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THE ALENTEJO, THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Posted by Mike Cowton | Jun 5, 2017 | Blog, Europe, Travel | 0  | ★★★★★



I AM IN A LAND OF GARLIC AND CORIANDER. A LAND SEEMINGLY ISOLATED FROM SOCIETY. THERE IS A STILLNESS IN THE AIR AS I CAST MY EYES OVER ROLLING PLAINS PEPPERED WITH ANCIENT, WILD CORK OAK TREES, OLIVE PLANTATIONS AND WHEAT FIELDS STRETCHING TO WHERE THE PARCHED EARTH BUMPS HEADLONG INTO A STRIKING BLUE SKY

As the temperature refuses to budge from its 36 °C, I liken this vast landscape to the plains of Africa. Uncluttered and unpopulated, a network of quiet roads leads through tiny, white-washed villages and upwards to hill-forts lost in time. I revel in this glorious isolation, away from the heartbeat of modernity and throngs of tourists not a million miles away at some of the most glorious beaches to be found anywhere in Europe. This is the Alentejo region of south-central and southern Portugal, where the climate is typically warm and dry for a large part of the year. Covering around a third of the country, the Alentejo stretches south from the Rio Tejo to the northern mountain ranges of the Algarve.

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Algarve Nature Week offers visitors plenty of opportunities to explore both the dramatic coast and inland sites

This is a region new to me. A year ago I was in the southwest of Portugal during Algarve Nature Week (<https://www.essentialjourneys.co.uk/algarve-nature-week/>), which offers visitors the chance to explore the region's natural world. In a landscape mostly untouched by tourism, I wandered the narrow cobbled roads of mountain villages, past small clusters of aged men seated on rickety stools in animated conversation, a backcloth of tumbledown buildings huddling together in a vain attempt to ward off the inevitable decay, a sad reminder of their siblings' evacuation to the coast in search of their own fortunes. Only pocketfuls of artisans remained, happy to open their doors to the odd passing tourist. As I wandered the dramatic coastline along cliff paths overlooking the vast Atlantic Ocean, itself in constant dialogue with the land, sometimes calm, at other times brooding and argumentative, I reflected on the thousands of tourists pouring into this country every year, ignorant of the beauty which lies only a short drive inland.

And now I find myself in similar reflective mood, soaking up a landscape swathed in minimalist beauty, and eager to explore its hidden charms, including the towns of Elvas and Évora boasting UNESCO World Heritage status, and in the Alto Alentejo (Upper Alentejo), the spectacular hill-top villages of Monsaraz and Marvão, each with their own stories to tell.



The megalithic complex of Cromeleque dos Almendres, discovered by chance in the 1960s

My first encounter with the history of the Alentejo region is amidst the Cromeleque dos Almendres, a megalithic complex located near the village of Nossa Senhora de Guadalupe, in the municipality of Évora. The Alentejo region contains numerous Neolithic stone formations and I find myself enthralled by the 95 menhir stones which form two large stone circles. Once part of a ceremonial site dedicated to a celestial religion, the standing stones are regarded as the finest example of Neolithic

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structures remaining on the Iberian Peninsula. I note that the local government has not cordoned off the stones, so visitors are free to wander at will around the site.



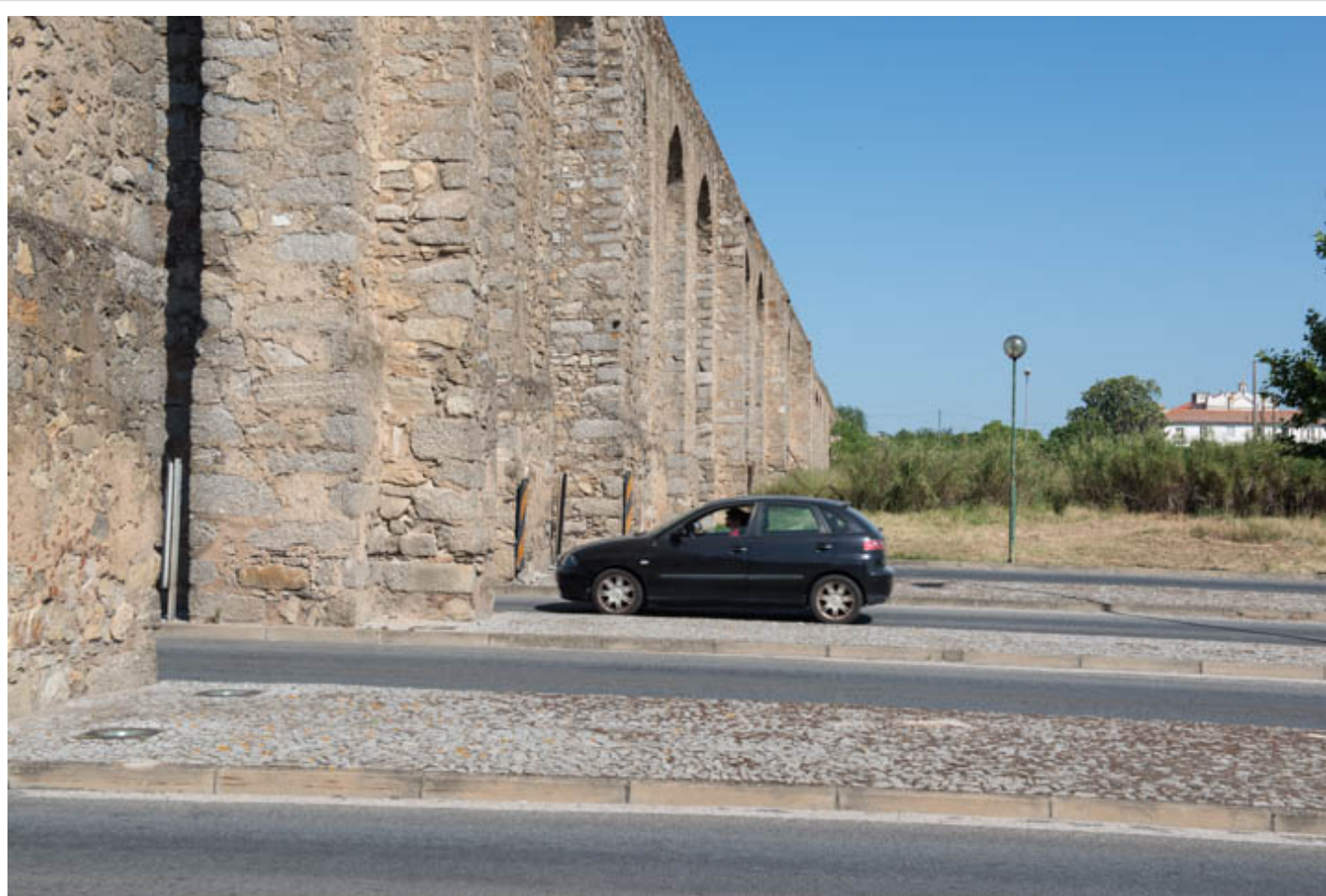
The standing stones are regarded as the finest example of Neolithic structures remaining on the Iberian Peninsula

The stones were found quite by accident by a farmer in the 1960s whilst clearing the land of undergrowth. Although the site is open throughout the year, it attracts few visitors, partially due to poor public transport links to the location. Yet with over 150 menhirs (tall, upright stones), dolmens (single-chamber megalithic tombs) and cromlechs (circle of standing stones) spread around the northern Alentejo, this a rich seam of Neolithic culture.



The Ecorkhotel was the first of its kind to be certified in Portugal as an eco-hotel

I overnight at the Ecorkhotel – Évora, Suites & Spa (www.ecorkhotel.com), a short drive from Évora city centre. This 4-star, rural, contemporary spa hotel has its main building coated with cork. The first of its kind to be certified in Portugal as an eco-hotel, it includes a state-of-the-art Spa & Wellness Centre, with indoor and outdoor swimming pools, sauna and Turkish bath. The air-conditioned suites feature a living area with sofa and flat-screen cable TV, free WiFi, minibar, and bathroom with free toiletries. All feature a private patio, and some also include an equipped kitchenette. Guests in the sophisticated Mediterranean restaurant can enjoy typical Portuguese cuisine.



The 16th century aqueduct provides clean drinking water to the people of Evora

The next morning I drive to Évora and park by the impressive main arches of Aqueduto da Água de Prata, a 16th century aqueduct built to provide clean drinking water by connecting the city to the nearest constant flowing river 9km to the north. Inside the city walls, the arches of the aqueduct reduce as they reach the terminus of the water flow.



The best way to discover the rich heritage of Evora is on foot

It is only a short walk to where I discover quaint houses and shops constructed underneath the arches along narrow, cobbled streets. In fact, I soon discover that the best way to enjoy this city and its rich heritage is on foot. With its roots embedded in Roman times, Évora was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1986.



The imposing Church of Santo Antao dominates the main square

I enjoy a coffee in the Praça do Giraldo. Located in the heart of the city, the square has sidewalk cafés and shops where tourists linger in the shade. Dominating the square is the imposing Church of Santo Antão, which was built in the 16th century in accordance with the designs of the royal architects. I next visit the Igreja de São Francisco (Church of St Francis). The huge church was built in the Gothic style and is best known for its somewhat gruesome Chapel of Bones, constructed by Franciscan monks. By the 16th century, there were 43 cemeteries in and around Évora taking up valuable land. Not wanting to condemn the souls of the people buried there, the monks decided to build the Chapel and relocate the bones. Above the chapel door, visitors are greeted with the sobering message: *‘Nós ossos que aqui estamos, pelos vossos esperamos’* (‘We bones, are here, waiting for yours’).



Evora’s Roman Temple is regarded as the best preserved Roman structure on the Iberian Peninsula

Escaping the claustrophobia brought on by the surrounds of some 5,000 corpses, I head for the iconic Roman Temple, incorrectly dedicated to Diana, the goddess of hunting. Situated in the attractive Largo Conde de Vila Flor square, the temple is regarded as the best preserved Roman structure on the Iberian Peninsula. Under the shadow of the magnificent Corinthian columns, I sit awhile in the Jardim de Diana gardens, close to the Palacio da Inquisição and the Museum of Évora, all under the watchful eye of the Sé Cathedral.



As a wine region, the Alentejo is substantial, making up nine per cent of Portugal's production

Portugal is renowned for its authentic cuisine and multifaceted wines. As a wine region, the Alentejo is certainly substantial, with some 22,000 hectares planted with vineyards, making up nine per cent of the total area under vines in the country. With around one out of every two bottles of wine consumed in Portugal being produced in the Alentejo, the region's sunny and warm climate, with its cool nights and dry winds, works to encourage a style of viticulture that is as close to nature as possible, creating wines recognised for their intensity of fruit and rich texture. There are in excess of 260 grape varieties cultivated hereabouts, the great majority being indigenous vines. There is little wonder, then, that wine routes have become the most visible form of wine tourism in Portugal, and are particularly well represented in the Alentejo, with routes crisscrossing the region. If you happen to find yourself in Évora, then it is worth checking out the Rota Dos Vinhos Do Alentejo (Alentejo Wine Route Office – www.vinhosdoalentejo.pt), where daily tastings are held and visits to wine cellars can be scheduled.



Evora enjoys an eclectic mix of properties jostling for position along the impressive aqueduct

Whereby the surrounding countryside has a certain minimalist appeal, the town of Évora enjoys an eclectic mix of old and new shops and traditional restaurants jostling for attention along its narrow streets. Lunchtime, and I seek out Mr Pickwick. Located in the centre just off the Praça do Giraldo, in Alcavora de cima, the restaurant has been serving locals and tourists typical Portuguese food and other specialties since 1988. All the outside tables are occupied, so I head inside and sit at a table next to the bar, with waiters bustling to and fro, creating a charming, friendly atmosphere.



Mr Pickwick is a popular lunch spot for tourists, with dining inside and al fresco

The Alentejo cuisine is one of the richest and original in Portugal, developed as a result of the isolation and poverty that the region has endured. As a result, the locals have been creative in the use of limited available natural resources, making use of seasonal and local produce, including some wild plant species such as asparagus, purslane, river mint, pennyroyal and coriander, as well as garlic, oregano, tomatoes, chickpeas and grains. Cereal grains are at the core of the traditional Alentejo diet, with bread and olive oil being used as a base for soup, very much a local dish in all its variants. Flocks of sheep that graze the hillsides supply the milk from which some of the most outstanding cheeses of Portugal are made, including Serpa, Nisa and Évora. To round off a meal, many of the sweets and pastries are made with numerous egg yolks and vast amounts of sugar, originally created in convents and monasteries.



The mediaeval town of Monsaraz offers panoramic views of the Alqueva reservoir

If anything, I find Évora to be an extremely sophisticated, user-friendly city, with all its visitor attractions encased within the ring of fortifications, and everywhere walkable. But time to head off to the walled mediaeval town of Monsaraz. Sitting high atop a hillside, the village offers panoramic views of the Alqueva reservoir. Fortunately, the distinctive characteristics of this stunning town have preserved over the centuries, to be enjoyed by visitors attracted to its charm.



Monsaraz is full of traditional white-washed buildings lining cobbled streets

By late afternoon, there are few to spoil my time here as I wander the quiet, cobbled streets, consuming the architectural heritage encapsulated in the mediaeval castle and keep, and the parish church of Nossa Senhora da Lagoa, which dates from the 16th and 17th centuries. Every year, throughout the month of July, Monsaraz becomes an open-air museum, affording visitors the opportunity to get to know more about the customs and habits used in the production of Alentejo handicraft, appreciate the delights of the regional cuisine and enjoy the various cultural events that are held here, including music, theatre, dance and art exhibitions.



Herdade do Sobroso estate has rural tourism down to a fine art

My second night is spent at Herdade do Sobroso estate (www.herdadedosobroso.pt), a wine and country house which has rural tourism down to a fine art. The 1,600 hectares of the estate are located between the Mendro mountains and the plains of Alentejo, alongside the Guadiana river and the Alqueva dam.



Herdade do Sobroso estate marries wine production with open space and nature *(Photo courtesy the estate)*

With its subtle and refined African and Oriental themes, the hotel accommodation includes five bedrooms in the Casa da Quinta (country house), and five apartments in the Casa das Cegonhas (Stork's house), together with a swimming pool. The estate has been in the Ginestal Machado family for the past seventeen years, and today's guests are witness to the culmination of a huge modernisation having taken place, including the rebuilding of the abandoned buildings in order to accommodate the winery and guest facilities.



A stork makes its nest on the Herdade do Sobroso estate

The estate takes its name (Stream of the cork trees) from the stream which flows across the property and into the Guadiana river. Herdade do Sobroso is part of a recent and enthusiastic generation of Alentejo estates that bands wine production with open space and nature. I found current family owners Filipe Pinto and Sofia Machado to be an extremely engaging couple, and there is little wonder that the estate is proving so popular with guests throughout the year.





Sunset on the estate, when guests can enjoy a picnic with local cheeses and wines

It is possible to book a sunrise or sunset tour of the estate, including a picnic complete with cheese and wine and a selection of excellent home-made pickles available from the estate's shop.

I leave Herdade do Sobroso with a certain reluctance, as I would have enjoyed stopping over a few days to enjoy the countryside and participate in a few activities on the river, but I had plans for a visit to the former garrison town of Elvas, which lies close to the border of Spain. Elvas fought to maintain the independence of Portugal and its history. Visitors to the city are greeted by a magnificent aqueduct, only overshadowed 1km distant on a hill by the largest bulwarked fortification in the world, with its defensive structures in the shape of a star. The fortifications were important in the battles with Spain for the independence of Portugal in the mid-17th century and served as a base for General Wellington during the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century.



Fort of Graça, with the Governor's House dominating the structure

Built between 1763 and 1792, Fort of Graça features three distinct layers of defense, each separated by walls and ditches. The outer wall is in the shape of a star. Inside this is the thick, inner fortification, shaped like a square with huge, raised diamonds of land at each corner. Smaller buildings were constructed on top of the wide corner pieces. In the centre of the fort is the elaborately decorated main structure, known as the Governor's House, which rises majestically above the rest of the base. The Fort of Graça was recently recognised by both the World Monuments Fund and UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.



Entrance to the Torre de Palma Wine Hotel, which opened to guests in 2014

Evening, and I check into the Torre de Palma Wine Hotel (www.torredepalma.com), another place rich in history. Located in Monforte, a village in the upper Alentejo in the Portalegre municipality, the property was left derelict for 30 years after the 1974 revolution. The remains of the ancient house, which dates back to 1338, were restored, and in May 2014, in a marriage of tradition and modern sophistication, the property began the next phase of its life as a wine hotel, with 19 elegantly decorated rooms, an excellent restaurant, indoor spa, outdoor swimming pool and horse-riding arena with its Lusitano breed of horses.



The Church of Santa Maria da Devesa dominates the main square in Castelo de Vide

Castelo de Vide is an extraordinary place. Situated in the foothills of the northern reaches of the hills of the Serra de São Mamede natural park, the old part of the fortified town sits enclosed within walls which once would have been a typical Portuguese hill-top village with a castle. To reach it, I stroll by the Praça Dom Pedro V, an elegant square surrounded by baroque buildings, the town hall and the Church of Santa Maria da Devesa, which is almost disproportionate in size to the rest of the town.



The Jewish Quarter in Castelo de Vide leads to the fortified old town on the top of the hill

Although of Roman origin, Castelo de Vide is best known for its sizeable Jewish presence in the Middle Ages. And whilst the town's prosperity is said to have been influenced by the commercial acumen of the Jewish community, they suffered an expulsion, with some deciding to remain as 'New Christians'.



Castelo de Vide is an extraordinary town, and well worth a visit

Several streets were reserved for the Jewish community, and I soon find myself walking steadily uphill through the dedicated Quarter with its splendid cobbled paths and small whitewashed houses with Gothic doorways and colourful plant pots. The short climb leads me to the 14th century fortifications, inside of which I discover an extraordinary mediaeval quarter, complete with the castle tower, which offers panoramic views. On the way back down, I pass what is believed to be the oldest synagogue in Portugal. As it is closed, I peer through the window to just make out a modest little room through the gloom.



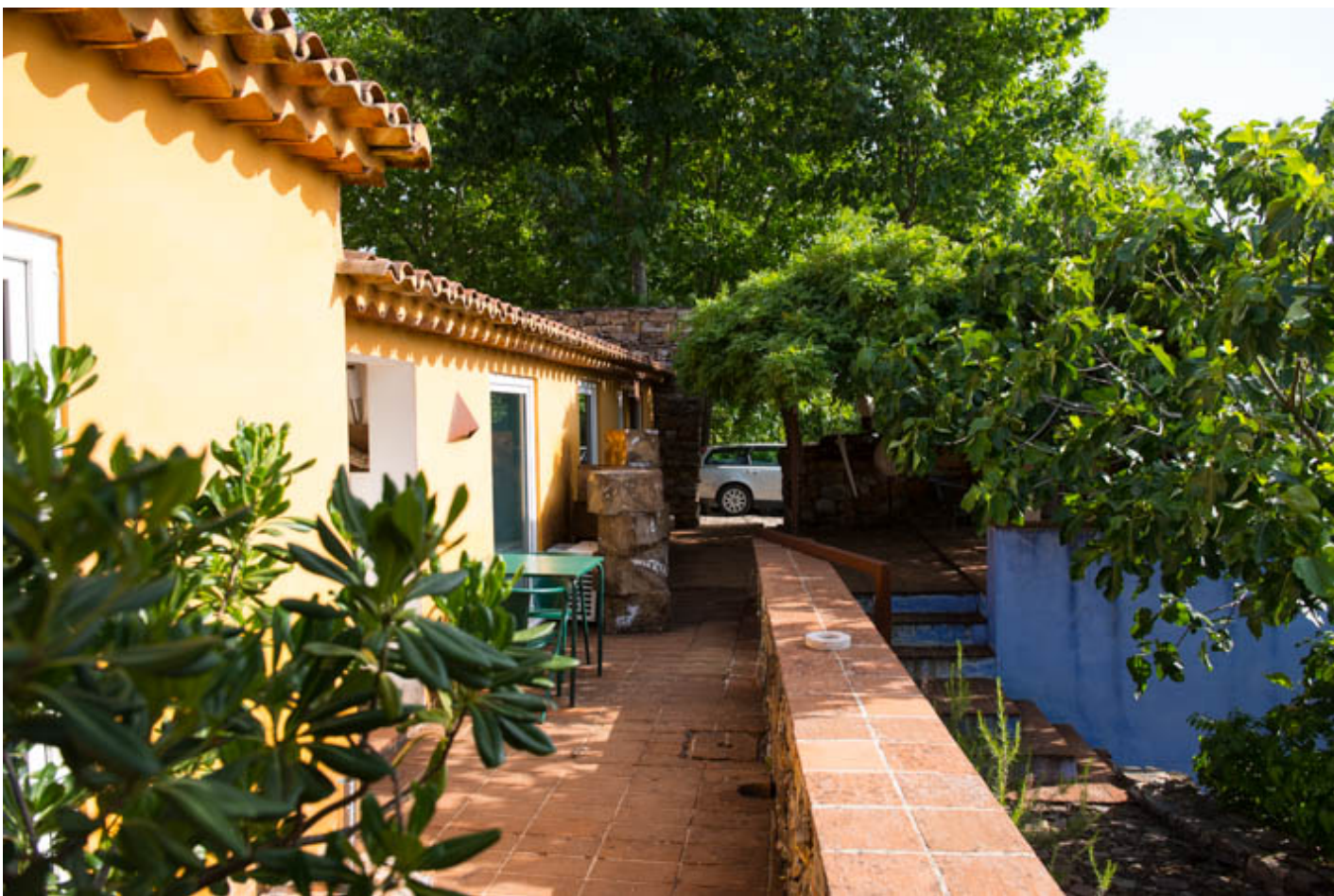
The mediaeval quarter in the old town is still inhabited

After a leisurely morning stroll, I lunch at the Almoco Restaurant on the banks of the tranquil River Sever (www.sever.pt/pt) before striking out in the heat of the afternoon along a clearly defined walking path to the hilltop town of Marvão. Crossing the bridge over the river, the path begins and ends in Largo das Almas, at the Portagem quadrangular tower, where taxes were once taken for those crossing from Spain.



From the manicured public gardens of the hilltop town, it is possible to enjoy sweeping views

The route follows medieval cobbled lanes flanked by rows of cork oak, Pyrenean oak and chestnut, before treating the walker to magnificent views. Marvão is yet another hill-top gem, dominated by its largely 13th century castle with austere granite walls. From the whitewashed village, it is possible to enjoy sweeping views up to and beyond the Spanish border less than ten miles away.



Quinta do Barrieiro guest house is set in a pleasant, rural landscape

A short drive takes me to Quinta do Barrieiro guest house (www.quintadobarrieiro.pt), my final night's stop. This is home to the Alentejo Sculpture Park, created by artist Maria Leal da Costa. As dusk falls, I wander the estate's two hectares and enjoy happening upon Maria's works of art, which interact perfectly with the landscape. Dinner is taken in the main house, with a traditional starter of scrambled eggs with asparagus and Serrano ham on slices of melon.



The Olive Oil Museum in Galegos is a treasure-trove of history

My final morning sees me at the Olive Oil Museum of Marvão (www.mpn.pt) in the tiny village of Galegos. In 2010, Antonio Melara Nunes walked away from his career as an architect in Lisbon and returned to his roots in the village where his grandfather Antonio Picado Nunes had been producing olive oil since 1953. The old machinery was still in situ, left to gather dust after his grandfather had stopped production in 1999. Young Antonio set about rebuilding the business by recovering the original olive trees, some of which are over 300 years old, with the aim of producing the same golden nectar as that of his grandfather.



Cutting-edge technology ensures only the highest quality of extra virgin olive oil

An investment in cutting-edge technology to ensure the highest quality olive oil allowed for both a development of his own brand of oil, Castelo de Marvão, and an option for locals to press and bottle their own olives. With zero use of chemicals, Antonio relies on grazing sheep to fertilise the 30 hectares of soil upon which grow 5,000 Galega olive trees. Visitors can pre-book a tour of the museum before sampling the olive oil, with its distinctive golden colour and fruity flavour.



The hill-top town of Marvao dominates the countryside

It is a sad fact that many of the spectacular towns and areas I visited in the Alentejo close to the border with Spain have witnessed a steady decline in population, mostly due to lack of employment. The need for progress is obvious, and tourism, although low key, is playing a vital part in boosting the overall economy. For me, what makes the Alentejo so special is its authenticity. Drive an hour southeast of Lisbon, and you happen upon an area which covers more than a third of the land mass of Portugal. Then reach into its soul, and you will discover that its wealth lies in its beauty, its flavours, its history, its people and its endless stories. Yes, progress may well be slow here, but in a way, it would appear to work in perfect harmony with the landscape.

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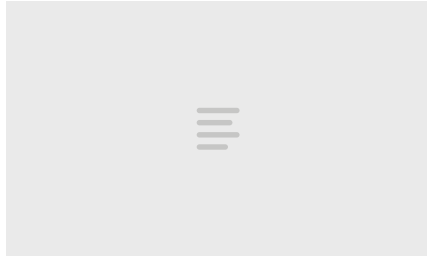


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Michael Cowton, an outdoors writer, editor and photographer with a passion for nature-based travel and wildlife. He is a former editor of EcoTravel, Outdoor Pursuits, Camping, Lakeland Walker and Which Motorcaravan magazines, and national newspaper journalist.

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