

PORTUGAL'S best known location is probably the Algarve coast but just a short hop inland to will reveal a treasure trove of natural, cultural and gastronomic wonders.

Yes, the coastal resorts are sublime. But many tourists don't stop to consider substituting or even combining the typical seaside holiday with exploring the "real" Portugal, away from the masses.

The beautiful Alentejo countryside is located in southern Portugal, between Lisbon and the Algarve coast. The countryside of Alentejo is a mixture of wide plains, gentle hills, cork and oak woodlands and craggy peaks. Finding such a region, almost untouched by tourism, is indeed a rare find today. "Algarve is for tourists, Alentejo is for travellers," said our amiable guide, Libânio Murteira Reis, of the Alentejo tourist board.

TAP Air Portugal flies from Heathrow to Lisbon in southern Portugal just under two and a half hours. Only an hour and a half south east of Lisbon brings you to the Alentejo region's capital, Evora.

The stunning town is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Whitewashed villas nestled under glorious blue skies. Temperatures can get as high as 40degrees Celsius at the height of summer, but in spring and autumn when it is cooler, cloudy days are still very rare.

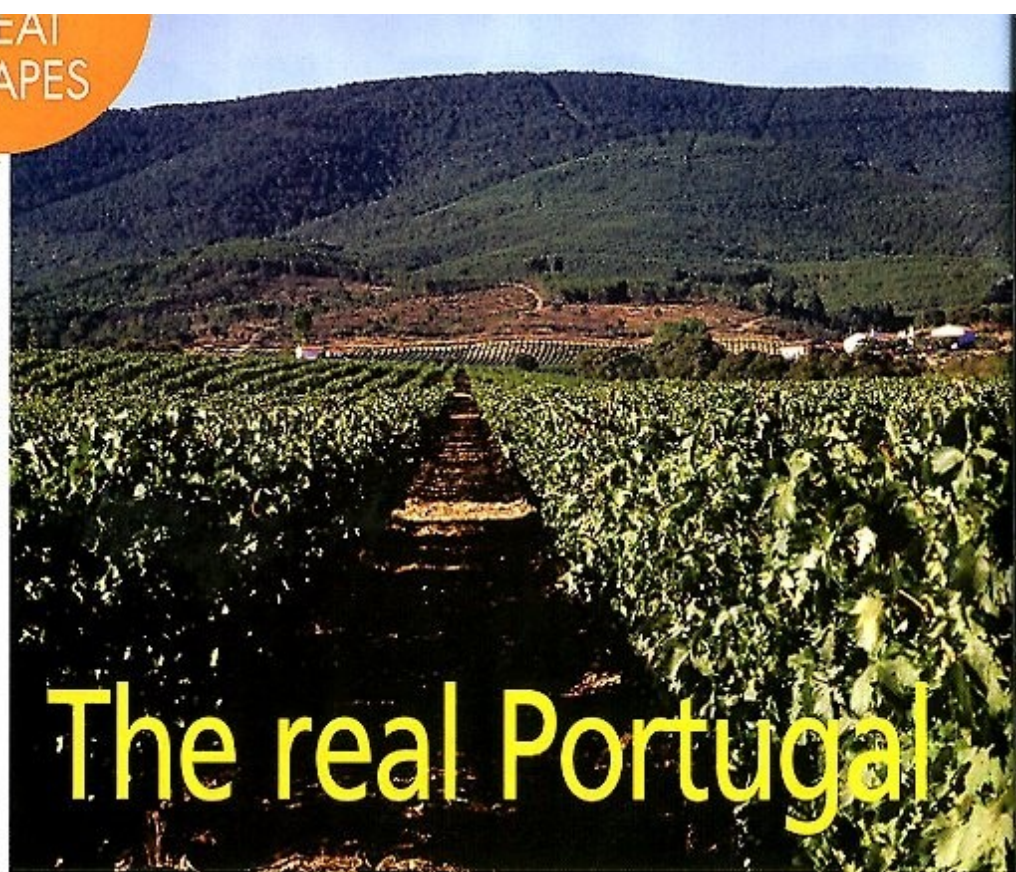
Evora is a town of narrow, cobbled streets, enclosed by ancient city walls. It is scattered with vestiges from the Roman times, including a Temple of Diana.

After exploring the town I had worked up quite an appetite and was delighted to hear about Alentejo's gastronomic credentials. Wine is big business in Portugal and in just Alentejo alone there are some 600 labels of wine available. The typical local cuisine is hearty, wholesome and satisfying.

I lucked into a meal which included fried pork, scrambled eggs with sausage, baked cheese with crispy bread and delicious cured hams, washed down with a medium white Feral de Evora.

Pork plays a big part in Portuguese cuisine; something that had become evident on the way from the airport as I passed by countless oak trees with pigs happily rooting underneath them.

Typically the Portuguese will have both a hot lunch and dinner – and make sure there is



plenty of it to go around! Restaurants often bring customers an assortment of dishes to choose from, tapas-style, but if you don't touch a dish, you don't have to pay for it.

For desert, there are platters of wonderfully gooey pureed fruits or sweet vegetables, inspired by Indian cuisine. They are often mixed with sugar and cinnamon and my platter included sweet prunes plus egg yolk mixed with almonds, pine nuts and pumpkin puree. The sticky and jammy result was delicious.

The beautiful Pateo dos Solares 5-star hotel lies on a hillside close to the nearby historic town of Estremoz. It is a modern, elegant and luxurious hotel with generous-sized rooms, plush furnishings and incredible views. It has everything one would expect of a five-star hotel, including a large swimming pool, an elegant restaurant with international cuisine.

The next day began on a gastronomic note with a tour of the local cheese factory – and I was excited to see how the Monforqueijo sheep's milk cheese is created at the traditional dairy cheese factory in Monforte. Fellow cheese-aholics are welcome to take a guided tour when visiting the region and hear about how it is made.

Next stop was Estremoz, and the "Monte Seis Reis" (farm of the six kings) vineyards for wine-tasting. The wonderful and very affordable wines produced on the 50

hectare estate include syrrah and cabernet sauvignon, as well as less well-known varieties of grape.

Estremoz is yet another beautiful hilltop location, dominated by a large medieval castle, with breathtaking views of the plains stretching to the hills in the distance.

There are more tours and wine tastings on offer at the enormous Altas Quintas vineyards, which stretch across 256 hectares high in the gently sloping hills of the São Mamede Natural Park. A beautiful, glass tasting room with panoramic views of the estate was under construction at my time of visit.

The combination of prime land and the owners' obsession for superior winemaking has paid off and Altas Quintas has earned an excellent reputation across the world.

A stone's throw away is the stunning hilltop village of Marvão, surrounded by the São Mamede nature reserve. The sleepy village has some key sights and an impressive castle. On a quiet side street is the boutique hotel, Albergaria O Poejo. It is extremely stylish and was the perfect place to unwind and watch the world go by. The rooms were modern and beautifully-furnished, and the attractive restaurant offered a range of quality Portuguese cuisine.

The final stop was for dinner on the banks of a river for a delicious meal of venison with chestnut and cabbage and dogfish soup with potato and orange – complimented of course by some more of Alentejo's fine wines.



TRAVEL FACTS

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