

little gems
DÁ LICENÇA

MARY LUSSIANA IS ENCHANTED BY AN ART AND CRAFT-FILLED HOTEL AMONG THE OLIVE GROVES AND HILLTOP TOWNS OF THE ALENTEJO REGION



Some two hours east of Lisbon, the landscape of open plains is dotted with olive groves and ancient, white-washed, hilltop towns graced with nesting storks. The recently opened Dá Licença has brought a completely new level of lodging to this raw and authentic corner of Portugal's Alentejo region.

Converted nineteenth-century farm buildings, scattered across ground that was originally cultivated as an organic garden by local nuns, are at the heart of more than 300 acres of land. Here, some 13,000 olive trees flourish and outcrops of the area's underlying marble - in soft pink and luminous white - push through the ground like snowdrops in springtime.

In the main house, there are three spacious suites, one of which opens out onto an emerald green infinity pool. Four more suites - two standing independently with private pools and two more forming a huddle with rooftop terraces and large courtyards - run from the house in between fig, olive and cork trees down towards Estremoz.

An imposing town with medieval ramparts and a 28-metre-high keep, wrought entirely in the local marble, Estremoz stands high on the horizon dominating the surrounding countryside. It is more than worthy of a day's wandering (stop for lunch at Gadanha Mercearia and try hearty local dishes, such as braised black pork cheeks). There is a wealth of historical monuments to visit, from

churches to castles and cloisters, as well as a rich regional tradition of handicrafts to discover, from weaving to colourful ceramics and clay figurines.

It is appropriate, then, that Dá Licença's owners - Portuguese Vitor Borges and French Franck Laigneau - have created this little gem in order to pay homage to arts and crafts. They have drawn widely on the skill of regional artisans, with woven rugs from Mizette Nielsen - long a figure of note in the Alentejo's weaving industry. The omnipresent marble features in side tables and lamps designed by Vitor and made by local craftsman Francesco Pluma; there are also tactile green-veined white marble bath tubs and hand-carved basins in Estremoz's palest pink marble - what the Italians call *pelle d'angelo*. Granite floors provide welcome cool in the intensely hot summers here.

Overlaying these interiors are artworks from the Jugendstil and Anthroposophical design movements - which Franck championed in his Paris gallery in a previous life - as well as many contemporary pieces, such as ceramics by Susana Piteira and a metal chimney by Ico Parisi, shaped like a drop of water. Each bedroom has been carefully appointed with furniture and paintings that echo the rural simplicity outside.

And it is the outside that left me with my overriding memory of Dá Licença: the red Alentejan sun setting over a round pool backed by slabs of marble and trees of orange, lemon and tangerine, through which the wind whistles in the silence.

Ways and Means

Mary Lussiana visited Dá Licença as a guest of Cox & Kings (020-3642 0861; coxandkings.co.uk), which offers three nights, B&B, from £1,650, based on two sharing, including British Airways flights and transfers □

FROM TOP The veranda at Dá Licença. In one of the suites in the main house, furniture from the Anthroposophical design movement is partnered with a painting by the Danish artist Ejnar Nielsen. The circular pool is backed by citrus trees

