

There's Always Another One Down the Road

► If our road trip had a catchphrase, it would most certainly be: *This can't be right*. My mom—who harbors a deep mistrust of Google Maps—and I kept repeating it as we crawled up and down steep, narrow roads in our Alfa Romeo (the only automatic at the airport car rental) through Portugal's Douro Valley. When I first got the assignment to explore this mountainous wine country with its trim, terraced vineyards descending in impossibly well-kept rows, I was admittedly nervous about driving hundreds of miles in a country rife with roundabouts and Portuguese road signs. So I did what any respectable middle-aged adult woman would do: call her mom. "It will be an adventure," I reassured her, adding that half the fun would be finding these remote wine hotels run by locals channeling their generous old-world grandmothers. "I'm flying coach to Europe," she said. "It will be...something."

The plan was to fly into Lisbon, where we'd stay a night at Verride Palácio Santa Catarina, a historic 18th-century town house once owned by a count. (Trying to find it while navigating Lisbon's disorienting, hold-your-breath alleys was not the softest landing.) The next morning, we'd cross the 25 de Abril Bridge and head east toward Spain for the two-hour-plus drive to São Lourenço do Barrocal in Alentejo. Here is where some of Portugal's best argones reds and ports are made, thanks to the region's warm, dry climate and its prehistoric landscape of cork trees and giant rock outcroppings, which have a way of making you turn off Spotify and just be reverent.

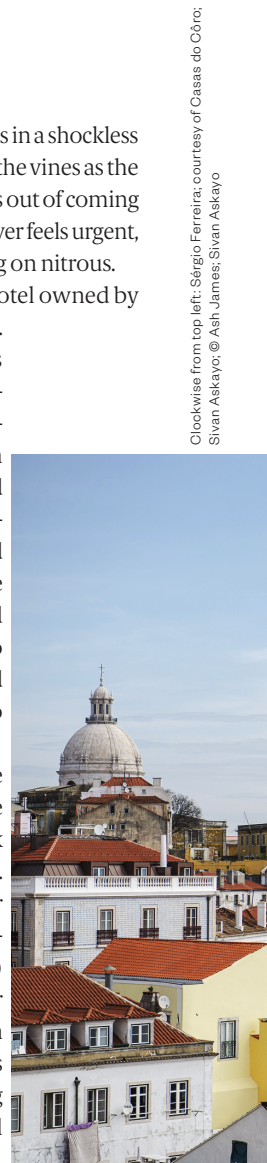
Our trip through the Douro (or Duero in Spain) really started on day three, two hours north across the Spanish border at Hacienda Zorita, a 14th-century former Dominican monastery (that once hosted Christopher Columbus), now a wine hotel and organic farm. It's 10 minutes from Salamanca, the Bologna of Spain, known for its cured meats and historic university. We barely made it there for the tasting, which started at 5 P.M. sharp and was helmed by a sommelier I can only guess is forced to wear a top hat. "I love this place!" said my mom, who dug the more composed Napa vibe here. We nodded our

heads studiously when Top Hat talked about the various syrah and tempranillo *tinta baroccas* we tried, which were more biting compared to the smoother, easy-drinking reds we'd been downing across the border in Portugal. But it was the vineyard's rosé cava that we wanted seconds of.

Being our typical American selves, we skipped breakfast and hit the road early to make the two-hour drive along hills of olive groves and tiny whitewashed houses to Casas do Côro, a family-run vineyard-hotel built into a medieval citadel. "Is she out of her mind?" my mom said as one of the 30 people who live in Marialva motioned vigorously for us to make a turn onto a road that appeared to be a sidewalk. We eventually found the hotel among the almond trees, though not before I may have nudged the bumper of our sweet ride against a medieval stone wall. After we recharged with espressos on our balcony watching white-haired ladies inch along with canes, we toured the vineyards with the owner's son, who spoke little English and whipped around the tapered roads in a shockless white van. In one particularly pretty spot, he took a picture of us in front of the vines as the sun slid behind the mountains, and I felt grateful we hadn't talked ourselves out of coming here together. Traveling as a grown-up with your parent in a strange place never feels urgent, but with the potency of 100 Sunday dinners, it should. It's memory making on nitrous.

The next morning, I told Mom we had to stop at Casa do Rio, a wine hotel owned by the notable winemakers and Portuguese hospitality titans the Douro Boys. My mom's what you call a planner, so I knew this would be a hard sell. "It's only 20 minutes out of our way," I assured her, repeating the travel writer's mantra that detours yield the stories you'll remember on your deathbed. An hour later, as I was whisper-cursing Google Maps, we crept down a hilly road surrounded by olive groves and tiered vineyards. At the end of it, a mid-century modern-style six-suite cabin complete with an infinity pool presented itself out of nowhere like that last gift hidden behind the Christmas tree. "Oh, shit," my mom said out loud. We had lunch in the sexed-up lobby—think low-slung leather couches and suspended pod fireplaces—eating filet mignon and potatoes and drinking organic Douro superior red (the field blend) and 20-year aged tawny port. We dipped our fresh-baked bread in the homegrown olive oil, laughed, and tried to remember what pants we had packed with drawstrings.

It was pouring when we arrived three hours later at Carmo's Boutique Hotel, a 12-room, three-suite family-run stay that reads like a Portuguese Art Deco Chateau Marmont. It was our last night before heading back to Lisbon, and both of us were feeling the wine-soaked miles behind us. That is, until Raquel do Carmo Barbosa, who co-owns the hotel with her mother, pulled out delicious bottle after bottle of *vinho verde* in the light-filled wine atelier. The next morning, we slept in (see: "bottle after bottle") and were running late once again. "Screw it," said my mom, dressed in her drawstring pants. We grabbed some flaky breakfast buns to go and ate them out of delicate white paper in the car as we listened to the Rolling Stones en route to Lisbon. "A roundabout's coming up," Mom said, now tapping on Google Maps with confidence. "I guess this thing does know Portugal pretty well." CANDICE RAINEY



Clockwise from top left: Sérgio Ferreira; courtesy of Casas do Côro; Sivan Askayo; © Ash James; Sivan Askayo