

Pousadas of the Alentejo

On The Road - Arraiolos to Vila Vicosa - Part 1



Pousada da Nossa Senhora, the beautiful converted monastery in the high Alentejo

TOURING PORTUGAL'S ALENTEJO

This land of endless horizons and immense estates, *latifundios*, is dotted with vineyards, undulating fields of wheat, olive groves and vast cork forests.

The region is populated by horses, goats, sheep and the famed acorn-grazing black pigs of the Alentejo. It boasts highly photogenic fortified hill towns, each with its own defensive fortress or castle sitting atop the hill, built during the time of the Christian Re-conquest of Iberia.

Handsome villages dotting the countryside sport tidy whitewashed homes complete with ornate wrought iron balconies often trimmed in yellow to protect the occupants against fevers, or in blue to ward off flies.

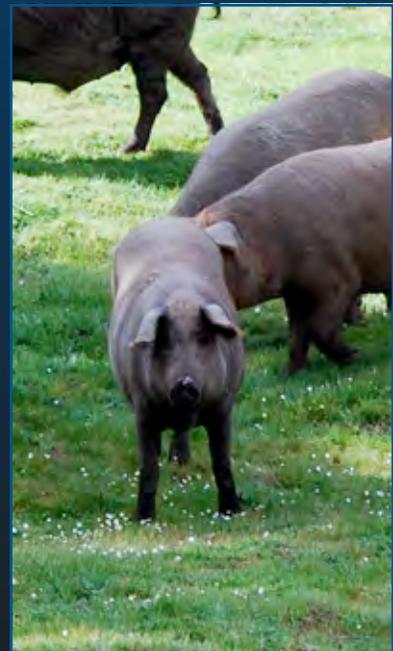
Early spring, when the landscape is blanketed with fields of colorful wildflowers would be the best time to visit sun baked Alentejo, before the stifling heat of summer moves in.

During our most recent tour, we lodged in several *Pousadas de Portugal*, similar to the state-owned Spanish Paradors. This network of 37 landmark buildings, converted into elegant inns, is owned by the state but now managed by the Pestana Hotels & Resorts Group. The Pousadas range from elegant manor homes to former monasteries, convents, castles and ducal palaces.

Touring the Alentejo

Our latest Iberian sojourn took us to Portugal's largest province, its "wild east", the Alentejo, "the land beyond the River Tagus", just 90 minutes from Lisbon, bordering on the western edge of Spain's Extremadura, the land of the Conquistadors.

The Alentejo is a vast, primarily rural, utterly tranquil and unspoiled area of rolling farm terrain, covering one third of Portugal's surface but housing less than one tenth of its population.



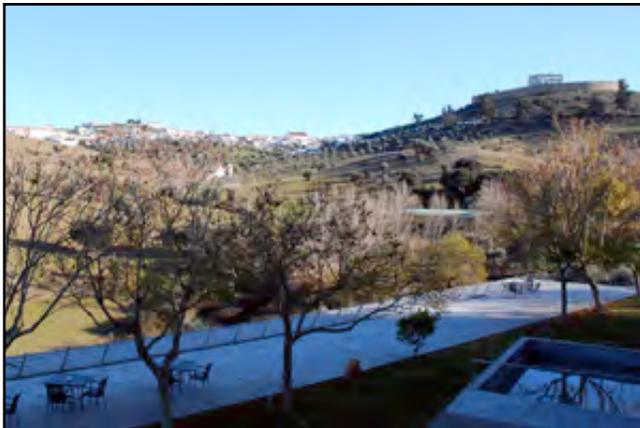
POUSADAS OF THE ALENTEJO



Pousada da Nossa Senhora de Assunção

We began our journey in Alentejo’s westernmost point, spending our first night at the **Pousada da Nossa Senhora da Assunção**, a “new wave” Pousada, with 15 rooms in the original 15th century monastery, wrapped around a silent, marble and granite cloister planted with citrus trees, and 17 new guest quarters in a starkly, all white minimalist wing, designed by architect José Paulo dos Santos in the style of the Porto School of Architecture.

The Pousada’s rooms provide 21st century creature comforts, with terrific sit out balconies where guests can admire the town of **Arraiolos** looming above, and listen to the sounds of sheep grazing on the hillside below its oval-shaped medieval fortifications. Utter tranquility.



Guests have use of tennis courts, pool and Lusitanian horses at the stables next door.

Moving to the southern, drier and flatter Alentejo (Baixo), Portugal’s “bread basket”, we enjoyed another tranquil night’s stay at the elegantly restored, 20-room, 15th century **Pousada Castelo de Alvito**, located in the spic and span white village of Alvito, handy to wineries (**Herdade do Rocim**) and the city of Beja.



From our beautifully decorated, spacious deluxe corner room with arched Manueline windows and stone benches built into the thick walls, we watched the resident peacocks strutting about in the gardens below.

We then traveled northeast to **Estremoz**, and the “museum” of all pousadas, the **Pousada da Rainha Santa Isabel**, the majestic, former 13th century castle-palace of King Denis I, built for his wife, Queen Isabel, high atop the town with magnificent views of



the vineyards. Here we slept in regal splendor in our “period piece” of a deluxe room with heavy drapes, 17th century antiques and four-poster canopy bed.

From Estremoz it was on to quiet **Vila Viçosa**, on the Borba plain, the white marble town and ancestral home of the powerful Braganza monarchs. Next to the enormous 16th century Braganza ducal palace sits the **Pousada de Dom Joao IV**, yet another



sparkling white restored Royal convent with a lovely fountain-filled, frescoed cloister, original nuns’ oratories, stunning marble staircases and doorways, and whose ten, themed “special rooms” are worth the splurge.

Continuing north to the rockier Upper (Alto) Alentejo, we lodged in the imposing 14th century monastery-caste-palace **Pousada Flor da Rosa** in **Crato**, a fascinating example of Portuguese Gothic with its defensive battlements and towers intact, once belonging to the Knights of the Order of Malta. Our contemporary quarters, however, were housed, once again, in a new generation wing facing the



garden, designed by yet another acclaimed Portuguese architect, Joao Luis Carrilho da Graça. The top floor tower suite with its enormous private terrace is highly coveted and provides a dose of medieval mysticism.

We ended our Alentejo explorations at the rustic style **Pousada de Santa Maria** in marvelous **Marvão**, the region’s most photographed garrison town, perched atop a dramatic escarpment, within the confines of a superb 12th century fortress with breathtaking, sweeping 360-degree views over the vast plains. While lacking in grandiose public spaces, as it was sewn together from several cottages, it does provide a cozy and restful setting for hiking in the Serra de São Mamede Nature Park.



View looking east toward Spain from the hilltop Pousada de Santa Maria

A VISIT TO EVORA, THE CAPITAL OF THE ALENTEJO

The multi-layered Alentejo “capital” of Evora, a university town and UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its 15th century Aqueduct, spider web of Moorish style, tiny cobblestone streets and wealth of monuments and Roman remains all contained within medieval walls, makes a perfect single base for exploring the region.

Evora’s former 16th century convent, **Pousada dos Lóios**, serves as an elegant and atmospheric lodging with a dead center location from which to explore the area. The Pousada sits directly across from a 2nd century Roman temple, *Templo de Diana*, and next door to the Igreja dos Lóios church with a nave covered with exquisite 18th century blue and white tiles, azulejos.

Across the street you’ll find the excellent Museum of Evora, on the site of the former Roman forum and behind the museum, the pre-Gothic, fortress-like Cathedral on the site of the former Mosque.

This elegant Pousada boasts a cozy living room with fireplace, an inviting interior courtyard with pool, romantic glassed in cloister housing the restaurant, smallish standard rooms (formerly monks’ cells) but sumptuous suites (such as 101) with original frescoes.

Visitors to Evora should not miss the macabre Chapel of Bones (Capela dos Ossos) of the Church of St. Francis, whose walls and columns are lined with bones of some 5,000 skeletons unearthed from city churchyards in the 16th century to serve as reminder of the fragile human condition.

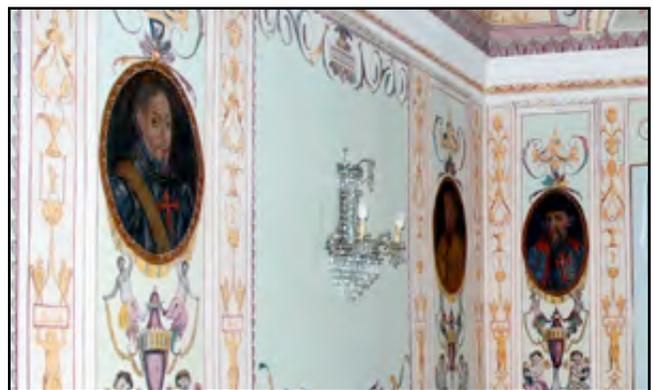
For archaeology buffs, the environs of Evora are blessed with a bounty of megalithic sights, fields hiding menhirs, dolmens and stone circles, including a Portuguese Stonehenge, the *Cromeleque dos Almendres*, dating from around 2,000 B.C.



Plaç do Giraldo, the popular main square in Evora



Templo de Diana



Part of the frescoes in suite 101

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PICTURESQUE HILL TOWNS IN THE ALENTEJO ALTO

In addition to Marvão, visitors should not miss two other highly picturesque fortified hill towns along the Guadiana River that separates Portugal from Spain.



Magical **Monsaraz**, the “Eagles’ Nest”, and the “jewel in the crown” of the Alentejo, is an extremely scenic border outpost perched above the gigantic Alqueva Dam. Captured from the Moors in 1167, its medieval castle courtyard functions as an unusual makeshift bullring during the summer.



Along the main street of Monsaraz



Castelo de Vide, the pretty neighbor to Marvão, is an immaculate, flower-filled, mineral springs town, which boasts an ancient Jewish quarter with a small restored synagogue believed to date from the 13th century, the oldest synagogue in Portugal.



In the Jewish Quarter of Castelo de Vide