

Condé Nast Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

AUGUST 2007

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A WEEK
IN THE
MALDIVES
page 27

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PORTUGAL'S
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Eight is enough: The Monte do Papa Legras B&B is on former farmland outside Zambujal da Mar in Portugal's Alentejo, where rooms are limited to eight rooms.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELANIE ACEVEDO

SIMPLE PLEASURES

PORTUGAL'S SLEEPY SOUTHWESTERN SHORE IS EUROPE'S NEWEST COASTAL PRESERVE—TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND UNSPOILED ACRES ZONED TO STAY THAT WAY. HERE, JUST THREE HOURS FROM LISBON, TIME ITSELF SEEMS TO HAVE STOPPED FOR A SIESTA. **AMY ENGLER** GETS BACK TO BASICS

AN OLD WIRE FENCE WAS ALL THAT STOOD between us. The pig was on my tail, catching up faster than I'd like to admit, and outweighing me by at least a hundred pounds. I never knew pigs could run or wear a leash like a dog. But in Portugal's southern Alentejo region, farmland since Roman times, the old ways are still alive. Without a better idea, I stopped and stared at the pig, and it skidded to a stop, disappointed, raising its snout to me. The game was over, and onward I went, until the road ended at a precipice high over the Atlantic. Looking down the coast, I saw cliff after black cliff, sandy beaches tucked between—a giant zigzag cut into the land, all within the boundaries of Europe's longest and newest coastal reserve, Southwest Alentejo and Costa Vicentina Natural Park. More than 200,000 acres of private and public lands are under severe building restrictions meant to keep the coastline rustic, wild, and suspended in time.

Some say this casual mix of farmland and beaches less than three hours from Lisbon is like the southern Algarve fifty years ago, or Long Island before the potato fields became second homes. There is no highway—just a winding road with harrowing passing zones—no car dealerships or fast food, no resorts, and

only 24,000 people scattered over sixty miles of coastline. As I sat on the dunes, careful to miss the burrs and the succulent flowering plants, lost in the rhythm of the waves, a fisherman in a wet suit and carrying a spear gun appeared from a thicket of bushes, coming up the steep path from the ocean. "Romêa." He nodded in the quiet way of the Alentejo, tucked his bucket onto the back of his dusty truck, and drove off.

We'd found our way to this corner of Portugal, still half in the last century, because of Rosa, my Portuguese sister-in-law, who married my brother three years ago in Brussels. Rosa is full of fun, her impeccable English sprinkled with curse words, but she is often contradictory, particularly about the country she left twenty-five years ago, as a teenager. To her, Portugal is intoxicating as well as seductive, backward as well as visionary. Despite this torrent of crossed signals, we all signed on to her proposed Portuguese vacation—my parents, sisters, and our families, thirteen people in all. Our destination, Rosa explained, was the Alentejo (pronounced *a-loo-TEZSH*), a mostly treeless region unlike the rest of Portugal, very authentic, and popular among her Lisbon friends I couldn't find Odeceira (pronounced *o-de-SAYSH*) or Zambujera do Mar in

my world atlas; there wasn't much in the guidebooks, either. Even a Portuguese travel agent, born in Porto and now living in New York, looked at me perplexed. "Never been there," he said with a shake of his head.

SIGNS SEEMED UNNECESSARY AT THE Alentejo border. The green hills south of Évora flipped abruptly golden brown, scorched like an African prairie, as if someone had just flipped the rainwater switch to off. In this exotic open landscape, with the big sky and the long distance to the horizon interrupted only by a scattering of trees, it was hard to remember that we were still in Europe. These were cork oaks, a cousin of the live oaks of the American South, with wild, gnarly branches and red trunks stripped of their bark, which is used to make the millions of wine corks the Alentejo exports each year. Every so often, a field of sunflowers, grown for the seed oil, announced an upcoming village, white-washed and perched on a hill.

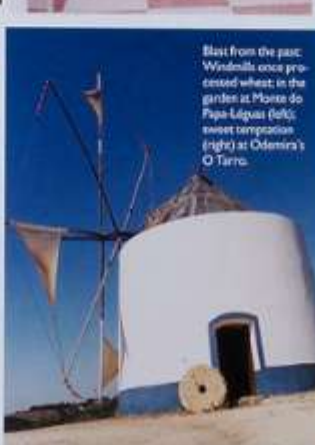
In the middle of this vast, dry plain was the region's capital and only well-known city, the medieval walled town of Évora, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Although the Alentejo sprawls from the Atlantic to Spain and south to the Algarve, taking up more acreage than any other Portuguese region, it holds fewer people than a small American city. Even in Évora, the luxury of all this space made it a sleepy,

THE GREEN HILLS TURNED ABRUPTLY GOLDEN, AS IF SOMEONE HAD JUST FLIPPED THE RAINWATER SWITCH TO OFF

PLACES & PRICES

THE GREAT ESCAPE

With thousands of pristine acres under protection, Portugal's southwest coast is gorgeously undeveloped. For the region's best beaches, inns, and dining, see page 134.



ROSA BOUGHT A COPY OF A PORTUGUESE
MAGAZINE WITH A STORY ON THE COUNTRY'S
BEST BEACHES. FIVE WERE WITHIN THE PARK



A strand of one's
own, Portugal's coast-
line is riddled with
pebbled coves. Here,
Tonal Beach at Zambora
Najira do Mar.

provincial city, a university town, we thought as we wandered the narrow streets under the relentless sun, took in the Roman temple, and watched farmers sell buckets of yellow plums and pears in the main square. By chance, with the children dragging, we mimicked the visit of José Saramago, Portugal's beloved Nobel Prize-winning novelist, from his travelogue, *Journeys to Portugal*, by arriving at the Church of St. Francis ready to collapse. "The heat," Saramago wrote, "feels as if it were exhaled from the mouth of a stove." We sat in the shade, as he had, recovering with nougat candy bought from an old woman. A wedding emerged from the church, the crowd quietly pushing out, rose petals flying. The bride did not wear white but the same pale golden yellow painted as decoration on the region's whitewashed homes. Not even she appeared to care that a fine brown dust covered the newlywed's black sedan.

"Farmers," whispered Rosa, unable to suppress her critical native eye.

With the outside temperature hovering over one hundred degrees, our caravan continued, stopping briefly at the Escoural Grotto, just south of Évora. The Alentejo is rife with remnants of prehistoric man—mostly in the form of dolmens, rock piles whose meaning archaeologists can only guess at—but none interested our restless bunch as much as the cave drawings discovered forty years ago when marble workers blasted into a catacomb of interior chambers. It didn't look like much from the outside: a small unmarked rise of parched grass and buzzing cicadas. Through a metal door in the side of a hill, a young guide led us down a few steps into a small cave, dimly lit by burg bulbs and full of bats. The guide paused good-naturedly, seemingly used to it as my twelve-year-old daughter, Georgia, screamed when bats veered overhead, and he showed us the crude horse drawings—stick figures really—that carbon dating indicates were created circa 18,000 B.C., and then an amazing carving of horse heads chiseled into a fold of the cave.

Finally, relief. Our caravan descended toward the Atlantic Ocean, the temperature on the car's dashboard dropping steadily as we passed Aljustrel and Retoucos, the graceful Odemira with its Moorish skyline, and Odceira. The thermometer registered a welcome seventy-two (thirty degrees lower than Évora) at Maria Vinagre, where we pulled into our inn, the Casa Vicentina. We were within the boundaries of Southwest Alentejo and Costa Vicentina Natural Park, a little over a mile from the sea. Three clay-walled white farmhouses built three years ago in the manner of an authentic *monte*, or tenant farmer's estate, the inn faced a reed-filled pond, with a pool, a wooden deck, and bougainvillea climbing the arbors. Inside, the rooms were cool—no air-condi-



Portuguese punch: The Casa Vicentina restaurant, outside Odeceira, has bright cheerful modern rooms and a lovely man-made pond.

A WEDDING EMERGED FROM THE CHURCH, ROSE PETALS FLYING. THE BRIDE WORE THE SAME PALE YELLOW AS THE REGION'S HOMES



Heaven on earth: The Church of Our Lady of Grace, in Vila Nova de Milfontes.

Cards in the air: Castelo de Milfontes is a seven-room inn whose stone bridge is a remnant of its former life as a fortress.



tioning was needed because of the vaulted walls—with peaked pine ceilings that rose at least fifteen feet over the bed. It was a gussied-up version of the home of the farmer who rented this very land fifty or a hundred years ago—one he could never have imagined. The place had been spiffed up with showers the size of ox carts and a circular drive. (A photo of the ruins of the previous modest dwelling hung in the communal kitchen.)

THE ALENTEJO, UNTIL RECENTLY THE poorest region in the poorest country in Western Europe, maintained a medieval land arrangement, with large semifeudal estates held by a handful of wealthy families, into the 1970s. This was horribly backward in a modern age, and after Portugal's 1974 revolution, the Communist-leaning government seized the land from those families, and, trying to make up for generations of unfairness, gave it to local farmers along the coast. (Farther inland, it went to agricultural collectives.) But making a small farm profitable is not easy with a horse or a mule, and one by one, the farmers began selling their properties in the 1980s, sometimes back to the original owners for next to nothing.

At the same time, intrepid tourists began drifting up from the crowded nearby Algarve, looking for empty beaches. They rented rooms from village women or camped out. Not wanting a wave of oceanfront hotels and golf courses to swallow up the rugged coastline, as had happened in the southern Algarve and Madeira,

local officials surveyed and delineated the protected area of the park and drew up rules against development: no houses higher than one story outside the villages; no resorts; rural tourism only, in authentic farm buildings with no more than eight guest rooms (and thus virtually invisible in the landscape). In 1995, without much dissent, the area became a nature reserve.

In this slowed-down atmosphere, with cows grazing above the beaches and long stretches of sand to themselves, bits and pieces of Rosa's past came out, none more fascinating than her stories about growing up during the longest Fascist dictatorship in Europe, something she'd never before spoken about. While we had our Vietnam War and visits to Disneyland, Rosa lived under a tyrant left over from the era of Mussolini and Hitler—António Salazar and his feared secret police. Thanks to Salazar's harsh paternal hand, even toys were prohibited imports, and Rosa, who lived in a suburb of Lisbon, read forbidden books that had been copied over and over, played with mended dolls, and learned to keep secrets. "What is said here stays here," her left-wing father reminded her and her younger brother after dinner. Rosa didn't need to be told; she was aware of other fathers who'd been taken away.

"You just knew," she said. "You didn't talk about anything." Most terrifying was the day her father crashed his car into one belonging to the neighborhood police informant, a minor incident that led to years of fear. "My father was so afraid," she said.

All this tension, poverty, and insularity under the dictatorship's motto, "Proudly Alone" (I feel into a national insecurity, Rosa explained, which had begun centuries earlier when Portugal lost its standing as a great maritime power to Spain and later England. "Until the seventeenth century, we were a proud people, equal to others in Europe," Rosa said. "It's as if we became humiliated beyond hope." She was nearly a teenager on April 25, 1974, when a protest song from the Alentejo played on the radio shortly after midnight, announcing the beginning of the revolution. Rosa remembers the celebrations of the end of the dictatorship—the chaos and the relief. Yet things didn't change fast enough for her or for others her age, who left in droves in the 1970s.

At the age of eighteen, desperate to get out of Portugal and willing to go just about anywhere, Rosa and a friend applied for a job teaching English at a diamond mine camp in Angola, Portugal's war-torn former colony. She ended up instead at a Canadian university—a good thing, since her friend was captured by guerrillas and held hostage for a time in the Angolan jungle.

The beach was part of what drew Rosa back to Portugal after a long absence—memories of languid summers spent south of Lisbon and the deliciously cool ocean wine. In the coastal region, our days unspooled as simply as those of her youth. To the relief of her children and mine, there was no sightseeing. We rode bikes to the dunes over the ocean cliffs, found starfish and baby (Continued on page 147)

Lazy days: The light-blue room at Castelo de Milfontes is a seven-room inn whose stone bridge is a remnant of its former life as a fortress.



IT WAS A CUSSIED-UP VERSION OF THE HOME OF THE FARMER WHO RENTED THIS LAND FIFTY OR A HUNDRED YEARS AGO