

2010 World Pipesmoking Championship
Estoril, Portugal

By Raymond M. Lykins

“Sometimes you can tell a lot about a people by riding the metro.”

I uttered this surprisingly profound statement at the President’s Dinner, which Vernon Vig graciously invited me to attend as one of two U.S. delegates to the World Pipesmoking Championship. My wife, Paris, and I had flown into Lisbon on Thursday morning, in the middle of a rainstorm. I am a fan of public transportation if it’s available, and Lisbon has one of the cleanest and most efficient metro systems in Europe. After getting through customs, we boarded a city bus to the Cais do Sodre train station for the train ride to Estoril. What I hadn’t figured on was the difficulty in riding a busy metropolitan bus with all of our luggage during rush hour in a major world capital city. Paris and I packed ourselves as best we could on the crammed bus, and held on for dear life as the bus driver weaved like an expert Indy 500 driver through the busy Lisbon city streets, stopping suddenly in neighborhoods where classic 15th century style buildings stood next to modern steel and glass structures, with graffiti rivaling the best artists from New York adorning many of the walls.

Yet it was the people on the bus that told me the most about Lisbon. They were an eclectic mix of nationalities, with languages from every corner of the world, most representing Portugal’s far-reaching influence as a seafaring colonial power. Amazingly, though, this was not like Atlanta or any other major U.S. city. I kept vigilant watch over our large roller bag that was blocking the aisle, trying in vain to hold onto it as the bus weaved through traffic and came to sudden stops. That’s when I observed the true nature of the Lisbon citizenry. Instead of ignoring our plight, or uttering Portuguese obscenities under their breath, complete strangers graciously helped secure our belongings, and lent hands to steady me as I tried to maintain my footing. This was clearly like no other major city in the world.

We enjoyed a pleasant 40 minute train ride along the Lisbon coast to Estoril. The rain broke long enough for the sun to shine through the clouds, revealing stretches of rocky beaches interrupted by small towns that looked largely unchanged since the days of Vasco da Gama and the great explorers. We arrived at the Estoril train station directly across from the gardens of Casino Estoril, the largest casino in Europe and the site for many of the week’s activities, including the smoking competition. According to my directions, the Hotel Londres should be within walking distance. We began to follow the signs, only to learn it was on top of a hill. Paris exclaimed “Don’t ever let me tell you “You don’t have a sense of adventure!!”.

We arrived at Hotel Londres and secured our belongings behind the hotel desk while we waited for our room to be ready. Exhausted from our trip, I napped on a couch in the hotel lobby. Once our room was ready, we collapsed in the bed for a well needed rest.

Friday evening, we met Vernon Vig at the Hotel Palacio next to the Casino Estoril for cocktails and the President's Dinner. It was a grand hotel with mirrors and ornate woodwork. Exiled dignitaries sought shelter here during World War II. Vernon introduced us to representatives from pipe clubs from all over the world. After cocktails, we sat down to a lovely dinner with representatives from the Scandinavian Tobacco Group, and representatives from the Dutch and Ukrainian teams. Vernon and I lit our pipes for a quick smoke before dinner, while several participants passed their latest acquired pipes around to be admired.

Vernon invited me to attend the CIPC meeting the following morning, but due to jet lag I slept right through it. Paris and I arrived at the Pipe Show on Saturday afternoon, where I introduced Paris to Luigi Voprati, whom I knew from Chicago and his many appearances at The Briary, my local smoke shop and home away from home. We also met Sara Geiger of Geiger Pipes of Sweden, who is producing some amazing work. We were greeted with gift bags prepared by the Cachimbo Clube de Portugal, which included several items. Thanks to our new friends from the Scandinavian Tobacco Group, I was able to secure the tobacco to be used in the competition. Vasco, one of the representatives from Scandinavian Tobacco Group, had been inspired to purchase his first pipe at the Pipe Show. Upon observing he was having some difficulty, I gently gave him a few pointers on how to get the most enjoyment from his pipe. Upon learning that he did not have a pipe tamper, I gave him one of my basic pipe tools from my pipe bag. After our generous reception, it was the least I could do to spread some good will around.

After leaving the Pipe Show, Paris and I stopped for lunch at the Jackpot Restaurant next to the Casino. Upon learning that Paris does not eat fowl or meat, the chef prepared for us a special seafood paella, consisting of lobster, mussels, squid, and octopus with saffron rice and peppers. It was a meal fit for royalty!

That evening, Paris and I went to the D Lounge at Casino Estoril for a special cocktail hour hosted by the Cachimbo Clube de Portugal preceding the Gala Dinner. I began to smoke Alsbo Black, the competition tobacco, to learn its burning characteristics, which I was pleasantly surprised with.

Afterwards, Vernon and I attended the Gala Dinner at Salao Preto e Prata in the Casino. After dinner, we were treated to a performance of *Fado: Histoia de um Povo*, which was an amazing show featuring acrobats, traditional Portuguese operatic singing, and elaborate props and costumes. The best way I can describe it is to imagine if Cirque de Soleil staged a production about Portuguese history and hosted it at Luxor in Las Vegas. It was truly an unforgettable experience.

After the show, Paris and I returned to Hotel Londres. The competition was the next day in the afternoon, but I knew I had to practice one more time. I went out on the veranda, filled my pipe with Alsbo Black, as close to three grams as I could muster, and timed myself. It had a fair amount of burley mixed in with the black Cavendish, which meant that it would not be nearly as difficult to smoke as I had imagined. I was able to

break the 2 hour 10 minute mark. Feeling a bit more confident about the next day's possibilities, I turned in.

Paris and I arrived at Casino Estoril about 11:30 a.m., in time to meet and greet our fellow competitors and get acclimated to our surroundings. I wore my full tartan kilt and flashes commemorating my Irish-American heritage as I had done in Chicago, which got a lot of attention from some of my fellow competitors. As the Italian team arrived, I took the opportunity to introduce myself to Gianfranco Ruscalla, the current world champion and world record holder. Around 1:30, Vernon and I took our seats at Table No. 9 with the team from the Netherlands and the team from the Czech Republic.

The pipes and tampers were distributed. The pipe this year was a Vauen Maple Billiard, distributed by Peter Heinrichs and stamped "World Championship Portugal 2010". Knowing that Vauen pipes are made to accommodate a 9 mm filter, I had practiced with a L'Anatra that took a similar filter, which Skip Elliot, the owner of the Briary, was generous enough to donate to me. I was relieved to learn that the Vauen pipes actually come with an adapter that allows you to smoke with or without the filter.

Then the tobacco was distributed in standard 3 gram pouches. The countdown started and we were underway. I used 2 minutes of my allotted time to crush the tobacco using the paper and to sort it, trying to make it uniform as possible, then exactly at 2:33 minutes elapsed, packed my pipe using the tried and true 3 step method. I got my pipe loaded with 20 seconds to spare.

Then the countdown for the lighting of the pipes commenced. It's truly a unique experience to hear 300 matches being lit all at once. I gently seared the tobacco with the first match, then tamped and did a final light with my second match. The contest was officially underway.

It turns out that I was seated directly across from a former world champion. Lubomir Cinka is the president of the Czech pipe association. I got to observe some of his techniques as I participated. I knew full well that I was not going to beat the Italian team, but if I could glean any knowledge from my first international competition, this trip would be worthwhile. I was encouraged to observe Lubomir using many of the techniques I had developed while practicing with straight black Cavendish, albeit more skillfully than I was doing at the present moment. My nerves had gotten the better of me and I was smoking hot. I just didn't want to have my pipe go out at the 45 minute mark. For me, that would have been too much of a disappointment. Instead, I focused on Lubomir Cinka, trying to outlast him.

One by one, our table began to clear. 45 minutes gone by, and I was still going strong. Vernon was right with me. Many of our Dutch competitors had gone out at the 30 and 40 minute marks. I watched Lubomir as he expertly observed his ember, clearing his pipe and letting it rest so as not to burn hot. At 1:04, Vernon went out. But, as he exclaimed, he went out satisfied, having given his best personal performance at a competition.

At 1:15, most of the Dutch delegation was gone, and at 1:41, it was only myself and Lubomir at the table. My hot start was now punishing me. I could tell that I had only a few smoldering embers. I had somehow miraculously brought my pipe back from the brink twice. I nursed those embers for as long as I could, until at 1:45:45, a mouthful of ash through the stem told me what I didn't want to hear. My pipe was out, and there was no tobacco left to revive it. Apparently I gave a good fight, however. Lubomir was out 10 minutes later at 1:54:53.

So, Vernon and I had given a respectable performance. I placed 34 out of 300 competitors with a time of 1:45:45, which was the best time ever by an American in an international competition. Vernon Vig came in at 117 with a time of 1:04:00. Where do we go from here? As Vernon likes to say, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" It's true that the U.S. currently lags behind Europe in competitive pipe smoking. But we can, and we will, improve. The task is difficult, but not impossible.

The Italian team swept the top three places in the international competition, with Gianfranco Ruscalla winning 1st place at 3:10:00. Italy took 1st place in the team competition with a combined time of 8:50:34. Denmark came in 2nd with 6:35:35, and Spain came in 3rd with 6:30:51.

Elisabeth Dobnig of Austria took the Women's title with a time of 2:05:12.

Paris and I stayed for the awards ceremony and for a chance to bid fond farewell to our new friends from all over the world and our gracious Portuguese hosts. In the true Olympic spirit of this contest, my fellow competitors sought me out to congratulate me for my placement and representation of the U.S. We knew that we had a once in a lifetime experience, and that we would not forget Portugal any time soon.