



Rota Vicentina

PICTURE: João Mariano/1000olhos.pt

Walk of life

The little-known Portuguese region of Alentejo wants to showcase all it has to offer via an extensive network of new walking trails, writes **Adam Shaw**

Iell someone you're heading to Alentejo, and their initial reaction could easily be "where's that?"

Despite being the largest region in Portugal – and less than an hour away from Lisbon – it remains something of an undiscovered gem.

Locals are looking to change that though, pointing to the region's rich cultural heritage, food and wine traditions (it produces more than half of all Portuguese wine), and beautiful landscapes. And they recommend you explore it through a series of trails known as TransAlentejo: routes mapped out to be used at any time but championed during an annual walking festival each autumn.

Despite some unseasonable weather disrupting the festival during my stay, I still get the chance to experience the walks, taking in some of the region's vast swathes of countryside alongside a host of charming towns and villages steeped in Alentejan culture.

The 12km 'Aljustrel has a Mine' circular route allows visitors to learn about the fascinating mining traditions of the village of Aljustrel. Starting in its main square, I walk along cobbled streets up to the entrance of a disused pit, passing the former mining company owner's mansion, which is earmarked to be transformed into a hotel, and, further up the road, the homes of current miners.

Yet the crown jewel of the route, and the story of Aljustrel, lies at the top of the hill in the form of a new

mining museum, which tells the village's story and is expected to open this spring.

"This will be the brain of the area, something that will explain the history of mining in the pyrite belt of Portugal," says José Pedro Calheiros, the mastermind behind the TransAlentejo.

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"We want to fill the place with passion and tell the stories of the miners. If you just think it's dirty and smoky, we'll show you it's different; it's about these people."

SING FROM THE HEART

People are what make Alentejo, something that is encapsulated when I settle down for a slap-up meal at Tasca do Filipe on completion of the route, which took me over purpose-built bridges, past churches and along country trails before heading back into the village centre.

As well as the warmth and hospitality offered by Filipe, the taverna is treated to an impromptu singing performance by a group of local miners who are ➤

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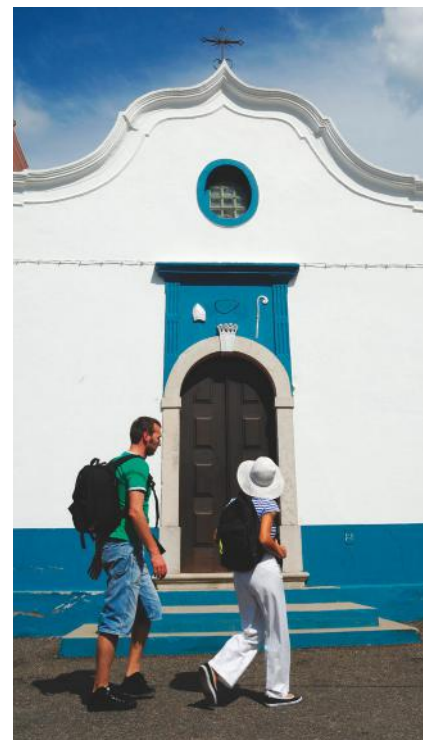


“Besides a rich history, where there has been an uninterrupted human presence for more than 7,000 years, the Alentejo offers breathtaking landscapes – a coastline with dozens of the most beautiful beaches and cliffs in Europe, and a hinterland full of vineyards and cork oak forests. I would say that Alentejo is an antidote to the 21st century; it has its own rhythm, it lives according to the seasons and makes us value what is most important to us: time.”

Vítor Silva,
president of the Alentejo
Promotion Office

BOOK IT

Seven nights' bed and breakfast at Pousada Convento de Beja with **Sunvil** starts at £836 per person, based on two adults sharing, including flights from Gatwick. Departures are available until November 7. sunvil.co.uk/agents



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Beja Castle; Rota Vincentina, part of the TransAlentejo; wine-tasting **PICTURE:** Goncalo Villaverde

settling down for a day of drinking and each other's company. Singing is a key pastime across the region. O Cante Alentejano (The Alentejo Singing) is a polyphonic musical expression produced without instruments and is recognised by Unesco as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

My guide for the whole of my stay, the Alentejo Promotion Office's Ruben Obadia, says: "The people are very proud, and they work hard. Their values reflect this, and you can hear how they feel through their songs."

Another source of pride for Alentejans is their longstanding relationship with winemaking, using an ancient method introduced by the Romans and known as *talha*, where the drink ferments in huge clay vats.

At the wine museum in the tiny village of Vila de Frades, I learn how vineyards first emerged in Alentejo and how harvesting techniques have developed.

There's plenty of information available in English, as well as examples of the imposing *talha* pots, some of which are hundreds of years old.

It is neighboured by Gerações da Talha, a family-run winery that offers tours, and País das Uvas restaurant, which serves traditional Alentejan fare such as tomato stew with poached eggs and stuffed pork cheeks.

SUSTAINABLE LIVING

It's clear that sustainability, and the concept of living off the land, has been a big part of Alentejan culture for centuries.

Extensive agricultural communities complete with lodgings and schools, similar to kibbutzim in Israel,

are dotted throughout the region and can be spotted during the TransAlentejo walks.

Many have been repurposed as working farms, producing everything from wine to cork, that also offer accommodation and excursions to visitors.

Herdade Freixo do Meio, near Montemor-o-Novo, produces its own honey, wine, olive oil, fruit and vegetables, but its key product is acorns – once a staple pauper's food, it is now used in everything from coffee to vegetarian sausages.

Alternative accommodation includes *pousadas*, traditional or historical buildings, formerly owned by the state, that have been developed into enchanting hotels. The one I stayed in in Beja, considered Alentejo's second city after Évora, was formerly a Franciscan convent and is characterised by typical religious and Gothic architecture.

Everything in the region leads back to the essence of Alentejo and the concept of Montado, a philosophy that ties it together and focuses on land, people and traditions. This is something, it is hoped, that the walking festival will convey, with routes that take in carefully protected cork forests, fortresses that date back to the Islamic conquest, and the food and drink of the region. Religion is a feature too, with trails named after martyrs and pilgrims.

As José Pedro explains: "This has taken two years of research, including putting up the information boards and marking the routes – we want to show people what we have. We are authentic – we are farmers, engineers, miners. And when you visit, we want you to see this and feel like you are with family." **TW**