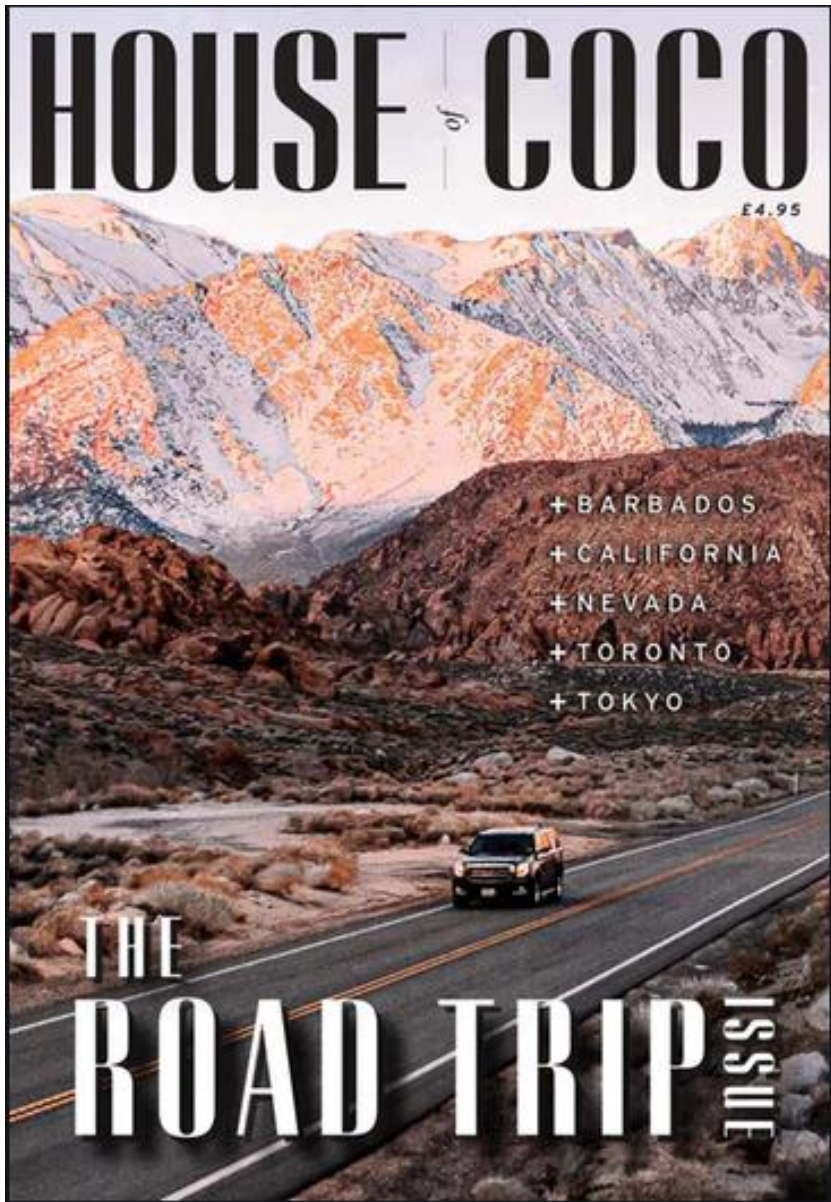


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THE ROAD TRIP ISSUE



Évora to Algarve: A Portuguese road trip

| WORDS: ZANA WILBERFORCE

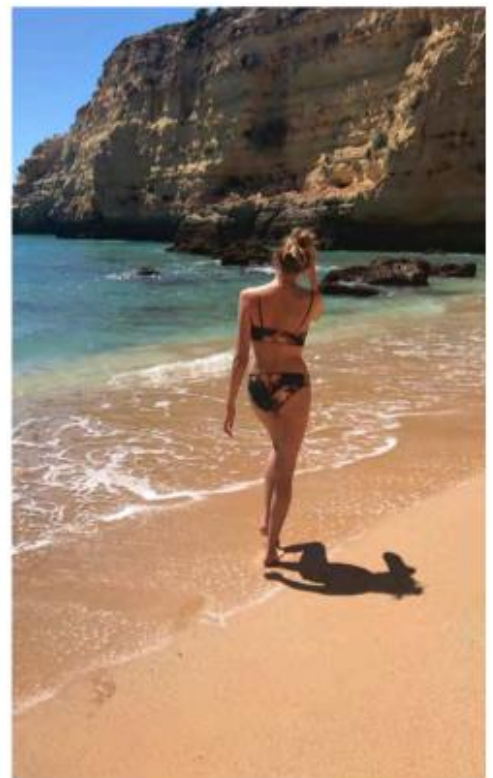
Within 45 minutes from the airport, we passed sun-dappled vineyards that stretched for miles; hundreds of trees kept cropping up row by row, wafting hints of orange and eucalyptus in and around the vehicle's interior. Various portions of the green quilted land still looked untouched, save for the occasional farmhouse perched contently in solitude on a hill, minding its own business amidst the citrus orchards and gnarled cork trees. Swerving through Alentejo's green and golden plains felt like an immediate detox from London's more manic lifestyle, sending me into a soothing state of respite.

Tivoli Évora Ecoresort is a large white building that almost resembles a contemporary art museum from its exterior. Inside, it could be mistaken for an interior design museum from the display of stylish mismatched chairs and Scandi-style lamps dotted around the lobby. The walls are lined with rows of cork oak, an environmentally-friendly material used for thermal and acoustic insulation.

The suites are spacious and minimal in design with a private terrace ideal for basking in the sun and sipping an early morning espresso with a local newspaper. Even with the doors closed, sounds of birds chirping seep through in stark contrast to the usual neighbourly ruptures and screeching foxes I'm used to in good ol' south London.

After a post-flight refresh in our suites, the rest of the evening was spent making culinary classics in the newly renovated villa with its own private outdoor pool. Eggs, vegetables and cooking utensils lay sprawled out along an extended dining table fit for a family of 12 or more. My dietary requirements meant that I was partially put in charge of the *sericaia*, a fluffy southern Portuguese cake made from eggs, flour, milk and sprinkles of cinnamon. Whilst the others prepared Évora's classic *Migas Alentejanas*, a dish that requires mashing bread in a bucket of water to give it a polenta-esque texture, I sampled the chef's zesty vegetarian risotto which is said to be one of the hotel's go-to dishes for its comforting aftertaste.

The next morning was spent outside the



hotel grounds exploring Évora city and learning about its 2,000 years of history. Just off Portugal's A6 freeway and over an hour's drive from Lisbon, Évora is the capital of Portugal's upper Alentejo region. There's the grand Templo Romano, a Roman ruin that was identified for many years as the Temple of Diana, though there's no direct connection with the goddess of hunting. Sé cathedral still has markings in the walls, carved out by the builders for proof of work and payment. Standing in the site of a former mosque, there's a transitional mix of Romanesque, Moorish and Gothic styles (known as Manueline), as well as 18th-century opulence from centuries of reconstruction and renovation.

Before a traditional Portuguese dinner at Sem-Fim, we stopped off in the mountains of Monsaraz which took us back through the Alentejan countryside into Portugal's past. This tiny village was originally built for protection against invasion from centuries of being captured and conquered by opposing religious institutions. It also overlooks Alqueva Lake, a ginormous man-made dam covering a surface area of 250 sq. km, and is 83km from end to end. The village is perched uphill, detached from the rest of the world in its own little bubble. The locals have everything they need: artisan shops, a handful of bars and restaurants and history right on their doorstep etched in the narrow cobblestoned paths.

We were back on the road the next day, travelling amongst rolling hills to Tivoli Carvoeiro Algarve Resort. As we pulled up outside the large glass entrance to the hotel, the Atlantic Ocean could be glimpsed right through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors at the opposite end of the hotel. My room, which happened to be handily located right by the spa and gym on the fourth floor, included a spacious balcony and a view of the pool below and the sea ahead. It would have been the perfect moment to crack open a chilled Sagres under the sun, but we had an alfresco lunch to tend to at the hotel's Azur Bar terrace.

The Azur Bar is the place for lazy lunches or cocktails designed by the hotel's mixologists. It would be wise to opt for the chef's tasting menu for the full experience of the region's culinary delights, starting with the seafood cataplana compiled of mussels and shrimp followed by fresh grilled codfish and spinach drizzled with olive oil. Food breaks might be mandatory owed to the generous portions. For dessert, the chocolate and mint mousse arrived in a little mason jar topped with fresh raspberries and petals.

Once the food coma had died down a bit, we journeyed over to Quinta da Cabrita

by car to tour the winery and sample the region's well-structured wines. One room looked like a scientist's laboratory filled with beakers and cylinders used for testing the wine's acidity and sugar levels. It was remarkable watching the wine bottles being packaged on what appeared to be a floating conveyor belt, a sight that wine lovers aren't usually exposed to in a local supermarket. The tour ended with a personalised tasting session backdropped by mottled-green vineyards and wide blue skies.

In between lounging by the pool and taking a trip down to the hotel's secret beach, we also embarked on a walking tour of Sete Vales Suspensos along the wild beaches of the Atlantic coast, framed by soaring cliffs and wrought limestone rocks across the region's breadth. The trees along this trail are all slightly tilted in the same direction, leaning away from Morocco which is directly across the Atlantic from this spot.

A few hours later, we were atop the hotel's sleek Sky Bar sipping passion fruit and pear cocktails served in pineapple-shaped glasses. The rooftop is beach chic, decked in white chairs and sporadic towering palm trees in a nod to summer. In this moment, the thought of returning to unpredictable weather and sweltering Tube journeys, though imminent, felt far and distant. ■

■ **Nightly rates at Tivoli Carvoeiro Algarve Resort start from £89 for a double room on B&B basis. For more information, visit: www.minorhotels.com/pt/tivoli/tivoli-carvoeiro**

■ **Nightly rates at Tivoli Evora Ecoresort start from £64 for a premier suite on B&B basis. For more information, visit: www.minorhotels.com/pt/tivoli/tivoli-carvoeiro**



