

Trailblazer

Rachel Roberts explores Portugal's Torres Vedras countryside, an easy add-on to a Lisbon city break

Embarking on a 'Trail of Discovery' through the countryside north of Lisbon, you might expect to uncover a few little gems from the local area – but it turns out, you might just learn a few things about yourself.

One thing I discovered is that this golf malarkey isn't quite as simple as it looks. João, our ever-patient instructor, deserved a medal for not wincing every time my club churned up the grass on the immaculate 18-hole golf course, entirely missing the ball teed up in front of me. That's my back-up career as a pro golfer off the agenda, then.

Thankfully, we weren't there

in the peak golf seasons of March and April or October to November, so didn't have to endure too many withering looks from the pros on the lovingly tended fairway.

▶ HIT THE TRAIL

The impromptu golf lesson was one of the activities on the Trail of Discovery, essentially a grown-up treasure hunt around the tiny villages and sweeping scenery of Portugal's Torres Vedras, a small coastal region just 20 miles or so north of Lisbon.

It's been devised by local blogger Vanessa Martins on behalf of Dolce CampoReal



It's a timeless landscape, steeped in history, rolling countryside, vineyards and tiny villages

Lisboa – a hotel surrounded by vineyards to one side and mountain ranges to the other – to encourage guests to get outside the resort and explore the Torres Vedras area in greater depth.

Though there's already plenty

to do in the resort – including a state-of-the-art Mandalay Spa, outdoor swimming pool and the golf course – this gorgeous region will awaken everyone's inner explorer.

It's a timeless landscape, steeped in intriguing history and blessed with rolling countryside, crisscrossed by vineyards and studded with tiny villages.

The trail is certainly a clever concept. While the golf nut in the family is teeing up, the rest of the gang can bond as they follow a set of seven simple clues around the countryside.

There's cycling to the village of Turcifal, with its cobbled

→ streets and majestic church – a fine example of Portuguese architecture – but for non-cyclists or those less fit, this can be easily adapted to walking. Either way, you still get a great feel for the landscapes around you.

History buffs will be fascinated by the area's past, a clue to which can be found in a rather saucy painting hung in the hotel's fine-dining restaurant, the Grande Escolha. It depicts the Duke of Wellington having some off-duty 'fun' with a lady companion. To be fair to the duke, he did help the Portuguese build an impressive line of defence to stop the French invading in the early 19th century, so he probably needed to let off some steam.

There's a regal connection too: it was also once the summer retreat and hunting grounds for Portugal's royal family.

GREEN SCENE

There are plenty of other secrets to uncover along the trail, which takes visitors close to the dozens of wind turbines that stand proudly on the hillcrests of the surrounding Socorro and Archeira mountains. Love or loathe them, a walk underneath these huge metal constructions is strangely calming; the thrum of



The vineyard owners encouraged the grape pickers to sing – to stop them putting grapes in their mouths

the giant blades slicing through the air sounding like mini planes on permanent take-off.

Their impressive wind-harnessing led to the area being named as one of the most sustainable destinations in the world in 2015, so they're an important fixture on the landscape.

It's the little titbits you pick up from the chatty guides who accompany groups on the trail that add real value. For example, the grape pickers who came to the surrounding vineyards used to sing to the ripe, juicy fruit. The reason? The vineyard owners encouraged it to stop them from popping the grapes into their mouths instead of their baskets.

Corporate travel agents will already have the Dolce CampoReal hotel, which is popular with the Mice market, firmly on their radar, but it's a



Tried & Tested

DOLCE CAMPOREAL LISBOA

The CampoReal has 151 tastefully decorated rooms, in a palette of neutral colours. There are Deluxe, Superior Deluxe and Premium rooms, as well as suites, and all guests can enjoy the impressive Mandalay spa, which opened last year and still feels pleasingly new. A highlight is the Thai-style massage using a stick which is tapped along the body's meridian

lines and is said to remove toxins. The ornate outdoor swimming pool, at the front of the hotel, is quite the showstopper too.

Book it: Rooms from €113 per night for two people in a Deluxe room, including breakfast. The Trail of Discovery costs €54 per person, with an option to add a taster menu for €20. dolcecamporeal.com



PICTURE: VRX STUDIOS

nice option for leisure travellers who want to combine a city break to Lisbon with countryside relaxation and easy access to the region's beaches. The hotel

is just a 45-minute drive north of the capital, while the white sandy beaches of Santa Cruz, a popular surfing destination, are just a 20-minute drive away. →



Santa Cruz coast

BACK TO NATURE IN *Portugal*

Portugal boasts a host of enticing landscapes beyond the Torres Vedras region. Here's our pick of ways to explore its rural scenery, rugged coastal paths and mountain trails.

GET ON TRACK WITH NEW TRAILS SITE

Check out Portugal's best walking and cycling trails on a new website – portuguesetrails.com – created by the tourist board. You'll find popular routes, maps and tips for where to stay, with detailed information about the Alentejo, Algarve, Azores and Centro de Portugal regions, and information on other areas due to be added.



TASTE DELIGHTS ON A FARM STAY

Stay at an agriturismo in the Evora district, surrounded by wheat fields and grazing cows, with a home-cooked dinner, on Intrepid Travel's Portugal Real Food Adventure, which includes a farm stay in the Alentejo. Strike it lucky and the local host might even be serving up Azaruja sausage, made from black Alentejo pigs, similar to Spain's Iberico pigs (from £1,710 for eight days).



DRINK ON THE DOURO WITH DSD

Go wine tasting in the Douro Valley to sample rich ports and fruity reds, all with a scenic backdrop of stepped vine terraces descending towards the river. Do Something Different offers a full-day Douro Valley tour from Porto, via Sao Gonçalo Church and Convent, with a tasting at Port Wine Real Estate and lunch in a local restaurant, from £88.



WATCH OLIVES BEING HARVESTED ON A NEW NAT GEO TRIP

Visit a cork farm, taste local honeys and see olive harvesting in the Alentejo region on Discover Portugal, a new tour from National Geographic Journeys. Sold through G Adventures, the eight-day Lisbon to Porto itinerary costs from £1,299, excluding flights.



TROT ALONG THE TROIA PENINSULA

Ride a horse through the countryside from the golden sands of Troia peninsula, south of Lisbon, to the tiny traditional villages and wildflower-filled fields of the surrounding area. Troia Resort, where beach house or townhouse accommodation starts at €370 per unit per night, offers 90-minute horse-riding tours for €50.



SPOT BIRDS IN THE ALGARVE

Go birdwatching at Rio Formosa Natural Park or Salgados Lagoon, two nature reserves close to popular Algarve destinations. They are home to species including flamingos, spoonbills (pictured), glossy ibis, purple swamp hens, black-winged stilts, black terns and crested larks. Salgados Palace, featured by Jet2holidays, puts the reserves within easy reach; or see both on a seven-night Saga Holidays birdwatching itinerary (from £1,249 including flights).

