



DESTINATION / PORTUGAL

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Portugal’s Alentejo region is far enough away from the traditional tourist hotspots that it can provide all the space you need, unspoilt natural landscapes and great food that hasn’t changed for generations. With a warm welcome guaranteed, what are you waiting for?

WRITER Debbie Pappyn PHOTOGRAPHER David DeVleeschautour

There’s something rare about places where locals are pleasantly surprised when they spot a foreigner discovering their whitewashed village or sipping a glass of wine in their neighbourhood bar. Most destinations are drowning with tourists but that’s not the case for the Alentejo region in southern Portugal, where wild beaches meet red-earthed countryside. Bordered on the west by the Atlantic Ocean – with plenty of surf spots and beachside cafés – and on the east by hot and dusty Spain, Alentejo is dotted with charming towns and blessed with the best soil for growing grapes, as well as olive and cork trees. It’s also a paradise for the Alentejano black pigs, which supply the world with the famous *porco preto* (cured ham). “Travellers can taste the essence of the Alentejo in almost every small restaurant because the food is the same as you would find in every home,” says gastronomic consultant Teresa Vivas, who has lived in the region for 13 years. “The dishes have remained unchanged for generations thanks to the *montado*: a sustainable agriculture system that produces cork, feeds the Alentejano pigs, produces wild mushrooms and aromatic plants. The hotels, as well as the restaurants, are keeping traditions alive and people genuinely love to receive travellers.”

lived and worked in London for nearly five years before establishing his restaurant in the town. It serves delicacies from fresh oysters and the catch of the day to steak tartare and Porco Ibérico. When you drive half an hour inland from Comporta, the people disperse and the landscape shifts from sandy white pine forests to an endless vista of red earth. The view is dotted with countless cork, oak and olive trees, interspersed by bleating goats with jangling bells around their necks. Every once in a while you’ll come across a white-washed village perched on a hill or a cowboy-style enclave where life moves at an extremely slow pace. Throughout, bright white *herdades* (working farms) break up the rolling scenery – agriculture still plays a major part in the region. Some of these family farms have turned their *herdade* into something new: rural retreats. One of them is *Dá Licença*; another is *Herdade Malhadinha Nova*, near the inland city of Beja. The latter’s owner, Rita Soares, and her family have turned their plot into an organic working farm with upscale accommodation. “Luxury for us is time, space and nature,” she says. “We are proud of our traditions and want to bring the memories of the past to the traveller.”

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The Alentejanos are proud of their land but they don’t yet fully realise the potential of their region, which can easily compete with Tuscany or Provence in terms of picturesque villages – including Alcácer do Sal and Vila Viçosa – not to mention its good food and wine. However, it’s clear that things are changing and it’s worth venturing beyond the western-coast village of Comporta. The latter has been on the map for many years, catering not only to weekend visitors from Lisbon but also an international clientele that values the laidback vibe of this seaside town. “The challenge is making sure Comporta does not change into the next Ibiza, where it’s only about seeing and being seen; we need to preserve the identity of this amazing place,” says Bruno Caseiro, co-owner and head chef of the new *Cavalariça* restaurant in Comporta. He

João Maria Grilo, the mayor of the beautiful hilltop village of Alandroal with its historic castle, is of the same opinion and believes in taking a slow approach to tourism. To this end he’s teamed up with various collaborators, including Portuguese architect Aires Mateus, to rethink the function of heritage. “In the future the challenge will be how to maintain the balance between staying authentic and welcoming more travellers to the area,” says Grilo. “Some destinations in the world are losing the battle against mass tourism so we realise that here we must focus on low-impact tourism, which can help our economy but won’t compromise our values and way of living.” Establishing the best way forward will be vital for Alentejo in the coming years. For now, much of it is as it has always been: wild and welcoming.

From top, left to right: *Dá Licença* guesthouse; *Dá Licença* owners Franck Laigneau (left) and Vitor Borges; *Herdade Malhadinha Nova*; *Monte do Freixo* guesthouse; *Cavalariça* restaurant in Comporta; leisurely dining at *Dá Licença*



1KM HOLIDAY: JAPAN

Don’t go anywhere

In the first of our three-part series, we ask our writers to have a holiday just one kilometre from their home. First stop: Tokyo.

WRITER Fiona Wilson

There is a particular indulgence about taking a mini-break in one’s own city – Tokyo, in my case – a distant awareness that while lounging in a *yukata* robe just a few kilometres from home, family obligations are being fulfilled and colleagues are holding the fort. My destination is Kanda in central Tokyo, already lauded in the late 19th century for its Russian Orthodox church and intellectuals. Writer Edward Seidensticker once described Kanda’s secondhand-books district as “among the wonders of the world”. If you can look past the modern buildings, not much has changed. To most, Kanda is known for its bookshops; for others it’s the place to buy musical instruments. To food lovers it’s synonymous with Japanese curry. I favour Bondy, a second-floor spot that serves the juiciest beef curry and a delicious banana au lait. It runs like clockwork and is perfect for a solo lunch. Then there are the *kissaten*, smoky old-fashioned coffee shops such as Laddio – a Hobbit-like nook with a laughably low ceiling – and Sabouru, where Edith Piaf plays and the owners frown on visitors photographing the weathered interior. There are interesting-looking buildings that only a free day will uncover: Kanda Yabu Soba, open since 1880, rose from the ashes of a fire six years ago. Kanda Myojin, one of Tokyo’s greatest Shinto shrines, is there too. In short, Kanda is the perfect place for mooching. And when in mooching mode there is only one place to stay: the Hilltop, a unique establishment that opened in 1954 in a 1937 building that formerly hosted the US’s occupying forces. The 35 rooms would not meet the tediously uniform standards of today’s luxury hotels but it’s all the better for it. Despite many a cocktail at tiny Bar Non Non, I had never actually stayed. I’m glad to report that it was even better than I’d hoped.

STAY: **Hilltop Hotel:** This hotel founded in 1954 has an old-fashioned vibe that runs throughout, from the service to the rooms. We’re hoping the current renovation (to be unveiled in November) won’t change that. Until the reopening, check in to the Ryumeikan Ochonomizu Honten. [yamanoue-hotel.co.jp](#), [ryumeikan-honten.jp](#) COFFEE: **Kissaten** (traditional Japanese cafes) ensure that coffee culture is alive and well in this area – and Sabouru is among the best. Founded in 1955, its dim, seasoned interior is the perfect place to while away an hour or two. [1-11 Kanda Jinbocho, Chiyoda-ku](#) LUNCH: **Bondy:** Don’t be put off by the queue: they run a tight ship here and you’ll be seated in minutes. On weekdays salarymen come here for the beef curry, which hasn’t changed since founder Hirokazu Murata opened the restaurant in 1973; his son Nobusuke is now in charge. [bondy.co.jp](#) DINNER: **The Blind Donkey:** A bistro run by Shin Harakawa (whose former restaurant, Beard, was a MONOCLE favourite) and Jérôme Waag. The menu focuses on Japanese produce with excellent wine. Come for dinner or small plates at the bar. [theblinddonkey.jp](#) SHOP: **Komiyama Tokyo:** This art, photography and sub-culture bookshop and gallery, in business since 1939, is run by third-generation Keita Komiyama. Shelves (and staircases) are piled high with books, while walls are covered with prints for sale. Just the place to find that rare book on Japanese tattooing or photographer Eikoh Hosoe. [book-komiyama.co.jp](#) SHOP: **Shimokura Musier:** This musical-instruments business was opened by Takashi Shimokura in 1937. There are 70 staff on hand selling 1,800 new and 800 secondhand instruments. [shimokura-gakki.com](#) SHOP: **Kitazawa Bookstore:** For secondhand English-language books there is nowhere better than Kitazawa, which opened in 1902 and is run by third-generation Ichiro Kitazawa and his daughter Rika. They have about 50,000 books in stock. [kitazawa.co.jp](#) SHOP: **Mauch Ecute Kanda Manseibashi:** Fashioned out of a disused railway station on the edge of Akihabara, this small development makes the best of the brick architecture in the area to create a series of cafes and shops. Highlights include interiors shop Haluta, Vinosity wine shop and casual Japanese restaurant Fukumori. [ecute.jp/maach](#) VISIT: **Mita Arts Gallery:** Among the numerous vendors of *ukiyō-e* (woodblock prints), this one is the most accessible to English speakers. Founded in 1963, it is run by Ken Caplan, the son of founder David Caplan who came to Japan after the war. There are hundreds of prints in stock and the gallery sells to walk-ins, private collectors and museums. [mita-arts.com](#)

BADI / SWITZERLAND

Great lake

Whether you’re a wild swimmer who dreams of being at one with nature or prefer a more manicured experience courtesy of man-made pools, Switzerland’s Lido di Lugano – the first in our ‘Badi’ series – has you covered. And thanks to its enduring appeal across generations and regular summer events, this 1920s gem is in no danger of going under.

WRITER Jessica Bridger PHOTOGRAPHER Bea De Giacomo



Across Switzerland, *Badi* season – which stretches from May to October – is rivalled only by ski season. The first public baths, those aforementioned *Badis*, were established in lakes and rivers in the 19th century. They are testament to a vanguard of municipal workers and leaders who believed that waterways should be clean and accessible to the public. Lido di Lugano is a prime example. Glaciers carved out Lake Lugano in the last ice age and the freshwater jewel is shared by Switzerland and Italy. While the summer climate feels tropical, the scenery is alpine – apart from the palm trees here and there. The lake’s northern bank is home to its namesake town and the historic lido. The *Badi* opened in 1928, just as Switzerland’s bathing culture was becoming popular.

Lush lawns and pools surround the red-timber bathing house, the round roof of which is emblazoned with “L-I-D-O” front and back – just in case you forget where you are. The lido’s architect, Americo Marazzi, also happened to be the city’s deputy mayor. Part of the idea behind the *Badi* was to boost the image of Switzerland’s Italian-speaking canton of Ticino, which is the last stop on a direct train line from Zürich that zips through the Gotthard Tunnel to traverse the Alps. The lake is ringed by small peaks and the dramatic San Salvatore summit, which towers 900 metres above the lido and is reminiscent of Rio’s Sugarloaf, just smaller. In the middle of July’s heatwave the lido was languidly buzzing with swimmers making the most of the weather – or just trying to keep cool. “A good day for us is 3,000 entries; last Sunday was this season’s record of about 4,000,” says Patrick Scarcella, who has worked at the lido for five years. “We get a lot of locals but also tourists, especially from northern Europe.” There’s space for everyone under the sun – or tucked under the green umbrellas that are available to hire on-site.



One part of the artificial beach is the domain of families, teenagers and tourists; another – just to the side – is reserved for those looking for peace and quiet. “This is especially for the locals, we all know each other,” says Barbara, a Lugano resident in a chic raspberry one-piece. “We come every day, day after day when they were small.” It’s rare to see so many generations in one place and there’s nowhere like the lido for people-watching. Barbara points to a distinguished-looking man having a nap on the grass: “He’s the director of a well-known museum.” For those who prefer man-made to natural bodies of water (you never know what could be lurking in the depths), three azure pools were added in 1959. They are framed by concrete tribune-style seating and a lawn. Snacks are served at the restaurant, which sits at the heart of the *Badi*. Its dining area is dotted with red-and-white parasols and a cook can be seen tossing French fries in the air to tempt onlookers. (Stay clear of the lido’s resident

“We come every day. I came when I was a girl and I took my kids every day when they were small”

swan: he’ll snatch your chips given the chance.) Films are shown after sundown on a big screen and early-evening concerts fill the air with music. However, the highlight of the summer is La Traversata, which is now in its 87th year. Hundreds of people take part in the 2,500-metre swim in Lake Lugano every August. “We open before most outdoor pools, on 1 May,” says Scarcella. Last year part of the lido stayed open until mid-October thanks to the warm weather. As the sun begins to set, Barbara shows us her storage cabin – one of 300 coveted lockable rooms. Hers has a mirror and a full regimen of beauty supplies. “I have this for five or six months. I can come here straight after work, any time I want,” she says, lounging on the wooden rail of the old lido building, overlooking the glittering lake.



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