
Digging for Portugal's *treasure*

With its well-preserved towns, lakeshore beaches and a burgeoning wine industry, the Alentejo region has plenty to tempt tourists away from the Algarve. *By Conor Power*

C*ave um buraco, encontre um fragmento.* Dig a hole and you'll find a fragment of the past. This is what my Portuguese guide Rosa told me as we walked the cobbled ancient streets of the charming town of Mertola. It certainly holds true for this *vila museu* or museum city perched dramatically on a hill at the confluence of two rivers. Thirty years ago, children playing on the heights of the town uncovered what turned out to be an ancient graveyard from the Middle Ages. As archaeologists dug deeper, they found the remains of houses and streets built by the Moors within the protective walls of the city, and beneath those Moorish remains, the huge structures of the Roman city that was called Myrtilis Iulia.

The saying also holds true for the entire region of Alentejo. Located to the north of the Algarve and once the poorest region in the EU, it has an arid landscape that is a thin veneer over a fascinating past. Even before the Romans arrived and turned Mertola into an important trading hub,

the Celts were leaving their mark across its landscape, still visible today in the form of dolmens, cromlechs and menhirs.

Mertola is one of a series of magnificently preserved towns and villages in the interior of Alentejo. It is because of their rapid economic demise in the past that these habitations are so well preserved today; now is a good time to savour the charm of their brilliant white walls and cobbled serpentine streets before they become the next target of mass tourism.

Evora, the capital of northern Alentejo (Alto Alentejo), is also the largest town. Within its impressive city walls are alluring streets and grand squares, 19th-century palaces and the occasional ancient Roman building.

Fifty kilometres east, close to the Spanish border, is the hilltop town of Monsaraz. With its dramatic setting overlooking Lake Alqueva, it ranks as one of the prettiest villages in Portugal, if not in all of Europe. It's a place that affords a window into traditional Portuguese life at its most atmospheric, in which flat-

capped men sit on steps smoking and chatting, their backs against uneven stone walls, and where the ancient Moorish game of *alquerque* is still played.

Beja – the capital of southern Alentejo – is a mid-sized town that was, in Roman times, the most important in Portugal (such as it was). Although no Moorish

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The ancient town of Mertola.
Below: Herdade da Malhadinha Nova offers five-star accommodation

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 monuments exist today, the Islamic quarter's narrow streets still hold something of the atmosphere of the souk and it's one of the most pleasant towns to walk around, adorned with its pleasing architecture, airy squares and friendly locals. It sits on a vast plain of some of the most fertile land in the arid region and from the tower in its 15th-century castle, you get a clear 360-degree view of the region. A vast patchwork of fields bears all the signs of fertility, with vineyards and olive trees dominating, as well as some grains. "But the town isn't growing as much as it should do," says our guide André, "because most of the land is

owned by the Spanish and most of those working the land come from poorer countries abroad."

While this region has had its fair share of unstable economic development – much like Ireland over the past 30 years – you can see evidence everywhere of a rising economic tide that appears to be raising all ships. The construction of the Alqueva dam transformed the life of Alentejo after it was completed in 2002. The largest in western Europe, it took another eight years for the enormous lake it created – Lake Alqueva – to fill up, forming the largest artificial lake in Europe. Its shoreline is an incredible 1,100km long – longer than the entire Atlantic coastline of Portugal.

As the lake irrigates the arid lands, a number of lakeshore beaches have been created, bringing a unique brand of seaside life to the area. These so-called *praia fluvial* – river beaches – have all the facilities of a normal beach, including fine

sand, in an incredible setting where water temperatures reach a balmy 30C in summer. The first opened just two years ago; they are already a huge success. River cruising, boat trips and major sailing events are now the norm in what was until recent decades a dry landscape with a small river meandering through it.

This mega water source has revitalised Alentejo's burgeoning wine industry too. Portugal has more than 250 native grape varieties, but its market has long been dominated by the illustrious Douro Valley that until now has left Alentejo in the shade. A left-wing revolution of the 1970s that left many farms in the region in ruin also didn't help. But today, a new wave of Portuguese entrepreneurs are carving out a renaissance wine industry here.

One of the most extraordinary examples is the estate Herdade da Malhadinha Nova. Set in the countryside 20km south of Beja, this 1,000-plus acre property was in a derelict state when two

brothers, Paulo and João Soares, took it over in 1998. They grew up on the Algarve where they had worked in their father's wine distribution business, so it was a natural progression for them and their wives Rita and Maria Antónia to realise the dream of owning their own vineyard. They now say the long-term vision is to produce wines of a quality that rival those from anywhere else. The other activities on the estate are developed with this same uncompromising attitude, from its five-star accommodation to its olive-oil production and Lusitano horse-breeding.

In an even more remote location, 50km north, another Alentejan winery is among those leading the ambitious charge to make the region one of the world's greatest wine terrains. In this corner of Alentejo, a Dutch couple fell in love with the area and started the Quinta do Quetzal winery. Their powerful artistic connections stretch from the MoMA in New York to the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, so it was somewhat inevitable that their project turned into a place of modern art as well as that of wine artistry. Sitting in the glass-fronted restaurant overlooking their verdant hilly vineyards on a weekday afternoon in September, the place was buzzing. The large number of visitors come for the wine, the splendid modern art exhibition or to sample Alentejan cuisine while enjoying the dreamlike vista. Reto Jörg, the winery's Swiss-born administrator, is effusive in his enthusiasm for this unique institution as well as for the Alentejo region and the future of its wine industry and culture.

Back in Mertola, Rosinda Pimenta of the local town council talks about how, during the bad old days, the population of her town plummeted from 30,000 to 6,000. The new approach to tourism redevelopment here, she says, is unhurried and holistic – an approach that seems true of Alentejo as a whole.

Inland Alentejo, however, is place that Irish holidaymakers are thus far unfamiliar with, put off by the barren hills and the fact that temperatures can soar into the forties every summer. If strong heat is too much for you, the best times to visit are in March/April, when flowering plants produce an explosive splash of green and colour, or September, when the weather just feels like high summer.

As the locals say, however – dig deeper and you'll uncover something truly remarkable, a region of friendly people who have cast off their shackles as the poor of Europe and where you'll now find great cuisine, outstanding wines and warm-water beaches like no other.

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The first of the manmade river beaches on Lake Alqueva, above, opened two years ago. The town of Monsaraz, left, overlooks the lake, below left, which has 1,100km of shoreline. Below: ballooning at Herdade da Malhadinha Nova