PORTUGAL

Alentejo: Portugal's time capsule

The fiercely proud Portuguese region of Alentejo is where time rolls back and the past sits cheek by jowl with the present

By Julia Buckley. Published on 8th October 2018

Monsaraz Castle with the Great Lake in the background. Image: Francesco Lastrucci

'On a clear day you can see forever', reads the 200ft-long steel sculpture at the edge of the Alqueva Dam. It is indeed a clear day, and the views stretch… not forever, but certainly far, teasing the edges of one of Western Europe's largest artificial lakes.

Alqueva's hilly landscape is covered in summer-browned grass and dotted with cork and olive trees. Unlike Lake Geneva or Garda, there's no roundness to the Great Lake's coastline — it jabs back and forth like a boxer, reaching round to the left, slithering off to the right, and wriggling out of view, without seeming to finish. Maybe that's what the sculpture means by 'forever'.

From the right comes the gentle sound of bells: butterscotch cows and lean sheep, collars clunking discordant tunes as they graze under the olive trees. And to the left are an uncountable number of white birds: gulls, terns, I'm not sure; they blend into a morass. They perch on the edge of this monumental — and monumentally controversial — dam.

Alqueva is the heart of Alentejo, which is itself the heart of Portugal: a third of the country but the whole of its rural bloodstream. Only a couple of hours from Lisbon, this feels like wilderness — an unbroken landscape of cork fields, sometimes savannah-flat, sometimes with hills as perfectly rounded as those in Tellytubbyland.

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THE EDIT

It's a land of extremes: scorching in summer and cold in winter, and it's dry — very dry. Which is why, in 2002, the authorities dammed up the Guadiana River and created this 97sq-mile reservoir. Villages were flooded and farms repossessed; locals staged mournful protests. Even those who weren't displaced were furious. "I remember the landscape as it was," Iago, my waiter had told me the night before, eyes flashing. "It was much, much more beautiful."

Many people who've been to Alentejo say it's like going back in time. It is, in a way; this is a land of sleepy hilltowns, whitewashed villages, a rhythm of life that was settled pre-air conditioning, and a soundtrack that flits between cowbells and wine corks being popped. But that's oversimplifying it. To visit Alentejo is to peel away the layers of time like an onion. Every civilisation that's passed through here left its mark, while preserving the preceding cultures instead of erasing them. In a day, you can go from a prehistoric stone circle to a Roman vineyard, from a Moorish citadel to a renaissance town or hi-tech, modern dam. Wherever you are, the rest of it comes too.

Twenty of us have piled into a boat to explore this artificial lake, passing islands that once were hills, wild thickets of olives that were once cultivated groves. Skipper Humberto pauses by a buoy in the shadow of the gargantuan dam. It's one of 80, he says, placed at one-kilometre intervals, marking the Guadiana River's pre-dam contours.

Upstream, beneath buoy 21, lie the remains of Luz, one of several villages to have met a watery end. Unlike the others, however, Luz was resurrected — same cobbled street plan, same church, same neighbours — on the
new shoreline.

In this Alentejan Atlantis there are also prehistoric remains: stone circles and menhirs, thrusting up from the depths. We see fish, we see turtles, we see storks, we see crayfish that Humberto hoiks up from the muddy depths. I'm unnerved by this water. And then he says: "Would anyone like to go for a swim?"

Only three of us dare. Humberto solemnly straps us into lifejackets. It's relatively shallow here — a mere 558ft — he reassures me. I jump, feel for ground that isn't there, then float. I watch an eagle soar overhead as the current tugs at my feet. I wonder what's below. And I think I get it: Alentejo, the levels of its history, the layers of its land.

"The first time we came here, we had the feeling of being on an island," says Alexandre Ruhlmann, in Monsaraz. "It's a strange atmosphere. There's no middle ground here; it's a place of extremes." On cue, the sun sets through his shop window, a fireball dropping like a stone behind the horizon.

Riding horses in the grounds of Torre de Palma Hotel. Image: Francesco Lastrucci

Alexandre and partner Thierry own Casa Tial, a 'slow food' shop in Monsaraz, a medieval walled citadel perched on a mountainous outcrop. Its streets are pedestrianised; its whitewashed buildings strung with hanging baskets; its alleys a series of selfie spots. The endless views from the city ramparts span farmland, villages and Alqueva's northern reaches.

It's been prettified, sure, but it's still fiercely local. Alexandre and Thierry's is the closest to a souvenir shop, but their 'souvenirs' — all drawn from the surrounding land — include everything from rosemary-flavoured biscuits to biodynamic olive oil from 800-year-old trees.

"They live by the seasons here," Alexandre says. "They know everything about the sky, the plants, the way things grow. When I'm weeding the garden, people say, 'What are

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you doing? You can eat that!'" Modern Alentejo holds on to its past.

The next day, I spool further back, to renaissance Alentejo — the 'marble towns' of Vila Viçosa, Borba and Estremoz, so called because they sit on a rich seam of flushed pink stone. Estremoz is capped by a 14th-century pink-marble tower. It's now part of a posh hotel; the staff wave me through to climb the 120 worn steps — flamingo-pink here, creamy there, a light grey over there — past antechambers, balustrades, arrow slits and a pigeon squatting on two eggs, to the top. Between pink battlements, I spy what look like snowy hillocks: the marble quarries.

Next up, dinky Borba feels understated, until I notice every pavement, door and window frame is marble. I have a coffee on the main street; tables occupied by raucous, elderly men in checked shirts and sleeveless jumpers; a decades-old Toyota parked beside me; a widow in black feeding stray cats under a tree.

I taste wine at the Adega de Borba cooperative winery, which turns local smallholdings' harvests into 300 types of wine, ranging from £1.50 bottles to prizewinning blends for around £20. There's no fancy talk of bouquet or mouth feel (it's clear wine isn't a scene in Alentejo, just part of life). "The best wine is the one in your hand," Filipe Teixeira Pinto, the chief winemaker at Herdade do Sobroso — a, laid-back agrotourism near Alqueva — tells me.

Borba is three miles from Vila Viçosa — the road between them skirting quarries: a gaping chasm to the right, diggers gnawing at bright white hillside to the left. Next to the road lie heaps of marble: boulders hewn from the land; neater, pink blocks and precut symmetrical slabs, polished to a shine.

In Vila Viçosa I scoot down a hill and slam on the brakes, awestruck by the main square. The House of Braganza (Portugal's ruling dynasty from 1640-1910) hailed from here, residing in the vast Ducal Palace. It sits in a square made entirely of marble — right down to the lampposts. The palace tour showcases the kind of mirrored, gilded and chandelier-slung grandeur you see in capital cities, not villages in the middle of nowhere.

I'm soon stripping off another layer of history — delving into Alentejo's Moorish heritage at Castelo de Vide — a hillside village of medina-like alleys. But even here there's another level — I head into an ancient former synagogue that's now a museum, telling the history of the Jews who sought refuge here in 1492, having been expelled from Spain.

At Montemor-o-Novo ('Montemor-the-New'), a village en route to Lisbon, I wander among the wildflower-scattered ruins of the old town, felled by an earthquake in the 17th century. Its shattered walls and sagging towers loom over the new town like something out of a gothic novel.

At Marvão, on the Spanish border, there's another castle — although I miss it at first glance. Here in the hinterlands, the peaks are higher and more jagged — and this, the last fortress before Spain, is sculpted into the rock itself. It looks like the citadel is teething: boulders erupt through cobbles in the narrow streets and the castle slots between peaks, its walls smoothing over pre-existing outcrops, wild jasmine scenting the air. It's so high up here that the wind whistles through my earrings, and birds of prey swoop below the ramparts. You can see for miles — but it's so perfectly welded to the mountain, that out there, the birds can't see you.

Oenologist at work. Image: Francesco Latrucci

"We have Roman ruins on our land," shrugs Carrie Jorgensen at her vineyard in Vidigueira. "Everyone does. We use a millstone as our table in the backyard." Her nonchalance is understandable; people here have long embraced their 2,000-year heritage. These vine-braided hills below Alqueva, along the Guadiana River, produced much of the wine for ancient Rome. When the empire fell, locals kept the tradition alive by making wine in terracotta amphorae. Carrie and Hamilton Reis, her winemaker, were intrigued by this.

Hamilton had moved here from Porto to work at Cortes de Cima, Carrie's vineyard, and he soon noticed his neighbours were making wine in clay jars. It was how they'd always done it in Alentejo, they said. He was fascinated — but shocked by how fast it corked. "It was good at the beginning, but then it would go splat," he says. "So I started thinking how to use technology to preserve the tradition."

Now they age one wine in shoulder-height amphorae thrown by hand in the village. We taste it, along with their signature bottle: the same blend of Petit Verdot, Aragonêz, Syrah and Touriga Nacional grapes, but aged in stainless steel tanks. The difference is palpable — the clay one smells like a facemask but tastes sweeter and a bit more minerally. It's almost a meal in itself. "I'd have the standard with lunch and the clay over a book," says Carrie. Clay isn't cost effective, but this isn't for profit, says Hamilton; it's to keep the 2,000-year-old tradition arcing forward.

They're not alone. Above Estremoz, Torre de Palma Wine Hotel produces wine and oil and keeps Lusitano horses exactly as the owners of the now-ruined Roman villa it sits beside used to do. Here in the north, time rolls back further still. The landscape is strewn with menhirs, dolmens and stone circles. They're the kind of thing you see in Cornwall or Brittany, only on a vast scale — every five minutes there's a sign to an anta (dolmen burial chamber), and it takes days of diverting down dirt tracks and scraping the hire car across lunar landscapes before I accept I won't see them all.

They range from 5,000-8,000 years old, and although there's something soulful about those that show their age — a dolmen crumpling in on itself, a menhir mottled by lichen, from decades in the ground — it's the best-preserved ones that take my breath away.

The Cromeleque dos Almendres is a stone circle near Montemor-o-Novo: 90 bulbous stones spiralling outwards on a hillside above the regional capital, Évora. The Menhir da Belhoa, near Monsaraz, has a concrete base but a top half incised with mysterious squiggles, somewhere between sunrays and octopi. Best of all is the Anta do Tapadão, on the way to Marvão. Like most of the ruins, it's on (accessible) private land. To reach it, I have to unbolt a gate, drive on an unmarked track through a herd of cattle, past a cork-fringed watering hole and up to a rocky outcrop.

There, on a hillock, is a colossal dolmen: seven stone slabs folding in on each other, with a curved lid on top and stone pathway leading into the burial chamber. It's been keeping watch up here, where views sweep towards the Spanish border, since before Spain existed. I think I feel it hum, but it's just a cow lowing.

Monsaraz. Image: Francesco Latrucci

Another remnant of Alentejo's past is older still. In the hills between the Almendres stone circle and Montemor-o-Novo is the Escoural Cave, filled with paintings and engravings thought to be between 12,000 and 32,000 years old. In the single, shallow chamber open for tours, we see animal heads spliced together, a pregnant mare, a chubby bird, and a herd of horses' heads that may actually, archaeologists think, represent a single animal in motion.

Everything's faintly traced, hidden under thick calcite, forcing us to squint in the torchlight. "This was their way of expressing what they were thinking and feeling, without a written language," says guide Sonia Contador.

There's a tension in the air as I make my way up the low cliffside at Lapa dos Gaivões, near Castelo de Vide, although its cause isn't clear. Is it the remoteness of this spot, wedged into the mountains bordering Spain? The solitary dog howling in the distance? Or the figure of a horned shaman I'm staring at?

The paintings here — daubed in red ochre and black charcoal on a rocky overhang, accessed via a boardwalk — are thought to be between 12,000 and 22,000 years old. That they're still as bright as blood and ink after being exposed to the Iberian sun for thousands of years, is miraculous. These aren't the grand portraits of Lascaux; they're rough, stick-man sketches: two horses; a hunter; three shamans wearing animal horns, lined up together. But they throb with energy.

To the right of the figures is a grid of vertical dashes — slashes of ochre, each with a little bulge round the middle. I lean forward and realise they've been made not with a brush but with a thumb — it's the splayed flesh giving that rounded edge. Even from 1.5 metres away, I can almost make out the whorls of the skin. I stretch out my hand, stroking the space between us with my thumb like I'm recreating the dashes. The air is thick with summer heat, a dog shrieks in the distance, cicadas in the cork tree start to roar. I stare at the prehistoric thumbprint. It feels like we're touching across the void.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

It's easiest to fly to Lisbon, an hour west of Montemor-o-Novo. TAP Portugal flies from Heathrow, Gatwick, London City and Manchester. British Airways flies from Heathrow, EasyJet from Gatwick and Luton, and Ryanair from Stansted.
You'll need a car to get around as there's little public transport. Roads are excellent, though, and for most routes you can use a paid motorway, if pressed for time.

When to go

Summers often reach 30C, while winters are cold (below 10C). The best time to go is late September-November and March-May, when the wildflowers are at their peak. Always take layers of clothes to deal with changeable temperatures.

Where to stay

Herdade do Sobroso
Torre de Palma
Convento de Espinheiro

More info

visitalentejo.pt

How to do it

Sunvil offers a week-long, bespoke, self-drive itinerary in Alentejo, including flights from Gatwick to Lisbon, car hire and B&B accommodation at Herdade do Sobroso and Torre de Palma, from £1,142 per person.

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