PRACTICAL DETAILS
The Alentejo is situated in the south of Portugal, between the River Tagus (Tejo) and the Algarve. To the east, its frontier is with Spain and to the west it is bathed by the Atlantic Ocean. It is an extensive region, essentially rural and thinly populated, occupying a third of the whole of continental Portugal. The beauty of its landscapes and the quality of its archaeological, monumental, architectural and ethnographic heritage and, par excellence, its gastronomy and wines, provide it with exceptional legacies to be discovered through nature tourism and cultural tourism.

AREA AND POPULATION
The Alentejo occupies an area of 27,000 kms² and has around 500,000 inhabitants. The population density is low, varying between six and fifty inhabitants per square kilometre. Space and silence never fail you.

CLIMATE
The Alentejo has a temperate climate, with continental and Mediterranean characteristics. The summers are hot and dry, the winters wet and cold, and in spring and autumn temperatures are delightful, with moderate highs and lows. The average lowest temperature in the coldest months, December and January, is 6ºC, and the
average high in July and August, the hottest months, is 30°C. These averages include, in winter, days with temperatures around or a bit below 0°C and, in the hottest summers, the mercury can climb above 40°C. The differences in daily temperature in summer are significant, sometimes in the order of 15°–20°. In the coastal areas, the temperatures and variations are modified and made more agreeable by the influence of the sea. In winter you need to wrap up well and in summer wear fresh, light clothing with a jacket for the evening. Sunglasses and a good sunblock are important.

ENCOUNTERS WITH HISTORY
So that you don’t miss out on any aspect of these thousands of years of history, it’s important that you have an idea of the different epochs which have clearly and abundantly made their mark on the rural and urban landscapes of the Alentejo. From the times dating back to the Palaeolithic up to the 12th century AD, we suggest that you concentrate on three fundamental periods of time: the Neolithic, which offers us interesting examples of the megalithic era, the the Roman occupation and the Arab occupation, which left us with an important inheritance, material and non-material, throughout the whole Region. During the so-called Christian reconquest, Portugal was born as a nation, which means that from the 12th century until the present, we have almost 900 years of history in our hands. From this long period, we will suggest that you discover some of the castles and historical centres that have a mediaeval flavour and that you visit the emblematic expressions of civil and religious architecture, built during the prosperous times of the Discoveries and the time of exploiting gold from Brazil (15th – 18th centuries).

EXCURSIONS WITH CASTLES
The whole of the landscape of the Alentejo is dotted with castles, forts, watchtowers and fortified towns and villages, bearing witness that, with the Reconquest firmly established in the south, it was necessary to continue to defend the frontiers of the country to the east, responding to wars with Spain, to prevent attacks by sea from the west and, throughout the interior, to slow down any advances not contained by the frontier defences. For those who bring with them an interest in fortifications, which itself is an excellent pretext for getting to know the exquisite historical centres that these fortifications were created to protect, there is a seemingly endless list of places, each with a particular history and a unique setting within the landscape: in the north of the Alentejo, there are Amieira do Tejo, Nisa, Belver, Castelo de Vide, Marvão, Portalegre, Alegrete, Alter do Chão, Cabeço de Vide, Avis, Arronches, Ouguela, Campo Maior and Elvas; in central Alentejo, Montemor-o-Novo, Arraiolos, Évora, Evoramonte, Estremoz, Veiros, Borba, Vila Viçosa, Juromenha, Alandroal, Redondo, Terena, Monsaraz,
Mourão, Portel and Viana do Alentejo; in lower Alentejo, Beja, Alvito (today a Pousada), Moura, Noudar, Serpa and Mértola; on the Alentejan coast, Alcácer do Sal (today a Pousada), Santiago do Cacém, Sines, Pessegueiro and Vila Nova de Milfontes. Those who appreciate military architecture should at least visit the imposing Torres de Menagem (castle keeps) in Beja and Estremoz, both dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, the fortified chapel of Nossa Senhora da Boa Nova in Terena, one of the most unusual monuments in Portugal, and Elvas, justifiably considered a museum city of fortifications. And as a visit that is obligatory for everyone, whatever the thematic purpose of their travels, we would highlight the fortified hill town of Marvão.

THE CONVENT AMBIENCE
Everything begins, once more, at the time of the Reconquest, when kings and military religious orders joined forces to put an end the occupation of the “infidels”. From the origins of Nationality to the 19th century, first with the help of the military, then through the not always pacific mission to civilise, evangelise, educate and, in the dark times of the Inquisition, to defend the orthodox Catholic faith, the Clergy, ordained and secular, have played an important part in Portuguese history. The Alentejo was no exception: quite the contrary. It is not by chance that a large part of its heritage is of a religious nature and that, for centuries, the church and the religious orders were the major landowners in the Region.

In the 19th century, a major volte-face in the story occurred: the religious orders in Portugal were closed down by decree and their goods and estates were either taken over by the state or were sold by public auction to some of the wealthy families of the time. As far as the convent and monastery buildings are concerned, the problem soon presented itself: what was to be done with these structures, many with great value in terms of heritage but now lacking their original function?

Two of the responses made are of great interest to those who visit the Alentejo. Some have been adapted as museums, such as the Convento de S. Domingos in Montemor-o-Novo, the Convento de N.ª S.ª da Conceição in Beja and the Convento de S. Francisco in Mértola. Other have been transformed into hotels, initially those of the state – the Pousadas – an experience that, from the end of the 20th century, has served as an inspiration for private initiatives. It is this history that allows us today, in the Alentejo, to stay in the refined ambience of former convents and monasteries. The exemples are many: in Crato, the Mosteiro da Flor da Rosa; in Redondo, the Convento de S. Paulo; in Arraiolos, the Convento de Nossa Senhora da Assunção; in Évora, the Convento dos Lóios and the Convento do Espinheiro; in Vila Viçosa, the Convento das Chagas; in Beja, the Convento de S. Francisco. Because of the care that has been taken with their restoration, they are all places not to be missed.
THE ALENTEJO IS NATURE

The Alentejo has a clear vocation for Activity Tourism and for Nature Tourism. The beauty of the landscape invites excursions on foot, on mountain bikes and on horseback, and the country lanes known as estradas municipais, despite the absence of cycle lanes, are excellent for cycling-tourism. On the rivers, the reservoirs and the coast, many water-based activities are possible. The beaches are of the highest quality. And the sky, with this fantastic climate, is ideal for parachuting, paragliding, ballooning and microlight flights.

ORGANISED EXCURSIONS

Those of you who like to travel independently should be aware that you will not, in every part of the Alentejo, find the kind of support that is usual in places that are more established as Nature Tourism destinations. For those in search of adventure, this could be an advantage. Those who don’t like the unexpected would benefit from combining some exploration on their own with participation in organised excursions. There is a wide offer provided by local enterprises: it includes excursions on foot, on mountain bike, in 4x4s and on horseback, activities such as climbing, cycle-tourism, canoeing, sea and river cruises, observation of flora and fauna, surfing, wind-surfing, diving, sailing, sports fishing and golf. Some hotel and rural tourism establishments include nature-tourism activities in their offers of accommodation. This kind of provision, combined with the very high quality of the hotel accommodation and restaurants and the wonderful resources that nature offers, has contributed to the fact that the Alentejo is increasingly sought after by company groups who take part in incentive schemes and outdoor training programmes here.

THE TEJO IN ALENTEJO, BETWEEN NISA AND BELVER

What we propose is the discovery of the unknown River Tejo (in English Tagus), very different from the river we see flowing into the wide estuary that washes Lisbon’s shoreline. First in the region of Nisa and then close to Belver. In Nisa, a municipality that has invested heavily in pedestrianization, you are faced with a variety of walking excursions, all PR (pequena rota – short route), which offer unexpected landscapes in the Tejo basin and the Serra de S. Miguel. Signposting has been maintained in an exemplary fashion. If you only have time for some of these tours, we would suggest three: PR1, “Trilhos das Jans” (the Jans trails – begins in Amieira do Tejo, 12.6 kms, medium difficulty); PR8, “Trilhos do Moinho Branco” (the white mill trails – begins in Montalvão, 14 kms, medium difficulty); and PR4, “Trilhos do Conhal” (the Conhal trails – begins in Arneiro, 9.8 kms, medium difficulty). This set of tracks are now known as Alentejo Feel Nature. The last is interesting for its inclusion of the Mina de Ouro Romana do Conhal (Roman gold mine), extensive terracing formed by piles of pebbles, which bears witness to the mining for
gold that would have taken place here in Roman and in mediaeval times. This place makes up part of the geological monuments that are brought together in GeoPark Naturtejo, one of 30 European “geoparks” classified by UNESCO (www.naturtejo.com). Lovers of fortresses, of beautiful views and of canoeing should take a trip to Belver. From the top of this castle you have an exceptional panoramic view over the River Tejo. On the further bank you will find the Praia Fluvial (river beach) da Quinta do Alamal, with a number of facilities, among which are canoe rental and other boatboard activities which will allow you to navigate the Tejo, here its waters calm, retained by one of the oldest dams in Portugal. Don’t miss walking along the magnificent 2 km percurso ribeirinho (river excursion), set out with wooden posts, constructed between the bridge and Quinta do Alamal. To “close with a golden key” any programme in this area, you should keep one day for a journey by train on the section of the Linha da Beira between Belver and Fratel. Be careful about the timetable, because this has not been designed for return tourist excursions.

THE NATURAL PARK OF THE SERRA OF S. MAMEDE
Nature expresses itself in an especially exuberant way in the Natural Park of the Serra (sierra/range of hills) of S. Mamede. From a geological point of view it is extremely rich, immediately drawing the visitor’s attention to the imposing quartzites, which mark the landscape with bizarre sculptures. In the northern zone, the chestnuts and Pyrenean oaks share the area with cork oaks and Holm oaks, while the vineyards, allied to olive groves, grow on the generally gentle slopes which border the streams. To the south, great ownership is affirmed. This is the Alentejo of the montes (traditional farm complexes), of farming that is in natural symbiosis with the montados (oak woodland combined with pasture) and with the small villages of low whitewashed houses surrounded by vegetable gardens and orchards. Despite the pressures of human occupation, fauna is abundant: rare birds such as Bonelli’s Eagle and the Griffin Vulture, Sparrowhawks, the Short-toed Eagle, the Black Kite, the Eagle Owl, the Tawny Owl and many others, live alongside Wild Boar, Red Deer, Badgers, Egyptian Mongooses, Wild Cats, Foxes and the Common Rabbit. The history of humankind has left its thousands-of-years-old mark in the dolmens, menhirs, camps, Roman and 15th century bridges, and also in the network of paved tracks and pathways, some of which form part of the walking excursions in the natural Park. Eight excursions are signposted in the Park. The leaflets are available in Quinta dos Olhos d’Água, the park’s headquarters (S. Salvador de Aramenha) and in the Tourist Offices in Marvão and Arronches. The Marvão (8 kms), Galegos (11,5 kms), Alegrete (11 Kms) and Esperança (16 kms) excursions, all accessible to anyone in good physical condition, together provide a sufficiently complete image of the Park’s landscape. The last two can be done on mountain bike.
SERRA D’OSSA AND THE ZONE OF MARBLE
The range of hills of the Serra d’Ossa, reaching barely 650 metres in height, is the main area of high land in Central Alentejo. It is oriented NW-SE and its centre is close to the council areas of Estremoz, Borba and Redondo. From its slopes run the streams which feed, on one side, the Guadiana basin, and on the other, the Tejo basin. Contrasting with the relief here present, essentially schist, extends the so-called Zone of Marble, on an axis linking Estremoz, Borba, Vila Viçosa and Alandroal. It is not possible to get to know one without passing through the other. Nor is it desirable. With such diversity of landscape and such abundant riches in terms of heritage, travelling in this region is an absolute must. We would offer two suggestions: one travelling through the Zone of Marble by bicycle or by car; one walking along some of the signposted pathways of the Serra d’Ossa.

For the first excursion, you do not need many directions; it is enough to choose the secondary roads which connect the urban centres, bearing in mind that the best route for seeing the enormous craters caused by marble quarrying is the one that connects Borba, Vila Viçosa and Bencatel. But take care, because the movement of heavy lorries is considerable. As a complement, you should visit the Museum of Marble in Vila Viçosa, its centre of attraction being the presence of this “white gold” as the greatest exponent of its heritage, and thus being “the cherry on the cake”!

The discovery of the Serra d’Ossa is a less obvious prospect. In the 1960s it underwent the planting of the largest continuous area of eucalyptus in Portugal (6,000 hectares). However, in some parts, it maintains its original montado (cork woodland and pasture), together with scrubland of cistus, gorse, furze and lavender. Although these Mediterranean oases can be found at various points on the Serra, the easiest way to come across them for yourself is by walking excursions. We would suggest two: PR1, “Percurso das Antas” (dolmens excursion), 5.9 kms, easy, with departure and return in the village of Freixo (Redondo); and PR, “São Gregório – Memórias da Aldeia”, 5kms, easy, with departure and return in Aldeia de S. Gregório (Borba). They are both interesting from the point of view of the environment, landscape, archaeology, and also for the observation of many aspects of Rural Life.

BETWEEN ÉVORA AND MONTEMOR-O-NOVO
The Évora – Montemor-o-Novo axis, apart from being immensely valuable in its heritage, has excellent conditions for participating in Nature Tourism. The range of organised activities is appreciable, although a number of them are restricted to a minimum number of participants (usually 4 to 10). On your own, you can do the Évora “Ecopiste”, whose track results from the conversion of part of the railway branch line from Évora to Mora. It begins inside the city and extends for 21 kilometres to Herdade da Sempre Nova. The excursion can be made on foot or by bicycle. The Água da Prata Excursion follows part of the Évora aqueduct, which still today carries water to the city.
It was constructed in the 16th century and has undergone reconstruction and improvements since the 18th century. The route, which is very interesting from both a heritage and an environmental point of view, begins on the Évora – Arraiolos road and extends for about 8 kilometres.

IN THE GUADIANA VALLEY
The Natural Park of the Guadiana Valley, with an area of approximately 70,000 hectares, extends between the area upstream of the Pulo do Lobo waterfall and the Ribeira do Vascão to the south Mértola. It includes landscapes that are very different from each other: the enclosed valleys of the river and its tributaries, the quartzite heights of the Serra de Alcôa and Serra de São Barão and an extensive and wild peneplain where dry-land trees grow – montados (woodland and pasture) of holm oak and areas of cistus. In the steepest parts of the serras and river valleys, where there has been little intervention by humans, you can still find the so-called Mediterranean scrub, an expression of the original vegetation of the region. In a word, we are in the part of the Alentejo that best expresses the inhospitable beauty of the south. But, now that the Alqueva has submerged a substantial part of the Guadiana, we are also in a place that is privileged in every way for discovering the memories of the way the river used to be as it continues to flow freely to the sea from the Açude de Pedrógão.
The urban centre at the pole of this Park is Mértola. Local enterprises offer excursions on foot or by bicycle, canoeing activities and trips in motorboats for the whole navigable section of the river, which extends between Mértola / Pomarão and Vila Real de Santo António. These small cruisers can operate regular programmes or are available for private bookings.
With an information base available at the Tourist Office, we suggest that, on foot, by bicycle, or by car, you don’t miss places full of bucolic delights, such as the Moinho dos Canais, the Azenhas de Mértola or the small fishing port of Penha d’Água. As places that should be seen, we suggest the Pulo do Lobo waterfall and the conjunction of the Mina (mine) de S. Domingos and the Praia Fluvial (river beach) da Tapada Grande.
Outside the Natural Park, we also suggest that you don’t miss visiting the beautiful stretch of river that extends upstream between the Pulo do Lobo waterfall and the Açude de Pedrógão weir.
Access to the Pulo do Lobo is signposted on the Mértola – Serpa road on the eastern (left) bank, next to the village of Vale do Poço, and on the Mértola – Beja road on the western (right) bank, from Corte Gafo.
As you are in the region, don’t miss a visit to the Historical Centre of Serpa and taste the renowned sheep’s cheeses of the region.
THE ALENTEJAN COAST

Discovering this part of the Alentejo, open to the sea, is always fascinating. From the marshes bordering the Sado estuary, there stretches an immense coastline which, from the Point of Troia to the cape of Sines, takes the form of uninterrupted beach. In the interior, where the exuberant greenery of the hills of Serra de Grândola stands out, the cork-oak montado (woodland and pasture) lives alongside blankets of pinewoods, the rivers are retained as beautiful reservoirs and the abundance of water provides for extensive rice fields. Suddenly, the landscape changes. To the south of Sines, the most capricious fantasies of geological time have made the sea and the wind their gouges and chisels, carving out cliffs, contorting blocks of schist, creating cordons of dunes bordering the beaches, making and unmaking the beaches in small and secret coves, defining new contours for the vegetation, tempering the coastal plane, providing food for the algae, fish, reptiles, birds and rare mammals to live on ...

It is a museum throbbing with history and with natural life and merits the classification of three Protected Areas: the Nature Reserve of the Sado Estuary, the Nature Reserve of the Lakes of Santo André and Sancha and the Natural Park of Southwest Alentejo and the Vicentina Coast.

ORGANISED EXCURSIONS
The excursions organised by local enterprises include on-shore programmes that are similar to those found throughout the Alentejo – on foot, by mountain bike, by 4x4 and on horseback – as well as a number of activities on rivers and on the sea, as you would expect from a coastal area: trips on the Galeões do Sal (“salt galleons”) on the River Sado, observing dolphins and flamingos, boat and canoe trips on the River Mira, sea-fishing trips by boat, maritime cruises, diving (courses, “baptisms”, open water, underwater hunting), surfing, windsurfing, kitesurfing and bodyboarding. Some of these enterprises rent out mountain bikes, motorboats, canoes and kayaks.

TRAVELLING INDEPENDENTLY
We offer here some suggestions organised into two geographical areas.
If you are travelling by bicycle, take into account that, on the coastal cliffs, the tracks are very sandy: opt for secondary roads or for well-compacted dirt roads.

From the Sado Estuary to the Cape of Sines
We begin at Alcácer do Sal, the Salatia of the Romans which, for those arriving from Lisbon by the A2, is a beautiful portal through which to enter the Alentejan coastal area. It welcomes us right here on the edge of the Sado, with seafood and candied pine-nut kernels and a Historical Centre that winds up between the river and the castle. After gazing at the panoramic views over the river, take a trip on a Galeão do Sal, a traditional sailing boat, in search of dolphins and flamingos. Before heading off for the coast, those interested in traditional rural
architecture would get pleasure from visiting Santa Susana, a village with typically Alentejan rows of low, whitewashed houses. Bordering the river, towards the mouth, it is important to visit the Porto Palafítico (palaphytic – elevated on stilts) da Carrasqueira, a curious fishing port with a labyrinthine system of piers constructed on props sunk into the mud. Good views over the marshes. Heading off to Comporta, land of rice fields, you should make a detour to the Tróia Peninsula, a zone of major tourism complexes, and contemplate the panoramic view over the Serra da Arrábida. The beaches are much sought after by windsurfers. It is on this peninsula that the extensive beach, called the Costa da Galé, begins and continues unbroken to the Cape of Sines. It is an area with excellent conditions for windsurfing and body-boarding, as the adept practitioners always to be found on the beaches of Comporta and Carvalhal bear witness. Nor should you miss the welcoming and protected beaches of Pinheirinho, Galé and Aberta Nova, enclosed by beautiful cliffs.

If you feel the call of the interior and are a lover of long walks, you have many possibilities between Grândola, Santiago do Cacém and Lagoa de Santo André. From Lagoa de Santo André, where you will find good tourist accommodation and many natural beauties to explore, don’t miss taking a look at the fantastic dunes of Praia do Monte Velho. There is an excursion of great environmental interest starting from this beach: “Poços da Barbaroxa” (4kms, low level of difficulty). It is advisable to be accompanied by a guide. Booking can be done through the Centro de Interpretação do Monte do Paio, a space providing reception for and information about the Natural Park, with a permanent exhibition about the natural heritage of this Protected Area. From this centre there is the signposted “Percurso da Casa do Peixe” (4kms, low level of difficulty), which can be done without a guide. Don’t do the walk between December and April as stretches of the lake can spread. As far as Lagoa da Sancha is concerned, it is practically a secret place. Discover it!

Before the Cape of Sines, if you like contemplating rough sea, you should make a detour to Praia do Norte. The agitation of the water and the dangerous depths advise against bathing, but there are rich shoals of fish in the submarine caves, which attract divers and hunters. To do the beach again, it is necessary to go round the Cape.

From Cabo de Sines to Porto de Azenha do Mar

Sines, land of Vasco da Gama. Without rush, go into this ancient fishing port, travel through the mediaeval streets of its Historical Centre and visit the heart of its heritage. Continuing south, we reach the zone of Vila Nova de Milfontes, first with the beach of Malhão and then with the Portinho do Canal. In the town, it is enough just to follow the movement to find the beaches of Franquia, Farol and Furnas. In this area, the conditions for sports fishing and for diving are good. The River Mira, which here discharges its waters into a lovely estuary, can be navigated by canoe or motorboat as far as Odemira. It is a trip that is well worth making. Some kilometres further on you will find the Praia do Almograve, considered one of the most beautiful in the south west of the Alentejo. It has excellent support facilities and good conditions for surfing

From Cabo de Sines to Porto de Azenha do Mar
and bodyboarding. In the town, a walking excursion is signposted: PR1, “Lapa de Pombas” (8.9kms, low level of difficulty, duration approximately 3.30 hours). The beauty of this coast deserves time for contemplation and we are close to one of the most fantastic viewing points: Cabo Sardão. For birdwatchers it also has another objective: this is the only place in the world where the White Stork nests on sea cliffs. Go and visit it now and, from there, even if you are not adept at long walks, stroll a little along the cliff top. It is a dazzling experience and, if you wish, you can go from here on foot or by mountain bike to Zambujeira do Mar.

If you would like to take a rest from beaches and breathe the air of the countryside and of the hills, you are in an excellent place from which to make a detour to Odemira, a white town which hangs in a cascade over the River Mira. From Odemira or Vila Nova de Milfontes there are two more walking excursions you can do: PR2, “S. Domingos” (starting in the village of S. Luís, 8.1 kms, medium difficulty) and PR3, “Troviscais” (starts in the village of Troviscais, 13.5 kms, medium difficulty). Returning again to the coast, the next destination is Zambujeira do Mar. As well as the beach next to the town, with good facilities and good surfing and bodyboarding, there are others to discover, to the north and to the south. To the north, make sure you take a look at Praia de Nossa Senhora. In the area of the fishing port of Entrada da Barca, next to Touril, where you can eat good fresh fish, you will find well-trodden paths over the cliff which reveal, a long way below, small hidden beaches. To the south, it is scarcely 500 metres to Praia dos Alteirinhos, classified in 2008 as a naturist beach.

If you are travelling with a family and want to make use of a beach, there are good sands at Praia do Carvalhal, with easy access from Brejão. From this village leads the road to the fishing port of Azenha do Mar, in the extreme south west of the Alentejo.

**THE ALENTEJO IS RURAL QUALITY**

It is open space that appears to have no end. It is colours and smells that burst from the earth. It is the unmistakeable outline of rural architecture, present in the “*montes*” (farm complexes) of the great estates, in the oldest rows of houses in the cities, towns and villages or in the chapels, which paint with white the tops of hills. It is what is gleaned from the ways of being and doing, from the arts and skills that are conserved and renewed, from the tradition that is maintained and recreated, from the “choral chanting” that, with heart and soul, only the Alentejans know how to sing. But the rural quality of the Alentejo of the 21st century is not exhausted in simply “country matters”. Through the not always positive changing fortunes of its history, this Region has preserved what today confers on it a value full of future promise: the smallness and environmental quality of its urban centres, the human scale, the silence,
the peacefulness, the freedom, the freshness of the air we breathe. It is time. A way that is so peculiar of understanding time, making us feel under our skins that, finally, it is possible to live time in this dizzying world, allowing it to be exactly what it is: the most precious of our possessions.

THE RHYTHM OF THE SEASONS
To get to know the Alentejo well, you should visit it in all of the seasons. The landscape changes a great deal during the year and the rural activities that are most interesting to observe are seasonal. We begin the cycle in autumn. September is the time for harvesting the grapes and making the wine. You can see this from any road where there are vineyards, but you would gain much from choosing an organised enotourism programme: you will be able to understand the skills, participate and, at the same time, taste the wines of previous years.

In October, stroll with no clear destination to contemplate the palette of colours provided by the chestnut trees where cultivation transforms the Alentejo. Enjoy the sun of the so-called “Summer of the Quinces” and, if there are quinces where you are staying, ask your hosts if you can attend the making of home-made marmelada (quince jam). In November, taste the new wine on St Martin’s Day (11th November), a time when we are again blessed with several days of summer weather. It is an excellent time to visit places that have festivals, such as Marvão, Cabeçao, Borba or Vila de Frades.

Between November and January, watch the harvesting of the olives (the traditional way, not mechanised) and go inside an olive press.

In Spring, the countryside is filled with thousands and thousands of wild flowers, which are an inexhaustible subject for photographers. And when the first heat arrives, the sheep shearing begins. If there are no flocks where you are staying, ask where you might attend this. On Ascension Day (a Thursday), take part in the ritual called Dia da Espiga (ear of wheat/rye/barley etc). Join with the people who go into the countryside and always put together a spray as tradition dictates: 5 ears of wheat, 5 poppies, 5 olive twigs, 5 white corn marigolds and 5 yellow corn marigolds. Hang these outside your front door for a year in the belief that they will bring, for you and for your family, bread, peace and happiness.

Suddenly, the yellows and golds take over the countryside. It is in June and July that the cereal harvest takes place, a time to imagine, at the height of the heat, the life of the men and women who, years ago, did by hand from sunrise to sunset what is now done by combine harvesters and balers. Later, when you listen to Alentejan singing, you will understand it better.

But it is not only the yellow of the dryness that you will see in the countryside: in the months of summer you can see the brilliant yellow of the fields of sunflowers and of lupins, the exuberant green of the vines and, around the reservoirs that irrigate the interior of the Alentejo, the strong colours of corn and of horticultural plots. In the Sado valley, it is an excellent time to see the rice fields and, above them, the painted pink and white of flamingos in flight.
In June and July and sometimes in August, don’t miss the cutting of the cork and the surprising orange colour of the bare trunks, which suddenly brighten up the *montado* (oak woodland and pasture). Since bark of the cork oak can only be removed every nine years, again ask your hosts if they can tell you where you can watch the activity happening. At every season, whenever you sense in the air the strong smell of burned wood, stop and go to take a look at the traditional ovéns making charcoal from holm-oak and olive wood.

If you are on the coast, visit a fishing port. Here, as in the rest of the world, the fishermen are courageous folk and fail to venture out to sea only when they are prevented from doing so. Go and watch them set out in search of everything that makes the difference in the Alentejan cooking of the coast and, when they return, attend them activity of the fish auction.

**THE ALENTEJO IS GASTRONOMY AND WINES**

In the Alentejo, you eat and drink very well. Eating, drinking and snacking (*petiscos*) are rituals, ways of socialising, of entertaining friends and guests, of celebrating. It is customary to say that, in a true Alentejan’s house, whether rich or poor, the table is always set. It is true. And this truth confers a very special flavour on the discovery of the gastronomy and the wines. They are products of recognised value for tourists, but it was not Tourism that created them for outside consumption: they are part – and a happy part – of the most authentic daily life of the Region. In the light of this, we can offer only one invitation: be Alentejan for a few days!

To enjoy to the full the seductive gastronomic adventures this region has to offer you, we suggest you travel with three ideas in your baggage. The first is that you forget the globalised world in which we live, dominated by homogenised tastes and freezing technologies and enjoy your holidays in the Alentejo by reviving the most ancestral ways of eating: fresh products in the right season, when the tastes are expressed in all their splendour. Some examples: in winter, taste fresh pork; between winter and spring, depending on whether the rains are early or late, the ingenious soups made from thistles, carrasquinhas (a shrub), beans with common dock or red dock, wild green asparagus with eggs, truffles, *silárca* (brown gurumelo mushrooms) grilled over charcoal seasoned only with ground salt; around Easter, *sarapatel de borrego* ("pluck" – heart, lungs and liver – of lamb cooked in blood), cottage cheeses and curd tartlets; at the end of spring and during summer, the dishes made with broad beans, the gaspacho, the tomato dishes, the purslane soups, the black bass; at the beginning of October, the game dishes.
When you eat with the seasons, the difference is vast. The second is that you experience dishes that are always different. There is only one Alentejo, but it is large and it is diverse. It is Atlantic and Mediterranean, hills and plain, coast and interior, rivers, lakes, reservoirs and sea. Therefore, although you will identify in everything you taste that “something” which marks out so strongly the way of doing things and flavouring things, you will be surprised to discover how infinite and varied is the traditional table.

The third is that you should have these experiences in the right place. Is there anything that can match a good fish on the grid, being grilled above a beach with a view over the sea? A sophisticated game dish, as the light of autumn softly penetrates the woodland of the montado?

On the coast, it is evident. From Troia to the port of Azenha do Mar, the Alentejo is rich in seafood (the percebes [goose-necked barnacles] of the south west are excellent!), in cuttlefish and octopus, in fish such as sea bream, stone bass, sea bass, mackerel and sardines. And as well as the common but delicious grilled and poached fish, there are dishes that are characteristic of this zone: the massinhas de peixe (fish with pasta), the arrozes de camarão, de choco e de navalhinha (prawns, cuttlefish, razor clams with rice), the fish soups and the fish stews. Dogfish stew is universal: it is on the menus of almost all Alentejan restaurants even, as long as nothing is amiss, in the interior. As far as fresh water is concerned, the geography broadens. You should not miss the eel stew of Lagoa de Santo André, nor indeed the lampreys of the Tejo (Nisa and Gavião) and of the Guadiana (Mértola); nor the black bass, fried or grilled, which you find in Odemira and in at least two places where they have fishing competitions – in the Alqueva zone and on the Raia river, close to Cabeção. Where there is fresh river fish, try the succulent caldeiretas, stews made with barbel, black bass and carp, which are seasoned with bay, pennyroyal and water mint.

We pass on to meat
The Alentejo is one of the regions of the world where free grazing is still possible. There is no lack of space. The flocks graze in the countryside, the Alentejan pigs live in the cork and holm oak montado (a system of woodland and pasture), which provides acorns, and the cows and bullocks graze calmly in the meadows of the great estates. There are various producers throughout the region who have invested in the certification of their products and today display with pride the various denominations of quality attributed to their meat. You must taste these: the Borrego (lamb) of Montemor-o-Novo, of Baixo Alentejo and of Nordeste Alentejano, all of the IGP – Indicação Geográfica Protegida (PGI – protected geographical indication); the Bovino (beef) Carnalentejana, Mertolenga and da Charneca, all DOP – Denominação de Origem Protegida (PDO – protected denomination of origin); and the famous Porco Alentejano, also DOP.
THE NECTAR OF THE GODS

In the Alentejo, there is no haggling over the honour to be paid to Bacchus. The wines are emblematic of the Region. There are more than 250 producers, with an area under cultivation in the order of 22,000 hectares.

You will find two types of white and red wine: the Vinho Regional Alentejano, which is produced throughout the Region; and Vinho DOC – Alentejo, produced in the eight regions defined as suitable for the production of wines with the seal of Denominação de Origem (Registered Designation of Origin) – Portalegre, Borba, Redondo, Reguengos, Vidigueira, Évora, Granja/Amareleja and Moura.

The Vinho Reserva, considered top of the range, can result from regional or DOC wines.

The wines produced in the northern part of Coastal Alentejo – Grândola, Alcácer do Sal, Santiago do Cacém and Sines – belong to the winegrowing region of Setúbal. Don’t find it strange, then, when you see on the label the denomination “Vinho Regional – Terras do Sado”. The DOC seal is a guarantee of quality. But in all justice it must be said that there are also Alentejan wines of the highest quality that do not have the DOC seal. The typical quality of the wine comes from various factors: the perfect marriage between the grape varieties used and the various types of soil (granitic in Portalegre, crystalline calcareous in Borba, Mediterranean grey and red in Évora, Granja/Amareleja and Moura, schist in Redondo, Reguengos and Vidigueira); the thousands of hours of sunlight that benefit the whole of the Alentejo; the discipline of the growers who understand that a good wine begins to be made on the vine; and finally the skills that the oenologists have revealed in the art of making the wine, bringing together tradition and modernity.

The white wines are aromatic, fresh, harmonious and sometimes complex, the result of the blending of varieties. The reds, ruby or garnet in colour, have intense bouquets of well-matured red fruits and are smooth, slightly astringent, balanced and full-bodied. Although they gain in complexity as they age, they can also be drunk young. The great secret for enjoying them fully is in knowing how to make the right choice: what wine to drink as an aperitif, with a good cheese or during a meal; and inversely, when the wine is chosen first, what delicacies to accompany it with.

In the Alentejo, there are many ways of getting to know the wines: in good restaurants, leaving yourself in the hands of those who know; by visiting the adegas (wineries) during wine-tastings accompanied by the wine-makers, who are available to explain all that you might wish to know; on enotourism trips which, accomplished in the art of making you feel welcome, organise interesting activities around the subject of wine; and finally in some establishments providing accommodation, which have gourmet gastronomy as their principal trademark, an image that is obviously inseparable from the nectars that accompany it.

The Rota dos Vinhos do Alentejo (www.vinhosdoalentejo.pt) association, an organisation which you should use to book visits to adegas and to wine-tastings, suggests various excursions, organised around three routes. producers in Portalegre,
Benavila (Avis), Casa Branca (Sousel), Monforte and Campo Maior; using the Rota Histórica, in Montemor-o-Novo, Évora, Azaruja, S. Sebastião da Giesteira, Arraiolos, Igrejinha, Estremoz, Arcos, Glória, Borba, Rio de Moinhos, Terrugem, Juromenha, Redondo, Aldeias de Montoito, Monsaraz, Reguengos de Monsaraz, Vendinha and Vera Cruz de Portel; using the Rota do Guadiana, in Cuba, Vidigueira, Marmelar, Moura, Granja, Ferreira do Alentejo, S. Brissos (Beja), Albernoa and Trindade. Whatever your choice, you will see how the theme of Wine can be an excellent guide to discovering the Region. To complement this, let us make a couple of suggestions. One is to go to Borba, if possible in November, when the Festa da Vinha e do Vinho (festival of the vine and of wine) takes place. In the Historical Centre there are various “tasquinhas” (small taverns/restaurants), some with enormous clay wine-pots, where the wine used to be made, that offer local products. During the festival, they are places on a special route visited by the Confraria dos Enófilos do Alentejo (confraternity of wine-lovers). The other is that, in December, you should visit Cabeção and Vila de Frades, when the tasting of the new wine from the producers is the occasion for a festival. In Vila de Frades, within the framework of the Vitifrades event, there is a competition for local “pot-made” wine (2nd weekend in December). In this town as much as in two others nearby, Vila Alva and Vila Ruiva, wine of this kind is still produced using methods very close to those used by the Romans. Finally, you should not fail to visit the Enoteca and the Museu do Vinho in Redondo. Begin with the museum, which has the advantage of being located in the Tourist Office, make an excursion into the Serra d’Ossa, enjoy a succulent lunch and spend the afternoon in the town. Visit the potteries and the workshops making painted rustic furniture, walk through history within the tiny Cerca Medieval (mediaeval walls) and, at the end of the day, enjoy some petiscos (snacks) in the welcoming space of the Enoteca. If there is a show in the Cultural Centre, you could enjoy live music into the night.

CHEESES, OLIVE OILS, CURED MEATS AND HAM

Let’s now complete the table of savoury goodies: with the traditional olives and olive oils; with the little cheeses which, depending on the season, the area and one’s taste, can be from goat’s milk or sheep’s milk, fresh or cured, hard or soft; with the inevitable sausages and cured meats of various qualities; and with the cured ham. For all of these products, a great deal of investment has been made by the producers to achieve certificates of quality. But in this field too, the same is true as we pointed out to be true of wine: there are excellent producers who have never put forward their products for the certification processes that are in force – some out of choice, others because the size of their operations does not justify it. You will find the contacts for all of these in Tourist Offices, as well as information about where the products are for sale. Here, because we have to be selective, we provide only information regarding the products with a DOP – Denominação de Origem Protegida (PDO – protected denomination of origin) and IGP – Indicação Geográfica Protegida (PGI – protected geographical
Cheeses
In the Alentejo, there are three regions which produce DOP queijos (PDO cheeses): Nisa, Évora and Serpa. All are obtained by the slow draining of the curdled milk, followed by the coagulation of the untreated sheep’s milk with an infusion made from thistles. They continue the traditional ways of manufacturing the cheese, revealing characteristics that are attributable both to the milk and to the traditional way of handling the ewes. Queijo Nisa DOP, cured, semi-hard in texture, closed, with small holes, is exclusive to a region in North Alentejo which embraces eight council areas. In the same geographical area is produced the Queijo Mestiço de Tolosa IGP, using milk from both sheep and goats. There are producers in Nisa, Monte Claro, Gáfete, Tolosa, Alpalhão, Vaiamonte and Monforte. In Tolosa and Vaiamonte, organic cheeses are produced which, when certified, display the seal AB – Agricultura Biológica (organic production).

Queijo Évora DOP is a cured cheese, hard or semi-hard in texture, with few or no holes, which can be produced in an extensive zone which includes 14 council areas in Central Alentejo and 3 in North Alentejo. You will find producers of this cheese in Évora, Arraiolos, Alcáçovas, Aldeias de Montoito (Redondo), Rio de Moinhos (Borba) and Sousel. Queijo Serpa DOP is, perhaps, the most famous cheese in the Alentejo. It is a cured sheep’s cheese, semi-soft and buttery in texture (it can even be poured) and has few or no holes. The cheeses are kept in so-called “linen cupboards” (cheese stores) for at least one month, in a cool, humid environment, until they reach maturity. Their provenance is a region that embraces 12 council areas in Lower Alentejo where the climate, soil and pasture provide Serpa DOP with the characteristics that make it a unique cheese. There are producers in Beja (Santa Clara do Louredo and Penedo Gordo), Moura, Pias, Serpa and Mértola (Corvos and Corte da Velha).

Azeitonas (Olives) and Azeite (Olive Oil)
Just travelling through the Alentejo would resolve any doubts about the importance of olive cultivation. Olive groves and plantations occupy more than 150,000 hectares and are one of the factors adding beauty to the landscape of the region. For keen photographers there are many hundreds of- years-old olive trees that still exist, with trunks that are truly sculptural, an excess of material providing hours and hours of pleasure. It is from these companions of humankind throughout the centuries that the olive springs forth, a food with a long tradition, which continues to “be sweetened” as in olden days, to be seasoned with salt and oregano and to make its presence felt in all Alentejan cuisine that is prized and respected. The customs of home cooking, which have been passed on to restaurants, are maintained: the first olives, gathered from October onwards, are eaten after being cut into pieces or pounded; for the rest of the
production, the olives are conserved until they become ready in the following March. As far as industrial production is concerned, the only conserved Alentejan olives that have the DOP – Denominação de Origem Protegida (PDO – protected denomination of origin) seal are those of Elvas and Campo Maior.

In relation to **azeite** (olive oil), there are three DOP brands: Azeite de Moura, Azeites do Norte Alentejano and Azeite do Alentejo Interior, all with distinctive flavours. DOP olive oil is Virgin or Extra Virgin, that is, it is produced exclusively through mechanical processes using low temperatures. It only receives its classification when the unequivocal connection between its quality and the natural and human factors of its region of origin are proved. The production of Azeites biológicos (organic olive oils) is famously expanding.

Producers of Azeite DOP are to be found in: Sousel, Santo Amaro, Borba, Redondo and Reguengos de Monsaraz (Azeites do Norte Alentejano); Moura, Serpa and Vila Verde Ficalho (Azeite de Moura); Portel, Vidigueira and Torrão (Azeite do Alentejo Interior).

In Moura, don’t miss a visit to the Lagar (olive press) de Varas do Fojo, transformed into the Olive Oil Museum, and in Campo Maior to the Lagar-Museu do Palácio Visconde d’Olivã. In the latter town, it is worth getting to know the Museu do Café (coffee museum).

**Enchidos – Cured Meats and Sausages**

They are eaten in every way possible: as they emerge from being smoked, boiled, fried, roasted, alone, as accompaniments, and as ingredients in various traditional dishes. The process of production is slow. It begins with the selection of the most suitable meat, which is then pricked and seasoned. The seasonings are not always the same, but the most common involve pimento, garlic, salt, wine and spices. After being seasoned, the meat is left to marinate to absorb the flavours. When it is ready, the natural skins are filled and hung on battens while they go through various stages of curing, all of which is done slowly, in the open air and in the smoke from holm-oak wood. The tradition is still maintained today: a person who kills a pig, whatever the number of fridges and freezer rooms may be, never gives up curing meats and sausages. At the same time, this ancestral way of doing things has entered industry, as one of the requirements for obtaining certification which, with respect to different kinds of sausages (**painho, chouriço, morcela, cacholeira banca, lombo enguitado, farinheira**, etc.), is identified by the IGP seal.

There are producers in Portalegre, Póvoa e Meadas, Elvas, Arronches, Fronteira, Sousel, Cano, Estremoz and Borba. Many of these belong to the the “Rota dos Sabores do Alentejo” (“Alentejo Tastes Routes”), an initiative which makes it possible for people to visit their establishments, with prior booking, to taste their products and to buy directly from the producer. Information from www.rotadossabores.com

**Presunto (Cured Ham)**

The **presunto** in the Alentejo is produced in Campo Maior, Elvas, Santana da Serra (Ouirique) and Barrancos. Presunto de Barrancos DOP, the only one with this seal of
origin, is obtained solely from the leg of pigs of the Raça Alentejana breed, reared under the Montanheira regime. The leg must have a minimum weight of 5 Kg, have an agreeable taste, be very smooth, delicate and slightly salty, and sometimes a touch piquant. The fat is shiny and aromatic. One of the characteristics which differentiates it from other brands is the fact that, thanks to the microclimate of the zone, it is air-cured, slowly, without any use of smoke. The result is excellent and justifies a trip to visit the producers who, as well as ham, also delight us with tasty enchidos.

THE SWEETMEATS THAT NEVER TASTED BITTER

We end with the sweetmeats, another flavourful voyage that is not to be missed. Gluttons will have to contain themselves because each area has its own sweets – and there are many! – and the nuns in the convents of time past never let their reputation fall into alien hands as far as sweetmeats are concerned. The tradition has come down from long ago and has brought us aromas of spices which the Alentejo has practically never ceased to have, whether they came by land, in the hands of Arab and Jewish merchants or, later, when they began to arrive by sea. This is the case with the perfumed canela (cinnamon), which goes into the composition of so many traditional sweet dishes.

In the houses of the poor and the rich, on days of celebration or to sweeten the harshness of everyday life, the imagination of the artists of the kitchen was creating a full recipe book. As well as the cakes from the bakery, which are baked in the same oven as where the bread is made, throughout the Alentejo we find the nógados (nougats) and the filhós (puff pastries), the bolos finto (fermented cakes) and the folares da Páscoa (Easter cakes), the azevias natalícias com recheios de gila ou de grão (pastries filled with gourd or chickpeas). Among many others, all linked to local traditions.

Many of the well-known cakes and sweets of the Alentejo have their origins in the convents (conventual). The ingredients that make these delicacies are easy to find: sugar, eggs (lots of eggs!), bread, milk, cheese, curd, cinnamon, almonds, gourd and little more. Anyone could lay their hands on a recipe and try. Making them with excellence, though, is not for everyone, because the secrets have been guarded and passed down, jealously, from generation to generation. And the sweetmeats, like the savouries, also demand the “touch”.

Happily, today we have a weighty factor in our favour: so strong is the conviction that “conventual” sweetmeats and puddings are also part of our heritage that, in order to taste them, we do not have be the privileged guest at one of those houses where there was always a grandmother or an aunt who made some sweets to eat and to cry for more. They are now part, as in the Alentejo they always were, of the menus of good restaurants. But, delight upon delight, they are also sold in specialised pastelarias.
(cafes/pastryshops), whole or in slices, which allows us to transform a simple lunch into an experience that lifts us heavenwards.

Useful information:
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