



**I**t was six years ago when I first landed on Alentejo soil. I was with my lawfully wedded husband of 38 hours. The drive to Cabanas no Rio in Comporta, the place we'd booked into for our mini-moon, took us through the ever-changing landscape of the Alentejo region. Occupying more than a third of Portugal, the "land beyond the Tagus" comprises wheat fields, vineyards and forests dense with cork oak. Alongside the nature, there are castle-topped mountains and walled towns. Against all of this beauty, a magnificent western coastline dotted with wild beaches and charming fish villages.

Silent Living is the small hotel company that runs Cabanas no Rio alongside several other properties. The locations, apart from the exquisitely restored Santa Clara 1728 in Lisbon's Alfama neighbourhood, speak to the vastness of Alentejo's sparsely populated countryside, sitting alone and in harmony with their surroundings.

We arrived to find two wooden cabins set against a marsh, surrounded by a stretch of water, a pontoon and a lonely boat. One of the cabins served as bedroom and bathroom; the other was a small living area with a kitchen. The wide doors transported us between full exposure to the elements in the day and a feeling of cosiness and protection at night.

For five days, we did what newlyweds do. Every morning a lady named Dolores would stride across the green with a sack full of ham, cheese and bread. Over a breakfast of toast, fresh orange juice and coffee, we spoke about what our lives would be. In the day, we would hold hands and enjoy the quiet of staring into the lake. On the rare occasions when we'd venture out, it would be to eat fresh grilled fish and drink cocktails on the beach at Comporta Café. In the late afternoon, we would move onto Praia da Galé-Fontainhas and watch as the sun descended behind the red sandstone cliffs and magnificent dunes.

We have returned to Portugal every year since our honeymoon. Initially, we stayed on a 50-hectare estate with several independent houses, the whitewashed boxes forming a trail to the pool where the journey ends either

## PERFECT PEACE

The wide open solitude of Portugal's Alentejo provides a surprising sanctuary after months of isolation, says *Charlene Prempeh*



Top: the author reads under the arch outside Silent Living's Casa na Terra. Above: one of the four bedrooms at Casa no Tempo, with a view of the open living and dining area

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with elation or wild disappointment, dependent on sunbed availability. On two other occasions, we were guests at a vineyard, where Espumante was served with breakfast and a delicious sparkling red cost €3. I'd come back behaving as if I were the first person to discover Vinho Verde.

**B**ut as often as not, we've chosen to go with a Silent Living property. Their cachet is born out of a thoroughly researched and remarkably executed vision – a cherry-pick of the best elements of self-catering rentals and hotels – so guests are able to experience the luxury of concierge services and catered meals while enjoying the privacy afforded by being the sole occupiers of the space.

The architecture in particular soothes and transports. The first of the Silent Living "houses" to open, Casas na Areia, which was originally a family home, represented Portugal at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008. The sand floors blur the sense of indoor and outdoor, while the structure blends effortlessly with the surrounding nature. With its emphasis on connection and serenity, the house encourages whoever is staying to move towards a simpler way of living. Silent Living's founder, João Rodrigues, describes his mission as "creating the perfect environment for small changes to happen in your life. It's a place to reconnect with yourself and the people close to you."

We have had all sorts of holiday experiences in Alentejo. I have brought friends and, as a group, we have descended upon the small town of Evora, a Unesco World Heritage site, and visited the museums, churches and an impressive cathedral enclosed within the medieval walls. One summer, a whole afternoon disappeared at the Herdade da Malhadinha Nova winery and spa, where we coupled a guided tour of the cellar with Ayurvedic Indian massages. Another year, the seaside village of Zambujeira do Mar featured heavily – I would lie stationary on the sand as others surfed or hopped between beaches using the clifftop paths.

But what I hadn't fully appreciated – until recently – was this: all of our Portuguese breaks have been fun, but the silence and tranquillity of our honeymoon trip had been healing. And after months suspended in isolation, it was a surprise to discover I craved nothing more than that seclusion once again. When the green light to travel was given, we didn't discuss even for a second where we would go.

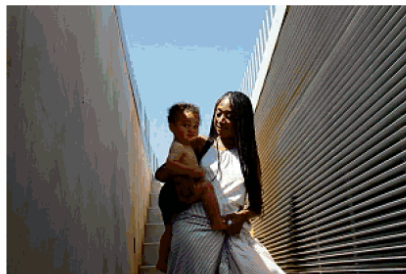
The roads from the airport to Casa na Terra, Rodrigues's latest addition to the Silent Living portfolio, are smooth and winding. Getting lost and driving through fields seems to be a rite of passage when travelling to a Silent Living house, and in Alentejo in general. This time we hit our dead end in a town one mile away, before gently being directed to our house.

Friends described the Casa na Terra, the first place in which we stayed, as "the troglodyte house". It has a subterranean appearance. In reality, the only cave-like qualities are the smooth cement floors and walls, and the coolness that's at odds with the burning heat outside. Huge amounts of light stream through from the glass doors of the kitchen and living area, both of which lead to an open stone terrace facing a field and an enormous lake. Here, staring at the view, hearing nothing and seeing no one, we found a sense of space and freedom that had been eluding us – and which we'd been dreaming about – for months.

Being there with our one-year-old left little opportunity for impromptu lake-gazing this time around, but the increased capacity to process and reflect was the same as I had experienced on the first visit years ago. In the mornings, we spoke of plans for the day with an ease that came from knowing that a perfectly wonderful option would be to sit around and do nothing – which is mostly what happened. In the evenings, we would drink local wine on the terrace and ask each other questions that were too huge and scary to consider in London during lockdown: Who are we going to be now? Where should we live? Is anything going to be the same again?



WITH STARS  
SHOOTING  
OVERHEAD  
AND THE SKY  
ABSORBING OUR  
LAUGHTER, THE  
SOLITUDE FELT  
LIKE A GIFT



Top: the dining area at Casa na Terra opens on to a stone terrace. Second top: the author at the edge of the pool at Casa no Tempo. Above: the author and her one-year-old, Lucky Prempeh-Goodhead, at Casa na Terra

Our second house, Casa no Tempo, was a short-ish drive away: a contained and traditional architecture that made a direct contrast from the more futuristic Casa na Terra. At Casa na Terra the view had been rugged with a vantage of the lake. Here, we looked at a landscape dotted with gleaming brown horses; a herd of goats sipped from the pool. The house itself, all whitewashed façade, sits harmoniously in the farmland. Inside, the space is deceptively large, with a wide, echoing corridor leading off to four bedrooms hosting low, wide beds, brown tiled floors and bathrooms with views of the grounds. The traditional country kitchen opens up to gardens; the boundaries between indoors and out are again softened and blurred. A long path leads down to the pool, where the smooth edges and sloping depth

create an illusion of sea. On a hike that took us deeper into the grounds, we found lakes acting as small oases across the land. Each one is bordered by intense greenery, eventually giving way to sandy shores where locals fish for crabs. Naked cork trees and mountainous rocks sit nonchalantly in the water, giving the whole scene an air of otherworldliness.

The last day of our sojourn was our seven-year wedding anniversary. We celebrated with lunch at the Michelin-starred L'And Vineyards resort in Montemor-o-Novo. Chef Nuno Amaral takes traditional Portuguese recipes and reinterprets them with Asian influence, creating a hybrid menu featuring dishes such as red mullet with lemongrass and coconut stew. His ambition is complemented by organic wines fermented in ecological vineyards across the region. More local ingredients were devoured at dinner that evening under the beautifully lit arch of the entrance to Casa no Tempo. With stars shooting overhead and the silence absorbing our laughter and stories, the solitude felt like an extraordinary gift.

There will be two more Silent Living projects on Casa no Tempo's land in the future: the first concept, coming in 2022, is six suites that will aim to foster community spirit by bringing guests together to make cheese and harvest fruit. The second will see the development of five unique cabanas reflecting the natural elements of rocks, water, trees, wind and the sand that they sit on. It's yet further elaboration on the theme at the root of everything Rodrigues does: the desire to host, to embrace guests in an ambience and an ethos that feel genuine. "Just the way you welcome old friends," he says. "That's what we've been doing and what we'll keep on doing." ■ HTSI  
*silentliving.pt; from €330.*

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