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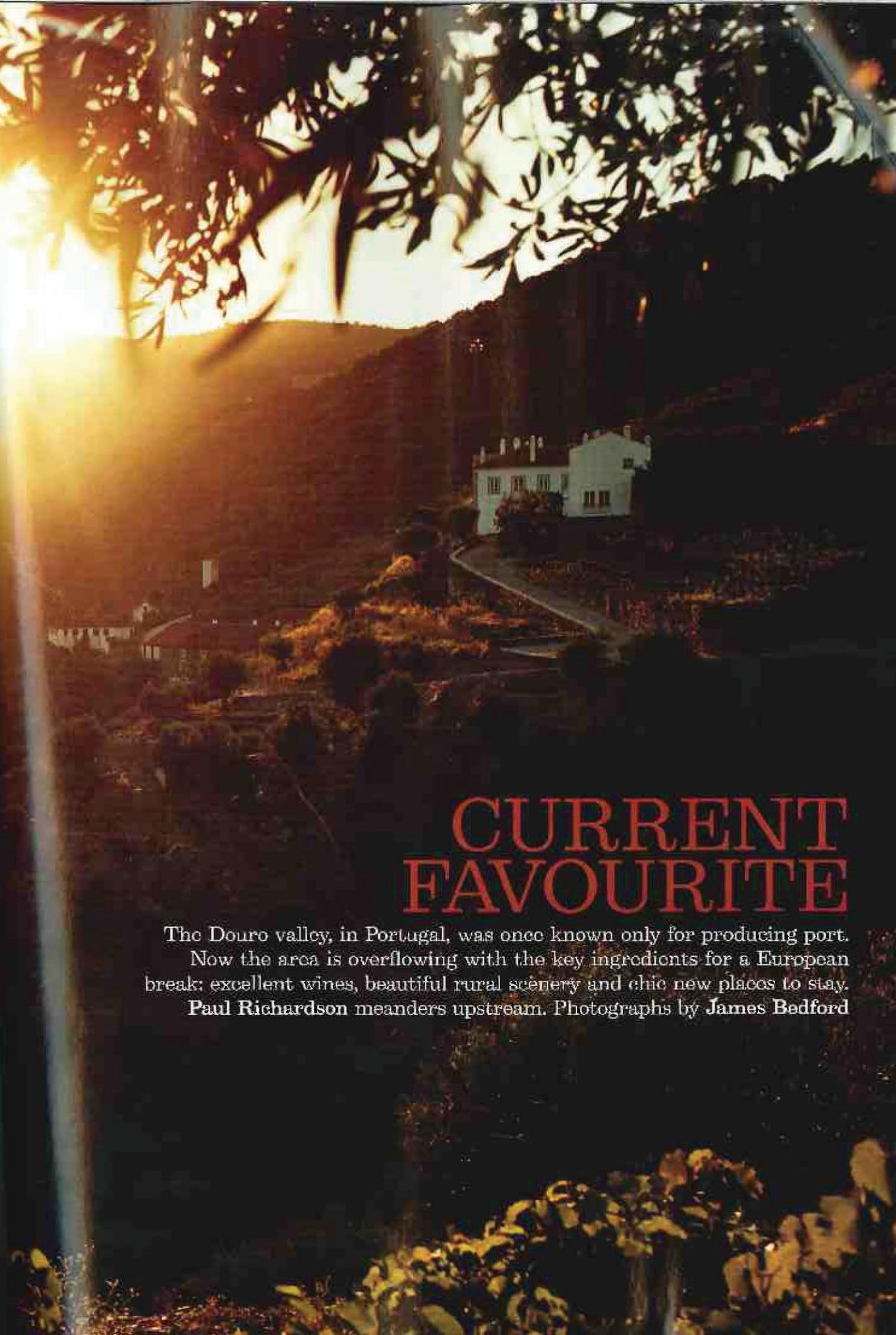
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View down the Douro valley towards Quinta da Romaneira, a high-concept hotel on a wine estate



# CURRENT FAVOURITE

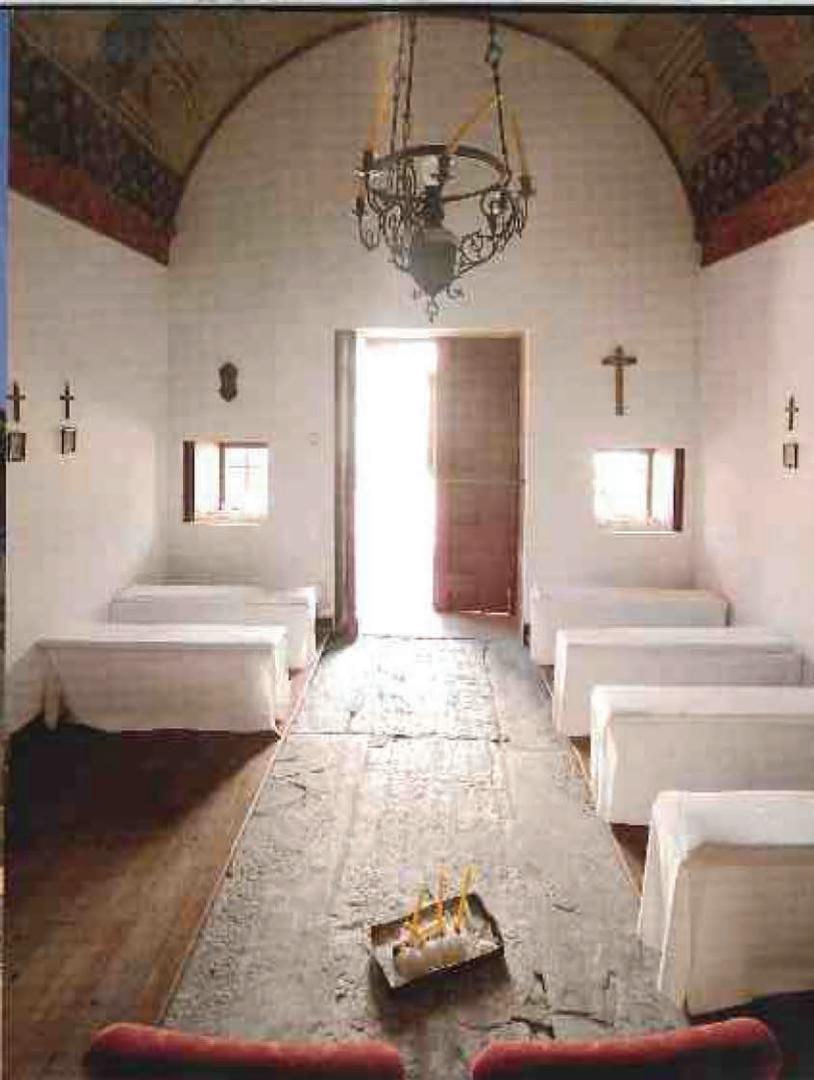
The Douro valley, in Portugal, was once known only for producing port. Now the area is overflowing with the key ingredients for a European break: excellent wines, beautiful rural scenery and chic new places to stay. **Paul Richardson** meanders upstream. Photographs by **James Bedford**



**F**AR BELOW THE WINDOW of my hotel room, the river glistened in the morning light. To the left and the right, the vines were racked up in steep terraces, looking from a distance like teetering walls of green. On the opposite bank, high above the water, a grand white farmhouse in a sea of vineyards seemed almost a mirror image of the house from whose window I was gazing. The silence was as palpable as the breeze off the river.

The Douro is born in Spain (where it is called the Duero), and spends much of its life on the high Castilian plain, flowing blithely through the provinces of Soria and Salamanca. In Portugal the river grows old gracefully. For the last 215km of its existence, it winds unhurriedly through some of the most spectacular landscapes in Europe: a deep valley, so deep in places as to become almost a gorge, thickly lined with vines, and studded with *quintas* (estates or farms) and rustic villages.

In the history of wine, the Douro looms large. It was here, and in the city of Porto which guards the river mouth, that British and Dutch merchants pitched up in the 17th century to begin trading in the fortified wines known generically as port. Then,



and for a good two centuries afterwards, the upper Douro was a wild and uncivilised region. One English travel writer of the 19th century complained that soap was 'almost unknown' here, and that 'the luxury of a bath has not dawned on the minds of the Portuguese lower classes'. Another lamented the 'almost complete lack of good public roads': 'Given these steep slopes, covered in all parts by rich vineyards and without a single means of earthly communication, such as civilised men must have, it appears that the proprietors and workers in this region must have wings like birds to take them from one place to another.'

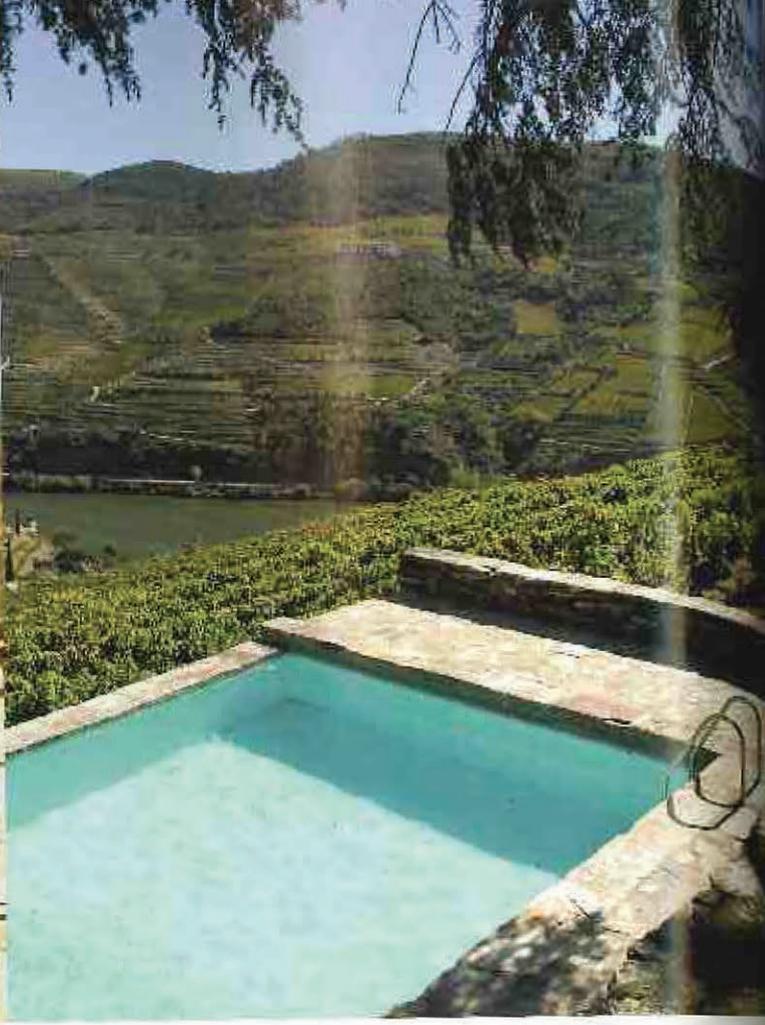
Things have improved somewhat since then, and especially during the past few years, when two phenomena have conspired to give the Douro region a new lease of life. First, a new generation of table wines has sprung up alongside the traditional fortified wines of the region, garnering rave reviews from influential wine critics and healthy sales on international markets. Second, there is a rash of good-quality new places to stay. Throughout the wine world, from California to La Rioja, wineries are realising that hotel-keeping is compatible with their core business. Two luxury modern 'resorts'

have already opened in expensively restored Douro *quintas*. If the Amanresorts group goes ahead with its rumoured plan to open a branch of its high-end chain in the wild upper reaches of the river, it will be not just the icing on the cake, but the glass of vintage port to go with it.

When I was planning my trip to the region, I was in no doubt about who to call first. Rupert Symington is joint managing director of Symington Family Estates; his family has been present in the Douro for 350 years and owns some of the major names in port wine – Graham's, Dow's, Warre's – as well as *quintas* and vineyards in the viticultural paradise of the upper Douro.

Rupert, an old friend, is as clued up about the latest developments in the valley as anyone you could hope to meet. In his office overlooking the river and the handsome old city of Porto, he gave me a crash course on the local wine industry. There had always been table wines in the region, he explained, but they were made mostly for private consumption at the port houses, and were rarely seen on the open market. The new wave of modern, unfortified Douro table wines began just 10 years ago. Quite simply, people are drinking less

**Above: tram crossing in front of the Igreja do Carmo, in Porto; the chapel at Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo. Opposite, top, the Dom Luis bridge across the Douro, in Porto; bottom, Rupert Symington at his family quinta, in Pinhão**



port these days, and the new wines are a hedge against a shrinking market. Almost all big-name port houses can boast at least one special table wine, and the best of them are world-beaters. To name a few, there is Quinta do Crasto's 'Xisto', Niepoort's 'Batuta' and 'Redoma' and the Symingtons' own 'Chryseia', produced in tandem with Bordeaux winemaker Bruno Prats of Château Cos d'Estournel, which Robert Parker of the *Wine Spectator* has given the resounding score of 94 points out of 100.

Next morning I drove east out of town and into the valley, passing the towns of Mesão Frio and Peso de Régua. A car is the best form of transport in the Douro area, though there is one other possibility: a charming little train that rattles from Porto towards the Spanish border, following the course of the river and stopping at every little station along the way.

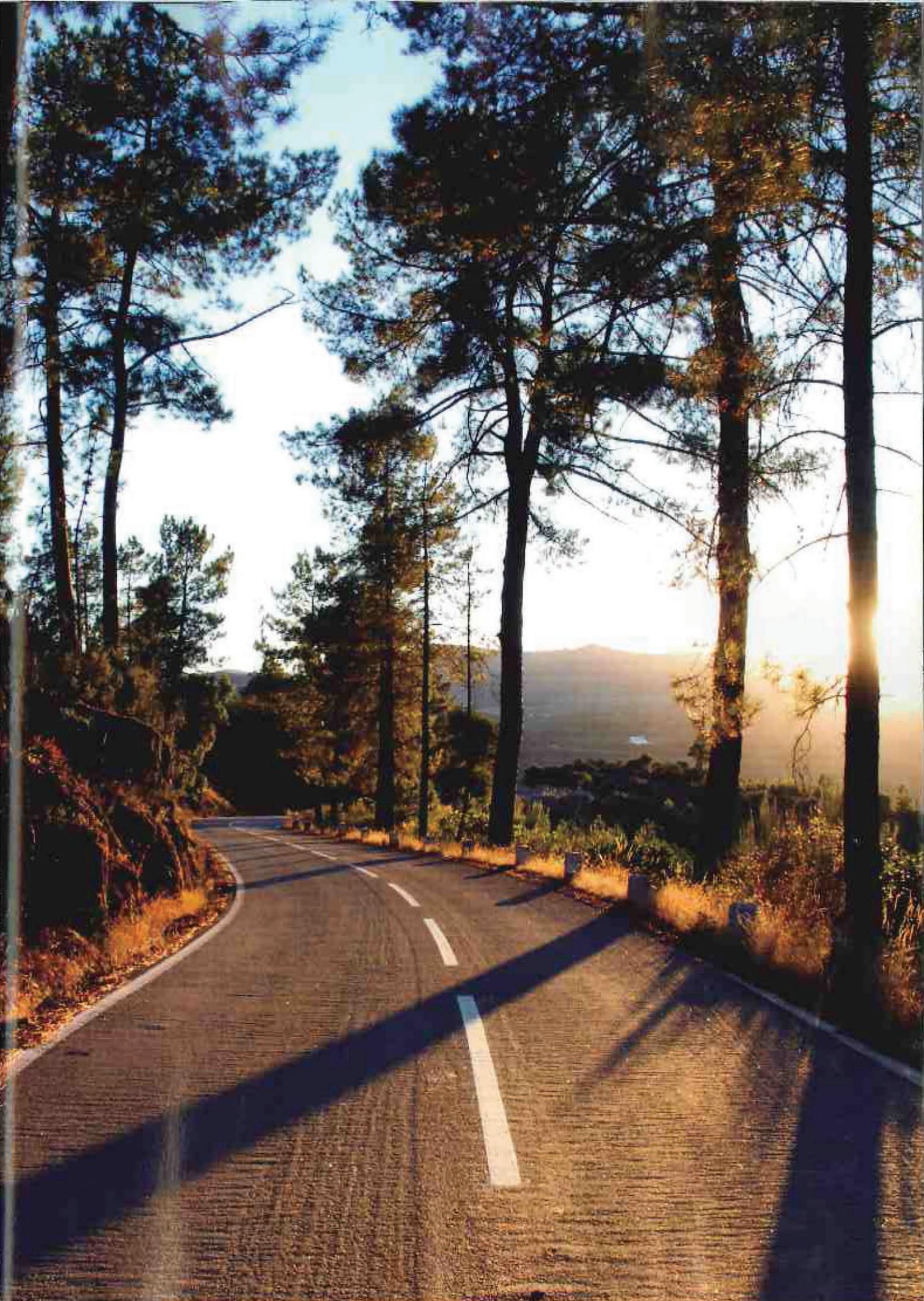
On the road map, the topography of the valley had looked simple enough. But now I was here, negotiating the single-track roads that twist and turn maddeningly among the terraces, creeping to dizzy heights before plunging down to the water's edge, it wasn't such a breeze. There are

only three possible crossing places along this stretch of river, at Peso de Régua, Pinhão and the dam at Valeira, which means that villages which stare at each other across the water might be hours apart by road.

The scenery, when I was able to wrench my gaze away from the road, was stunning. As winelands go, the Douro is surely one of the loveliest, up there with those of South Africa, Tuscany and the Rhine. This is a Mediterranean landscape virtually on the shores of the Atlantic, a paradox of sorts, with familiar crops such as olives, figs, and almonds, and a laidback lifestyle that feels more southern Italy than northern Portugal. Gentle hills surge up alongside the river, as often as not crowned with a whitewashed *quinta*, reached along a stone-paved track beyond a granite portal or an ironwork gate.

The major feature of the landscape, as is natural in a region where wine is the only industry of note, is the grapevine. The Douro valley's vineyards are something to see. They cling, often in single rows, to death-defying slopes, held in place by hundreds of kilometres of dry-stone wall. The vineyards, planted mostly with the red varieties Touriga Francesa and Touriga Nacional, are still cultivated

**Above: outdoor dining at Hotel Rural Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora de Carmo, set on a wine estate, and its swimming pool. Opposite, the road from Pinhão to Favaios**



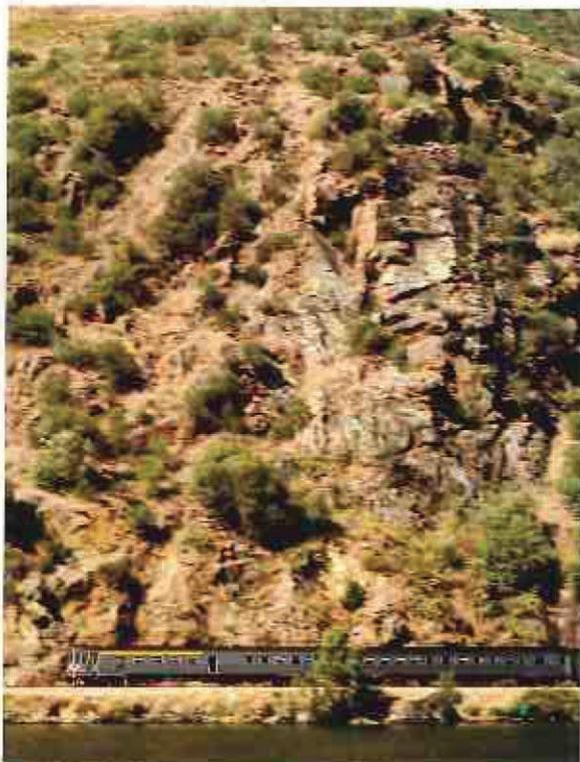
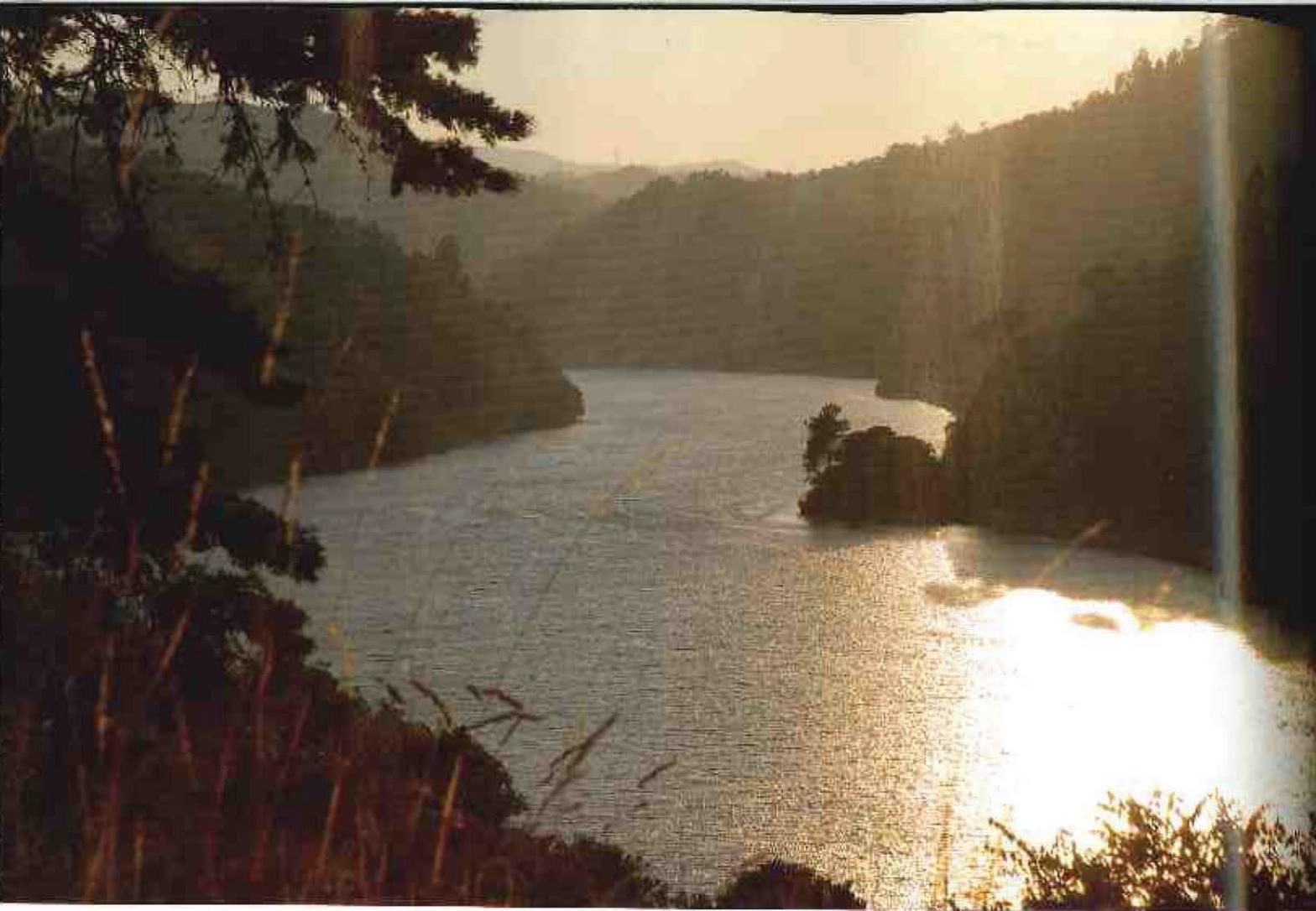
The mixture of ultra-modern design with traditional objets trouvés in a rural



The swimming pool at the recently opened Quinta da Romaneira hotel on the north bank of the Douro

andscape is familiar enough, but not yet seen around these parts – until now





by hand, since there is no machinery small or agile enough to manoeuvre on these tiny terraces.

The valley's villages are honest-to-goodness communities, big on agricultural-supply stores and machine-repair shops. Some are nicer than others – three I liked were Linhares, Provesende and Favaios – though all are well-preserved, with traditional cobblestones over which the car rattles, loose change clattering in the glove compartment. The closest thing around these parts to a proper town is Peso de Régua, where it's worth taking in the Solar de Vinho do Porto, a kind of showroom in a dark-beamed storehouse with barrels around the walls, wine for sale, and an 'enoteca histórica' that holds dusty bottles of ancient port.

For the visitor, the best plan is to have no plan: to meander like the river itself, stopping in the occasional village for a bracing dose of Portuguese coffee. There is little of interest in terms of high culture, which comes almost as a relief. Surprisingly few of the region's great houses are open to the public, the exception being Casa de Mateus, a palace outside the town of Vila Real. Mateus is an example of the Portuguese baroque country house, stuffed with antiques and surrounded with French-



style formal gardens reeking of box and cedar. As its name implies, Casa de Mateus is connected with the famous rosé wine – centrepiece of countless romantic dinners in the 1970s – still produced in the village. The palace was built in the 18th century, and, like many a bourgeois home hereabouts, still has its complement of fine paintings, furniture, carpets and clocks, which must have been brought from Porto on horse-drawn carts on roads that barely deserved the name. I spent a morning nosing around the garden's vine-covered walks and its famous tunnel of ancient yew, pruned to form a dense canopy: dark and cool and slightly spooky.

Good places to stay in the valley are divided into two main categories: the classy B&B in a stone village house – simple, comfortable and affordable – or the converted *quinta*, from the working farms with rooms to the full-on designer makeover with international clients and prices to match. I spent a weekend at Hotel Rural Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo, a hotel on a wine estate run by the Amorim family. Quinta Nova is in a superb position, with widescreen views of the river and the farm's 120 hectares of vineyard, and a good example of the

quiet revolution going on locally, in terms of wine and tourism. Of the *quinta's* grape production, 85 per cent goes into table wine. The dynamic young manager, Luísa Amorim, makes a distinction between Porto's traditional wine trade and the forward-thinking strategies of the upper Douro. In 2005, Luísa opened the hotel in the farm's 18th-century dwelling house, doing it up in classic Portuguese country style: plain and pretty, with white walls and dark furniture, antique prints in simple frames, and cool linen sheets.

So much for rustic simplicity. Quinta da Romaneira, where I slept the following night, might as well have been on another planet. A legendary *quinta* on the north bank of the river in the prime wine-growing area around Pinhão, the estate has 2.5km of river frontage and three railway stations, and it sprawls over 400 hectares, stretching beyond the rim of the valley. For years the estate had been in sad decline, until a group of international investors (headed by Christian Seely of Quinta do Noval) took it over and began the work of restoration. The idea was both to revamp and replant the vineyards, and to convert the two houses into a high-concept hotel.

**Above: the Aquapura Douro Valley hotel in Lamego; the hotel reception. Opposite, top, view up the Douro from the Pinhão road. Bottom, the train that runs between Pinhão and Porto**

The bar at Aquapura Douro Valley, a *quinta* that has been reconstructed at a cost of €25 million with a state-of-the-art spa



This would be run by French hospitality guru Thierry Teyssier, whose Dar Ahlam in southern Morocco is a pioneer of 'desert chic'.

Rupert had been invited to the launch party a few weeks earlier, and told me: 'think leopardskin'. Certainly, Romaneira represents an exciting departure from tradition for such a rural area. The mixture of sleek, ultra-modern design and lighting with tribal artefacts and *objets trouvés*, all in the context of an unspoiled landscape, is familiar enough from the five-star circuit around the world, but has never yet been seen around these parts. Goodness knows what the locals make of the place – or of its prices, which start at 1,000 a night.

As it turns out, the kind of luxury offered at Romaneira is less about the skin of endangered felines, and more about cutting-edge contemporary design and smooth-as-silk service. The hotel's welcome brochure mentions a landscape designer, a perfumier, a 'colourist' and a 'luminous objects creator'. Staff pad about the house in espadrilles, white cotton trousers and shirts emblazoned with poetic phrases about fulfilling your dreams.

My room, which had majestic views of the river and vineyard, had been done up in dazzling white and a rich, vinous shade of purple; that at least had a certain logic. The interior decorator has a keen eye for a bit of fab gear; I won't forget the gigantic table in the dining room, made from a single length of cashew tree trunk, brought over from Bali. I pictured it coming down Romaneira's four kilometres of dusty track, or perhaps floating up the river on a wooden wine-boat from Porto.

After dinner I sat at my window and watched the twilight coming down. The infinity pool seemed to hang in midair above the vines. A cruise ship headed gently downstream on the khaki-coloured river; on the other side, a gang of vineyard workers packed up their tools and climbed into pick-up trucks, disappearing down the valley in a cloud of dust. There's no doubt that the Douro is a deeply relaxing place to visit, if those rollercoaster roads don't set your nerves on edge. It has all the appeal of an up-and-coming destination where large-scale tourism has yet to plant its clodhopping feet, but you can still find most of the things you want from a European holiday: peace and quiet, well-kept villages, affable locals, glorious landscapes, magnificent red wines, and beautiful rooms with beautiful beds in which to sleep them off.

#### Weather to go: Douro Valley, Portugal

Winters in the Douro valley are mild, and summers rarely become uncomfortably hot. Temperatures rise, and there is less rain, from June to September. **Best month: June**

Sunshine	Temperature	Rainfall	Humidity
10hrs	13°C min 23°C max	41mm	Moderate

## THE DOURO: GO WITH THE FLOW

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Hotel Rural Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo.

Covas do Douro (00 351 254 730430; [www.quintanova.com](http://www.quintanova.com)). Doubles from €105

#### Quinta da Romaneira, Cotas

(00 351 254 732432; [www.quintadaromaneira.pt](http://www.quintadaromaneira.pt)). Doubles from €1,000

### ALSO RECOMMENDED

#### Aquapura Douro Valley Quinta do Vale Abraão.

Lamego (00 351 254 660600; [www.aquapurahotels.com](http://www.aquapurahotels.com)).

This splendidly ambitious hotel, with wonderful views of the river, opened last year in a 19th-century *quinta* outside Régua, after a fire in 1990 destroyed everything but the exterior walls. The €25-million reconstruction project is impressive. Uncompromising modern design rules throughout the 50 rooms, 21 villas (which are up for sale), two restaurants and a huge (2,200 square metres) state-of-the-art spa, that is sophisticated for such a rural area – perhaps indicative of the area's bright future. The spa features 'tropical rain' showers, and therapies such as 'The Body Reviver' (a combination of oil massage, acupressure and stretching), 'Body Oil Ceremony' (aromatherapy and Swedish

massage), and a foot-and-leg treatment to ease jet lag. Doubles from €225.

#### Vintage House Hotel, Lugar da Ponte, Pinhão

(00 351 254 730230; [www.relaischateaux.com/vintage](http://www.relaischateaux.com/vintage)). The setting, on a bend in the river beside the water's edge, is lovely. So are the grounds – especially the pergola with its thick ceiling of greenery, a good spot for a drink at sundown. The interior is pleasant, if a little old-fashioned. Don't miss the excellent wine shop at the entrance, which has an anthological collection of the best new Douro table wines. Doubles from €125.

#### Casa de Casal de Loivos,

Casal de Loivos (00 351 254 732149; [www.casadeloivos.com](http://www.casadeloivos.com)). Manuel Sampaio, a gentleman of a certain age, runs this small guesthouse in his family home, built in 1658 by a distant predecessor. The stone house, which has six comfortable bedrooms, was one of the first high-quality places to stay in the Douro valley. Vines grow around the pool and terrace, and there are fantastic views of the river and surrounding countryside. The house has a fascinating history which Sampaio will happily relate. Curiosities

and antique furniture adorn the place; don't miss the collection of vintage dresses, including the silk and velvet gown worn by Sampaio's great-grandmother at her daughter's wedding in 1898. Doubles from €95.

#### Casa do Vilarinho de São Romão, Lugar da Capela, Vilarinho de São Romão

(00 351 259 930754; [www.casadevilarinho.com](http://www.casadevilarinho.com)). This *turismo de habitação* opened six years ago in an historic manor house (the chapel was consecrated in 1462) in Vilarinho de São Romão. The owner is Cristina van Zeller, an art historian and graphic designer, and a descendant of Dutch merchants who arrived here in the 18th century. The Casa has six bedrooms furnished in an unfussy country style with a judicious use of colour. Van Zeller is a good cook, and uses local meat and seasonal vegetables from her garden. Dinner by arrangement. Doubles from €90

### GETTING TO PORTUGAL

**TAP Portugal** (0845 601 0932; [www.flytap.com](http://www.flytap.com)) flies from Heathrow to Porto from £93.20 return in April. **Ryanair** (0871 246 0000; [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies from Stansted and Liverpool to Porto, from £37

