.

Money Matters

I love the versatile *Multibanco*, the equivalent of an ATM, here. They are everywhere, so unless you are in a teeny *aldeia*, or village, you can feel confident you'll never be out of cash. This is a good thing, because it is a common way to pay for purchases.

If you ask for forty euros, the slot delivers a twenty and two tens. How thoughtful is that, to dispense a few smaller bills? You can send a payment to an organization for membership, or to attend a function that has an entry fee. You can even pay your taxes there. Seriously. What a great system.

Medical Matters

A few years ago my husband required medical treatment for a freak respiratory issue. We went to our local clinic in Penela and were told he should go to the emergency room at the hospital in Coimbra, about a half hour away. Once there, he met with a doctor and had x-rays taken. As my husband sat with the doctor for a consultation, his personal copies of the films spit out from the fax machine. The cost for the two visits combined was ten and a half euros. That's public health care here. I've signed onto CUF, a private carrier. Even there, the costs are more than reasonable.

Customs and Traditions

The Portuguese love parties and festivals. In this predominantly Roman Catholic country there are religious holidays, of course. One notable saint day is the *Festa de Santo António*. Born in Lisbon in 1195 to a noble family, Saint Anthony became a priest to whom many miracles have been attributed. On 12 and 13 June, residents and visitors alike dance in the streets of Lisbon, which are strung with lights and filled with the pungent aroma of grilled sardines.

Not to be outdone, up north in Porto, 24 June offers the festival of *São João Baptista*, which involves setting up stalls selling leeks, cloves, basil, and curiously, little plastic hammers for revelers to engage in what has been termed “friendly aggression.”

Also in June (10) is the *Dia de Portugal, de Camões e das Comunidades Portugueses*: “Portugal Day, Day of Camões and of Portuguese Communities,” the last of which can be found all around the world.

There are political observances like 25 Abril (Liberation Day) and 5 Outubro (Republic Day).

They are also big on book fairs and all sorts of food and wine celebrations. We’ve come across onion festivals, garlic festivals, bread festivals, and beer festivals. And that’s just scratching the surface.

History

A great deal of understanding the people is knowing how they view the past.

In this country of legendary navigators who ventured across the seas centuries ago to discover new lands and catapult Portugal into world prominence, many sorely miss that position.

The national folk music of *fado* gives voice to this longing for the past, expressing *saudade*, a painful homesickness for what was, is not now, and never will be again.

Originally a country ruled by kings, Portugal experienced dictatorship under Salazar and today is a republic. Most people I’ve spoken to cherish their freedom, and to prove it, every city and town seems to have an *Avenida de Liberdade*, *Rua de 5 Outubro*, and *Rua 25 de Abril*. Then again, monarchists can always be found.

Cultural Icons

If you know of only three of the country's cultural icons, you should know about poet Luís Vaz de Camões (ca. 1525-1580), *fadista* Amália Rodrigues (1920-1999), and *futebol* legend Cristiano Ronaldo.

Camões is considered Portugal's greatest poet, so much so that the Portuguese language has been called "the language of Camões." His work, especially the epic *Os Lusíadas*, has been compared to that of Shakespeare, Homer, and Virgil.

Originally *fado* was about the country's past, but there came to exist a romantic element: women standing on the shore, looking for lovers gone off to sea, failed love affairs, etc. The best-known *fado* styles are that of Coimbra (sung only by men) and of Lisbon. Amália Rodrigues, known as the "Queen of Fado," was born in Lisbon. Her talent helped to internationally popularize the art form. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARS7Zi-Zpkw>

Cristiano Ronaldo (dos Santos Aveiro) plays for the Spanish club Real Madrid and the Portugal national team. A forward who serves as captain for Portugal, he's led his teams to many stunning victories. Everywhere you will find little boys—and big ones—proudly sporting jerseys with his number "7" across the back.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, here's a quote from my second memoir, *A Movable Marriage*:

In this new and decidedly more rural area of the country, our understanding of the Portuguese mindset deepened. The people are sensitive to personal dynamics and quickly discern if a person has genuine respect for their culture.

A tourist seeking an inexpensive vacation, during which he'll view stunning landscapes, sample mellow Port wines from long-established houses, and enjoy an abundance of fresh fish, is graciously welcomed from a polite distance.

A visitor who attempts to speak a few words of Portuguese, who smiles at the locals, and who defies the gruff facial expression characteristic of the race, will break through and make a tentative connection.

But a person who expresses respect for the history of what was once one of the greatest countries in the world, who seeks to understand their political, religious, and philosophical take on life, and who embraces their cuisine and language will be accepted as “one of them.”

For more information:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Portuguese-Modern-History-Barry-Hatton/dp/1904955770>

www.juliedawnfox.com

<https://www.amazon.com/How-Eat-Out-Brazil-Portugal/dp/8873011004>

Thanks so much for reading, and again, for following my blog.

I've also written three award-winning full-length books: the afore-mentioned *A Movable Marriage*, *Slippery Slopes*, and *Rabbit Trail: How a Former Playboy Bunny Found Her Way*. All are available in print and digital versions on Amazon world-wide and via my website at www.triciapimental.com.