

Introduction

“I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world.”

~Mary Anne em Radmacher

Even though living in Europe had been on my bucket list for almost my entire life, I waited until it felt like the nation and the world were on fire before making the jump overseas. Literally people were dying.

In 2020, the world was caught in a pandemic that gave us a very real view of what a dystopian future would look like: People were sick and dying from a new disease that had we had no treatment for or, at the beginning, a vaccine to prevent. Businesses were closed, there were shortages of basic necessities (I’m looking at you, toilet paper!), streets were eerily empty.

No one knew what the next day would bring.

If that sounds like what you’re experiencing today, this book is for you. This is the book I wish I had had when I made the decision to leave the US. In spite of the research and preparation I did before moving to Portugal, I was incredibly unprepared for what I would face. My first year as an expat called for some quick thinking and the occasional stroke of luck. It also involved a lot more anxiety and stress than was necessary.

This book covers my decision to move to Portugal, the visa process I went through (it changes on the regular and I’ve added the most recent changes in the back matter of the book), and what it is really like to live as a local here. I had *general* knowledge of Portugal—weather, geography, a bit of the history and culture. For some reason, I thought that the US expat population was much larger than it actually is—there’s about 14,000 US expats here, which is about 0.1% of the population. I chose to move to the Algarve region because it has a large tourist industry and most of the Portuguese people in the area under the age of 40 speak some English.

But there was so much I didn’t know and wasn’t prepared for. My transition would have been so much easier and less stressful if I had been clued in. While nothing can take the place of spending an extended period of time in the country you want to move to—and I highly recommend that people make scouting trips before moving abroad—I want to give you as much information as I can for you to make the best decisions about moving overseas for *you*.

Making the decision to move to a new country is huge in so many ways. It's time consuming, it's sometimes heart-wrenching, and it's expensive. Approximately half the US expats who move to Portugal don't stay—they either go back to the States or they try another country. And that's okay. You don't know if you don't try and really, big kudos to them for making the jump at all.

But I want you to make the most informed decision possible. While this is not a “how to emigrate from the US” book, it follows my journey as I move through the process of making the decision to move, applying for my visa, and most important, what I encountered in my first year that I was and wasn't prepared for. You have to be flexible; you have to be willing to find a different solution if the first one doesn't work, you have to give up a lot of control. (That's super-hard.) Moving overseas is scary and hard and fun and eye-opening and I wouldn't trade it for the world. But it could have been a little less scary if I had known what to expect. I want this book to give you some insights into the actual, on-the-ground experience.

Why Portugal?

I read the book *Kidnapped* at an impressionable age and I couldn't think of anything better than tramping through the Highlands of Scotland. That's where the idea started—I wanted to live in Scotland! I blame Robert Louis Stevenson. Stay with me here.

“Move to Europe and live there for at least a year” was on my bucket list since before bucket lists became a thing. I wanted to explore Europe the “right” way—not as a tourist. That item stayed on my goal list for over 30 years.

I finally went to Scotland with my mom and two of her friends in June of 2001. It was a bus tour of Ireland and Scotland, almost all senior citizens. I was a last-minute addition to the foursome; my mom's friend had fallen ill and I had a passport.

I had lived in Florida for over a decade and had become used to the climate. I had my luggage and jacket beside the door. When the airport shuttle arrived, I grabbed my suitcase and headed out. Didn't even notice my coat waving at me, saying “Hey! Wait!”

Did you know that Scotland is cold in June? Very, very cold. I learned this as soon as I stepped off the plane.

It turns out that Scotland is cold just about every month of the year. I hear August is nice. I made it through the trip with sweaters and long underwear. Considering I had spent the better part of my life searching for a warm climate to live in, I managed to enjoy it thoroughly. However, my chattering teeth made it obvious that I was not cut out to live there.

I know. I'm a wuss.

I started looking at southern Europe and decided on Italy. My father's parents were from Italy, it looked like I might be able to tap into that to get residency and possibly citizenship. (I wasn't thinking that far ahead, to be honest.) I got the language tapes for Italian as a practical first step. I failed miserably.

Spoiler Alert: Failing at languages will be a recurring theme in this book.

Nevertheless, the line item on my bucket list became "Move to Italy and live there for at least one year."

The Dream

As a dream, it was all far away from my everyday life. Something to look forward to in the hazy future known as someday. How do you just pick up and move countries? Sure, I wanted to experience Europe as a resident, but it was just one of those dreams people have. Crazy idea. Pipe dream.

I made up budgets: How much would I need to fly there, to rent an apartment, to keep myself in food and electricity for a year... and still travel? I was looking at \$30,000 minimum. At the time, I was working as a temp, doing stand-up comedy at night, and teaching comedy traffic school classes. Let's just say that savings were thin. Okay. Nonexistent. In fact, I quit stand-up comedy (no loss to the industry) two nights before I left for Scotland. But I still taught classes and did some theater. If I was ever going to move "live in Europe" from a pipe dream to reality, I needed a new career.

Pivot

The early 2000s saw the real estate run up, not just in Florida but across the country. My parents had both been Realtors, and my father had fixed up and rented houses. I tried my hand at that and fortunately for me, any idiot could buy a property at that time and make money. I became active in investor meetings and ran one of the more successful meetings in the area. My reputation expanded and the requests to speak on real estate investing started coming in! I aligned with one of the "Old Guard" investors. We created content, shared training documentation and started holding seminars. It was the new career I needed to make the dream of travel possible. With stand-up comedy in my rearview mirror, this was a lucrative endeavor where I could use my speaking skills and expertise while doing something fun

During that heady time, my friend, Chris Krimitsos, came to me and asked if I could help him with a real estate course he had written. We re-wrote his course, added some videos and he was off and running. He said, "Barb, why don't you re-write the course from your perspective and then you can go out and speak on this, too. That way I don't have to travel as much." So, I

did. Yet another skill set that would ultimately play into my dream of living abroad: Nobody does such a big thing without the collaboration of others.

Another local investor wanted help with her course, and a friend referred her to me. And then another. Pretty soon I was writing based on my own knowledge as well as ghostwriting real estate courses for speakers, including a few TV personalities. What I didn't know was that I was pricing my services way below industry norms. Some things you learn too late. I became regionally well-known in the industry and made enough to keep a roof over my head... until the crash.

And just like that, I was out of business. Broke. My Roth IRA was wiped out because the money had been invested in properties. Most of my big real estate guru clients were struggling to stay afloat. But I had a new skill—writing courses and books—and I could do it from anywhere with wifi. What at the time looked like a disaster created a full pivot into writing for an actual living—something else that had been on my bucket list for decades. It was the business that would enable me to finally make my dream of living in Europe come true and it was a solid business lesson, to boot: What looks like a grand misfortune in the moment can turn out to be exactly what you needed.

I expanded my writing to include business books and had a steady, even thriving business. Yet it was never enough to put \$30,000 and a year aside to go live in Europe.

The Push

In December of 2009, I rented a nice condo on a deep-water canal in a lovely little town in Florida at a ridiculously cheap price because of the crash. I sat on one end of my couch, laptop in lap, churning out words for my clients. It is wonderful to work in a T-shirt and shorts, and not have to leave the house. But I sat in that same place for so long, I actually wore down the leather on that part of the couch.

In 2016, my oldest brother died. We used to joke about him sitting on one end of the couch, day and night, whether there was a party going on around him or not, watching his shows. And I realized that I was sitting on the same end of my couch as he did on his. He was 65. I was hitting my late 50s. His wife had been really good about getting him out and traveling. They had gone to Europe several times. They toured all the baseball stadiums in the US. He had done a lot of things he wanted to do, but I know he would have wanted to do more. One thing about humans, we might not know exactly what we want, but we know we want more of *something*.

That was a bit of a wake-up call, but still, Italy and Europe were out of my reach financially. The way I wanted to do them at least.

The years churned on. A friend became very ill and I nursed him through two years of hospitalizations. I took an online coaching job to help with the medical bills, where I met my friend Mary Anne “I’m Not Dead Yet” Radmacher. In September of 2019, Mary Anne and her handsome dog Webster moved into the condo with me. Fortunately, they were both patient while I adjusted to living with people again. And something else contributed to getting closer to realizing expat dream. On Mary Anne’s first excursion, decades earlier, to Europe, she wrote an aphorism that has become a rallying cry for adventurers around the world, “I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world.” Her enthusiasm for travel in Europe was unmistakable and it further underscored my own.

Then, in January of 2020, COVID hit. Of course, we didn’t really know much then. By March, people were dying by the hundreds, then the thousands. We were in full lockdown. My business once again came to a grinding halt while the entire world tried to adjust to this new reality.

The most important and fortuitous part? I turned 62 (ah, now we’re all doing the math!) and I could collect Social Security early. With no money coming in, no vaccine, and no idea if I would live to see 65, I signed my little butt up. Not only did that decision make living through lockdowns and a global pandemic easier, but it was the key that enabled me to move to Europe—a steady, reliable income.

In those 20 years between accidentally traveling to and freezing in Scotland, deciding to move to Italy and actually getting to the reality of moving, Italy changed its requirements for residency, upping the minimum income and reserves requirements. The income I had; the reserves I did not.

Just Shift a Little Bit to the Left

My friend Kellie McRae had been traveling the world as a digital nomad. She had spent time in Chile, Nicaragua, Chiang Mai Thailand, and had finally settled on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Kellie and I would talk and message endlessly about business and marketing, and always worked ourselves around to places we would like to travel to and possibly live. When I told her Italy was out of my reach, she suggested I look at Portugal. She gave me a link to a YouTube channel run by an American woman who had moved to Lisbon. One of the first videos I saw talked about the visa process and she had a downloadable checklist for the visa process that gave me my first concrete steps. She showed me the path. That initial exposure was influential in the manner in which I would become the same kind of portal and inspiration for the long-held bucket list/dreams of others.

I started doing my research. Portugal wasn’t as warm as Florida in the winter, but I’m originally from New England; I can handle “mild” winters.

I met all the income requirements. I read the glossy magazine articles that talked about how affordable Portugal is (only a little bit of a fib on their part). The research pointed me to settling in the Algarve region of Portugal—the warmest part. I planned to take my scouting trip in summer of 2020 and move in 2021.

Here comes another one of those obstacles I mentioned earlier.

But COVID.

Everything was shut down. Everything was in limbo. Nothing was certain. It was that exact uncertainty that persuaded me that every minute besides this one is uncertain. So, what the hell? COVID or not, I got up off my couch and stayed off it.

I decided to emigrate anyway.

Chapter 2: Getting My Ducks in a Row to Move Abroad

At this point, the decision wasn't real. I knew I wanted to live in Europe and I was fairly sure I would base myself in Portugal. But, I didn't just "decide" to move. I thought I did. It turns out the decision to move was really a series of decisions, each one building on the last and really, getting more granular. I had to say yes to every step and every step made it more real.

Moving abroad is a big leap, physically and metaphorically. When you've had a dream for decades and you finally put the gears in motion to actively pursue it, it gets a little scary. Okay, it gets big scary. Scary for my friends, too.

"You're just going to pick up and leave the country?" They didn't add "Are you crazy?" I could hear it anyway.

But, as I started my preparations, I realized I had been positioning myself to make this jump for years. I would like to say that it was serendipity, but really, it was my subconscious mind slowly moving me towards my goal. I'm not one of those "meant to be" people. I like to think that I am IN CHARGE and making VERY CONSCIOUS DECISIONS!

However... 😊

Yeah. I probably make a lot of subconscious decisions.

A lot of people right now don't have the luxury to let this decision marinate in their minds for a while. They are making very conscious, major decisions that also need to be made sooner rather than later. That's a hard reality. I will tell you upfront, that in spite of all the pictures of beaches and cobblestone streets and the many coffees in sidewalk cafés—and yes, all of that is real and as wonderful as it sounds—moving to a new country has mental and emotional challenges, just to make the practical challenges all the more... challenging.

Forget All the Logistical Stuff for Just a Minute.

Truly, the biggest issue to deal with in moving to another country is that you are leaving family and friends behind. If you are fortunate enough to be moving with a friend or your partner, at least you have each other. But I was literally flying solo.

Most of my friends are scattered across the country and my family lives in Massachusetts, so seeing most of them involved travel of some sort, whether it was driving 100 miles north to the Tampa area or getting on a plane and flying to Boston. I was already used to keeping in touch with people through phone calls, texts, emails, and Zoom. But Portugal is 4,000 miles away. An ocean apart. Wrapping my head around that was a little tough.

The pandemic and quarantine actually made it a little easier to leave—I couldn't visit with my most of my friends and family anyway. And I wouldn't be able to in the foreseeable future. I know many, many people in the US are contemplating leaving because they no longer feel safe. They don't like the direction the country is headed in. And not everyone can move.

But for most people, I think leaving the love and safety net of friends and family has to be the hardest part of moving away.

Emotions aside, I was fairly well set up to make the big move.

The Pros

The work part was covered. I had no real estate, pets, plants, or romantic entanglements. I'm not dissin' on my lovely gentleman friend who I had been in a long-distance relationship with for half a dozen years. But, while it was pleasant and fun, it had pretty much run its course for both of us. I had sold all my real estate back in the crash and I've been a happy renter for years. (Much better than being a landlord; not as good as being a homeowner in some respects.) My lease was up at the end of November 2020. I didn't have a pet or plants. In short, there was nothing tying me to one location.

As I mentioned in the Introduction (you DID read the Introduction, yeah?) the pandemic pushed me to apply for my Social Security benefits early and in so doing, removed the biggest obstacle to moving overseas. You need to show steady, reliable income or enough money in reserves to immigrate. That holds for just about every country. I'm self-employed. A one-gal shop. Which means my income can be up and down and most years it rings in at about the same amount, but it comes in chunks, not a set weekly paycheck.

Of the countries I looked into, Portugal has one of the lower income thresholds for immigration. While I can't live on my Social Security benefit alone (yes, even in Portugal), the monthly payment is more than enough to qualify for the D7 passive income visa.

So, I would still need to work—even while living in Portugal.

I've been in my current business for about 20 years, which gives me a lot of credibility when government agencies look skeptically at the ticked "self-employed" box. I had a dedicated home office, but, when I wasn't meeting with clients, I was sitting on the couch with my laptop, cranking away. I had deliberately built a business that allowed me to work from anywhere just in the hopes of one day moving abroad. So even before COVID, I conducted 95% of my business via the Internet. In truth, I can work with all of my clients remotely; it just happened that a few of them were local to me in Florida. I was confident that my clients would be fine working with me longer-distance. As long as I had a wifi connection and electricity, I could conduct business.

I also knew that people didn't have a problem hiring me remotely. When I was first in business, I thought it would be a bigger problem than it was. I started as a ghostwriter and added nonfiction book coaching. Both involve substantial deposits. Who would send some woman they had met on the Internet thousands of dollars? (I mean, outside of lonely men?)

Since over 90% of my clients are personal referrals, there is a certain amount of trust built in. I meet with people to discuss their needs and wants in a free consultation which helps them get to know me and know that I am a legitimate business. I was worried that might change if I moved to Portugal.

As it turned out, no. In fact, people seem more eager to work with me because—get this—they think I'm cool. (Shh. Don't tell them.) They like to see what the weather is like when we have our sessions and will often ask what is going on here or what Europe thinks of what's happening in the US. I'm still waiting for some of my US clients to come over and see Portugal for themselves.

And Some Cons

But living overseas came with some very real drawbacks for my business. Because I coach people, I need to meet with them at a time that is reasonably convenient for both them and me. The five-hour time gap between Portugal and the US East Coast is fairly easy to work with. The additional three hours to the West Coast created a little more of a challenge. For the most part, it means that I would stay available until 7:00 pm Portugal time a couple of nights a week. Not a huge sacrifice. And while I still count time zones on my fingers when manually setting an appointment with a client, my scheduling software does that for me. I now send people to my scheduler to book an appointment. The scheduler knows my hours and converts them automatically to the time zone my client is in.

I would also lose out on in-person speaking engagements that helped me raise my visibility and bring in clients. In the midst of the COVID crisis, speaking engagements had disappeared and event promoters were just figuring out how to do live, large-scale events online. Until the pandemic was over, it didn't matter where I was living; live speaking engagements weren't in the cards.

My finances weren't precarious living in the US. I could make money. If worse came to worse, I could physically go get a job. I had skills, a solid reputation, and a network. If I moved to Portugal, I would have none of these things.

Moving to a new country, even a new state, on a shoestring budget puts you at a disadvantage. In this real world, money solves a lot of problems. Not having “extra” money, a buffer, makes everything harder. It limits your options. At the very least, you have to be more flexible and resourceful.

Part of my evaluation process was calculating the risk, not of losing business, but not being able to attract as much new business as I needed. I knew that I needed to build in a financial buffer for at least the first year of living in Portugal.

I'd Been Here Before

I sat my medium-size butt down and evaluated the pros and cons. Just because I *could* do this didn't mean I *should* do it. When I thought about it, I realized that I had made major moves before. I moved from Massachusetts to Georgia to Florida, back to Georgia, to San Francisco, then Hawaii and back to Florida.

As I made my final evaluations on moving to Portugal, I thought back to my most complex move: San Francisco to Hawaii, way back in 1989. Moving to Portugal had a lot of similarities to that move. I had never been to Hawaii and I only knew one person there. But I knew I wanted to live in Hawaii. It had been on my goal list for almost a decade.

Then I remembered how I financed it. Or in truth, how I didn't have the finances to make the move. If I had a better grasp of reality at the time, I probably wouldn't have made the jump. I prepaid for a week in a hotel in Waikiki with the idea that I would find a cheap place to live—which I did. I may have had \$2,500 cash reserves in total after shipping belongings via a cargo container, airline ticket (one way), and the hotel. I had the (maybe) promise of a job and when my money started getting low, I signed on with a temp agency. The job came through about five months later. I didn't starve. I didn't die. I had a lot of fun.

Older and wiser, I had a much better grasp on reality this time around. As I worked my way through creating a real budget, I felt more confident about making the move.

The Deciding Factor

The pieces falling into place, all the calculations and spreadsheets and research are important, but they are logical. All left-brain stuff.

What was the deciding factor? What overcame my inertia? Mortality. I am getting older and less mobile. At 62, I wasn't old or frail, but another ten years of sitting on the couch would sideline me. Making the leap was a do it now or never do it at all situation.

Mostly I just got mad because I had spent decades lying to myself. I gave myself a thorough chewing out: *How can you say you want to do this but not do it? Either you really want to move to Europe or you need to take it off the bucket list and never go.* Basically, I kicked my own ass.

There was nothing stopping me from finally living in Europe. It was time to either make the leap or stop yapping about it.

And then I got another push.

Chapter 11: Little Victories

I woke up to the sound of gulls jabbering. A thick, muffling fog had rolled in overnight. The construction on the building in front of me hadn't started yet. It's much better to wake up to the sound of gulls than jackhammers. Motivating, even.

It was cold again, but still warmer than a month ago. A cold front had moved in a week before, bringing rain and cloudy days. The country had been tamped down by COVID protocols. This day, the fog burned off revealing bright sunshine. Albufeira looked positively glorious. People were definitely ready for a break. I felt an energy that hadn't been there before. The sun was shining. The air was warm. People were out walking the streets and the beach, almost all of them masked even when walking outside. In my previous travels, I had passed little restaurants that were closed. On this Saturday, many of them were open for takeaway.

The government released pandemic figures every day, telling people what was going on in the battle against COVID. Portugal was the #1 hot spot for COVID after the Christmas holidays. Hospitals reached the breaking point and some non-COVID patients were airlifted to other countries. Medical teams came in from other EU countries. Four weeks of hard lockdown turned the tide. The prior week, WHO reported that new COVID cases were down 56.5% in Portugal, the largest decrease in Europe. Hospitalizations continued to fall. All good news. The lockdown had been extended through March 15th, but people could see that it was working and most (not all) were supportive.

All of this kept me from exploring as much as I like. Or maybe it gave me an excuse not to explore. When I thought of going out, which meant downhill, I also considered that I would have to walk back up. My last Saturday shopping excursion had been fun, but climbing back up the hill with my bags of groceries was... challenging. And yes, I was out of shape, but you need to understand that "climbing back up the hill" is more like climbing a series of steep hills. My apartment was about six levels up from the beach. I had found sets of stairs as an alternative to hiking up the streets. These seemed easier (or maybe faster) than the steady walk up a street. They probably weren't, but I was good with whatever psychological games I needed to play to get me up the hill. Still, I cursed myself for not taking a taxi back.



I'll Take My Wins Where I Can Find Them

That Saturday was full of little victories.

I hit one more “big” grocery store, the Pingo Doce. I cannot find everything I want or need at one store so shopping is a matter of rotating through Aldi, Lidl, Continente, and now Pingo Doce, and then remembering where the hell you found avocado oil or the Biscoff cookies or full fat milk as opposed to two percent. I still hit my smaller neighborhood market to pick up necessities. Today those necessities were Oreos, Ruffles potato chips, and plain M&Ms. And cream and eggs and bread and meat and all that responsible stuff.

As I waited in line to get in, I realized that I was spending more on groceries than I normally would. I recognized that it was a symptom of insecurity. I normally don't have that much junk food in the house. Now I have it just in case I have a craving. Or if I start missing the States and my friends. I figure as I adapt, my food bill will go down. But right now, it's my only real expenditure and I am indulging myself.

One thing I have missed is prepped foods. While Costco rotisserie chicken is legendary and most American supermarkets carry rotisserie and fried chicken and other prepped meals, I haven't found that in Portugal. I think the Continente might have some. Saturday, I discovered some prepped meals at Pingo Doce. Since my “kitchen” had no real oven, I wished I had found this

weeks ago. Still, I didn't order from the deli counter. I watched to see how it works—people going to a little machine and getting a numbered ticket, just like the deli counters in the States. I listened to the exchanges, all in Portuguese. I don't want to be *that* American and assume someone will speak English. My Pimsleur Portuguese lessons had yet to include what to say at the grocery store and I was shy about approaching the counter. I realized—again—that my life will be a lot better here if I make the effort to learn the language.

I was slowly trying new foods. Near the deli counter I picked up a package of Croquette de Picanha. They looked like hush puppies or maybe donut holes. I asked myself, *How bad can they be?*

Spoiler Alert: They were neither hush puppies nor donut holes.

I was inspecting a pastry at the bakery counter when the baker pushed a package of six little pastries towards me, said a lot of stuff quickly in Portuguese that even if I had caught the words I would not have understood. I read the label: Pastéis de nata. The famous Portuguese treat. I said to him in English, "You are a dangerous man." Neither of us knew it yet, but he was my new BFF.

On the way back, just a few doors down from the Pingo Doce, is TimTim's Chinese Restaurant. OMG! I hadn't had Chinese food in months. (How have I survived?) Their sign on the sidewalk said they were open for takeaway. I walked up the two flights of stairs (talk about being motivated!) and put in an order.

I waited in the sunshine, mask down, breathing in the fresh air. One or two people passed me on their way up from one street level to the next. The city is filled with these back stairways, short cuts from one street to another, one level to another. I was just now discovering that they are the rule, not the exception.

My order was ready and it was less expensive than I had calculated in my head—just under 15 euro. Portugal is "not a tipping culture," but I tipped generously because restaurants and their staffers had taken a huge hit due to the pandemic. I told the woman, "You are saving my life," and she laughed. But she didn't know how absolutely glorious it would be to have a meal that I didn't cook (my cooking is abysmal). She didn't know how much I have missed Chinese takeaway and pizza and Costco chicken. *Tonight*, I schemed in my head, *I will have a feast!* I was bubbling with happiness and anticipation.

It's All Scenic

I would say that I took the scenic route back, but honestly, it's all scenic. I could see the Atlantic from just about every point of my walk. Most of the streets are calçada (cobblestone). The houses are mostly white with orange tile roofs.

The two-mile trek back to my place involved many stops, some to rest and some to take pictures of the painted utility boxes. I am trying to be more “mindful” here, to take notice of the everyday things. I had seen the painted utility boxes on previous walks without really taking them in. On my return journey, I found them seemingly at every turn.

I walked along the beach road, just above Praia dos Pescadores. The beach was uncrowded, but busier than I had seen so far. I couldn’t imagine how cold the water was—I have been spoiled by the warm waters of Hawaii, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Florida. I grew up in New England where stepping into the Atlantic usually sent a shockwave through your entire body. I was almost ready to dip my feet in here, even if it was cold. The waves weren’t big, but the surfers were out, just happy to be in the water.

The climb home once again discouraged me. I was not conquering these hills. I was not magically getting in shape. (*I dunno, could be the Oreos and potato chips, Barb...*) It was discouraging. I felt old. Was I physically up for this new life? My next Airbnb was in town, much closer to all the stores and only halfway up a hill. It will be easier there, I told myself.

Let’s Have Mikey Try It

I put the groceries away and looked up the word picanha on Google translate. I wanted to make sure it was not fish. Rump steak. Okay. I have never eaten a croquette anything in my life. I am not an adventurous eater but I am committed to trying a new food a week. I heated it in the microwave, wishing I had an oven because I knew that this was **NOT** the way to go with this thing. They are fried, so the microwave screwed up the texture. But even the microwave cannot ruin these things. They are GOOD! I had a new food. My discouragement vanished.

Next up was the pastéis de nata. I told myself it was my reward for not dying on the hills today. OMG! You have to come here just to eat these things! I am so glad I did not die before I ate one of these. A pastel de nata is a puff pastry shell with a sweet custard filling, caramelized on the top. I didn’t know if you were supposed to use a knife and fork or if it was finger food. I ate it standing over the sink to catch the little flakes of puff pastry that didn’t make it into my mouth. (*Sinful waste*, I thought to myself.) It is my new favorite thing and I was VERY GLAD there were six of them in the package. I was also glad that they were a two-mile walk from me because if they were close by, I was very certain I would gain 40 pounds in a week. I resisted the urge to binge on another—*Pace yourself*— but I planned on having one for dessert that night, after my Chinese food. These things are seriously yummy.

Must Do Better

I won’t lie. I was more tired than I should have been. I had planned to walk the beach the following day, but I was just not up for it. My exhaustion was part physical, of course. But it was

also mental and emotional. Going grocery shopping induced a level of anxiety in me that was embarrassing so I tried to ignore it. I mean, it's grocery shopping. It's a simple activity. While only a limited amount of people were allowed in stores at a time, you were still inside, breathing through a mask, not sure if a COVID germ would somehow get through.

But it wasn't just COVID anxiety. Going out in public, to the store was like one of those scary movie montages where you are lost and weird laughing faces zoom in close to you. Very little on the shelves looked familiar. I saw splashes of color but didn't recognize brands or even what I was looking at. I tried to interpret the labels and my Internet connection on my phone didn't work because I didn't have the right SIM card. Things weren't where I expected them to be and if I found something once, there was no guarantee I would find it in the same spot the next time. When the clerk asked me a question, I had no idea what she was asking. She held up a plastic bag. I showed her my cloth bags. I paid by card because I still hadn't figured out the cash machines here and the currency exchanges were not open. I was super-self-conscious at the check-out, trying to bag up my groceries as fast as I could so I was not holding up the line. No one complained or stared; it was all me and my anxiety.

I was very much aware that I was "the other" here, not because of anything anyone did or said, but because everything—everything—was so alien to me. People talked to each other, laughed, knew where they were going, knew how to navigate interactions. It was like I was put on stage in the middle of a dance number where everyone else was a professional who knew the choreography. I kept bumping up against metaphorical things, clumsy, self-conscious, out of rhythm. They all belonged; I was stumbling through.

More than once, I wondered if moving here was a mistake. I couldn't go anywhere and explore places. I didn't know the language. I was in limbo as far as my immigration appointment. I didn't know anyone. I missed my friends. I missed my car. I missed how easy my life was back in the States: I knew where everything was and how everything worked. I was exhausted by a simple trip to the grocery store. Was I going to wash out of the expat life?

But on this day, I had tons of food in the house and work to do. Little by little I was learning about my new country, even if I couldn't explore beyond my first city. I reframed the inability to travel as something that took the pressure off me. For now, I didn't have to figure out car rentals or driving roundabouts or the train system. I loved that there was so little traffic in Albufeira but I didn't know if I was ready to head out on the A22. So, the lockdown was not as onerous for me as it was for most. It provided good cover for my cowardice. But soon I would have to step up to the plate. And I knew that I would. Really, there was no choice. In the meantime, I'd keep climbing the hills. And get that walk in on the beach.

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