

How to Run a Portuguese Laundromat for

How to Run a Portuguese Laundromat for One

Your landlord left you two bottles of vinho verde. You should be about halfway through the first when the washing machine finishes its inaugural cycle. Important word for a washing machine—inaugural—but given what it took to get to this point, first should feel lacking. Roll the remaining wine around in your glass and reminisce about the time before you popped the cork, back to earlier in the afternoon when you spent half an hour wrestling with Google—longer than anything should ever take once Google gets involved—trying to figure out the controls to the front-loading THOR TL2 800, an appropriate name considering the size of the hammer you'd have liked to smash it with.

The THOR's designers were sure to offer plenty of options—around twenty altogether—for providing clothing with the perfect washing experience. Each option, denoted by a number and a symbol, promised to do some mysterious something to your clothes at a temperature displayed in what you could only assume to be Celsius. The symbols include a trapezoid, an isosceles triangle, a cave man's answer to an iron, a rhombus, and a spiral like what you might find on an airplane's turbine, to name a few.

You spent some time working through the symbols while sipping some (read: the only two brands of) local beer, also left by your landlord. Before you had taken your first hard pull from a bottle of Super Bock, you considered the importance of the fifteen-foot inflatable Sagres can you saw down by the Tagus after your orientation and first day of classes. Since both beers taste the same, have no light variants and since most stores and bars offer only one or the other, the chance of customers grabbing either should be

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roughly the same. The giant, inflatable can could have simply read “BEER,” or, more appropriately, “CERVEJA,” and accomplished the same thing.

But back to the washer. When you decided on trapezoid—definitely trapezoid—and pulled the soap from under the sink where it sat wrapped in a thin plastic bag atop a nest of flowery rubber gloves, you noticed its unmistakably Tide branding came paired with instructions in Arabic and a second unidentified language lacking Romanized characters. Soap is soap, sure, but maybe, you mused, a rule exists for amount of soap to amount of clothes with relation to the distance from a large body of water, similar to rules for baking at high altitudes. As this thought crossed your mind, you sneered in the direction of the river, even though numerous buildings blocked it from direct view.

Having already had your fill of failed Googling for the day, you applied only a pinch of soap to the wash, shut the washer door and cranked the dial all the way to trapezoid. After a moment’s debate on if you’d made the right decision, you breathed an emphatic “Fuck it,” tore the cork from the first bottle of wine and plopped down on the apartment’s lone beanbag chair.

Stand up. Drain your wine glass. Mute the fado. Set the glass by the sink on the countertop above the THOR. Hold your breath. Cross your fingers. Maybe scrunch up your face and squint through a single eye.

Open the THOR.

Heave a green-scented sigh of relief when no soapy water spills to the floor. Double check to be sure you’ve wiped away the bread crumbs from earlier in the day, then pull your clothes from the machine, spread them across the table, and try to ignore

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how much water they've retained. You'll have certainly expected the THOR TL2 800 to be a 2-in-1 washer/drier deal, but it's not. It's merely a humble—for some reason Norse—washing unit.

Pour another glass of green and grab the orange notebook you received at orientation. Open it to its fourth page. See her phone number at the top. Underline it two or three times and remind yourself, again, to call her. Scan the apartment for empty spaces suitable for drying. Give yourself a brief walk around tour, even though you're nearly a week into your stay. Note the single bedroom, single bathroom and single multi-purpose room which serves as a kitchen, a living area, an office, and once (so far), after thumbing through the dusty CDs lining the shelf above the TV you'll never plug in, served as a dance floor for the Sagres-fueled (that's you). You flailed your arms to the unusual guitar and somber vocals filling the room, understanding not a word, while your shadow cascaded across the backs of the blinds, offering enterprising voyeurs a near glimpse at what may have been the initial steps down a short road toward insanity.

List out possible drying spaces: the bannister, the four windowsills, the top of the bedroom door, the top of the bathroom door, the shower curtain rod, and the clothesline which is, for whatever reason, attached to the building's exterior outside the window in the shower, overlooking a small concrete courtyard, which you'll likely never figure out how to reach.

The bannister and the tops of the doors, being the farthest from the windows, will dry clothing the slowest. The shower rod will dry with roughly the same speed as the windowsills, leaving the clothesline as the fastest drying area. For ease of use, assign

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these areas numbers relating to the degree of drying they'll provide. Open the small wooden cabinet between the stairs and the bathroom and pull out a couple handfuls of clothespins—some small and made of clear purple plastic, some deep green and adorned with flowers, some nondescript white. Also grab the pair of yellow rings connected to one another with white plastic chains and outfitted with over a dozen tiny clothespins. Use this for hanging socks in the Level Three Dehydrating Zone, as its space required to garments dried ratio makes it the most efficient drying method for anything small enough to dangle from it. Before shutting the cabinet, consider acting on the coupons for Portuguese pizza joints lining the inside. Ultimately decide against it.

Spread your clothes out across the necessary spaces, leaving the least needed garments to dry in a Level One Dehydrating Zone (bannister), and placing the most important in the only Level Three Dehydrating Zone (clothesline overlooking concrete courtyard). Those of intermediate importance can be placed safely in Level Two Dehydrating Zones (everywhere else). Note that garments allowed to dry through only L1DZs will likely begin to stink and may not fully dry. Consider developing a rotation for moving clothing through various degrees of drying to ensure none of your t-shirts wind up smelling like the inside of an old hamper.

When you step into the shower to hang your favorite pair of underwear, the red boxer briefs with the snug fit, from the L3DZ, use extra care. Be prepared for your extra care not to matter. Watch helplessly as the colored cotton flutters to the pavement some twenty feet below. Mourn momentarily; they were good boxer briefs. They may have been the best boxer briefs. In the future, hang underwear from the sock carousel.

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The second time you have to run a load through the wash, you'll know what to expect. You'll need your pants again—the ones you were wearing the night she gave you her number—for a semi-formal reading at The Luso-American Development Foundation, or FLAD as the locals call it. You'll have class that morning, too, so you'll have to get up right about the time the sun splashes through the skylight over your bed—a design choice you'll question daily—to be sure you can get the necessary garments into the L3DZ before leaving the apartment.

Make your second cup of instant coffee and set it aside to cool. Open the window over the kitchen sink. Notice the drying twigs and stems in the flower box brimming with plants you promised your landlord you would water. Fill a plastic bottle in the sink and dump the water onto the soil. Watch the water bead up on top for a moment before pressing into the dirt and disappearing. You'll add more later. Probably.

As the THOR announces cycle completion, grab a handful of clothespins and the sock carousel. Pop the door and begin assigning clothing to drying areas before moving on to the tedious task of attaching socks to the carousel. While attaching socks to the carousel, take some time to enjoy the early morning scenery through the flower box window. Notice the man one building over who often reads late into the night standing fully nude on his balcony, a large stoneware cup grasped firmly between both hands, and a cream colored curtain curling around him. His lover will soon appear behind him, wrap an arm about his waist and nuzzle a two-day beard into his neck. The Reader will close his eyes and smile, leaning back with the cup still tight between both palms, demonstrating what must be a belief that only coffee is more important than sex, a truth

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you've proven yourself through countless boxes of single-serve coffee pods and only half a box of condoms. No, not a big box of condoms.

Look down, flip the carousel, and begin attaching socks to the other side. Look up in time to see The Reader's lover returning with his own, smaller cup of coffee. When the curtain billows to the side, you'll be able to see their naked cocks swaying slightly while they sip from their cups. You'll find yourself staring as you blindly tend to your socks. You'll notice The Reader has noticed you noticing them. They will both raise their cups in one hand and give you a nod hello. Nod back, and return to your work. Notice you've clamped six clothespins across the side of a single sock.

Your coffee will have cooled down enough to drink by now. Go ahead and do that.

Later in the evening at FLAD, she'll notice the two of you picked the same color free t-shirt to take home from the event. She'll use this fact to start a conversation. She'll have a second glass of red wine, which she'll hand to you with a complaint about the event's choice of white wine. Agree with her. Finish your beer, then start on the red. Hold a superficial conversation with her about music or something else equally unimportant. Avoid puns. Use whatever segue you can to ask her out to a proper meal. Leave with her immediately when she agrees to this. Seriously, avoid puns.

At the restaurant, order the bacalhau. Be sure to order the preparation involving the fewest words, therefore leaving the least room for unexpected oddities. Try not to grimace when the fish comes from the kitchen complete with a full skeletal structure including a surprisingly thick spinal column. Eat around the bones. Eat slowly. Talk more

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superficial topics. Split the bill with her and thank the restaurant owner when he chases you out the door to return the heavily bitten Bic you left on the table.

She'll roll complicated cigarettes while you walk from the restaurant, her pouch of tobacco nestled in the crook of her arm while a set of deft fingers drop dried leaves into a rolling paper held flat in her other palm. Offer to help. Don't worry when she declines your offer. Once she has stuffed her tobacco pouch, lighter and pack of rolling papers back into her messenger bag, she'll entwine the fingers of her free hand with yours, squeezing ever tighter as she pulls fire through the paper. Walk beside her, moving amid the faint fog billowing from her lungs, the soles of your Chucks—that is, yours and hers—silent against the stone sidewalk.

You'll soon find yourselves on Rua de Barocca, strewn with streamers, providing a colored canopy of cheap decorations, which look miraculously more expensive as daylight decreases and blood alcohol levels increase. Take her to Maria Caxuxa for a few drinks.

Pull the roll of Euro notes from your shorts. A number of coins will likely slide from within the bills and clatter to the sticky wooden floor. If you can grab them without hitting your head on the bar, without rubbing against the patrons to either side of you—the old man with bushy eyebrows, the woman roughly your age with dark teeth—and without covering your hands in a film of whatever has blessed the baseboards with their sticky disposition, go ahead and pick them up.

Place a five note on the counter and hold up two fingers with one hand while using the other to point to the beer tap. The bar tender with the curious scar curling up the side of his face—a jagged gash from the corner of his lip to just below his temple—will

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smile, take the note and balance two glasses between his fingers, slap the tap with the back of his other hand, and swirl each glass beneath the amber liquid until it sloshes over the rims. He'll set them down on the bar, take your money and return a one Euro coin to the surface of the bar in a motion so fluid you're certain he must practice magic on the side. This may explain his facial scar, even though coin tricks tend not to result in those sorts of injuries, unless, of course, he has a fondness for making large sums of other people's coins disappear.

Go ahead and leave the single euro in change on the counter, even though tipping tends to cause more confusion than anything else. Return to her to find that she has also purchased two drinks from the other side of the bar. She didn't, however, go the beer route, instead opting for Ginjinah shots, which trail deep red fingers down the side of the glasses. She'll hand you one as you hand her a beer. You'll probably need a table to avoid dropping all four drinks in this exchange. Go ahead and find one of those.

When the nightly crowd starts to arrive, she'll tell you to finish your drink, and will grab your hand to pull you along behind her before you have a chance to set your plastic cup on one of the few tables lining the brick wall outside the bar. She'll kiss you beneath the statue of Camões with his Moor-maimed eye. Let her. Let the lights of strangers' cigarettes grow ever more distant as she grabs two fistfuls of your hair and pulls your mouth into hers. Close your eyes and try to forget the café fronts filled with patrons who likely see this sort of thing all the time.

After a short moment, you'll reach out to pull her close, but she'll already be gone. Open your eyes. Notice her crossing the street, her dim shape moving toward the

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metro station and back to her hostel. Don't follow her. Remember to underline her number a few more times.

When you return to your apartment, you'll long for some remnant of her. When you undress for bed, note the small amount of dirt smeared across the back of your pants, likely from when she pushed you against the poet's pedestal. Smile to yourself and hang the pants in your closet unwashed.

The next morning, you'll find the remaining clothes left in the L3DZ have fully dried, and begun to grow stiff from the sunlight. Your red underwear will still lie in a heap on the concrete below. Break from routine. Leave the clothes on the line. Wear nothing to the kitchen/office/dance floor. Prepare your first cup of instant coffee. Raise it in greeting when The Reader emerges from behind his cream colored curtains, a different lover around his waist.