

NEXT STOP



The walled town of Marvão on a rocky promontory in Alto Alentejo in eastern Portugal. The town's castle was a Moorish fortification built in the ninth century.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOÃO PEDRO MARNOTO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

# Alto Alentejo, Unsung but Not for Long

By ROBERT GOFF

IN 2002, Doug Smith was bored. Korakia Pensione, his Mediterranean-style boutique hotel in Palm Springs, Calif., that attracted a celebrity crowd like Annie Leibovitz, Gore Vidal and Brice Marden, pretty much ran itself. Mr. Smith was looking for a new project — a grand fixer-upper in an exotic locale — where he could show off his well-honed style and settle into a life of rustic ease with his new wife, Josie.

He scoured real estate listings for haciendas on the Yucatán and sea captain houses on the Greek island of Simi. But then, one summer while touring farms in the Extremadura region of Spain, Mr. Smith crossed into Alto Alentejo, a region of Portugal that he'd never heard of, and found himself enraptured by the landscape, excellent food, a lost-in-time lifestyle and the relatively inexpensive cost of living.

After four days of inspecting broken-down barns and farmhouses, he bought a 130-acre 18th-century farm outside the village of Campo Maior. "Compared with Spain, this place was even more charming, beautiful and about a third less expensive," Mr. Smith said. "Old guys in snap caps and corduroys tip their hats to strangers."

In the past seven years, Mr. Smith, who no longer owns Korakia Pensione, has watched the Alto Alentejo, a border province carpeted with cork oaks and olive trees in southeastern Portugal, emerge as a stylish backwater. The region's name is derived from "Além-Tejo," which means "beyond the Tagus," the river that flows past Lisbon. A new blacktop highway now stretches eastward from Lisbon, and within an hour you're admiring vineyards, the occasional whitewashed town or castle and gently rolling plains.

A sophisticated international set has started to snap up properties in the area, turning Alto Alentejo into their little European playground. Now tucked among the fashionable homes is a smattering of boutique hotels, wineries and casual yet sophisticated restaurants.

Until recently, Alto Alentejo was an enclave of Lisbon's old-money set interested in making wine, raising the local breed of Alter-Real horses and communing with their version of the outback. But they welcome newcomers. "We want to tell the world about this part of Portugal," said João Pinto Ribeiro, the president of Palácio do Correio Velho, one of Portugal's leading art auction houses, who has owned a farm in the region for more than 20 years. "It's a poor place and could really use more visitors."

He met Doug and Josie Smith while driving his horse and buggy along a country road that runs between their respective houses, and a friendship arose over Alentejo's principal vices: food and wine.

A big night out in Alentejo is a dinner party at someone's home. As in Provence and Tuscany, food and wine bond families and strangers alike. On a warm night in July, Mr. Ribeiro prepared to serve one of his specialties, *bachalau*, gliding a long knife through what looked like a massive mound of coarse salt in a clay baking-dish. He carefully used the flat side of the blade to turn over a flap of encrusted salt and flesh to prevent salt from scattering into the giant cod beneath it.

"If you do this correctly, you might even need to add a bit of salt for flavor," he said. The fish was the centerpiece of Mr. Ribeiro's dinner party, which took

place poolside overlooking the Caia Reservoir, a hub for birdwatchers. The guests included the Smiths; a local landowning family; Mr. Ribeiro's wife, Ana, and brother, José, a photographer; and a surgeon visiting from Louisiana.

By day the region is best visited by car. Start in Estremoz, one of the main towns of the Alto Alentejo with a population of 15,000. Once the seat of the 14th-century Portuguese king Dom Dinis, Estremoz remains grand, if seemingly empty of people. Like many towns and cities in Alentejo, the streets and buildings are lined in marble, an abundant local resource, which gives an overall effect of everything appearing white and, on a sunny day, radiant.

On Saturdays the main square of the town, the Rossio Marquês de Pombal, comes alive with a morning market where farmers peddle fresh cheese, wine, local crafts and bric-a-brac. Nar-

*Outsiders are turning a Portuguese area into a stylish backwater.*

and clear water unmarred by boats. The reservoir, adjacent to Mr. Ribeiro's estate, is a haven for rare birds like Montagu's harrier, the great bustard and the Spanish imperial eagle. Visitors can stay at the Casa da Ermida de Santa Catarina, a seven-room boutique inn that sits at the end of a peninsula on the private Rocha estate.

But for the epicures who have flocked to Alentejo in recent years, the region's top draw is its cuisine. Its basic elements are wheat, olive oil, pork and certain fish, like cod, which the locals fry, bake and infuse with garlic and herbs in various glorious ways. Lamb and duck make luxurious appearances.

Aromatic cheeses range from the firm, nutty Nisa to the runny, fragrant Queijo da Serras. The regional wines can be sophisticated and interesting, from the robust reds of the Quinta do Carmo, jointly owned by the Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite), to lighter wines made from local trincadeira grapes.

A perfect example of the Alentejo's gastro-rustic cuisine is Restaurante a Maria, a small establishment in sleepy Alandroal, where the owner and chef Maria Monteiro serves exquisite local fare in a room decorated to look like a village square. Classics include *queijo de Ovelha* (an orange-crust round of gooey sheep's milk cheese), *pato em molho de vinho tinto* (duck in red wine sauce) and *migas a Alentejana* (fried pork with bread soaked in pork fat). Culinary awards plaster the walls near the entrance, and there is a seriousness about the diners that is in keeping with the quality of the food.

Like Maria Monteiro's unself-conscious fare, many of Alto Alentejo's Old World charms are served up in a straightforward and unpretentious manner. All of this may change when, in addition to the new highway from Lisbon, a high-speed train between Madrid and Lisbon starts service as expected in 2012, with a stop in Elvas, making Alto Alentejo even more accessible to tourists and weekend house buyers from throughout southwestern Europe.

But for now it is an uncomplicated place, inexpensive and appreciative of visitors. "This is Tuscany 30 years ago," Mr. Smith, the former hotelier, said.



## FORMERLY PALACES, NOW HOTELS

### HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest major airport is in Lisbon. Continental and TAP fly nonstop from Newark Airport to Lisbon, with fares starting at about \$600 for travel next month, according to a recent online search. The drive to Estremoz from Lisbon's airport on the new highway takes about two hours.

### WHERE TO STAY

Housed in a former royal palace, the **Pousada Rainha Santa Isabel** in Estremoz (Largo de D. Diniz; 351-268-332-075; www.pousadas.pt) offers canopied beds, marble bathrooms and high-ceilinged rooms with views. Rooms start at 90 euros (\$138 at \$1.53 to the euro).

Just outside of Crato, **Pousada Flor da Rosa** (Mosteiro da Flor da Rosa; 351-245-997-210; www.pousadas.pt) attracts a stylish clientele with rooms starting at 102 euros.

In Elvas, the **Hotel São João de Deus** (Largo S. João Deus, 1; 351-268-661-194; www.hotelsaojoaodeus.net) is elegantly appointed and has a small pool. Rooms start at 70 euros a night.

Between Estremoz and Redondo, the **Convento de São Paulo** (351-266-989-160; www.hotelconventospaulo.com) is in a former hilltop convent, with two pools and stunning tilework. Rooms start at 90 euros a night.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Zona Verde** (Largo Dragões Oliveira, 86; 351-268-324-701) in Estremoz serves regional fare like roasted black pig and braised lamb shank with potatoes. Dinner, including wine, comes to about 25 euros a person.

**Restaurante Casa do Povo** (Rua de Cima, Marvão; 351-245-993-160) serves traditional fare on a terrace with valley views. The accorda Alenteja, a garlicky bread and coriander soup, is delicious. Lunch for two, no wine, is about 25 euros.

**Restaurante a Maria** (Rua João de Deus, 12; 351-268-431-143), above, in Alandroal is a venerated traditional restaurant. Dinner for two, with wine, is about 80 euros.

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A porch at Casa da Ermida de Santa Catarina, a seven-room inn overlooking the Caia Reservoir.

