

Nine Can't-Miss New Hotels in Portugal

A new wave of small hotels has arrived in Portugal's Alentejo and Algarve regions—big on style and character, yet refreshingly affordable.

Richard Alleman January 14, 2015

Portugal often gets overlooked by travelers in favor of France, Italy, and Spain. But in recent years, several Lisboans and European expats have quietly opened small, design-centric properties that are drawing in-the-know visitors and establishing the country as the next great stylish getaway.

Along the cliff-studded coast of the Algarve and on the sun-drenched plains of the Alentejo, these architecturally dazzling hotels stand out boldly from the wild, rural landscape, yet feel entirely rooted in the local culture.

The owners of Villa Extramuros, for instance, enlisted a Lisbon-based architect to design a modern white cubic structure that blends beautifully into the wildflower- and olive-tree-covered hills of the Alentejo.

The area has not escaped the attention of some big-name international figures: Philippe Starck reportedly bought a house in Herdade da Comporta, a chic seaside enclave in the Alentejo, and Aman Resorts has been scouting locations in the area.

Despite such developments, this corner of Portugal remains primarily an insiders' refuge—quiet, inexpensive, and thoroughly unpretentious.

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Cabanas no Rio, Comporta

With its dune-backed beaches and pine forests, Comporta has long been a well-guarded secret among the Portuguese elite. The outside world started to take notice in 2010, when Casas na Areia—four rustic-chic cottages with sand floors, modeled after fishermen's huts—arrived on the scene. Owner João Rodrigues and Lisbon architect Manuel Aires Mateus recently expanded their portfolio with a pair of reclaimed-wood cabins (one is the bedroom, the other, the living room) that hold just one couple. The gloriously remote property sits in the Sado Estuary Nature Reserve, a haven for flamingos, and comes with its own jetty, kayaks, and bicycles.

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Sublime Comporta Country House Retreat, Muda

Husband-and-wife team Gonçalo and Patricia Pessoa went to Comporta to buy a weekend home and ended up building the area's first, much-needed luxury hotel. Spread out over 17 secluded acres (you'll see more umbrella pines than people), the property has five rooms in the elegant main house and nine duplex suites in a nearby annex. Contemporary interiors mix Gervasoni furniture with polished concrete floors and white linens. The infinity pool is a lap-swimmer's dream, and just a five-minute drive away are the magnificent white sands of Pego Beach. When you're there, order a bucket of steamed clams on the deck of Restaurante Sal, a buzzy spot where you might bump into Comporta regulars like Christian Louboutin and Jacques Grange.

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3 of 9 Courtesy of Cabeça da Cabra

Cabeça da Cabra, Porto Covo

While house-hunting in the hills above the small coastal town of Porto Covo, Maria Santos fell in love with an abandoned schoolhouse that was up for auction. On a whim, she bid on it, won, and eventually turned the place into a B&B with a big word-of-mouth following. The wood-floored former classrooms are now smart studios filled with cool finds like vintage chests and Victrolas. Maria dishes out breakfast in an open kitchen, where she also prepares unfussy dinners that include salads from her garden and chorizo flambé served in a clay pot. Although the property is not on the water, wonderful beaches are just a 20-minute bike ride away. Most guests simply hang out in a deck chair on the veranda, where a lap pool will soon be part of the picture.

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Torre de Palma Wine Hotel, Monforte

The Alentejo is gaining more standing in the wine world with its earthy red blends, and Isabel Rebelo and her husband, Paulo Barradas, recently began serving their first bottles at this 14th-century estate turned hotel and winery. The blazing-white manor house is ringed by long ranch-style buildings that house the 19 antiques-filled guest rooms. Portuguese decorator Rosarinho Gabriel gave each a different theme: the Loft Rural rooms, with their neutral palette, are our favorite. As a testament to the couple's success, locals from the nearby village of Vaiamonte are coming to the restaurant, Basilio, to try hearty Iberian pork cheeks and slivers of marbled steak. Whatever you order, don't miss tasting the couple's full-bodied red.

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Villa Extramuros, Arraiolos

French-born François Savatier and his partner, Jean-Christophe Lalanne, felt that a strong, modern aesthetic would suit their 13-acre plot in the Alentejo. They were right. Lisbon-based architect Jordi Fornells's huge, white cubic structure blends beautifully into the wildflower and olive-tree-covered hills. Butterfly chairs from the 1950s and stacks of books acting as tables give the public spaces a casual, retro feel, while Aesop bath amenities and Estremoz marble bathtubs add a touch of luxury. Outside, you'll find a striking infinity pool. Breakfast is made to order, and for lunch and dinner, Savatier and Lalanne can steer you to bistros in the neighboring village of Arraiolos.

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Vitória Stone Hotel, Evora

Most come to the Alentejo to stay in the countryside or explore the coast, but the capital, Evora, is worth a couple of days. You can see everything from Moorish plazas to Roman ruins, and use this reimagined hotel, run by the Cabeça family, as your base. The property now has an intimate, cavelike lobby, featuring faux boulders and distressed concrete floors. (It's not as crazy-looking as it sounds.) The 48 contemporary guest rooms are subtler, with bedside tables and headboards made of recycled timber. Make time to lounge by the rooftop infinity pool and have and have a caipirinha at the fourth-floor bar, which has quickly become a popular spot.

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7 of 9 Courtesy of Aqua Ria Boutique Hotel

Aqua Ria Boutique Hotel, Faro

Some travelers avoid Faro, the capital of the Algarve, mistaking it for a tacky tourist town. In fact, not only is Faro a rich place to explore, with its Renaissance churches and lively sidewalk cafés, but there's also a new place to stay, right on the main shopping street. Occupying the upper floors of a landmark 18th-century building, the Aqua Ria offers 17 simple but comfortable rooms, with a fresh, modern feel (taupe walls, wood floors, 1950s Egg chairs updated with bold fabric). The restoration was a labor of love for Elvino Carolino and his two sons, owners João and Elvino Paulo. The family also runs the street-level restaurant, Costa Algarvia, a neighborhood classic. At lunch, ask for a table outdoors and order any of the grilled fish dishes, followed by *molotof*, a divine, ultralight meringue.

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Casa Arte, Lagos

The reason to stay at this white neo-Moorish villa just outside a national park in the southwestern Algarve is the food. Owner Freerk Mulder does double duty as the chef, every night turning out four-course tasting menus that might include langoustines with crème fraîche and sesame oil, grilled lamb chops with mustard sauce, and tiramisu with layers of fresh raspberries. The rest of the property earns plenty of raves, too: a free-form pool surrounded by a lush garden and five airy, art-filled rooms with their own terraces. For day trips, the fortress town of Lagos is a 10-minute drive to the east, and Cabo de São Vicente, where Portuguese navigators would sail off for the New World, is 45 minutes to the west.

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9 of 9 Courtesy of Design Hotels™

Praia Verde Boutique Hotel, Castro Marim

Praia Verde always had a stunning location overlooking a huge beach on the eastern end of the Algarve. After a total overhaul, it has a cool look to match. The lobby is a flowing, open space that connects reception with the lounge and dining room—all of them with floor-to-ceiling windows. The 40 one-bedroom suites at this Design Hotels property are playfully designed (faux-bookshelf wallpaper, pineapple-shaped ceramics on the coffee tables) and have a balcony overlooking the pool or ocean, along with a kitchen. But skip cooking and try À Terra, the Mediterranean-inspired restaurant where Jan Stechemesser makes magic in his wood-fired oven—everything from thin-crust pizzas to roasts topped with local *flor de sal*. His *bacalhau* stew, loaded with codfish and vegetables, is also not to be missed.