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# SpringFLING



# Follow the sun

Helena Lee savours an epicurean adventure in Portugal, come rain or shine

THERE WAS A MOMENT AT SÃO LOURENÇO DO BARROCAL WHEN I forgot we were in the 21st century. Sitting surrounded by ancient olive-trees, sipping vinho verde and watching a donkey and cart trundle past, I experienced a flash of pure contentment. The peace offered by this rural sanctuary was luxury itself, I reflected, until I was brought back to reality by the persistent questions from my young children about braying asses.

The first stop on our Portuguese escape had been Lisbon two days before. Moody clouds were gathering overhead, and our taxi driver was full of foreboding. 'Wear trainers,' he advised darkly. 'Lisbon was built on seven hills.' It was sound counsel; the constant rain rendered the geometric-tiled roads slippery as ice. So we forewent most of the sightseeing in favour of exploring the city's numerous dining opportunities, lunching on octopus hotdogs, fish and hearty francesinha, a meaty sandwich slathered in rich gravy. Our hotel, the AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado, was boutique bliss – perfectly situated on the Praça do Município, next to the city hall from which the Portuguese republic was proclaimed – and home to another fantastic restaurant, Delfina. When we weren't eating, we visited the Oceanarium, next to the pounding Atlantic Ocean, and

took a trip up to the castle of São Jorge and the LX factory, an intriguing mix of hipster restaurants and creative endeavour.

Alentejo was a glorious contrast to this urban bustle; two hours' drive inland, towards the Spanish border, it's the country's largest yet least populated region, a place of gently undulating hills, peppered with holm oaks and olive-trees, around which cows and wild horses happily roam. The São Lourenço estate had originally been part of the royal family's hunting grounds, until it was purchased by Manuel Mendes Papança two centuries ago and converted into a farm. Eight generations later, it is owned by the same family (apart from a brief period during the 1970s when it was nationalised) and is still a working farm and a centre of local craft, as well as a supremely comfortable hotel.

Arriving here was like taking a deep breath. We entered via a cobbled path, fringed with thriving rosemary bushes that ran past the whitewashed converted farm buildings, and sat down to

a welcome lunch of fresh tomato soup with a poached egg, followed by prawns in a garlicky butter. Afterwards, the girls wanted to play hide-and-seek, weaving in and out of the orange- and lemon-trees, the disused sheep pens, the former bullring and the dolmens. The way to the pool was past sculptural agricultural hangovers: water mills, cereal towers and industrial pulleys; the pool itself, framed by boulders, was bracing but stimulating.

Everyone we spoke to told us the constant rain was wonderful. Prior to our arrival, there had not been a drop between February and September – affecting the output of olive oil, honey, wine and crops. Despite ourselves, we agreed, even when we had to be rescued from a deeply muddy bike ride through the grapevines.

Whatever the weather, there was plenty to do. Breakfast was a highlight: fresh honeycomb dripping with honey, a whole leg of cured ham, piles of cinnamon-dusted French toast and homemade jams. Then, we would set out on our adventures. One day, we went to the Alqueva dam, Europe's biggest man-made lake, and boarded a racing-red boat armed with four rods to learn the rudiments of fishing from our instructor Eduarte. Seven-year-old Darcy became addicted to casting and reeling; I closed my eyes, felt the sun on my face and listened to the bobbing of the boat and the whip of the line

as it whizzed through the air, and the shrieks of glee when Darcy was duly rewarded with one little black bass and then a huge carp. On the way back, we stopped at Monsaraz, a gleaming, white-walled mediaeval hilltop village that was once home to a thriving creative community, to admire its castle and the views it offered over Alentejo.

Another afternoon was spent learning to make cocktails and mocktails. The girls delighted in using their shakers and strainers to create a jasmine tea and pepper cordial concoction, while the base of the grown-ups' elixir was figs and leaves from a nearby tree. And we popped into São Lourenço's olive press, which is active only two weeks a year. The olives had just been picked and were being mashed into paste, before the oil was filtered into vats. We lifted a lid and

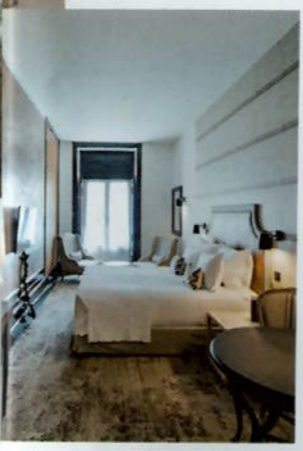
inhaled the fresh, fruity, aroma that emanated from the golden-green liquid.

As dusk fell, finches darted in and out of the ivy on the walls, their chirps filling the air. Sometimes we ate supper at the table in our cottage – part of a high-ceilinged, wood-panelled converted barn, full of furniture crafted in the region; on other nights, we headed to the hotel's restaurant for exquisite dishes: tender veal and rich, delicious pork, eaten by the roaring fire. After Darcy and Margot went to bed, we would invariably open a bottle of São Lourenço Syrah, look out at the full moon peeping through the cloud-striped sky and try to hold onto the memory of the day.

*AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado (almalusahotels.com), from about £115 a room a night B&B. São Lourenço do Barrocal (barrocal.pt), from about £4,000 B&B for four nights, based on a family of four sharing a two-bedroom cottage, including return flights with British Airways, transfers and a concierge service arranged by F&P Travel (fandptravel.com).* □



Left: outside a cottage at São Lourenço do Barrocal. Below, from top: the bar. A bedroom in a Barn cottage. São Lourenço do Barrocal's outdoor pool



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, ASH JAMES, NELSON GARRIDO