

Editor's Choice From This Month's Issue

Table of Contents



The Romantic 19th-century Pena Palace draws visitors to Sintra, but there are many reasons to stay, as Heidi Dezell discovered. ©David Gibb

BONUS CONTENT

By David Gibb [November 2021](#)

Leaving a Six-Figure Job for Portugal's Small-Town Charms

Set in a cooling landscape of rolling hills, Sintra is a gorgeous, Disney-esque Portuguese village, a half-hour train ride from Lisbon. UNESCO classified it a World Heritage Site in 1995, due to its majestic palaces and villas, and the remnants of an historic Moorish castle.

My wife, Beverley, is tearing into a *Queijada* at a *pastelaria* in Sintra's picturesque town center, as I try to avoid the temptation. She boasts that this pastry cake, a traditional local specialty since 1756, is absolutely out of this world. Baked with cheese, sugar, eggs, flour and cinnamon, the aroma is making me drool like a Saint Bernard. But, after indulging in several *ginja* shots, served in dark chocolate and *pastel de nata*-flavored edible cups, at a bar around the corner, I'm already over my limit when it comes to indulgence.

We're here in Sintra to meet with Heidi Dezell, a kindred spirit, a few steps ahead of us on her expat journey.

Beverley and I have just started the search for a place to call home overseas—Portugal is our first stop... But Heidi's search for paradise ended right here in Sintra.

We're eager to hear what it was about Sintra that made her decide to settle here...and to learn more about the practical steps involved in moving to Portugal.

10 Years of Adventure?

Emotionally unfulfilled and seeking a more exciting life, Heidi, at 55, walked away from her six-figure job as a national sales executive for a U.S. tech company. She planned to travel the world in search of her personal utopia.

"I'm the type of gal who likes to jump from airplanes, and do other crazy stuff, so I didn't want to wait, in case I couldn't physically do it anymore," she explains.

Heidi quit her job, rented out her house in Seattle, crammed her personal items into storage, and headed to the airport with a single carry-on bag. She planned to spend 10 years traveling, figuring out where she wanted to be and what she wanted to do.

“If, in the end, I was 65 and had to go back to work, then so be it—but I wanted to spend this time doing crazy fun stuff,” she tells us.

She was divorced—and her two children were grown and living busy lives of their own, so the timing was perfect.

“Going nomad” wasn’t a huge jump for Heidi. During her years in sales, she’d often spent only three or four nights a month in her own bed. Now, however, she was looking forward to traveling for fun instead of work.

Heidi first journeyed around Asia and Australia, returning to the U.S. in December 2019 for what was supposed to be a quick pitstop, before she resumed her tour of the Far East. But she caught wind of a nasty new virus taking root in that area and chose to make a detour.

“I had always dreamed of following the Silk Road,” she says, “but I decided this may not be the best time...so, I headed to Europe instead.”

Northern Italy, to be exact. There, she found herself in the middle of difficult times, as COVID hit the region strong—in February 2020. President Trump advised Americans to either return home immediately or “shelter in place.” Heidi chose the latter, spending February and March in northern Italy and the south of France.

Heidi’s ambitious plan to tour the world was shaken to rubble. She hunkered down, couch-surfing with some friends in a small village outside Zurich in Switzerland, while waiting for circumstances to change. But each month she had to apply for a visa extension—something that was never guaranteed.

“I kept thinking I’d be sent home on the next plane,” she laments. “It was emotionally exhausting, and, at that point, I began looking for somewhere I could just settle down.”

Portugal—A Beacon in a Storm

Her research led her to Portugal. She had never set foot in Portugal, and knew only two people who had ever visited. But, with just a five-year track to citizenship, she found the country very appealing.

Heidi returned to the U.S. to complete her application for a D7 Visa (issued to foreign nationals who want to retire to Portugal or live off self-generated income) through the Portuguese consulate.

Her arrival back in Seattle, on June 4, 2020, however, was ill-timed. Boisterous and bloody protests against police brutality took place directly below her apartment, and she woke in the middle of the night to the odor of tear gas.

Portugal beckoned Heidi like a beacon in a perfect storm...

By the time she received the FBI fingerprint clearance needed for the application (due to COVID-related delays), however, Portugal had temporarily closed the door on any new D7 applicants.

Disappointed at her lousy timing, Heidi busily researched other types of visas that Portugal still provided. She found one that would work...a student visa. Hitting Google with a fury, she found an option to study Portuguese, for 28 hours per week, through the University of Coimbra. She quickly signed up, submitted her paperwork, and received approval just two weeks later.

It would be the ticket to her yellow brick road.

“We’ll Take Care of You!”

Heidi landed back in Portugal with four heavy suitcases. As she struggled to collect them at the baggage carousel, the heaviest one fell on her foot—breaking her big toe and tearing off her toenail. Blood began pooling, as Heidi, exhausted after 36 hours without sleep, began to sob.

Portuguese people descended on her, saying, “Where’s your bags?” “We’ll take care of you!” and “We’ll get the airport nurse!” (Wait...there’s an airport nurse?)

The nurse sent her to the hospital in a taxi. The cabbie took care of all her luggage and rushed her to the emergency room. There, an ER doctor and two specialists treated her injuries. She was in and out in less than an hour, while the cabbie waited patiently. Without traveler’s insurance, Heidi was surprised when her final bill was only €100 (around \$115...less than her deductible in the U.S.!) They even apologized for charging so much. Follow-up visits, which Heidi says would have been cost-prohibitive to her in the U.S., were only €18 (\$21) each.

“I’ve never had an injury heal so quickly,” Heidi exclaims. “It’s amazing what happens when you get proper medical care.”

The cabbie then drove to a pharmacy to fill her prescriptions, helped her use the ATM, and took her grocery shopping, before carrying all her bags up four flights of stairs to her apartment. With over three hours of his time invested, Heidi feared the cost. But the gentleman sheepishly asked, “Is €50 OK?”

“I still get teared up thinking about it,” says Heidi. “I thought, oh my goodness... I’m in the right country! The level of compassion was completely overwhelming.”

And, just like that, Heidi knew she had found her perfect place to live. A place where people still cared, and the community supported and helped one another. Something she felt had been missing in the U.S. for some time.

(As a side note, Heidi now spends \$33 per month on a health insurance plan she buys from her bank—banks and grocery stores sell insurance in Portugal! —“less than a bad meal costs back home,” she jokes.)

“Everything I’ve Been Looking For”



Sintra has cooler temperatures than most of Portugal—and that suits Heidi just fine. ©David Gibb

When her classes at Coimbra switched to online learning, Heidi decided to explore more of the country. That’s when she discovered Sintra and fell in love.

With its cool and cloudy microclimate, Sintra is very different from most of Portugal. But Heidi likes it that way, preferring to avoid excessive heat or cold. She says there’s only about seven expats living here, which also suits her fine, as she prefers to integrate with the locals. Sintra offers small-town life, just a short train ride from the big city. And, as a single woman, Heidi feels completely safe here.

Heidi rents a 970-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment in a 250-year-old building, for €800 per month. Utilities, including electricity, water, and WiFi, run about another €150 monthly. (However, Heidi does not have air conditioning, a dishwasher, or dryer.)

Heidi returned to the U.S. in May 2021 to file again for her D7 Residency Visa. During the two months it took to process (filing through the Washington, D.C. consulate is much easier than San Francisco or New York, according to sources), Heidi sold her house in Seattle and got rid of most of her belongings.

When her D7 was approved for a two-year temporary residency term in September, Heidi returned home for her dog, Bailey. Now she, and Bailey, are in Sintra—hopefully for good. In two years, she can apply for another three-year term, after which she can apply for full citizenship—provided she passes a language and history test.

“Everything I’ve been looking for I found right here in Portugal,” says Heidi. “I’m finally home!”

[PREVIOUS](#)

[NEXT](#)

Quick Links

[Logout](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

Your Subscriptions

[Platinum Circle](#)

[International Living Magazine](#)

[Dream Home Letter](#)

International Living Lifetime

Real Estate Trend Alert

Global Intelligence Letter

The Savvy Retiree

Incomes Abroad

Ecuador Insider

Ecuador Digest

Panama Insider

Panama Digest

Costa Rica Insider

Costa Rica Digest

Belize Insider

Belize Digest

Free Reports

International Living

Customer Service

TOP OF PAGE

