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How to Spend it

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HORTISCUPTURE ART GOES OUT TO GRASS



don't pass on the port



Distinctive new hotels, sensitive planning and improved attitudes to service are tempting discerning travellers to rediscover the beauty of Portugal. By Mary Lussiana.

The Americans are on to something. "Alentejo – the next Tuscany?" asked the cover of one glossy travel magazine; "The capital of Portugal fast becoming Europe's next 'it' city" wrote another, tempting passers-by to pause a while at the newspaper stand, in the cold of a New York January, and imagine the Portuguese sun on the other side of the ocean. Even more importantly, *The New York Times* travel supplement ranked Lisbon number two on its list of "Places to Go in 2008".

So much more has been written about neighbouring Spain, yet Portugal is a country rich with cultural heritage, natural beauty and a passionate pride in its identity. Few know about the Alentejo region in the south, for example, where black pigs snuffle freely under oak trees and long horizons of golden corn are broken only by Stone Age megaliths. Where huge stork nests balance, improbably, on telegraph poles or on the typically wide chimney stacks – made for smoking the local hams – their chattering inhabitants as much a voice of Portugal as the Fado singers of Lisbon. Where mountain-top, white-washed, medieval hamlets such as Marvão or Monsaraz impress as much as

the grand ducal palaces and Roman temples of Vila Viçosa or Évora. Portugal is full of such marvels; ornate Manueline cathedrals and empty Moorish fortresses; cities such as Coimbra; Byron's much-loved Sintra or the beautiful Óbidos, so perfectly encircled by its fortified walls.

This little-known beauty is in sharp contrast to parts of the Algarve: long popular with the English and sunseeking Germans, its popularity was its downfall. Cheap apartments encircled pretty, white-washed fishing villages, creating mayhem in summer and ghost towns in winter. But lessons have been learned, says Luis Patrão, president of Turismo de Portugal, who has been handed the task of changing the face of Portuguese tourism. Foremost in all his efforts is the understanding that tourism needs to move upmarket – a change that has already begun. "It used to be 3.3 stars," says Patrão. "Now it is becoming 4.3 stars."

Hotel schools throughout Portugal are implementing a new syllabus in September to encourage a more ambitious attitude in a people whose recent past has ill-suited them to work in such a competitive sector. Throughout four decades of dictatorial rule under Salazar, the implicit instruction to citizens was: "Don't think,

Main picture: *Monument to the Discoverers*, Lisbon. Top: Amache, a room at Quinta da Romaneira. Above: the Alma Lusa restaurant at Aquapura Douro Valley.



just do as you are told." The "Carnation Revolution" in the 1970s informed people: "You have no obligations, only rights." Both the turmoil of these events and the philosophies promoted by those involved had disastrous side-effects on the service industry. Now, however, the government is encouraging independent hoteliers to blossom. It seems that we are at the start of something exciting: new hotels designed to spoil travellers as they rediscover the charms of a largely forgotten country.

Of particular interest is the opening in 2010 of Martinhal Resort. This is the baby of property developers Chitra and Roman Stern, and consists of over 100 individually designed villas and a 38-room hotel. All are low-rise, terracotta-roofed buildings, invisible from the surrounding hills; a prime example of sensitive planning. The location is unbeatable, a small bay on the undiscovered western Algarve where guests of the hotel will have an unspoiled view over the ocean with the pine- and rosemary-scented wilderness of the protected Costa Vicentina National Park at their backs. To the west lies Cape St Vincent, otherwise known as *el fin del mundo* (the end of the world), the most south-westerly point of mainland Europe. It was from here in the 14th century that Henry the Navigator, the architect of the Portuguese age of discovery, sent sailors forth to the untamed Atlantic to "attempt the discovery of things that are hidden from men".

The Sterns have teamed up with Nigel Chapman and Nicholas Dickinson, whose previous successes in the hotel industry include Woolley Grange, Moonfleet Manor, Fowey Hall and The Ickworth. The Martinhal

Above: Castelo de Pena, Sintra. Right: the Fontana Park Hotel, a former smithy in Lisbon. Below: the three-bedroom Villa 2 Andalucia at Martinhal.

hotel has been designed by Conran & Partners and the vibe here is one of bare-foot luxury, a well-heeled informality in the three restaurants, the spa (of course) and the multitude of water sports. Perched on a cliff a little further along the rugged coast is the Memmo Baleeira Hotel. Originally built in the 1960s, it had become somewhat faded in recent years. Now part of Design Hotels, currently one of the most desirable brands in the hotel business, it glistens with a minimalist sophistication produced by architect Samuel Torres de Carvalho. Carvalho plays to the demand for design by today's travellers, who he believes

"Today's travellers want to see themselves and not their grandparents, in their chosen surroundings."

"want to see themselves and not their grandparents, in their chosen surroundings". Memmo's next project is planned for Lisbon in 2010, next to the Castle of São Jorge on one of the capital's seven hills, with a view over the rooftops to the wide Tagus beyond. This is the Alfama district, its narrow cobbled streets the heart of the city and vibrant with a life which suits the hotel's motto: "You will never forget Sagres."

Two new hotels in Lisbon have been added to the portfolio of Design Hotels – a first for the city. One, Jerónimos 8, is a four-star property in Belém, near the wonderful 16th century Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, where Vasco da Gama is buried. The other, more central, is Fontana Park Hotel, which opened in December 2007 and is a four-star, 139-room vision in purple and black. Well-known architect

Francisco Aires Mateus and designer Nini Andrade Silva have created a futuristic feel in this former iron foundry, with open-plan bedrooms and baths which add colours, not bubbles, to your water. The owner was influenced by visits to the Sanderson hotel in London and wanted to bring this type of avant-garde property to the Lisbon market.

Another privately owned Lisbon hotel, the Bairro Alto, from hotelier Grace Leo-Andrieu, set a benchmark for contemporary hotels when it opened in 2005. Bairro Alto remains the undisputed queen of the boutique hotels, with a superb location on Praça Luis de Camões – on the streets rather than above them. Outside, Lisbon's yellow trams rattle past; inside,



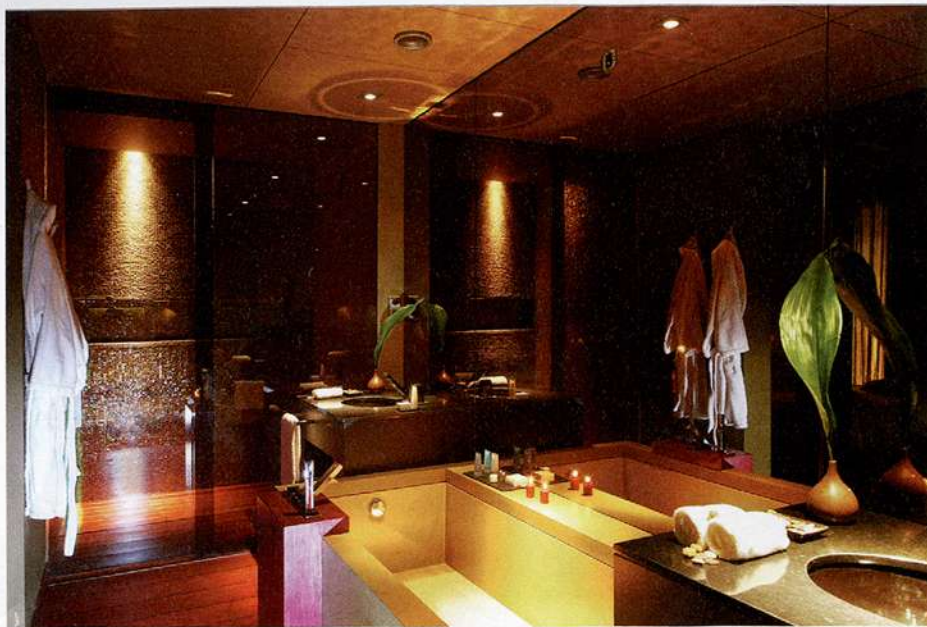
bold decoration reflects the soul of the city. A drink on the roof terrace is a must. The same ownership plans a second Lisbon hotel and will also open a boutique hotel in the old city of Faro in the Algarve.

Nowadays, it seems, all good hotels need a spa. In Portugal this is particularly important given the seasonality of tourism. Spa guru Martin Goldmann, of Grupo Ambiente, has 38 projects on his books and demand is strong; the difference, he says, is that the plans he sees are now far more professional than even three years ago. Among others in the pipeline is a vinotherapy spa at The Yeatman, in Porto, Portugal's great northern city.

The Yeatman – owned by the Fladgate Partnership, which owns port houses Taylor's, Croft and Fonseca – is due to open in December 2009. Situated in Vila Nova de Gaia, facing Porto across the Douro river, the five-star Yeatman will have 82 rooms built into the steep slopes of the bank, an infinity pool, two restaurants and the Wine Spa.

Follow the Douro river inland and you discover a rural paradise of painted roadside shrines and tiny stone hamlets where little has changed over the centuries and





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life has a different pace. Aquapura Douro Valley is set in a renovated, terracotta-coloured, 19th century manor house. The idea of hotel group Aquapura is to have smallish hotels with an enormous spa forming the heart of the property and a residential area of villas. This is the first: it opened last year and has just won the Best Hotel in Portugal Award from the influential *Boa Cama Boa Mesa* guide. Up-to-the-minute technology is balanced by huge beds with oversized pillows. Lavish baths have plasma screens as a backdrop

and the latest Aromatherapy Associates products. Service and food are exemplary and the spa offers a specially created Karin Herzog range using grapes from the surrounding vineyards.

Aquapura is certainly ambitious: it is currently working on projects in Brazil, Budapest, Prague, Macedonia and in Portugal's own Alentejo – a hotel surrounded by olive groves and vineyards. The managing director Miguel Simões de Almeida

envisages a group of about 15 to 20 hotels on a level to rival the Aman group.

A tour of the new wonders of Portugal would not be complete without a visit to Quinta da Romaneira. Amid terraced vineyards rolling down to the Douro, two ancient farmhouses (*quintas*) have been renovated to provide 19 suites and apartments, rich with simplicity. Telephones and TVs are out; iPods are in. Meals might be by the infinity pool, afloat the Douro or among the vines. Two spa

suites have opened offering “massage with a handful of earth” and “soft cream wrap for the body fragranced with sun-dried straw”. Staff are local and “work with their heart” for French owner Thierry Teyssier. Rather than hire professionals from outside the area, Teyssier prefers working with the locals and local culture. It has, perhaps, taken a foreigner to reveal what is best in this country, for Quinta da Romaneira imposes nothing – it strips everything away, leaving raw, undomesticated Portugal at its most magnificent. ♦

BACK ON THE MAP

Mary Lussiana was a guest of **Fontana Park Hotel**. The following prices are per night for a double room B&B, unless otherwise stated: **Aquapura Douro Valley**, Quinta do Vale Aarão 5100, Lamego (00351-254 660 600; www.aquapurahotels.com); from about £240. **Bairro Alto Hotel**, Praça Luis de Camões 2, 1200-243 Lisbon (00351-213 340 8288; www.bairroaltohotel.com); from about £190. **Fontana Park Hotel**, Rua Eng Vieira da Silva 2, 1050-105 Lisbon (00351-210 410 600; www.fontanaparkhotel.com; www.designhotels.com); from about £135. **Jerónimos 8**, Rua dos Jerónimos 8, 1400-211 Lisbon (00351-21 360 0900; www.jeronimos8.com; www.designhotels.com); from about £175. **Martínhal Resort**, Apartado 54, 8650 Sagres, Algarve (01285-648 512; 00351-282 620 026; www.martínhal.com); rates yet to be set. **Memmo Baleeira Hotel**, 8650-357 Vila de Sagres, Algarve (00351-282 624 212; www.memmobaleeira.com); from about £100. **Quinta da Romaneira**, Cotas, 5070-252 Alijo (00351-254 732 432; www.maisonsdesreves.com); from about £400 per person full board including house wine and activities. **The Yeatman Hotel & Wine Spa**, Rua do Choupelo 250, 4400-088 Vila Nova de Gaia (00351-223 742 800; www.fladgatepartnership.com); rates yet to be set.

Above left: lavish bathing at Aquapura Douro Valley. Above right: the Dona Clara dining room at Quinta da Romaneira.