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ON GUIDES AND GUIDANCE

Ian Robertson

When advertng to guides – the uncritical ones – Aldous Huxley once remarked: ‘For every traveller who has any taste of his own, the only useful guide book will be the one he himself has written. All the others are an exasperation – they make him travel long miles to see a mound of rubbish; they go into ecstasies over mere antiquity ...’ etc. When in 1970 I was commissioned by Ernest Benn Ltd to write my first ‘Blue Guide’, which was to Spain, I vowed to avoid thus misleading my future readers.

With my wife, an indefatigable chauffeuse, we had already explored several areas of that country when on holidays after visiting her parents’ flat in San Sebastian; and also, by that date, we had made our home near Segovia. Naturally, I had read a deal of history of the Iberian Peninsula, its art, architecture, and culture already, and had started to collect earlier books of travels and Peninsular War narratives, as I have continued to do so since. I had noticed also that the 2nd edition of the *Blue Guide to Spain* (not including Portugal: see below) although still in print, was getting very out of date, which was why, in the first place, I approached the publisher about the possibility of revising it.

By 1980, when asked to compile an entirely new *Blue Guide to Portugal* – the subject of this brief article – I had already some experience of the difficulties involved in such an undertaking, the more so because the only previous guide in the series covering the country in any way – and then largely by rail – was that entitled *Southern Spain and Portugal*, dated 1929, half a century earlier. In this, barely 100 pages had been devoted to mainland Portugal, a mere 20 of which were on Lisbon, while an additional 13 described Madeira and the Azores. As Portugal

had been jettisoned from the second edition, of 1964, the only other solid guide available to the country was that in the 'World Guides' series, being a translation from the French Hachette's Guide Bleu of 1956, in which I could place scant reliance and into which I hardly dipped; and the only travel book in English to Portugal then available, and which has been referred to as being 'thuriferous', was getting dated.

On a recent visit to London, I had met with a welcome reception by both the director of the Portuguese Tourist Office there and their Cultural Attaché, Eugénio Lisboa, which reassured me. I went home to prepare the ground, but soon realized that I would have to concentrate entirely on the mainland, at least in the first edition. The country was not entirely unknown to me, for in 1975, not long after the 'revolution', I had made a rapid excursion to the Western Algarve with a friend worried (needlessly) about the state in which she might find her parents' holiday house. Our route had taken in Estremoz, and Évora, which immediately enchanted me, and I promised myself to return there as soon as other commitments allowed.

In early January 1980 my wife and I drove directly to Lisbon in our little Citroen Diane, where I had a preliminary discussion of the project with the tourist authorities: naturally, it was one which they were keen to support; and they were to be most hospitable in arranging future accommodation for us whenever they could, often in *pousadas*. This was most appreciated; for after what was frequently a strenuous day of exploration, sight-seeing, and note-taking, one needed to relax in comfortable surroundings and, while on our travels, I was to find most of their managers to be informative. After several days in Lisbon, and excursions to Sintra and Mafra, we returned to base (via Tomar and Castelo Branco) to make more detailed plans for our first comprehensive and intensive tour, which started that March.

During ensuing weeks we covered a great deal of ground, after re-entering Portugal on 23 February, and spending the whole of March criss-crossing the country from Tavira and Sagres to Valença and Bragança, to leave after a night at hill-top Marvão.

I well remember the warm-hearted welcome given us by Alice Chicó at Évora, by the guardians of the little cathedral at Elvas, the Roman villa at São Cucufate, and at Idanha a Velha; by the curator of Castelo Branco's museum, by José Luis Porfirio in the Rua das Janelas Verdes, by Claudio Torres at Mértola, and Maria do Céu at Ponte de Lima, to mention a few names and occasions at random who come to mind, although it may be invidious to name individuals who went out of their way to offer assistance, advice, or hospitality. Even civil servants were helpful, which has not always been the case. J.M. Neale, compiler of Murray's *Hand-Book to Portugal* in the 1850s, commented that, in Lisbon, 'The English Consul is Mr Smith ... The Vice-Consul, Mr Meagher ... From the latter gentlemen every kind of courtesy will be experienced.' I never forget – even after several decades – that of the old village lady at the church of São Pedro at Lourosa, or of the lonely guardian of the Citânia de Briteiros, singing to himself towards sunset as we left the site. The sacristan at Braga had been somewhat over-enthusiastic: I well remember the plaintive groan emitted by the seventeenth-century portative organ in the cathedral treasury when he kicked it into action to prove that it still 'worked'. What impressed me was the pride with which so many pursued their tasks, however humble: it was with obvious pleasure that they set out to help me in mine, no mere duty. How different, only too often, had been our reception when on similar assignments in Spain, I regret to say.

By the time we had reached home, I felt I had a reasonable enough general idea of the terrain and its numerous attractions

to start writing; which continued uninterruptedly for many months; and the first edition of my *Blue Guide to Portugal* was published in 1982. In the following year I made a brief visit to Lisbon specifically, and in 1984 a second edition was issued.

Our next intensive tour was delayed until January 1987, when we re-visited several places and – by taking different routes – covered many comparatively minor towns, villages, and sites still not previously seen in person, which naturally entailed a number of corrections and additions to be made.

Apart from a very brief incursion into the Trás-os-Montes and Minho while revising ‘Spain’, we made two further long exploratory journeys, the first early in 1991, the last in the autumn of 1994, on both making new and enchanting discoveries, as at Tibães, for example, or for my personal interest – I later reverted to writing several books on the Peninsular War (to which I also compiled an Atlas, published by Yale University Press in 2010) – Freineda, Wellington’s headquarters during two winters, among other similar sites.

But sadly, by then, the Blue Guide series had passed into other hands. The new proprietors wanted to make them more ‘popular’, not realising that any form of down-market change that this would entail – which went entirely against my grain – would inevitably disappoint and discourage those discriminating travellers for whom I wrote. (Adding the names and telephone-numbers of ‘tour-operators’, the addresses of local tourist offices, and lists of hotels and restaurants in Lisbon and Oporto, was not only pointless, but make a guide-book out-of-date even before issued.) My agreement with the Director of Tourism, after he had invited us to visit the islands as their guests, in order to include Madeira and the Azores in a new edition, was – to my mortification – brusquely and insensibly annulled by the publishers at very short notice

with the derisory excuse that any such supplement would add to the cost of the guide.

Before very long, the lamentable trend had become only too evident in the case of some new titles cobbled by those without any evident qualifications, and the name and remaining stock of the series was sold off to another publisher, with whom only a few very obvious titles survived, later to be reissued in another form.

It is now very unlikely that another guide to Portugal worthy of the name will ever grace any surviving shelves, but, should one do so, it will hardly be recognised as such by the educated reader. However, to paraphrase Richard Ford’s acerbic aside in the preface to the second, condensed, edition of his authoritative *Hand-Book for Travellers to Spain* of 1847, ‘many are the wild Iberian flowers which will be rooted out, that none may be tempted off the dry road ... thus tomes change with times, and literature keeps pace with locomotion.’

Ian Robertson was born in Tokyo in 1928. He was associated with Blue Guides for over 25 years, since being commissioned to rewrite Spain in 1970. He has compiled or rewritten several editions of Blue Guides, among them those to France, Austria and Switzerland. His other works of Portuguese interest are: A Traveller’s History of Portugal (2002; 3rd ed. 2011); and A Commanding Presence: Wellington in the Peninsula 1808–1814: Logistics · Strategy · Survival (2008). He was also the part-editor of and contributor to José Hermano Saraiva’s Portugal: A Companion History (1997). He wrote the revised entry for Joseph James Forrester in the New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004) and also the Preface to a reprint of Joseph Baretti’s A Journey from London to Genoa through England, Portugal, Spain, and France (1770; Centaur Press, 1970). He now lives in France.