

# Rural retreats

Joanna Booth discovers  
the delights of the  
Iberian countryside

**F**rom big-hitting Barcelona and Lisbon to up-and-coming San Sebastian and Porto, cities tend to dominate the skyline when we think beyond Spain and Portugal's beaches.

It's understandable: cities are an easy, fly-in, fly-out hit. But there's more to the Iberian peninsula, and it's worth slowing down to appreciate the beautiful rural landscapes and relaxing way of life. Next time a client is looking for something a little different, suggest leaving the city behind and inspire them with one of these country charmers.

#### ▶ THE VILLA STAY

The ultimate rural escape has

its own front door, garden, and often a swimming pool, so clients can enjoy the privacy of their own hideaway. Families, couples, groups of friends – all types of traveller can find a home-away-from-home to suit, with everything from simple farmhouses to palatial villas in extensive grounds.

Villa specialist Novasol has 3,000 villas in Spain and 50 in Portugal. Countryside options include a six-bedroom former farmhouse outside Morón de la Frontera. Guests at the finca can swim in the pool or dine outside on the patio to enjoy the views. The nearby town sits on the border of the Cadiz and Seville

provinces and in July a flamenco festival brings its white-washed streets to colourful life. A week in September starts from £799.

With 1,093 villas in Spain and 462 in Portugal, James Villas has plenty of rural choices too. Villa Casa Verde is set in three acres of grounds on Portugal's Costa Verde, the green corner of the northwest famous for forests, vineyards, mountains and wild Atlantic beaches. The six-bed, six-bath villa has endless facilities for a countryside hideaway, including a private pool, games room, tennis court, and covered terrace with a barbecue for alfresco dining. A week in September starts at £1,644.

#### ▶ THE SELF-DRIVE TRAIL

Forget a long-haul flight across the pond – Spain and Portugal are just as suitable for a good road trip as the US, especially once you leave city traffic behind and enjoy the tranquil rural routes.

Classic Collection Holidays will book clients a pretty meander from Porto to Lisbon via the Douro Valley and the Alentejo region – one of Portugal's prettiest and most underrated spots. Stays are at characterful properties including The Yeatman in Porto, which has a Michelin-starred restaurant, The Vintage House in Pinhao in the heart of the Douro's vineyards, converted olive oil mill the Alentejo



Six Senses Douro  
Valley, Portugal



**LEFT:**  
Casa Verde,  
Portugal

**RIGHT:**  
Royal  
Hideaway  
La Bobadilla,  
Spain

**BELOW:**  
The Algarve



→ Marmoris Hotel & Spa, and L'And Vineyards Resort, where the sky view suites have retractable glass ceilings so clients can sleep beneath the stars. A 10-night package on a B&B basis with flights and car hire in September starts from £2,159.

Sunvil introduced fly-drives in Portugal's Alentejo last year, with stays in historic pousadas, and it proved so popular the operator has added Spain, with four itineraries in rural Andalusia taking clients beyond the bustling coast. A seven-night tour of the region's famous Pueblos Blancos visits these white-washed, flower-filled villages, staying at small, historic, four-star properties and winding through the mountain scenery. Flights, seven nights' B&B and car hire starts from £749.



## Many activities focus on viticulture, with the chance to be a winemaker for a day and stomp the grapes

### ▶ THE FOODIE HOLIDAY

Fine food isn't only available in city restaurants - getting back to where it is grown and reared can give clients an even more authentic taste of the destination.

Intrepid Travel combines the flavours of northern Spain and Portugal in one delicious 17-day Real Food Adventure from Barcelona to Lisbon. Highlights include exploring the wine caves

underground at Laguardia, a trek through the Picos de Europa National Park followed by a cooking class and tastings of local cheeses and ciders, and a stay in an agriturismo in the Alentejo. The trip starts from £3,250 with lots of dining and activities included.

The medieval village of Ujue, with just 300 inhabitants, sits on a hill high above the riverside plains of Navarre, with beautiful views of the Pyrenees. Typically Holidays uses the quaint location as the base for a cooking workshop teaching travellers to make specialities from this Basque region of northern Spain. Food is cooked over an open wood fire and the speciality of the house is migas de pastor, or shepherd's breadcrumbs - fried breadcrumbs with herbs and chorizo.

High-end gastronomes will love Royal Hideaway La Bobadilla, a 70-room hotel set in 1,000 acres of grounds in the countryside between Malaga, Seville, Cordoba and Granada. The hotel, built in the style of an Andalusian village, is home to the only 'five-fork' restaurant in the region, and offers paella cooking classes and wine-tasting experiences.

In Portugal, suggest the Six Senses Douro Valley, a beautifully renovated manor house overlooking hills, vineyards and rivers. Much of the produce in the hotel is sourced locally or from its organic garden, and one of the restaurants specialises in local dishes. Many activities focus on the area's viticulture, with the chance to be a winemaker for a day, and - in season - to have a go at stomping the grapes. →



## ▶ THE ACTIVE BREAK

When the burn of high summer fades, Spain and Portugal have the perfect climate for an active holiday – plenty of sunshine but not the sky-high temperatures that make exertion unpleasant.

Northern Spain has been famous for its long-distance walking route for centuries, as pilgrims paced the Camino de Santiago. Today's clients may be more likely to find their spirits lifted by the breathtaking scenery – and gradients – than the shrine in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, and plenty of operators offer guided or non-guided walking holidays. G Adventures offers an eight-day itinerary from Lugo, snaking through the beautiful Galician countryside, from £977.

Walking and cycling specialist Headwater offers a range of itineraries on two feet or two wheels in both Spain and

Portugal, and can open clients' eyes to a side of the Algarve far from manicured golf courses. Its self-guided tours contrast the lush flora inland with the region's dramatic seascapes as clients walk from hotel to hotel (ranging from four-night short breaks at £679 to a more comprehensive 10-night itinerary, from £1,209).

## ▶ THE WINE ROUTE

There's something about wine regions – who's ever seen an ugly vineyard? – and a holiday built around tasting different vintages will make any tittle-loving client bubble over with happiness.

Specialist operator Grape Escapes offers agents 10% commission and has a range of trips in Iberia, focusing on the Douro in Portugal and Rioja in Spain and including tours, tastings and often some lunches in the itineraries. Options range from Essential Rioja, a great



PICTURES: ERIC CUVILLIER; HEADWATER; JAMES VILLAS

ABOVE: Hotel Marqués de Riscal, Rioja

introduction to the region at a manageable price (from £462 for a three-night break), to Exclusive Rioja. Guests booking the latter stay at the luxurious, Gehry-designed hotel at working winery Marqués de Riscal and are offered tours of exclusive estates and tastings of premium wines (from £762 for three nights).

Portugal's Douro wine region can be toured by road or river. All the usual river cruise suspects, including AmaWaterways, Emerald Waterways, Riviera Travel, Uniworld and Viking River Cruises, feature ships on the Douro, offering a very easy pace of life, with frequent stops for wine sampling along the way. TW

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