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# a passion for fashion

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how to spend it  
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THE SMOOTH GUIDE | THE LONG LUXURIOUS WEEKEND

## christian louboutin's **alentejo**

The shoe designer reveals his love of the unspoiled coastline and traditional villages of the Portuguese countryside to **Andrew Barker**. Portrait by **Richard Grassie**

“ Although I look it, I am not Mediterranean. I am Breton. I grew up in Paris but would spend all my holidays in Brittany and here in the Alentejo it is the same sea, the Atlantic. I love the contrast of this very peaceful landscape going into the ocean, where there is always movement. It sometimes reminds me of The Hamptons.

The region's coastline stretches unspoiled for 100km south of the city of Setúbal. The further south you go, the more wild and more Portuguese it becomes. I swim at the beach every day, arriving on foot via the dunes. You have to park the car and walk through very low pine trees, through the little evergreen shrubs, until you reach the sand. It's so beautiful and so wild, it almost looks landscaped.

On the Praia do Carvalhal beach the fishing boats look like toys. There



are a few little cabins but you don't see any houses. My favourite restaurant on the beach is O Dinis Restaurante dos Pescadores. It's made of wood and on the walls are photos of the owner, Dinis, when he was a young fisherman. He was so handsome, with such incredible blue eyes, it looks like staged fashion photography but it's not. Dinis has silver hair now and he is still just as attractive. I always order the arroz caldoso, a huge stew of rice with jumbo shrimps.

I can't eat fish because I am allergic, but I love crustaceans. I buy them at the market in Carrasqueira, a 200-year-old fishing village with around 300 inhabitants who live in traditional houses made out of straw from the river. There is a floating fishing harbour, all piers and wooden stilts. All kinds of people go to the market, from the high society of Lisbon to locals from surrounding villages who like to buy fresh lobster, crab and big shrimp. I cook what I've picked up on my outdoor barbecue at my home in Lagoa de Santo André, which is surrounded

From top: **Christian Louboutin in Santiago do Cacém. A vineyard in Évora in the Alentejo's distinctive hilly landscape**

by olive trees, acacias, mimosas and umbrella pines.

My land here is so full of sand – everything grows. I have planted every type of salad, 20 kinds of carrots, turnips, salsify and potatoes – sweet potatoes, red potatoes, black potatoes. We all share; I often go to my neighbour's when she is not there to pick up tomatoes.

I have people working in the house so the produce is for them too. For eggs and dairy products I can go to Santo André, a town of about 10,000 people, but really the whole of the Alentejo is the kind of place where merchants drive past and bees to see if you want to buy from the back of a car. Sometimes it's bread, sometimes meat, sometimes fish.

In Alcaicer do Sal there's the Praça de Touros João Branco Nuncio building, which has bullfights in June and October. In Portugal, the fight is more humane: the bull has his horns shorn; the *tourero* rides a horse and does not kill the bull. It is straight out of a Velázquez painting: the traditional dress is tied at the side with large pockets; it is very beautiful, like a Marquis's outfit. A lot of the bullfighters are female. Nearby is the town of Grândola where there is a store called Luadisantos, Loja dú Peixe, where you can buy dried and tinned fish.

I collect the colourful sardine tins and put them in my kitchen. I don't eat them – I would go so far as to say I am disgusted by sardines – but people who come to visit always end up eating them. Grândola also has a wine shop, Garrafeira D Nuno, where I buy varieties made in the Alentejo.

I discovered the region 15 years ago. I was spending holidays with Portuguese friends in Comporta, an hour from Lisbon, which was nice at the time. Now it's completely ruined, with ugly developments – too many people, too much electricity, and it's the land of mosquitoes because of the rice. Where my house is, further south, there are very few. I have also put a lot of big pots of citronella around the perimeter around the place, which are really good at keeping mosquitoes at bay.

I love to drive around the Alentejo. You find beautiful small, straight roads that are a little bit bumpy from the roots of cork oaks. The trees are not very big and the houses are all single-storey with flat roofs to protect against the sun and the wind, so the hills look huge. On top of the hills you will often find a big house or a castle that looks out to the sea; there is something quite magical about that. Wherever you go there is this feeling of being in a late-medieval landscape. The road to Beja is very long and really pretty, full of cork trees, and the landscape is straight out of a Cervantes book. I almost expect to see Don Quixote waiting for me at the castle. Beja is a great place to pick up *vonnerie*, or wickerwork.

Every time someone comes to visit for the first time I take them to Evora, home to one of the best restaurants in all of the



Clockwise from top: the main square in Evora. Examples of the colourful sardine tins that Loubovnik collects for his kitchen. An old boat in the 200-year-old fishing village of Carrasqueira

## I don't expect to see Don Quixote amid Beja's late-medieval landscape



Alentejo. Fialho. It is very traditional and bourgeois. You need a reservation because people are there, eating legs of lamb or pork medallions with rosemary for hours. It's refined but rural, almost ancient, cuisine. The third generation of the family now runs it. Afterwards I will often go and take a walk around Evoramonte Castle, which was built in the 14th century; the Chapel of Bones [Capela dos Ossos] at Igreja de São Francisco, the Roman Temple or the cathedral, which is full of blue and white 16th-century *azulejos* – tin-glazed tiles. Then on to the Palácio Cadaval. I have a dear friend, Alexandra de Cadaval, a descendant of the family, who helps organise the Festival Evora



Clássica there, which started as a classical festival but now includes world music and photography from the former Portuguese colonies of Africa. After that we might go to Cartuxa winery for a tasting – it is only 2km away in an old Jesuit monastery. Heading from Evora to Santiago do Cacém you pass through many villages. The Alentejo is not like other tourist destinations. There are just a few villages and towns, with Portuguese populations who live there all year round – fishermen and stonemasons, or people who work on the rice paddies around the lagoons. On top of the hill in Santiago is a church and a castle with a huge panorama, and at the foot is a beautiful town, all paved, with lovely houses. There are two great antique dealers, selling everything from vintage

## THE HIT LIST

### WHERE TO STAY

Prices are for a double room with breakfast. **Monte do Brejinho de Evora**, Brejinho de Evora, Rua Sul, 7570-516 Grândola (+351269-440 101), from €60.

### RESTAURANTS AND WINERIES

Prices are for three courses and a half bottle of wine. **Cartuxa winery**, Quinta de Valbom, Estrada da Soeira, Evora (+351266-748 383; [www.cartuxa.pt](http://www.cartuxa.pt)), tasting of five wines from €30. **O Dinis Restaurante** dos

**Pescadores**, (+351967-977 193), from €40. **O Melidense**, Rua da Junta de Freguesia (+351269-907 288), from €25. **Restaurante Fialho**, Travessa Mascarenhas 14, Evora (+351266-703 079; [www.restaurantefialho.pt](http://www.restaurantefialho.pt)), from €35.

### SHOPS AND MARKETS

**Carrasqueira fish market**, Carrasqueira village. **Luadisantos, Loja do Peixe**, Rua Estreita 10, Carravilha, Grândola. **Garrafeira D Nuno**, Rua Dom Nuno Alvares Pereira 113A, Grândola (+351269-441 074; [www.garrafeiradnuno.pt](http://www.garrafeiradnuno.pt)).

### BEACHES, SIGHTS, MUSEUMS

**Chapel of Bones at Igreja de São Francisco**, Praça 1 de Maio, 7000-650 São Pedro, Evora (+351266-704 521). **Evoramonte Castle**, Rua da Convento, 7100-308 Evora Monte (+351268-950 025). **Palácio Cadaval**, 7000-845 Evora (+351967-979 763; [www.palaciocadaval.com](http://www.palaciocadaval.com)). **Praça de Touros João Branco Nuncio building**, Ovilva de Coronel, 7580 Alcaicer do Sal (+35126-622 778). **Praça de São Torpes**, 8km south of Sines on the A26-1 road. **Praia do Carravilha**, access by leaving the N261 road and heading west

to Carravilha village. **Roman Temple of Evora**, Largo do Comede de Vila Flor, 7000-865 Evora (+351266-769 450).

### WHEN TO GO

Summer brings music festivals and bullfights but also inland temperatures of up to 40°C. May and October are cooler and quieter.

### HOW TO GET THERE

**British Airways** ([www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) flies from London Heathrow to Lisbon three times a week, from €115 return.

