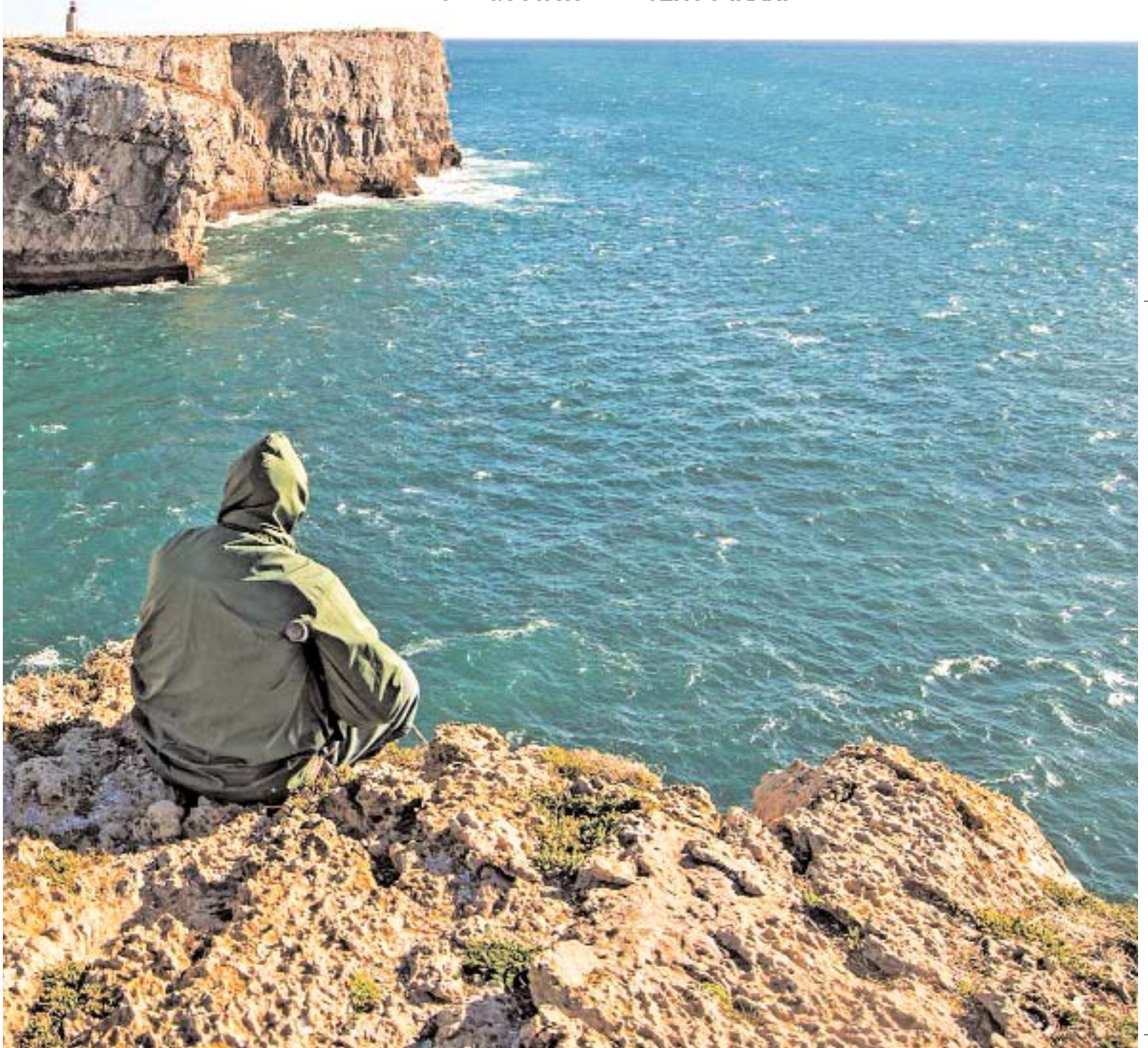


SENSUAL FEAST





A PASSION FOR FISH AND SEAFOOD IS TO BE EXPECTED FROM PORTUGAL, A NATION OF SEA-FARING EXPLORERS WHO BROUGHT RICH EXOTICA FROM DISTANT LANDS AND THREW IT IN THE COOKING POT TO CREATE AN INIMITABLE EXPLOSION OF FLAVOURS, SAY **GUSTASP** AND **JEROO IRANI**



My favourite Portuguese meal is a simple grilled fish drizzled with olive oil," said a local whom we met one morning as we strolled down the talcum-powder beaches around the picturesque little town of Cascais near Lisbon in Portugal."And I love the way they cook it there," he said, pointing to a snack bar at Praia da Poca, a cinnamon-coloured beach that wraps itself around Cascais.

In Portugal, you are never far from the sea, and eating out in this country, perched on the edge of the Iberian Peninsula, is all about gorging on the fresh catch of the day and robust meats, prepared in simple ways accompanied by freshly baked bread and tarts whipped up in dim vintage patisseries. *Pastéis de belém*, flaky tarts filled with custard cream, baked cod fish, *cataplana* or a rich seafood stew. These are some of the must-have dishes rooted in Portuguese terroir. And a stroll through some of the country's scenic vineyards will yield some swig-worthy heady Port wines that Portugal is famous for.

A country that grew in semi-isolation on the westerly edge of Europe, Portugal developed its own cuisine — robust yet healthy, simple yet delicious. Our culinary journey started on the Lisbon coast at our luxe, family-friendly hostelry Martinhal Cascais Family Hotel, a half-hour drive away from Lisbon.

In the glass-enhanced hotel and restaurant, which allowed the outdoors to stream indoors, we slurped *caldo verde*, a heart-warming kale and potato soup topped with a chouriço or sausage, even as the umbrella pines outside rustled and sighed in the breeze. The restaurant was a melee of happy children playing in the toy-filled Kids Corner and relaxed parents who were digging into Portuguese-inspired creations like scallops in lemongrass with quinoa; and baked cod confit with olive oil and roasted vegetables.



(Above) Cod fish. (Below) The Portuguese are known for some of the finest seafood





GETTING THERE
AIR INDIA, KLM, ROYAL DUTCH AIRLINES, ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES, SWISS AIR, AIR FRANCE, FINNAIR, JET AIRWAYS LUFTHANSA, EMIRATEJS, QATAR AIRWAYS, VIRGIN ATLANTIC AND ALITALIA OFFER MULTIPLE OPTIONS

Blue waters at the end of the world

An in-house magician entertained kids and families. When he stopped by our table to perform some card tricks, he told us in between his sleight of hand, that dried, salted cod and fresh cod are perennial crowd-pleasers across the country.

Indeed, locals say that there are cod-fish based recipes for each day of the year; some aver there are 1001 recipes. The styles vary and sliced cod could be roasted on hot coals or baked with oil and black-eyed peas; smoked, fried, baked or grilled and so on. A passion for fish and seafood is to be expected from a nation of sea-faring explorers who brought back from distant lands rich exotica and threw it

in the cooking pot to create an inimitable explosion of flavours.

A half-hour drive away from our sun-filled Martinhal Lisbon Cascais Family Hotel in Cascais lies Sintra where Disneyland style palaces, castles and villas weave a web of magic. After half a day of intense sightseeing, we had lunch at Taverna Dos Trovadores, a two-decades-old atmospheric restaurant and bar, with low, wood-beamed ceilings, warm terracotta tiles, interlinked rooms with a fire place and racks of ageing wine bottles in the corridor. At this eatery, the meal is prepared after one places the order, and so takes a while to materialise. A smiling waitress plumped on our table some fresh bread, olives and cottage cheese to still our gnawing

hunger pangs. The taverna was filled with a mix of locals and tourists but the action really happens at night when live folk concerts are held after 11.30 pm.

We went with the national passion for cod, and ordered a dish of steamed cod which came with spinach, potatoes and chick peas and paired it with some house wine from the Alentejo region. The portion was generous, as large as the large-hearted Portuguese themselves, and we rued the fact that we could not do full justice to the rich bounty of the North Atlantic.

Later, when we strolled down the tangled alleys of the old town, studded with chic eateries and boutiques, we stumbled on the iconic 1872 café-cum-shop called Casa Piriquita, tucked away in a cobbled lane. The diva at this family-run café is a pastry called *travesseiros* (the word means 'pillow' in Portuguese), an incredibly light, puff pastry with a sprinkling of sugar, stuffed with a filling of eggs and sweet almond cream which left a pleasing buzz in our mouths. Incidentally, the recipe for the filling is a closely guarded secret and known only to two members of the family.

Casa Piriquita's *queijadas* or cheese pastries are equally famous and go back farther in time. They were savoured by King Carlos I who loved to summer in Sintra and gorge on these mouth-fillers. The royal seal of approval gave the tiny bakery of Amaro dos Santos and his wife Constancia Gomes a huge fillip and the name Piriquita was how the king addressed the diminutive Constancia. Much later, in the

1940s war years, the founder's granddaughter concocted the *travesseiro*.

The next morning, we drove from Cascais down to the Algarve, the southernmost region of continental Portugal, knifing through the scenic Alentejo province (known for its top-grade beef) where olive trees and vineyards unfurled a green carpet welcome and groves of almond trees were dusted with white and pink flowers.

We arrived in Sagres, located at the western tip of continental Europe, in a little over three hours. Sagres is a town of under 2,000 people who live in the shadow of awesome landscapes — the wild Atlantic that pounds spun-sugar beaches over which cliffs tower in sun-baked silence. And yes, this is the best place for seafood.

Some of our finest meals happened at the Martinhal Sagres Beach Family Resort, located in a pristine nature reserve, which overlooks a champagne-coloured beach, edged by precipitous cliffs; it's the only lux designer hostelry in Sagres. There, in its signature O Terraco restaurant, with its floor-to-ceiling windows and wood deck that fielded views of an aching blue Atlantic and a silken sandy beach, we savoured lip-smacking maritime delights. Micael Valentim, the executive chef, traipses daily to Sagres harbour to purchase fresh fish like sea bass, bream, monk fish, shrimps... redolent with the briny fragrance of the sea.

Shell fish rice in a spicy tangy sauce dappled with

View of the lighthouse at St. Vincent Point





Prawns and shell fish made in a traditional manner



shrimps and clams; crisp fish filets with mashed potatoes and sun-ripened veggies; baked octopus with spinach and sweet potatoes, and cod fish, fresh and salted, held court at O Terraco! At a neighbouring table, there was drama as a large sea bass, grilled to perfection with salt, a dab of olive oil and spritzed with a dash of lime was brought in ceremoniously in a large platter.

The highlight of another meal was a starter of shrimp fried in garlic, coriander and piri-piri sauce; and clams in garlic, coriander, lemon and white wine sauce. The chef's dexterity was on full display in the seafood *cataplana* cooked in a closed clam-shaped vessel which seals in the flavour of the clams and oysters that sizzle in a pepper sauce, spiked with white wine. The *cataplana* seemed to have layers of texture and colour and a heady aroma. (In the mountainous heart of Portugal, there are lamb and pork *cataplanas*, too.)

The chef at Martinhal is a dab hand at his own cuisine and has re-imagined traditional Portuguese fare, even offering sea urchin with scrambled egg as a starter! For a change of pace, we tried some hearty meat-based dishes which exuded the earthy robustness of free-range cattle — Portuguese style rib eye steak with crispy smoked ham, boiled egg, sweet potato and spinach, garnished with a sprig of rosemary.

Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal, was the sweet finale of our holiday and in its narrow cobblestoned streets, lined with magnificent monuments, oft times a little frayed, we discovered by chance some hidden gems. Lisbon's edgy, trending dining culture encompasses *pastelarias* that showcase classic handmade tarts and pastries; atmospheric *tascas* (no-frills restaurants) that serve classic Portuguese fare

and the city's melting pot population that rustles up delicacies from the former colonies of Macau, Goa and as far as Brazil.

With just a day and a half in Lisbon, we started out from our family-friendly hotel — Martinhal Lisbon Chiado Family Suites and walked around fashionable Chiado. On the advice of the friendly staff at our hotel, we stopped for a coffee and snack at Cafe A Brasileira, one of the oldest in the city, where Bica — a very strong espresso — was created. Like the Bica, the Art Deco interior of this 1905 café has remained unchanged; as the cafe was, in times past, the hang-out of intellectuals, writers and poets. A bronze statue of the poet Fernando Pessoa is placed in the outdoor section and has become a prop for the selfie-obsessed.

After pounding the pavements, we had a bite at a no-frills *tasca*, a *feijoada*, a hearty meat and bean stew which left us wanting a nap. In the evening, we landed up in Bairro Alto's Calçada do Duque street, a thumping nightlife hub, dotted with cheap dives, wine bars and restaurants with views, where wait staff waved menus to attract the attention of passers-by.

We opted for Solar do Duque, whose tables were charmingly set up on steps overlooking the city and Lisbon's landmark castle. The sun set and the cool breeze prompted the staff to give us blankets. For those who like the unfamiliar, the oven-cooked duck with rice is a good choice, as is a Bairro Alto original, shredded cod with onions, eggs and potatoes.

Our Portugal odyssey had turned out to be a veritable sensual feast, with palate-pleasing fare and views that hijacked our hearts.