

Grape expectations:
wine harvest at
Paço de Calheiros.
Opposite, walking in
the hills with views
of Lima Valley

Trails & bibulations

Pilgrims of old walked Portugal's Caminho de Santiago with no comforts. Now you can do it with soft pillows in grand mansions, fine wine and great food. **Sarah Baxter** strikes out

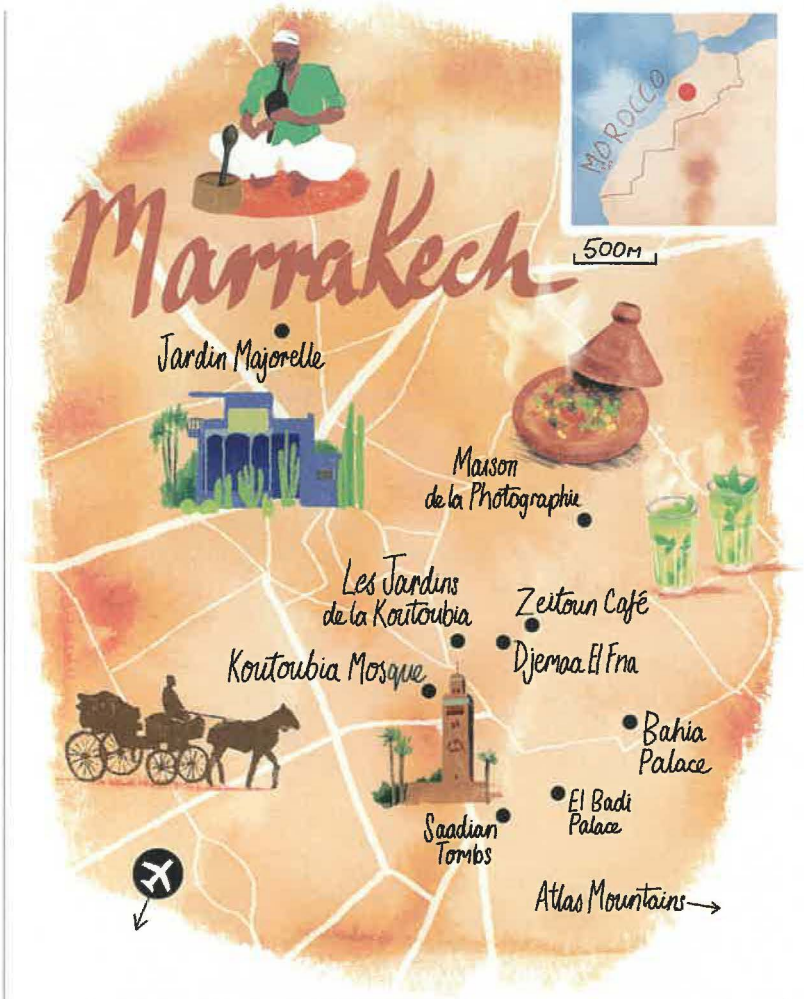
Photography: **James Tye**

Retail detail: opposite, all set to shop the souks; messing around in Jardin Majorelle; the Saadian Tombs; palms reflected in Jardin Majorelle; kebab skewers at Kasbah Café. Below, a stroll through Bahia Palace

Bahia Palace, a 19th-century extravaganza, the boys are (we all are) seduced by riotous tilework, fountains and stained-glass windows, which create pools of coloured light for them to play in. Realising there's absolutely no need to subject them to the information boards, we submit to a 'secret adventure', popping out from shady passageways into mosaic-tiled courtyards, where the Grand Vizier's concubines once lounged.

Back further still in time, the nearby ruins of 16th-century El Badi Palace require a little more imagination, but the storks that nest on its crumbling ramparts are a hit – swooping low over our heads like B-52 bombers. By the time we reach the Saadian Tombs, though, the sun is high in the sky and two tired little tourists are wilting. William sits down in protest – until bribed with the promise of a ride in a calèche, one of those horse-drawn carriages seemingly tailor-made for children's pleasure (OK, adults', too). We trot off at a pace in the direction, I hope, of the Ville Nouvelle. After a morning of mosaics and history, I have a surprise up my sleeve...

Stepping through the gates of Jardin Majorelle is like stumbling into a psychedelic desert oasis. Cartoonish cactuses soar six metres high. Groves of banana palms and thick bamboo surround pools patrolled by koi carp. Everywhere there are expanses of rich 'Majorelle' blue, created by the garden's original owner, landscape painter Jacques Majorelle. The fashion legend Yves Saint Laurent fell in love with the place and bought it in 1980, before gifting it to the city. His ashes were scattered here. After the madness of the medina, it's a relief to potter along its shady paths. The boys skip ahead, on the lookout for frogs and terrapins among the lily ponds, towards a pretty cafe in the grounds. A serene last port of call for a perfect family moment, talking about monkeys, cobras and baseball caps as the day softens into dusk and we tuck in to delicious bowlfuls of Moroccan-date ice-cream – exotically unfamiliar, yet effortlessly easy to swallow. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go packaged

BA Holidays (ba.com) has three nights at Les Jardins de la Koutoubia for two adults and two children from £579pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick. Or try **Kuoni** (kuoni.co.uk).

Go independent

BA flies to Marrakech from Heathrow and Gatwick, from £85 return. **EasyJet** (easyjet.com) flies from Manchester and Gatwick, from £50 return.

Where to stay

Outside the medina, **Beldi Country Club** (beldicountryclub.com; family suites sleeping four from £238, B&B) is a 15-minute taxi from the city, with chic Moroccan decor and two kids' pools. Families with older children could try **Riad Kniza** (riadkniza.com; doubles from £135, B&B) in the medina, which has a larger-than-average pool and rooftop terrace, or **Riad Adore** (riadadore.com; doubles from £128, B&B), with its library of DVDs and games for the kids and a hammam for Mum and Dad.

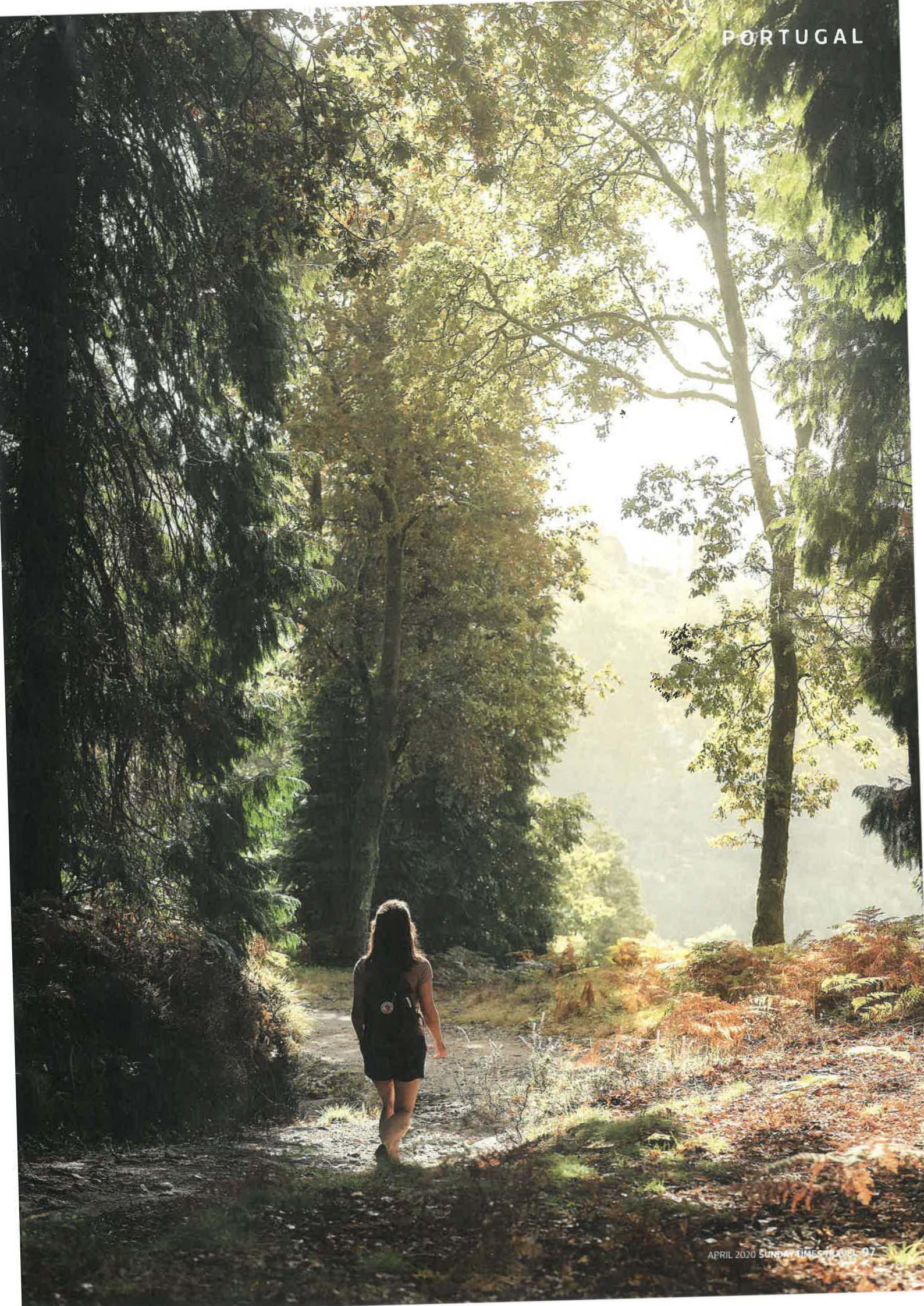
What to do

Maison de la Photographie (maison delaphotographie.ma; £4, under-12s free) has stunning Berber portraits and a great rooftop cafe. Avoid tour groups by making an early-morning visit to **Bahia Palace** (palais-bahia.com; £6, under-5s free), then see the storks nesting at **El Badi Palace** (palais-el-badi.com; £6, under-5s free) before the midday heat, as there's little shade here. After admiring the **Saadian Tombs** (tombeaux-saadiens.com; £6, under-5s free), recharge at the **Kasbah Café** (kasbahcafemarrakech.com) opposite. If you've got kids you can skip the lines at **Jardin Majorelle** (jardinmajorelle.com; £6, under-12s free) – there's a separate ticket booth for families. A **calèche** will cost you about £12 for 20 minutes (but you'll need to haggle).

Further information

Plan a bigger itinerary at **visitmorocco.com**. Then get in touch with **Stubborn Mule** (stubbornmuletravel.com), which has an excellent selection of journeys tailor-made for families.





W

e arrived late at the Quinta de Malta, but Senhora Sobreiro had cooked for us anyway. She

didn't mind, she said; she was happy popping into the kitchen between soap operas. My boyfriend and I were far too British to admit we'd already eaten. And, anyway, we still polished off her fried green eggs, veg plucked straight from the farm and cracking crème brûlée. Not to mention the bottle of Vinho Verde, the region's speciality 'green wine'. 'It's not one of ours,' she said as she poured some into our pimpled-glass goblets. The Quinta de Malta estate, founded in the Portuguese village of Durrães in the 16th century, only recently went organic and the new vines aren't yet productive, she explained.

The meal was delicious, and it was midnight by the time we hit our room, with its castle-thick walls, age-creaky bedstead and faint whiff of church. We pulled back the crisp bedsheets, slumped in and fell fast asleep.

Historically, I don't think most pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela dined on crème brûlée, ate with monogrammed silverware or snuggled under delicately crocheted coverlets. But, then, we weren't making any claims to abstinence or piety on our trip. We'd decided to follow the Portuguese section of the popular Caminho de Santiago (aka the Way of St James) – the pilgrimage route to Galicia from Porto, via the Minho region – in greater style. Here, I thought, we could walk like *peregrinos* (pilgrims), but sleep like kings.

The Minho, Portugal's lush-green, agrarian, northwesternmost portion, has a particular draw: it has one of the country's highest concentration of manor houses. Its main port, Viana do Castelo, waved off many 15th-century voyages of discovery and welcomed back lots of New World wealth, which was channelled into fabulous mansions. Some are now ruins, but many have been saved, often able to offer princely stays at reasonable prices. Quinta de Malta (less than £70 a night) proved a good start. What other beautiful bargains might we find?

The next morning, we woke to views of the fertile valley, breakfasted on the Quinta's own kiwi fruits and

I don't think pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela dined historically on crème brûlée. But we weren't making any claims to piety

then set off on our pilgrimage. We strolled along lanes splattered with fallen oranges, past gardens full of olive trees and amid pine and eucalyptus, picking up the Caminho near the Ponte das Tábuas bridge, its slabs worn smooth by 500 years' worth of *peregrinos*.

From here we wound around bird-skimmed fields to Balugães and the moss-mantled steps up to the church of Santuário Nossa Senhora da Aparecida. It was here, it is said, that in 1702 the Virgin Mary made her first appearance in Portugal, giving a deaf-mute shepherd boy his hearing and speech so he could instruct his father to build a chapel. The large Baroque church was closed, but a shelter holding remnants of votive candles and a cabinet full of dolls' limbs added an unexpected hint of the macabre.

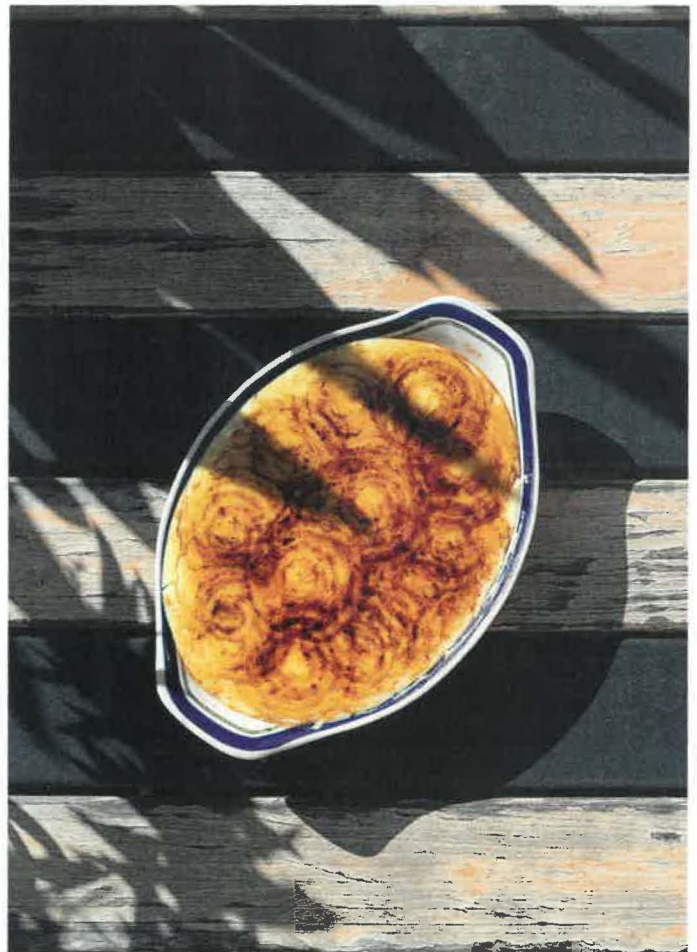
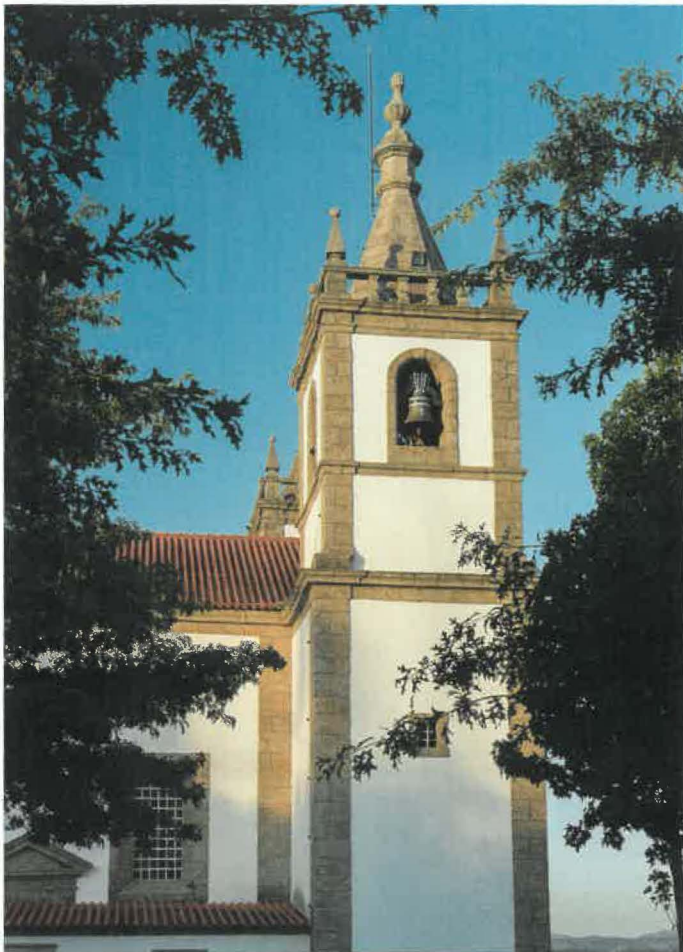
Over the next few kilometres, following the scallop-shell signs that indicate the pilgrims' route, we felt increasingly like frauds: many people hailed us with cries of '*Bom Caminho!*', congratulating our long, hard pilgrimage to Spain... Little did they know that after a few hours of hiking amid fields and *hórreos* (the region's stilted granaries), we would be ensconced in a former 17th-century nobleman's home eating cake.

The Quinta do Casal do Condado, in the hill-hugged hamlet of Facha, shouldn't really be standing. Fifteen years ago this mansion was a roofless hollow; now it has been revived for tourists with considerable architectural flair (yet still a low room rate). The original stone loggia fronts a smart interior of historic features and modern art. In the grounds, a pool and tennis court sit alongside the chestnut grove, orchards of oak, camellia and cedar, and a frog-friendly lake. We sat for a while in one of our ➤

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The Nossa Senhora da Aparecida sanctuary in Balugães is only open on Sundays and holy days; if you don't like crowds, avoid it August 14–15, when tens of thousands of pilgrims descend

Tower of strength: opposite, the Santuário Nossa Senhora da Aparecida in Balugães; **crème brûlée** at Quinta de Malta; **Vinho Verde** Centre in Ponte de Lima; **room** in the Paço de Calheiros .



Green travel:
farmland in the
Minho region.
Opposite,
the Avenida dos
Plátanos; spicy
sausages for sale
in the market
at Ponte de Lima

Aristocracy seemed to be coming at me
from all angles. By dinnertime, I had
become very aware of my use of cutlery



room's window seats, a cosy niche in the near-metre-thick walls. Then we sank into sofas in the lounge and discussed the Primeira Liga's football problems with hotel manager Vitor. We also talked food, which is a big deal in the Minho region. *Caldo verde* (cabbage soup) is popular, but the main allure is *arroz de sarrabulho*, rice cooked in pig's blood, meat and spices, served with more meat and accompanied by cupfuls of red Vinho Verde. 'People come from Porto just to eat it,' Vitor told us. 'Though it's not to every visitor's taste...'

The town of Ponte de Lima is considered *sarrabulho* central, and was where we were heading next. As we left Quinta do Casal, the sun was breaking over the hills and warming the slinking cats, mangy chickens and yards of tumbled machinery. And it warmed us, too, as we threaded past the Minhotan vineyards – in this region, farmers string vines around the field edges like an organic fence, leaving the centres free for other crops.

Before long we reached the old hamlet of Passagem, where a pole-propelled ferry used to convey traders and pilgrims across the River Lima. Now, the only little boat visible sat anchored mid-river and unmanned – there was no way to cross. Instead, we turned upstream, following the waterside path to Ponte de Lima.

This path afforded a surprisingly grand arrival into Portugal's oldest town, leading us there through the Avenida dos Plátanos, more like a cathedral than an avenue of trees, the planes soaring high as a nave and touching as if in prayer. Ponte de Lima as a whole was a pleasant surprise. I'd had no expectations of this town, but it was just right: an agreeable mix of the well-preserved and the atmospherically ruined, with pavement cafes, mountains rearing behind, a river running through it and an extraordinary Roman bridge.

We stayed in Ponte de Lima for two nights and, I'm afraid to say, at every meal chickened out of *sarrabulho*. An ill-advised lunch of *orelha de porco* (cartilaginous lumps of pigs' ears) rather put us off pork products, too. However, it didn't deter us from sampling more of the Vinho Verde. These young wines from the Minho DOC are low in alcohol, high in freshness and becoming more fashionable. Our tasting session at the Vinho Verde Centre took us from a lightly sparkling Loureiro to a floral Alvarinho to an earthy, red Vinhão. The region, our sommelier said, has 'a difficult romance with red wines'; this one smelled like perm solution and tasted like soil, but, they say, goes wonderfully well with *sarrabulho*...

When we'd had our fill of Ponte de Lima, we left by crossing the river, just as the Romans did. A squadron of wooden statues stands on the left bank as a reminder of when they marched northward, then refused to go further, believing the Lima to be the Underworld's River Lethe, the 'river of forgetfulness'. A Roman general had to wade across and shout out all the soldiers' names to prove his memory was intact before they would follow. We heard only piped classical music as we walked over the town's eponymous bridge, five arches of which are old Roman, the rest 'new' medieval.

MENU DECODER

Check menus for 'people' symbols, which are sometimes used to indicate how many a dish will feed. For some dishes, including *sarrabulho*, the minimum size is for two people (and is usually big enough to feed more)

Inside the church on the bridge's far side, a lady was arranging Sunday flowers, while outside the adjacent pilgrim hostel, *peregrinos* were adjusting their backpacks, readying for the off.

We were all headed the same way, north along the Caminho, through the Lima Valley. The trail led through fields and villages, past streams hopping with tiny frogs and the gateways of old estates. Climbing gently, the valley opened into a spread of patchwork greens, neat terraces, whitewashed and terracotta, and swirls of smoke. This landscape is still dominated by small-scale farming and the views have changed little for centuries.

In some ways, our final stop, the Paço de Calheiros hasn't changed much either. The Calheiros family has lived in this spot, lording it over the surrounding vineyards, for 700 years. After spearheading an extensive renovation, the current Count of Calheiros has opened the *paço* (palace) to guests, from about £120 a night. ▶



Spiritual high: the countryside near Durrães; the pool at Quinta de Malta. Opposite, wine-tasting at the Vinho Verde Centre

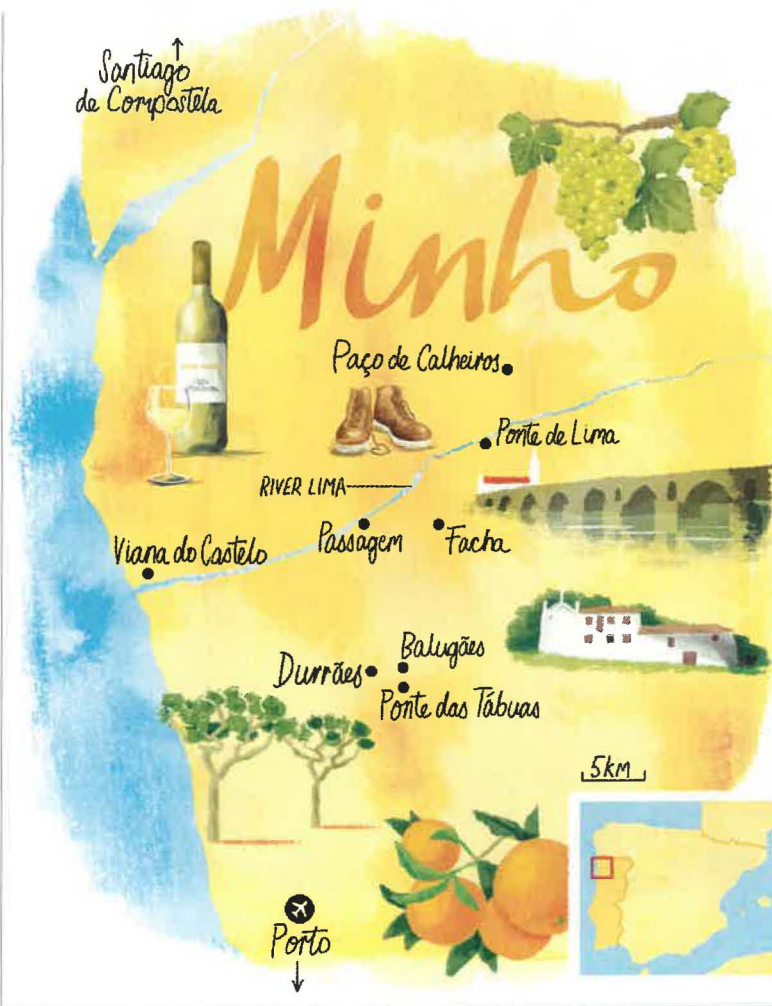


'The Lima Valley is like a petit Loire – but with manor houses instead of châteaux,' Count Francisco said as we walked down the long drive of his stunning ancestral home. 'The government has encouraged owners of historic houses like this to restore their heritage.'

Eyes gleaming, grey curls escaping their pomade, he showed us around the ornate family chapel; the guest room with the bed built for Napoleon; the wine cellar turned breakfast room; the outhouse turned wine cellar; the pool; the parterre garden; and the orange grove. Later, flinging open our wisteria-draped French doors, I felt I'd climbed several rungs of the social ladder – it's called a *paço*, because it's a place where royalty would deign to stay (visitors have included King Philippe of Belgium).

That evening, after we'd walked through the surrounding hills and forests, we joined the Count in the sitting room, full of old portraits and knick-knacks. There was also a society magazine featuring the wedding of the Count's son, who has been dubbed 'Portugal's Prince William'. Aristocracy seemed to be coming at me from all manner of eccentric angles. By dinnertime, I'd become very aware of my use of cutlery... But the Count, of course, was the perfect host, filling the room with bonhomie.

Before we retired to bed, the Count showed us the Calheiros coat of arms: a pair of crossed walking sticks and the five scallop shells and three stars of St James. 'For centuries pilgrims stopped here on their way to Santiago,' he said. 'A 12th-century codex on the Caminho mentions Paço de Calheiros as a place to visit.' So we really were living like pilgrims after all. I'll raise my antique glass of sparkling Vinho Verde to that. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

EasyJet flies to Porto from Bristol, Gatwick, Luton and Manchester, from £23 one way. **Ryanair** flies from Stansted, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, from £15 one way. To reach Durrães the same day by public transport, try to choose a flight that lands in Porto no later than 5pm to connect with the 7.20pm train (failing that the last train departs at 10pm). Single Porto–Durrães train fares cost from £5. A taxi costs about £50.

Where to stay

Quinta de Malta (quintademalta.com) has doubles from £67, B&B. **Quinta do Casal do Condado** (quintadocasal.com), in Facha, has doubles from £64, B&B. Ponte de Lima's **Paço de Calheiros** (pacodecalheiros.com) has doubles from £120, B&B. If you want to stay in Porto at the beginning and/or end of your walk, try the stylish **Mercador Guest House** (mercador.com.pt), which has doubles from £58, B&B.

Go packaged

Inntravel (inntravel.co.uk) has a seven-night Manor Houses of the Minho self-guided walking holiday, which includes Ponte de Lima, gentle hiking along parts of the Caminho de Santiago, staying in characterful manor-house accommodation; the trip costs from £795pp, excluding flights. Or try **Sunvil** (sunvil.co.uk), which offers a week staying in Minho *pousadas* from £684pp, B&B, including flights and car hire.

Where to eat

Casa do Provedor (casadoprovedor.pt), in Ponte de Lima, serves Portuguese specialities; try the blackened pork (£11) or *sarrabulho* (£8). Or, on the opposite side of the bridge from Ponte de Lima's town centre, stop at **Restaurante Petiscas** (restaurantepetiscas.pt) to eat namesake *petiscas* (snacks) such as codfish roes (£3.40) or mains like the speciality veal steak (£13).

Further information

See visitportoandnorth.travel.



