

Discover the Alentejo – Portugal

By Paul - 13/09/2012

There is always a degree of excited anticipation when you are about to get off an aircraft at a new destination about how warm will it be. Thus having left London in 20 degrees centigrade, I rejoiced as a heat of 30 degrees hit me at the top of the aircraft steps at Lisbon airport. This had the makings of a good trip - the real Portugal.

We set off in our air conditioned coach to the south over the spectacular suspension bridge which spans the river Tagus which is watched over by a huge statue of Christ on the hilltop next to it.



The area of central Portugal south of Lisbon is called the “Alentejo” which means “south of the Tagus”. A fast road soon meant we arrived at Setubal where we caught a ferry to Troia. It took 30 minutes (there is a passenger hydrofoil which is quicker) and as we crossed the estuary I noticed how calm it was –not a breath of wind –hot and sunny. You could see the sandy beaches of the Troia peninsula as we got closer. They were deserted, even on a hot sunny day in mid-September. Troia has some nice hotels, a

conference centre and by ferry has easy access to Setubal.

We visited the Acualuz Suite Hotel which Sunvil feature particularly for families who want a quieter resort with sandy beaches. There are studios, one and two bedroom apartments as well as children’s facilities.

Following the coast south, you begin to realise that this part of Portugal has lots to offer. We stopped at a rural estate (Herdade) das Barradas da Serra which produces cork. Alentejo is a major cork producing area. The bark is removed from the trees which are then marked with the year it is “farmed”. Then the tree is left for 9 years to grow more bark(cork) and the cycle begins again. We were shown huge piles of cork awaiting collection. This Herdade had 6 rooms decorated traditionally, some even with a 4 poster, and a few steps outside, a lovely pool. You could ride locally or walk and it was not far to the lovely sandy Atlantic beaches nearby.



A pretty town on the coast, Vila Nova de Milfontes, is in a prime position on the Alentejan coast between the deservedly popular Zambujeira do Mar and the River Mira’s collection of beaches and inlets. Each with its own character, though all with matching rugged cliffs as a backdrop and perfect sand underfoot.





Vila de Milfontes; There are several properties in this area. The Casa da Eira Aparthotel top floor units look out towards the river valley. Naturarte Campo has two properties in the area. One has fewer facilities than the other. The best has rustic rooms decorated by family heirlooms reflecting local history, a pool, tennis court and extensive grounds. My favourite was the Monte de Zambujeiro which has several units; one is a romantic villa with double-bed sitting room with river valley view,

kitchen and even a river view from the bathroom toilet! Other units are 3 or 4 bedroom houses which would be ideal for extended family holidays. My second favourite the Herdade do Freixial a rural hotel with a stunning views over the same river valley from an infinity pool and outside bar area. We spoke to guests there who were enjoying the peaceful relaxed atmosphere.

We continued further south along the coast and reached Herdade do Touril an award winning rural tourism, family run, hotel centred around a manor. This manor house has five bedrooms around a lovely swimming pool and gardens. There are four other houses within the estate with spectacular cliffs and a little fishing port within walking distance. Here we find a busy local fish restaurant by the harbour and we settle in for one of the languorous lunches that define our trip.



Olives, local quijo and pão (cheese and bread) provide a hearty pre-starter; fish is of course on the menu and slow food is very much a way of life here. As a wine-producing region, small bottles are easier to come by than single glasses, decimating the chances of anything happening quickly come afternoon.

Hours later, we left the coast and drove inland towards Spain. When we arrived at the Herdade da Malhadinha Nova the rise in temperature was noticeable (35 degrees). This is a beautiful wine making estate with high quality accommodation. A highlight was a jeep safari around the grape vines learning about the wines and how it ends up in bottles, together with a wine tasting session. Stables and horse riding is also available at this really nice property.

Our overnight accommodation was in Beja a historic city. I have always wanted to see a pousada and was delighted to find that we were staying in one. A pousada is a type of luxury and often historic hotel. The Pousada Sao Francisco was a Franciscan Monastery in central Beja which dates back to 1268. It had cloisters and walking around this hotel was fascinating. Rooms were air conditioned comfortable and a good size. Mine looked out onto the spacious grounds which had green lawns, tennis court, a swimming pool and outside eating terrace. We ate in the restaurant which could have been a great hall when it was built- a pleasant setting and a super meal. It was relaxing and quiet as I assume the thick walls kept out the noise of the surrounding city.

The following morning we left for the town of Portel which (as is usual in the Alentejo) has a hilltop castle at its centre and can be seen from miles around in the countryside. We visited

the 4 star Refugio da Vila Hotel which was also a historic building. The rooms in the main building had frescoes from 19 th century and there was a cookery school in the kitchen on the ground floor.

Clients on 3 nights or longer stay, can stay in one of the junior suites rear annexe, in the grounds which are set out in a 'street' fashion which was pleasantly different. You could drive your car up the 'street' and park close to these suites at the back of this pleasant rural hotel.

Close to Portel, there is a man-made Alqueva Lake caused by a huge dam. We went to a marina where it is possible to have houseboat holidays. I steered the boat for a short trip on the lake before lunch. It was a very hot day so afterwards it was pleasant to relax under the awning at the restaurant by the marina where we had a mammoth meal.



We spent the afternoon exploring one of the most interesting places of the whole trip. The hilltop village of Monsaraz is historic, has a castle, narrow cobbled streets and is very quaint.



Not far away, was one of the largest wine making estates in Europe. So large, that as you approach it, there are vines all around you as far as the eye can see. We toured the winery, saw the vast refrigerated vaults



with huge casks of maturing wine, the bottling plant and then enjoyed wine and cheese tasting.



One final visit made the day. Our overnight hotel was a lovely one, the Horta da Moura in the countryside within a mile of Monsaraz. The junior suites here are spacious and the hotel recently renovated and well laid out. The restaurant is popular with the locals and the food was delicious. There was an infinity swimming pool in a quiet area of the grounds which looked out across a valley giving great views of the beautiful countryside. This hotel has a tower which with its rural position makes it an ideal place

for star gazing great for those interested in astronomy.

Our last full day is spent at Evora, a UNESCO city – capital of the Alentejo's Alto region.

The next property, the Hotel M'Ar de Ar Aqueduto is inside the walls of the city. It is ultra-modern and built upon ancient ruins, which are featured in it and as its name suggests is next to the historic 16 th century aqueduct. It makes you wonder what relics were covered up by this new hotel. Best rooms to book are first floor suites with pool and garden view. Too modern for me!





That contrasts with a lovely hotel in the countryside outside the city walls. The Hotel Convento do Espinheiro is a famous monastery and a national monument built in 1458 .It became neglected and has been sensitively renovated and a 5 star luxury hotel and spa built around it with 20 acres of grounds. A lot of the hotel is located in ancient monastery rooms, restaurant and bars in vaulted wine cellars. They have found a tiny monks kitchen where they do cooking lessons and with help from the hotel's chef we were

able to cook our own lunch. Historic Evora has Roman fortifications, which keep 21st Century life firmly at bay, you feel as though you have gone back in time to somewhere like colonial Central America. It's hard to tell where the bright stripes of each building end and the scorching light of the sun begins, so after ducking into a shady spot for a rest we step out into the less intense afternoon heat to explore the cobbled streets, manicured gardens, palaces and galleries of this city.

There are a number of churches (even a very odd one where the walls are built out of human bones and skulls).

The Pousada dos Loios, which is inside the city walls here is another 15 th century monastery. Standard rooms were small but some of the suites were especially ornate and the history of the building was evident. We ate a splendid four course meal in the restaurant.

Our last night was at Hotel M'ar de Ar Muralhas, a good 4 star with grounds within the city walls. Nice restaurant, pool area and good size rooms some with French balcony. A busy hotel with a lot of one night guests in coach groups.

We returned to Lisbon airport over the other Vasco da Gama bridge crossing the Tagus to the Nations Park area which was built for Expo 1998 at Lisbon. A shopping centre, Marina, water gardens, viewing tower and conference centre are the attractions. Lisbon is an interesting city with lots to see-somewhere I would always love to visit again. Likewise, the Alentejo which is an ideal place for a relaxed scenic drives along dusty roads past fields of cork trees and for world heritage towns and whitewashed villages-The Real Portugal.

