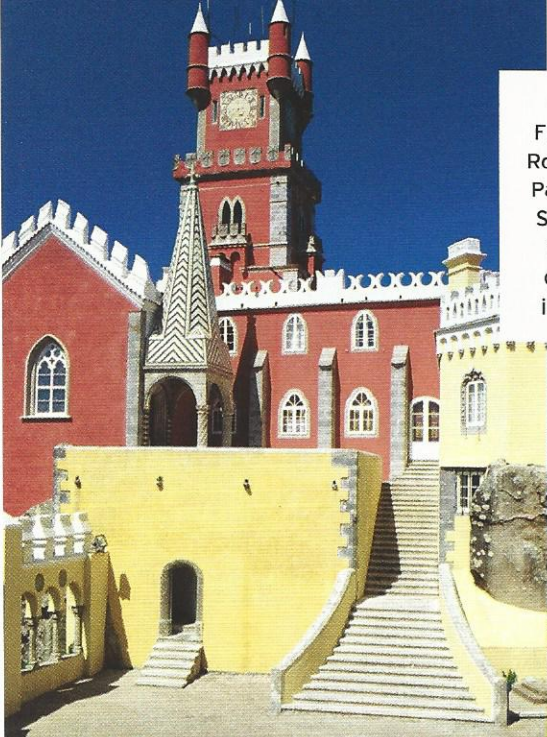


CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT The
Romanticist Pena
Palace, set in the
Sintra hills (also
right). Quinta
da Regaleira's
inverted tower



the road NOT TAKEN

Pamela Goodman sets out on a walking tour of Portugal, taking in parks, palaces and rugged landscape on her way to the magical Pena Palace in Sintra

Many years ago, I saw a picture of Pena National Palace rising from an eerie sea of cloud in domed and turreted splendour. It seemed like something from a fairy tale – a crazy concoction of mustard yellow, russet red and garish purple that only a true fantasist could have invented. The idea that such a place actually existed seemed preposterous, so I tucked it away in a corner of my memory for another day.

And then, while leafing through the Inntravel brochure – a rare occurrence in an age of endless websites – I chanced across a similar image. It was illustrating a holiday called Palaces and Pathways of Sintra, and I was hooked.

I know Inntravel well, having travelled with the company several times. I know it delivers interesting, self-guided walks at very reasonable prices. I know the accommodation it uses is reliable – if, at

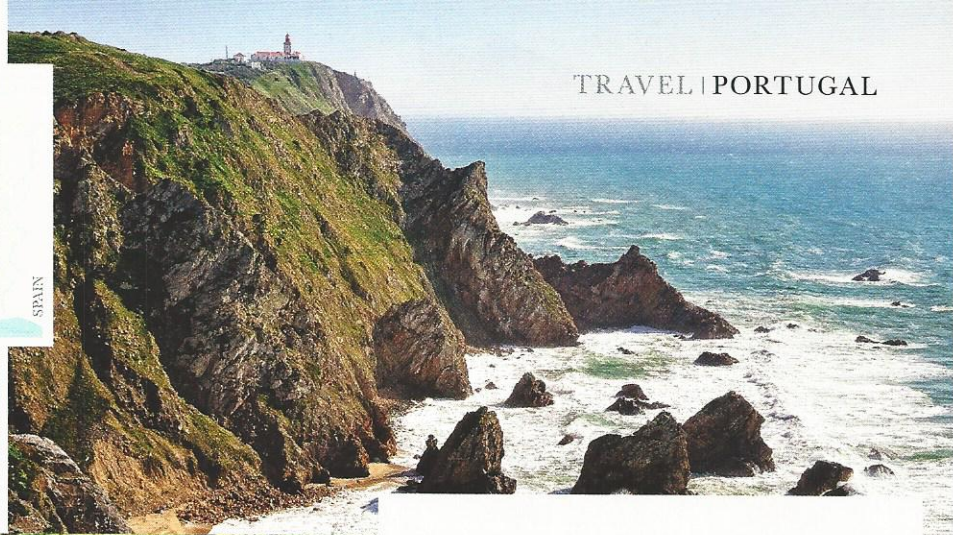
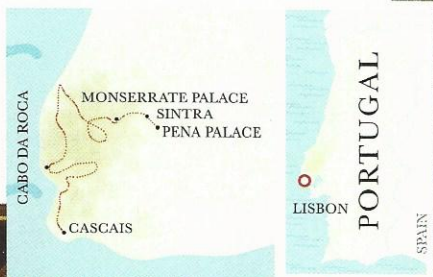
times, a little quirky – and I know that the walking notes it provides are faultless and detailed, down to the faintest waymark on the side of the tiniest track. Maps, though provided, are not essential, which is a good thing. I'm useless with maps.

So my seven-day adventure begins in Lisbon, with a bus trip to the station and a train ride along the coast to the seaside town of Cascais. My walk will start here the next day, after an evening of Douro Valley white and fresh Atlantic sea bass, spent in the company of an old friend who has nobly agreed to be my walking companion.

Reading through our walking instructions for the next few days, our quest feels like a grand treasure hunt, each mile walked – and there are about 45 stretching ahead of us – bringing us nearer and nearer to the pot of gold that is Sintra. Our rambling journey will take us through a varied landscape of wide beaches and dramatic clifftops, through misty, mossy woodland, rural villages and meadows awash with heavily scented wildflowers.

Aside from the simple pleasure of putting one





WHERE TO STAY ON THE WAY

The seven-day trip means that guests have one night at Pergola House, and two nights each in the second, third and fourth of those listed below. Luggage is transported independently from one hotel to the next.

PERGOLA HOUSE

In the heart of Cascais is a traditionally styled Portuguese mansion with a terracotta roof, whitewashed walls and decoratively tiled window surrounds. The drawing room and 10 bedrooms are furnished largely with Portuguese antiques; those with a balcony overlooking the flower-festooned front garden are the pick. The shops, restaurants and beaches of this lovely seaside town are right on the doorstep. pergolahouse.pt

CONVENTO DE SAO SATURNINO

Everything about this family-run guest house, set in a steep-sided valley, suggests a deeply religious past – from its name to the architectural style of the building and the extensive religious iconography found in all the rooms. It was, in fact, built only 20 years ago, albeit on a site with religious associations stretching back through the ages. It's an unusual place where the welcome is warm and the dinner delicious. saosat.com

COLINA FLORA

This tiny guest house prides itself on its garden and its eco credentials. The five rooms are well designed, though Lavender, with its 360-degree aspect, is the best. James and Aasta, the owners, are more than happy to suggest and make dinner reservations and will drive guests to and from their chosen spot. colinaflora.com

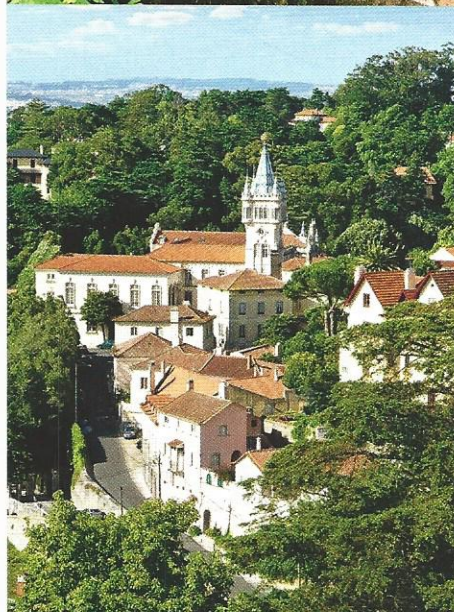
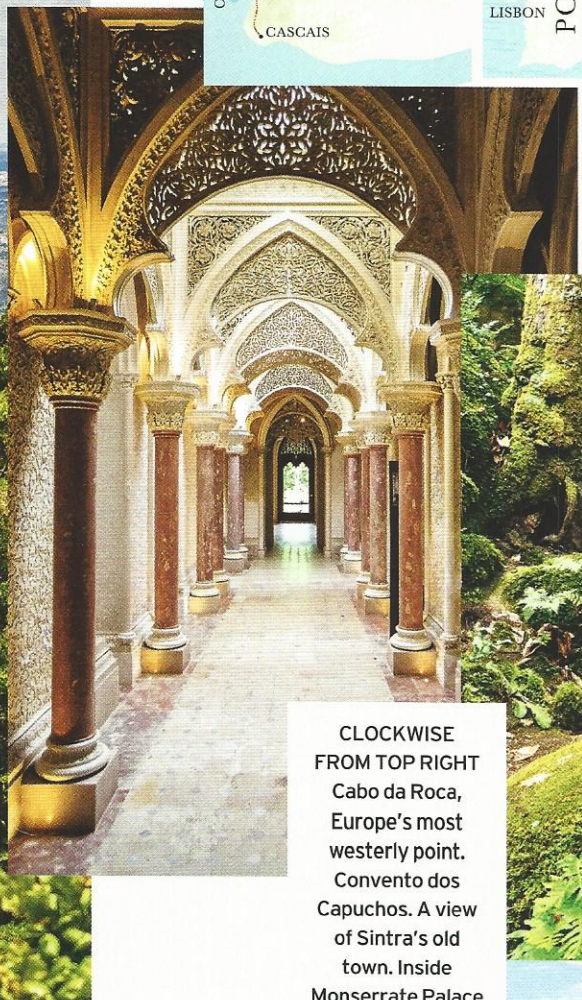
TIVOLI PALACIO DE SETE AIS

In Sintra, Inntravel clients can take their pick of hotels according to budget, and this one is at the top of the pile. It is a neoclassical palace set in elegant gardens, complete with a pretty outdoor pool. The centre of town is a walk away, but it is a good grand finale to the trip. tivolihotels.com □

WAYS AND MEANS

Pamela Goodman travelled as a guest of Inntravel (01653-617002; inntravel.co.uk). Palaces and Pathways of Sintra costs from £675 per person, including seven nights, B&B, two dinners, walking notes and maps, and excluding flights.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT
Cabo da Roca, Europe's most westerly point.
Convento dos Capuchos. A view of Sintra's old town. Inside Monserrate Palace



foot in front of the other, there are plenty of surprises along the way: lunch on the deck at Praia do Guincho bar; the ferocious wind at Cabo da Roca, Europe's most westerly point; the haunting Convento dos Capuchos, where a small community of Franciscan monks eked out a brutally ascetic existence for nearly 300 years; the elaborate interiors and gardens at Monserrate Palace; the inverted subterranean tower in the fantasy land of Quinta da Regaleira's extraordinary park in Sintra. And, of course, Pena Palace itself.

Arriving in Sintra on foot, in the manner of the knights, monks and wandering pilgrims who inhabited this landscape for centuries, seems entirely appropriate. A cool mist, which rolls in off the Atlantic, lends an air of mysticism to this extraordinary hillside town, where nineteenth-century Romantic architectural whimsy famously runs riot. At Pena Palace, in a heaving throng of tourists, most of whom have arrived by bus, our goal is reached, our treasure found – a magical castle in the clouds.