



Classic Quinta style at Paço Dianha, a 'palace' thanks to a royal visit

On the River of Forgetfulness

North of Porto, around the river Lima, some of the best rural accommodation is in Quintas - old Portuguese manor houses. Carol Wright finds a tranquil world

Photography by Carol Wright

Roman soldiers believed the river Lima was equivalent to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. It was so beautiful that if they crossed it they would forget their own land and family. Livy describes how troops refused a crossing in 138BC and were only persuaded by their leader Decimus Junius Brutus who snatched the standard and forged ahead.

Having taken the plunge, literally, a Roman mark remains in the shape of Ponte de Lima's sturdy bridge. The Lima is one of four almost parallel rivers running east/west across northern Portugal. The Lima's length can be driven in around two hours, but its tranquil ambience is not to be rushed: river-bent roads slow the driver - as well as overlaid motorbikes, wine lorries, oxen under carved yokes or women bearing hay bundles on their heads like some fashionably bewigged 18th century dandy.

There are few hotels away from the coast, but excellent *pousadas* exist on the Minho river, north of the Lima, and at Guimarães. At Valença, the **São Teutónio** is snuggled into massive 13th century walls, looking down on the 1885 Eiffel bridge crossing the Minho river boundary to Spain. The

Dom Dinis at Vila Nova de Cerveira, also within ramparts, has rooms in old houses around a church and a modern glass box style restaurant overlooking the river. Both are good spots for meals on day drives. Minho specialities are beef from the lush water meadows, salmon, and lampry that may have done for our King John but is happily downed here, casseroled in red wine.

The Turihab Collection To provide accommodation in this area, Count Francisco de Calheiros set up what is known by the rather unlovely name of Turihab. This is a collection of privately owned houses - the majority around **Ponte de Lima** - offering bed and breakfast or self-catering apartments in converted outbuildings and cottages. Some of the houses are termed *paços* - little palaces - indicating a king has stayed there. Turihab has three categories and three price ranges, from £43 to £75 double per room or apartment night. *Casas Antigas* covers architecturally significant manor houses, mostly from the 17th and 18th centuries. *Quintas* and *Herdades* are farms and estates;

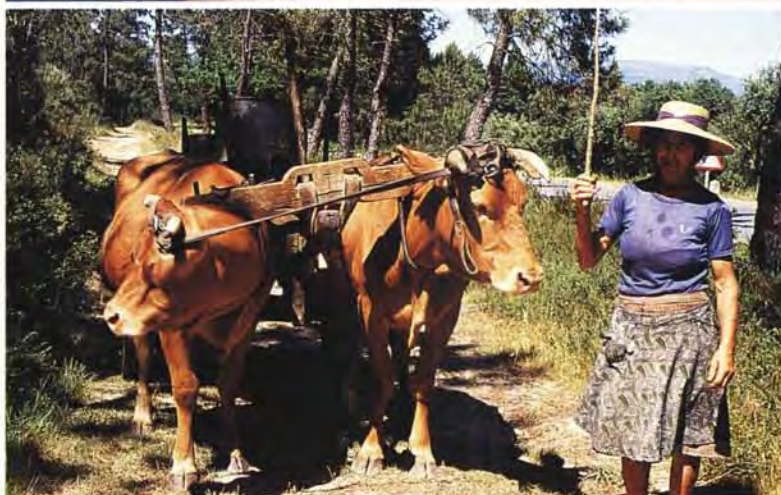
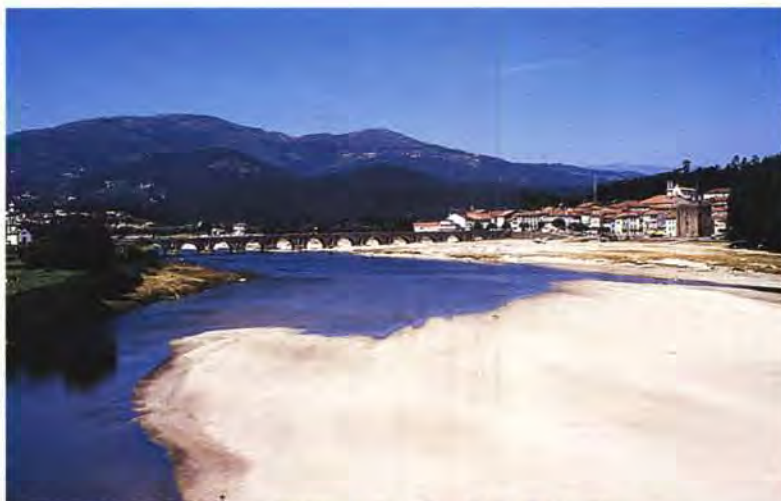
Casas Rusticas are simpler regional buildings. An impressive Minho area example is **Casa de Rodas** near **Monçao**, a 15th century house inhabited by the same family since 1566.

Reached from Porto up die-straight roads beside long breaker-bashed beaches, **Viana do Castelo** is the Lima's estuary gateway, a boat-building and cod-drying resort, noted for pastry shops and seafood - especially crab. A sample sweetmeat is usually offered along with a glass of local *vinho verde* in the backroom bar of the friendly tourist office, set in an old palace.

The best times to visit are May, June, September and October. In October visitors staying in wine estate houses can enjoy the vintage. In July and August the Spanish come to visit from over the border and in August there are traditional religious pilgrimages and celebrations that attract big crowds.

The festivals, numerous stone chapels, churches, crosses and river bank shrines - *alminhas* ('little souls') - overlay more earthy pagan traditions. São Gonçalo, the patron saint of marriage, is dominant in the region, and as patron saint of **Viana** his day in June is commemorated with bread baked in the form of the sexual act. It is also a surprise to find somewhat pornographic tiling on the walls of the Misericórdia church. In **Amarante**, another town proud of its baking skills, São Gonçalo's statue on his tomb in the Baroque church by the bridge has the toe worn away by the kisses of spinsters hopeful of his marriage blessing. Amarante honours Gonçalo with phallus-shaped, egg based sweetmeats called *foguetes*.

Hearty Meals Staying in private houses one can learn about local traditions and recipes from the owners. Food in these areas is hearty: soups, stews, *chispe* - pig's trotters with beans and cabbage. Along the Minho and Lima valleys one can see tall *couve* cabbages growing below vines or 'fencing' cottages. These are used in *caldo verde* soup, now a national dish. Good accommodation for foodies is **Casa Grande de Bandeira** in Viana, owned by an English teacher, Maria Teresa Mayer de Faria, who lets three rooms (the Turihab average) and like many other hosts cooks dinner by arrangement. In her tiled kitchen, overlooking a secluded garden, she may prepare hake in the Viana way - layered with potatoes and onions in mayonnaise, finally sprinkled with a little port. Her typically local desserts include *Arroz Doce* - sweet rice with lemon and cinnamon, a 'tart' of almonds that is more like a Swiss roll, and *Princess*



de Lima - boat shaped sweetmeats served with coffee.

At **Meadela**, near Viana, one can stay in the house - or in converted cowsheds - at **Casa do Ameal**, where the Araujo family has lived since 1669. Guests can use a vine-shaded barbecue area and are given produce from a vegetable and fruit plot. One of the most delightful spots is Antonio Julio de Alpuim's **Paço d'Anha**, a mile from the sea south of Viana - it's *paço* enti-

TOP: Northern Portugal's Lethe-like river Lima still work the land
MIDDLE: Casa de Rodas, kept in the family since 1566



ABOVE: grand entrance to Paço Caculheiros, Lima valley
RIGHT: the gardens of Casa dos Ribeiro, near Guimaraes



tlement comes from the king who hid there in 1580 when chased by Spanish soldiers. Alpuim, a former Lisbon wine trader, speaks good English - as do most hosts - though it's an idea to take along a dictionary. Bottles of estate wine are placed in fridges in the well-designed and equipped rustic apartments, with regional artefacts, tiled kitchens, walk-in granite fireplaces and bread oven alcoves. The apartments are named for the farm buildings they replaced: the distillery, where the powerful *bagação* (marc) was made, and the *quinteiros*, where corn was dried. A vine-covered courtyard separates the apartments from the paço where Alpuim shows off his antiques, magnificent traditional kitchen and cellars. In October guests can join the vintage and at any time can enjoy terraced gardens with wall fountains, leading on to tennis courts.

Rampant Vines Turning eastwards from Viana, along the Lima, vines grow regimented on upper slopes, but along the river scramble up trees, along pergolas, shade courtyards, line paço drives and compete with haystacks. Their grapes are turned into vinho verde, green in name and youth, with a slight fermentation sparkle - perfect well-chilled with fish and picnics. **Vila Real**, to the south of Guimaraes, is an area for red wines and Mateus rosé - sold much drier in Portugal; the formal gardens around the

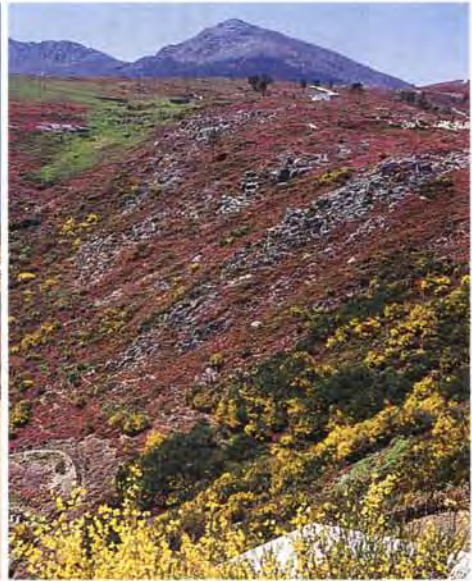
palace pictured on the label can be visited. Hosts in the paços and quintas are generous in offering their own wines, or perhaps *ginginha*, a cherry and almond brandy served with plain or sugared almonds.

Ponte de Lima, 23km from Viana, is an attractive town sporting a cooling plane tree avenue, a fortnightly Monday market held since 1125, the São Francisco church with gilded altars and pulpit, and a prison keep where handicrafts are now sold. Until the 1960s, prisoners let down baskets to cadge cigarettes or food off passers-by; the strings

have etched lines in the stone. The tourist office also sells handicrafts and acts as the booking centre for Turihab properties. The rooms in these houses are often furnished with family antiques and paintings. At **Paço Calheiros**, the bed linen is monogrammed at the family textile factory in Barcelos. Private tiled bathrooms adjoin rooms and hosts usually provide a sitting room with TV, books and card table. Days start with breakfast which may be served on the terrace or by the garden fountain: Brazilian coffee, freshly baked breads - a regional delight - home made preserves, a pile of estate-fresh fruit or juice, perhaps *queijos frescas* - light cream morning cheeses.

The home of Count Francisco de Calheiros, Turihab's founder, is 7km from Ponte de Lima, imposingly hill-set overlooking vineyards and river. Restored to its original 17th century design, it has six double main house rooms and self-catering apartments in old barns under massive magnolia trees beside stone fountains.

Bridge over the Lima Other houses around Ponte de Lima include **Casa das Torres**, an 18th century house with granite edged windows decorated with shells, indicating it was on the Compostela pilgrimage route. The owner is a good cook and chats with her guests on the terrace by the pool. Produce from the estate, including the kiwi fruit - in



LEFT: 12th century Pousada Santa Marinha da Costas, in Guimarães Portugal it was first grown here - and vinho verde, eases self-catering shopping for those booking the two bedroomed cottage alongside the house. **Casa do Outeiro**, restored in 1723, has a superb library and religious paintings. In 1809 the invading French general Marshal Soult made the house his headquarters. It is tranquil now, beside a stone aqueduct surrounded by woods. **Casa do Arrabaide** is within walking distance of Ponte de Lima but peaceful, with three beautifully furnished rooms and two apartments beside a private chapel. **Casa de Abbades** is a 17th century house among vineyards and orchards, ideal for swimming, cycling in quiet lanes and walking. The private chapel is used for family weddings and celebrations, and as well as rooms in the house and apartments there is a small rentable cottage.

One of the most romantic is the secluded stone water mill **Moinho de Estorãos**. It has a riverbank garden and one could almost fish from the windows. Fishing licences for river trout are obtainable from the Ponte de Lima tourist office. Around Ponte de Lima are white sandbanks for fishing, picnics, swimming and sunning. 'Praia fluvial' signs lead down steep lanes under vine curtains and rose tangles to the river.

From Ponte de Lima to Ponte da Barca, vineyard hills close in on the river. At **Bravaes**, 12km east of Ponte de Lima, there is an 11th century church with superb five arched doorway carved with birds, animals and figures. Further east is the **Peneda-Geres National Park** of high granite hills and ridges, small swift rivers cutting deep into the stone and forests with riding and walking trails. At **Soajo**, one can see stone *espigueiros* - maize stores like mini chapels on stilts, topped with a cross.

The Old Capital From Ponte da Barca roads lead south past Braga to **Guimaraes**, Portugal's first capital. It has two *pousadas*: **Santa Marina de Oliveira**, a 16th century aristocratic town house with ten rooms - always well booked. Just outside the town is the 55 roomed **Santa**

Marinha da Costas, a 12th century monastery with Baroque facade and choice of large rooms with sitting areas or monks' cells (two cells now equal one bedroom). The restaurant is splendidly pillared and arched and there are tiled cloisters, fountains and formal gardens.

Nearby, the 16th century **Paço de Sao Cipriano** is a warm and friendly home of the Sottomayer family, sheltered by camellia hedges, with formal gardens - featuring pools and fountains - a chapel, and eucalyptus forest walks. Several rooms are in a tower with stone window seats to admire the view. Also in the Guimaraes area is **Casa de Sezim** where wine has been produced since 1390; today its vinho verde wins prizes. Further east at **Molares** is **Casa do Campo**, for garden lovers, where a prizewinning garden of camellias clipped to shapes - including the oldest camellia in Portugal - surrounds a 17th century manor house and Renaissance chapel where weekly mass is held.

A good stopping, point 56km from Porto, is **Amarante**, as lovely as its name (which came from its Roman governor Amaranthus). Set on the river Tamego, with an 18th century Baroque bridge and São Gonçalo's convent, its wooden balconies overlook the river - perfect for admiring the willow trees and the town's flock of white river patrol geese. A good vantage point is **Zé de Calçada**, a restaurant serving traditional dishes, or neighbouring **Lai Lai's** pastry shop. Lai Lai - short for Maria Adelaide - was a cook noted for *Bola*, a heavy roll of preserved fruits and nuts in the thinnest of crusts; *pingos de tocha*, made with thread eggs (eggs strained into bubbling syrup) curled into little rolls and iced; and *Amarantinhos* - small egg yolk patties cooked in cinnamon and lemon syrup. □

Manor houses and pousadas are bookable through Destination Portugal, Madeira House, 37 Corn Street, Witney, Oxon OX8 7BW Tel: 01993 773269

British Airways currently offer seven services per week from London Heathrow to Porto and seven per week from London Gatwick to Porto. Summer schedules apply 26th March to 28th October 2000; services are operated by GB Airways Ltd. UK Reservations: 0345 222111