

# The good life



With high-end wineries, food, accommodation and culture, Central Portugal is an epicurean's dream destination, finds **Yolanda Zappaterra**

**I**f clients think they've 'been there, done that' when it comes to Portugal, simply because they've strolled the streets of Lisbon on a city break, teed off on the golf courses of the Algarve or cruised through the Douro Valley, it's time to introduce them to the kind of destination that is increasingly hard to find in a world documented and dominated by social media.

Central Portugal, an area stretching more than 150 miles south from Porto and inland to Vila Nova de Foz Côa, feels like a step back in time, a sun-bleached postcard from the 1960s rather than an oversaturated Instagram image. A sense of *la dolce vita* infuses the area, from its gastronomy and accommodation to its wineries and culture – as I discovered along with a small group of agents on a recent fam trip to the region. ➤

Canal in Aveiro, Portugal  
PICTURE: Shutterstock/Georgios Tsielias

AGENTS'  
*verdict*

**Jacky Bowman,**  
Travel Matters, Balham

"The hotels' value for money was impressive. The cultural heritage also surprised me, with stunning churches, art nouveau buildings and the Unesco-listed monastery. I'd recommend expanding an itinerary beyond Porto and the Douro Valley to include the Dão region."



**Ian Cann, My Travel Guys,**  
Nottinghamshire

"My standouts were the friendly people and the contrasts between areas so close together. The quality (and quantity) of the vineyards surprised me. The family-owned ones we visited were a joy. I'd suggest a fly-drive, as there's so much to discover."



**Andreea Spasova, Travel**  
Counsellors, Bromley

"The locals' hospitality was remarkable – we felt like welcomed guests. Discovering the tranquil canals and charming atmosphere of 'little Venice' was unexpected. Encourage clients to take their time exploring the region to allow for deeper enjoyment of the landscapes, cuisine and culture."



ABOVE: The 15th-century Viseu cathedral on Rossio Square PICTURES: Shutterstock/trabantos; Jason Parnell Photography

### UISEU: VALLEY WHIRLS

That feeling of discovering a very special destination began straight away, as we arrived in Viseu, 80 miles southeast of Porto. Set in the heart of the Dão valley wine region, the birthplace of Renaissance artist Vasco Fernandes is home to a museum filled with stunning works such as a painted 13th-century wooden statue, its still-vibrant colours outdoing even the lovely flower-filled 15th-century Rossio Square on which the museum and a cathedral are located. Beyond the square, Viseu's parks and gardens brighten the granite stone of its many imposing buildings, eventually giving way to countryside dominated by the 20,000 hectares of vineyards that make up the Dão wine region, with hundreds of small wineries cultivating their own small patch of land.

Among those, the Quinta da Tabaodella is unlike any wine cellar I've ever seen, its mix of wood, cork and local materials offering an elegant example of ecological sustainability, designed by Portuguese architect Carlos Castanheira. With a boutique hotel on site, featuring handmade sheep's wool blankets and a palette of earthy tones, *quintas* such as this one are changing not only the perception of the region, but also the traveller's experience.

Close by, the five-star Relais & Châteaux Valverde Santar Hotel & Spa mixes modern – a heated outdoor granite pool, spa and restaurant – with traditional, by way of a 17th-century house filled with period pieces. It embodies the sense of a region that is increasingly aware of its appeal to affluent tourists but isn't compromising on its authentic character.

### AVEIRO: LITTLE VENICE

Just 50 miles west of Viseu, the waterfront town of Aveiro, near the Atlantic coastline, is a striking contrast. With breezes rolling in over the lagoon, a network of canals and even its own fleet of gondolas (*moliceiros*), the vibe is not a million miles from the smaller islands of Venice such as Murano and Burano.

But salt pans, an expansive lagoon and fantastic ceramic-fronted modernista buildings add a unique feel. Nearby, the bright candy-striped cottages that fill the tiny fishing village of Praia da Costa Nova add a fairytale aspect to its coastal attractions, which include a fabulous beach.

### ALCOBACA: STAR-CROSSED CITIES

The next stop, Alcobaca, shifts our perspective again. Famous as the resting place of Pedro and Inês, the Romeo and Juliet-like stars of Portugal's most tragic love story, its cultural clout resides not only in the extraordinary tombs of the ill-fated royal lovers, but also in the imposing Unesco-listed Cistercian abbey in which they are housed.

Dating back almost 900 years, its medieval abbey buildings, early Gothic church, three cloisters and a fabulous, recently opened, five-star hotel make an overnight stay in the town a must.

Nearby Caldas da Rainha offers another cultural reset, this time to a 15th-century thermal spring and arresting *azulejo*-fronted buildings – covered with the famous blue-and-white ceramics. One of them, vibrant boutique hotel 19Tile, is part ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## SPAIN & PORTUGAL | CENTRAL PORTUGAL

### WHERE TO *stay*

#### Quinta São José do Barrilário Douro

This new five-star hotel would merit its positive reviews just for its location high up above the Douro, but it also wins plaudits for its cool, crisp decor with wine barrel motifs, plus a spa, infinity pool and panoramic restaurant. Its location in Armamar makes it a great starting point for a tour of Central Portugal. [barrilario.com](http://barrilario.com)

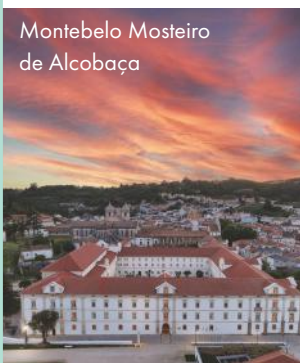
#### MS Collection Aveiro Palacete de Valdemouro

The five-star city-centre hotel, which is in a restored 18th-century building, features decor inspired by the Portuguese writer Eça de Queiroz. It is home to 39 rooms, a two-Michelin-starred restaurant, a spa and an outdoor pool. [mscollection.pt/en/aveiro](http://mscollection.pt/en/aveiro)

#### Montebelo Mosteiro de Alcobaça

Designed by the award-winning Portuguese architect Souto de Moura and taking its cue from former monks' dormitories, the 91 minimalist rooms and the vast scale of the five-star Mosteiro might not suit everyone, but it is unforgettable. [montebelohotels.com](http://montebelohotels.com)

Montebelo Mosteiro de Alcobaça



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Rooftops and the Castle of Óbidos; the fam trip group exploring Central Portugal's wine regions; Quinta São José do Barrilário Douro PICTURES: Shutterstock/ecstk22

of a ceramic heritage trail celebrating Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro, who founded a ceramics factory here in 1884.

But for me, Caldas da Rainha's true USP is its large, daily outdoor market, which is filled with cauliflowers and cabbages the size of beach balls; huge bundles of leafy greens; homemade cheeses stacked up on tiny stands; and bakery stalls groaning with all manner of breads and sweet pastries. It's the perfect place to stock up on souvenirs for foodie friends before, laden with local produce, we head off to find some wines to go with them.

#### OBIDOS: LITERARY LOVES

Our guide, Filipe, has one last discovery lined up for us before we're able to tuck into lunch though – and it's a treat. The noble medieval walled town of Óbidos is largely known for its production of cherry liqueur Ginja d'Óbidos, and its cobbled streets are lined with gift shops selling it in tasty chocolate cups. But even more enticing are the many bookshops established around the area's designation as Óbidos Literary Town. I wander into one that is lined with tomes from its floor to its wooden rafters and houses a homely vegetable stand selling local produce too, another double-take in this area that clearly takes pride in its traditional goods and crafts.

It's fitting that our last lunch en route to the airport is at the equally idiosyncratic Quinta do Sanguinhal. Tended by four generations of vintners making some of

the most prestigious protected DOC wines produced in the region, it's now in the hands of the redoubtable Anna, whose stories carry us back in time to the 19th-century foundation of a winery and family home. As we take in everything from ancient copper distillation vessels and still-working spindle and stick wine presses – some of the oldest in the Iberian peninsula – to a house where Miss Havisham wouldn't look out of place, we all agree we've barely scratched the surface of this most surprising of regions. **TW**

#### BOOK IT

**Newmarket Holidays'** eight-day Pousadas of Portugal tour visits Lisbon, Viseu, Óbidos, Porto and Aveiro, and includes wine-tasting at a Dão valley quinta. Prices start at £1,769, including flights from Stansted to Lisbon departing October 7 and back from Porto (other UK departure points are available), B&B accommodation in pousadas, sightseeing tours and four dinners. [newmarketholidays.co.uk](http://newmarketholidays.co.uk)

**Explore's** seven-night Highlights of Portugal tour takes in Alcobaça, Coimbra, Douro and Porto. Prices start at £1,445 per person, departing October 4, based on two sharing, B&B accommodation in hotels, activities, transport and the services of a tour leader. Flights cost extra. [explore.co.uk](http://explore.co.uk)