

# Vicentine Coast Trail – Ruta Vicentina

## From the Alentejo you can see the sea

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**We asked the fado singer Joana Amendoeira to take time out from the Lisbon night scene and come hiking with us along the invigorating Vicentine Coast Trail. Between imposing cliffs, powerful waves and one or two insects, we followed in the tracks of the greatest fado diva of them all, Amália Rodrigues.**



Shoes are dear to the hearts of us girls, but here you need different footwear. We arrived at nightfall in Zambujeira do Mar, on the Alentejo coast, for a weekend's rambling. We had just got stuck into the seafood salad which greeted us at O Sacas restaurant when someone asked: "Did you bring your walking boots?" With map of the brand new Vicentine Trail in hand, Marta Cabral, 37, the energetic executive director of the Casas Brancas sustainable development project, checks that everything is in order. Fado singer Joana Amendoeira, 30, confirms. With no further ado we tuck in to grilled bream and fresh sole from the quay outside.

Fresh fish all year round is just one of the privileges reserved for anyone who trades Lisbon for the peace and quiet of the southwest. For more restless souls, the isolation and tranquility may prove too much. For Marta, born and raised in the capital, it is paradise. Even in winter. "I have children, family. The worst that can happen is it rains and we stay indoors next to the wood-burning stove, listening to the birds outside."

Casas Brancas sees hiking trails as a great way to reinvigorate this region outside the hectic high season. The new 340 kilometres of trails and paths are already signposted. Around 100 companies have got involved, including accommodation owners and restaurants. Support from the local population needs shoring up; shepherds, taxi drivers, and anyone else who will come into contact with walkers. "O Sacas, for example, has helped us tremendously with the fishing community", explains Marta.

In the kitchen Ti Ana, 61, is in good spirits. In culinary circles many have heard of her, the chef who cooks in her sleep. “This is very simple cooking”, she warns us when we enter. “And I’m just an old woman”, she comments when she sees the camera pointing at her. Triggerfish steak is her pride and joy. “A fish started appearing at the quayside that not many people knew about”, she explains. “I thought, ‘this must be good because there’s a lot of meat on it’. One day I went to bed and decided, ‘I’ll think up a new dish’. When I woke up, I removed its skin and bones and made a steak.”



Quietly helping out are her daughter, Sílvia, 37, who works in the kitchen, and her husband, the original Sacas, in charge of the grill. “He is very pleased when the customers say that the fish is well done”, says Ti Ana. A shy smile keeps the ex-fisherman at a distance. Then you understand that this cook is not to be crossed. First come sweet potato crisps, then liqueurs to help them down; mint, clementine, eucalyptus, strawberry tree. All home-made, all dreamed up. Joana Amendoeira can’t take a third glass. Ti Ana continues: “I dreamt the other night that I ought to make one from nettles.”

### **Vale of silence**

If you left school without really understanding what an oxymoron is, just go to Quinta do Chocalhinho, near Odemira. There, early in the morning, the silence is really deafening – just as love for Camões was an ‘unhappy contentment’. Perhaps it’s a city thing, for people who are used to constant background noise. The night before we had only arrived in time to appreciate the new moon in the sky, a crystalline astronomical chart. Now, day breaks in all its glory. As the fresh air pierces our lungs, we look around and spot olive trees, cork oaks, donkeys in the field below, and we congratulate ourselves: we are truly in the middle of nowhere.

Four years ago Margarida and Luís Freitas opened this cosy rural tourism facility. The property belonged to Luís’ grandfather and it was here that the retired judge spent his childhood. After much travelling around the world from the Azores to Macau, they decided to renovate the pre-existing houses with a touch of the east and some contemporary comfort.

The hospitality starts with a generous breakfast: Alentejo bread, home-made preserves, a divine cottage cheese – di-vi-ne – from Queijaria do Mira, organic eggs and even a freshly-made angel cake. In the background there is some fado playing and Joana Amendoeira identifies it. She has a collection of over a thousand CDs. This is “Um Violino no Fado”, she hums. “Listen. A surprise! They’ve put on one of my records.” Luís Freitas enters the room with a smile: “As you see, fado came to Quinta do Chocalhinho a long time ago”.



### Fishermen's trail

If they hadn't told us that Rudolfo was Swiss, we might not have believed it. With his greying pony-tail and cap, 50-year-old president of the Casas Brancas Association, Rudolf Müller and his wife, Angélica, a Brazilian of 36, welcome us at the chapel in Zambujeira do Mar, which faces out on to some perfect waves. The plan is to walk south along the narrow fishermen's paths, but before that there is the customary question: “Are those the only boots you've got?” The friendly guide points to her flat-soled suede boots and warns Joana, “They won't survive the trek. Down by Amália's house it's all muddy.”

The country retreat of the greatest ever Portuguese fado singer is the carrot that we are dangling in front of our young fadista. For her, more used to late nights, all this is new: the Alentejo and Vicentine Coast, the walks, the fuss over footwear. Passing the beach at Alteirinhos, Rudolfo remarks “this is one of the most beautiful” – and it is where he comes fishing. We marvel at the cliffs and other rock formations, the powerful sea down below, the undergrowth. The most distinctive flower here is *Armeria pungens*, or spiny thrift. In the distance is a peregrine falcon. A few hours later at Carvalhal beach, we see a kestrel.

By car we reach Brejão, Amália Rodrigues' former holiday home. António Pacheco welcomes us at Casa da Seiceira. He is the grandson of Augusta Maria, the woman who sold the property to the famous fado singer. “She saw it and instantly fell in love”, he tells us. We aren't allowed to visit the house, but walk around the outside. The footpath passes close to a stream, which is in fact very muddy and Joana's boots do not survive.



It is worth the sacrifice. We cut through the undergrowth and come upon the same amazing view that Amália would have had from the garden overlooking the sea. Joana recalls the diva. “The intelligence, the vision, the courage”, she says. “I even got her autograph in a book of poetry: ‘With a kiss from Amália’. I didn’t manage to say anything to her.”

### **One final push**

Joana wakes the following day with suntanned legs. We don’t want to imagine what the evening’s stretching massage in the Stress Free Zone must have been like. Even so, fair-play is observed. Even if, as she points out, to aid her recovery she has to walk twice as far today. Meanwhile, the conversation about footwear has become a running joke. Before setting off, the fado singer shows Rudolfo her white trainers. He approves but can’t resist: “If they are not spotless by the end of the day, I apologise.”

We leave Quinta do Chocalhinho and head off on our historic hike. The inland part of the Vicentine Trail makes up in calmness for the drama of the fishermen’s trail. Along the River Torgal, in the shade of poplars, cork oaks and ash, we make for Pego das Pias. We pass strawberry trees and interrupt a carnivorous plant having lunch – a sundew (*Drosophyllum lusitanicum*) enjoying a grasshopper. We come across some friendly black pigs and cycle to Senhor André, an old boy of 79 who thanks us on leaving with “I’ll have a better day today”.

After lunch by the sea, I don’t feel like leaving Pego. What a lovely nap you could have here. Except that we have another test in store for our fadista and it is still quite a few kilometers ahead.

Despite being from the Ribatejo, Joana Amendoeira has never ridden a horse. She is even a little nervous. Perhaps we shouldn’t have told her. No-one can resist the Lusitanians at Quinta do Pessegueiro, in Porto Covo, and before we know it she is on white one, the beautiful Quasimodo – another oxymoron. “If you feel very nervous, sing! They love fado”, the lady of the estate Cláudia Castanheira says encouragingly. Joana smiles as always, take a deep breath and confesses, “I’m sweating”.

We return safe and sound from a 45-minute canter along the stunning beach at Ilha do Pessegueiro. The sun sets in a pink sky over the sea. Joana smiles again, but from relief. It is time for her natural habitat. The Sr. Vinho fado house in Lisbon awaits her. With no trainers, no mud, no footpaths and not a horse in sight, tonight she will sing fado once more.

