

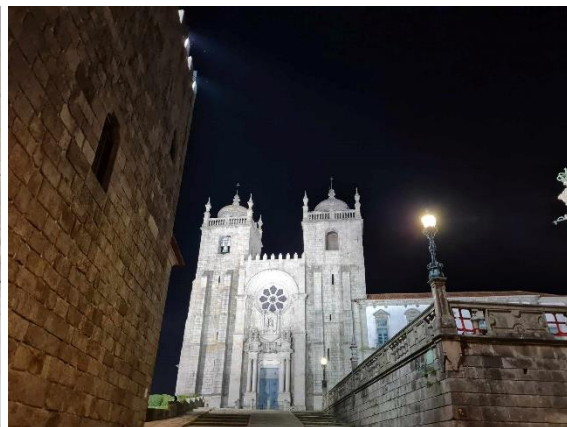
## Why Portugal? Why Not?

Two words, one question. “Why Portugal?” I get asked it a lot, and depending on the context, I like the question. When it’s asked with curiosity, it’s a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the reasons and explain how much I’ve thought about this decision and showcase the research that led to this conclusion. Sometimes, it’s asked with bewilderment, as if to suggest that it doesn’t make sense to leave the UK and move to Portugal. One experience of this was at the airport. I was just about to board my flight when I stopped to buy a drink and the cashier asked me about my destination. Excitedly, I said that I was going to Portugal, and that I was planning to relocate. The sudden quizzical look and wrinkles in her eyebrows preceded her question: “Why would you move there?” I did not have the time to give a detailed response, but I managed to squeeze in the fact that I thought it would be an eye-opening adventure that allows me to explore a different culture and embark on a new way of life. She did not seem to understand this, but wished me a safe journey. Interestingly, just minutes before that interaction, the security officer who performed a more detailed search of my person asked me the exact same question. When I said that I was moving to Portugal, her face lit up and she very enthusiastically told me to have a lovely time.



Submitting my visa application at the office in London a few months earlier, I was asked by the lady processing my documents why I wanted to move. Resisting the urge to say that “It’s in the motivation letter I’ve just handed to you” I said that I wanted to start an independent life somewhere new. It seemed like such a flimsy answer, but this does not make it any less true...and I

would argue that the value of living somewhere different to your homeland should not be underestimated. Whether the experience is positive, negative, or a mixture of the two...testing your adaptability, learning a new language, fending for yourself, and experiencing things you wouldn't in your day-to-day life in your home country is something that can't be compared to anything else. I have wanted to emigrate for many years and have been slowly edging towards that goal. From choosing a degree that had a year abroad to studying international journalism with the aim of working overseas, I have always had this goal in mind. The key questions have always been "how" "where" and "when". I very much felt like my brain would atrophy because of the lack of challenges in my daily life. Going to work and coming home every day for years brought a level of stability has its merits... but the monotony of it can bring listlessness. Back to the merits: I had job security during the pandemic. Caring for my mother when she was hospitalized would not have been possible without support from the flexible working arrangements that my company provides. Once the healthcare-related challenges my mother endured had finally come to an end, I asked myself the question: what do I want to do for me? As an only child who enjoys independence and autonomy, it's easy for me to grab my backpack, purchase a flight ticket and "get out of here 🗺️"™ which was my Instagram tag line a few months ago. Having solo travelled since 2016, I feel most challenged when I'm abroad. I become easygoing and solution-oriented. If the bus doesn't arrive – what's another mode of transportation that can get me to where I need to go? What are the local taxi numbers? Can I postpone this part of the trip and do something else? It makes me a problem-solver.



As someone with a history of anxiety, it is fascinating that the calmest I feel is when I'm in a place that's unfamiliar to me. Portugal was a country that I intended to visit with my mother in 2020. It didn't happen...but the country was never removed from my bucket list. In April 2023, I tossed a coin

to decide on where I would go for a weekend break. The options were Poland and Portugal. Interestingly, Poland “won” but when I reached out to a potential Airbnb host, he told me that it was a national holiday in Poland on the weekend that I intended to go and that he didn’t want to rent the place out at that point. No worries, I thought! That’s when my Portuguese adventure really began. When I landed in Porto, I was greeted with sunshine, friendly smiles, and an easy, affordable trip into the city on the metro. After checking into my Airbnb in a quiet, residential area, I spent more than seven hours on foot exploring the city. Ignoring the pain in my feet, I woke up at 5 in the morning the following day to explore Lisbon. In just a few hours, I saw many sites: Arco da Rua Augusta, Belém Tower, Lisbon Cathedral, and Palácio das Necessidades. On Sunday, I squeezed in a visit to Aveiro, where I met a friend for ovos moles and I was amazed by the upbeat mood of the tour guides, trying to convince us to ride in the canal boats even though the sky was full of clouds. I experienced a similar level of joy from Portuguese friends who encouraged me to move as soon as I expressed interest. My voice notes are full of detailed explanations of what it’s like to live in the country, and I was sold. The highlight of my weekend was definitely my visit to Viana do Castelo, a city on the northern coast of the country with a captivating church on a hilltop that was even more breathtaking than I expected.



As a big fan of churches, heritage sites, bodies of water, and lush greenery...Portugal has everything I’m looking for. I wanted to live somewhere that feels safe, where I could blend in and become part of society without turning heads as I have done in some remote locations I’ve visited around the world. I’m pleased that there’s such a diverse population. Getting my hair done is a priority for me, but more importantly, people who have “been there, done that” and can support me as an unambiguously black woman moving to a new country is absolutely priceless. I’m not uncritical of Portugal: Like the country of which I am a national, it was a colonial power which brought devastation upon natives of countries spanning the entire world. Anti-immigrant sentiment is rising in some enclaves, and some people can be impatient with people who don’t yet speak

Portuguese...but these features are not unique to Portugal, and there's no metric to determine whether it's "worse" in this country, than in any other. Racism and discrimination are personal experiences that can happen at home as well as in lands that are far away. I expected to have difficulty finding accommodation: after all, I'm a black woman and have been scammed in my home country in the UK. I had quite the opposite experience! I found a place in just two days of searching online and the landlord welcomed me with port wine and a map of the city. Other aspects of the move have been smooth and straightforward in a way that I was not anticipating, because of previous experience of navigating life as a black woman. Though it's important not to be naïve about racism, prejudice, and other factors that threaten to make life more difficult in an unfamiliar environment... it's possible that things will be easier than you think. Even if they're not, there is a community out there that is willing and able to offer support. I've been invited to a number of social activities, and I feel increasingly assured that I've made a decision that works for me at the stage of life that I'm in.

So why Portugal? Aside from the reasons I've listed above, I am an absolute sucker for a numinous experience.

