

# SLOW LANE



The medieval village of Montargil, Alentejo

Skip the Algarve and the busy streets of Lisbon and venture inland to the region of Alentejo, where you will discover exceptional wine and laid-back luxury

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At a time when we're all learning how to slow down, live sustainably and savour the moment, it's well worth a visit to the Alentejo region in Portugal, where that is the way of life. Our guide Ruben explains that the people of Alentejo don't need to use the word sustainability, it comes naturally to them.

This is not just lip service for the tourism industry. Perhaps, as the cork-production capital of the world, the people of Alentejo have learned to be patient in their pursuit of quality. A cork oak must be at least 25 years old before its bark can be harvested, then again every nine to ten years. And despite this lengthy process, the cork forests of the Alentejo, like its tourism industry, are growing.

It's only fitting that the home of cork is also the biggest wine producer of Portugal. Wine has been made here since Roman times (more on that later), and while Douro is more commonly spoken of for Portuguese wine, viticulture in Alentejo has been innovating and expanding for the past two decades.

You may be wondering then why you don't see too many Portuguese wines on menus in Ireland. While familiar grape varieties from France and Spain make it easier for us to order what we know and like, like Malbec or Tempranillo, these single grape varietals are not as popular in Portugal.

Portugal, along with Georgia, the birthplace of wine, has the most diversity of grapes in the world. And so they

tend to make blends rather than single grape wines, which result in more complex wines. Our trip saw us drive the length of Alentejo, with its varying microclimates and landscape, we realised the scope of what they could produce here.

Some grapes to familiarise yourself with include Arinto, a white wine grape known for its refreshing acidity and gentle flavours of apple and citrus. Touring Nacional is known as Portugal's finest red grape variety, which has intense flavours of raspberries and blackcurrants.

## YOUR FIRST STOP

With such a vast network, it would be overwhelming to try and decide what wineries to visit. But a stop at **Rota dos Vinhos do Alentejo** in Evora, a tasting room and information centre that will help acquaint you with the region, will help you to plan an itinerary – and develop a taste for the wine.

There are 250 producers in the region, with 71 prepared to wel-





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come visitors with restaurants and tours. For €3pp you can taste six wines, and if you spend more than €10 on bottles of wine here, the tasting is free (yes, you read those figures correctly).

Evora itself is a UNESCO world heritage site. One landmark not to be missed is the **São Francisco Church**, which houses the **Capela dos Ossos**, the Chapel of Bones.

The walls and ceilings are covered in the skulls and bones of hundreds of bodies, exhumed from the city's graveyards in the 17th century. The Franciscan friars wanted to convey a message of the fragility of human life, and so at the chapel entrance a message reads "We bones that are here, for yours we wait". Certainly a thought to mull over with a glass of wine.

## WINE TOUR

**Monte da Ravasqueira** is a picturesque estate which was once home to world champion Lusitano horses, and still houses a unique horse carriage museum. Two decades ago the de Mello family turned their focus to producing wines on the 3,000 hectare property.

This professional tour through the vineyards gives a sense of the scale of the operation, before a tour of the winery and cellar provides an intensive insight into the process. But lunch was the real highlight.

After enjoying olives, honeys and unique wine jellies made on the property, we sampled two staples of the **Alentejo** diet. The first, hearty main of the local speciality **migash**, a savoury bread pudding dish served with pork ribs, and then **cornbread** and salted codfish – an ingredient used in countless ways in Alentejan cooking. For €40pp, you can enjoy the tour and three course lunch with red and white wine. ☉



## R&R:

For a casual yet elegant place to stay, **Herdade do Soboroso** feels like a secret escape, with just 10 rooms in the villa, surrounded by endless olive trees and vineyards. Here we fell for the **Reserva Barrique Select** red and **Cellar Selection** rose, and enjoyed a lunch of octopus salad, codfish tartlets and more **migash** and pork. The whites here are particularly crisp, thanks to the microclimate which makes it about 5°C warmer.

To truly unwind, book into the country house hotel and spa, **Malhadinha Nova**. The family-run estate is the most luxurious place we visited, and has a variety of accommodation options to suit whether you and friends want to book a stunning private villa or choose a peaceful suite in the main house, with a picturesque infinity pool outside your door.

Using traditional methods and boasting vineyards with advantageous slopes perfect for creating high quality wines, it's worth even just booking in for dinner in the restaurant to take a chance to sample their huge selection of wines. Here you will also discover distinctive hallmarks of Alentejo – the indigenous black pig rooting in the fields, or the Alentejo Mastiff protectively roaming the grounds.

## WHEN IN ROME

Alentejo is the guardian of a historical wine production method that will be unlike anything you have seen before. **Vinho de Talha** is a Roman method where the wine is fermented in large clay vessels (*talha*), and the ancient methods are still used today. This includes stirring the wine by hand with a long paddle at least twice daily and even into the night during fermentation, to prevent a potential explosion that would occur if rising grape solids were to block the mouth of the *talha*.

At **Honrado Vineyards**, home of **Vinho De Talha Artesanal**, we were lucky enough to fill our glasses straight from the spout near the bottom of the *talha*. We then sat down to a traditional lunch of cheeses, simple stews and a platter of cakes, while at the table next to us, the diners crooned the distinctive polyphonic traditional singing of the region. Known as **Cante**, it's also protected by UNESCO, and the repetitive melodies are mesmerising.

## EXPERIENCES

You will need a car to explore Alentejo, but the roads are excellent and there is no traffic. Visit the medieval hilltop village of **Monsareiz** close to the Spanish border to appreciate a 360° view of the Portuguese landscape. Pretty white buildings are closely knitted together against the wind, and inside you will find traditional coffee shops (enjoy an espresso and a custard tart at the counter to blend in with the locals) and gift shops filled with cork products and hand crafts.

**Ervideira Wine Shop** in Monsareiz is a gem where you should stock up on award-winning wines at incredible prices. Or, sneak up to the rooftop terrace to enjoy a glass of wine and soak up the sun, surrounded by fruit trees.

Overlooking the town of Elvas is a unique pentagonal fortress, built in the 18th century. **Forte da Graça's** unique shape and 144 canons ensured that it survived several attacks in the early 1800s. Later it served as a political prison until 1974, and walking through the hallways feels eerie.

## A TASTE OF PORTUGAL

**Kevin O'Hara** brings wines from these vineyards to the Irish market. Visit [portuguesevine.com](http://portuguesevine.com) to discover stockists near you. Plan your trip to Alentejo at [visitalentejo.com](http://visitalentejo.com).

There are daily flights to Lisbon from Dublin with **Ryanair**, which last just under three hours. The drive to Evora is approx 90 minutes. Book your flights at [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com). ☉

