

# The Grand Grey House

First Class Lodgings In Portugal

by Tanya Dewhurst



Meticulously restored Casarao Cinzento (Grand Grey House), a classic mansion sitting among the verdant rolling hills near Portugal's Caldas de Monchique.

**T**ake a radical change of pace from a hectic lifestyle and discover the beautiful scenery of Portugal's Serra de Monchique. Situated several kilometers above the Algarve coastal town of Portimão, this land of mountain peaks, fertile valleys, nestling villages and mineral spas will soothe away anxiety and smooth that furrowed brow.

The locals describe it as the unspoilt Algarve because even though Serra de Monchique lies within the Algarve district, mass tourism has largely by-passed the area and the villages and their denizens have retained their traditional character. The tranquility makes it easy to forget that only ten kilometers down the road lie screaming kids with sticky fingers, crabby parents, sandy everything and a restrained impatience that makes your monster headache unbearable.

Among the olive groves and citrus trees, bubbling streams and chat-

tering birds, Serra de Monchique awaits ... with that far-away-enough feeling to make you wonder what all the hassle was anyway.

In Caldas de Monchique my lover and I stayed at a fabulous bed and breakfast run by an English couple, Danny Brennan and Alan Kane. Forget all those images of dowdy Portuguese pensions with port-hole sized windows and musty rooms. Casarao Cinzento (The Grand Grey House) is an astonishingly luxurious private guest house converted from an old Portuguese mansion.

**A**fter completely gutting and revamping the interior, Danny and Allen set about creating a space that would be private enough to maintain a sense of intimacy yet spacious enough to entertain parties from five to fifty. Delicately decorated in grey with prints by Jean-Paul Vroom, Valerie Daniel and Jean Reuter, amongst others, the effect is stunning with three floors of comfort, freedom, practicality and sheer luxury.

There are only three double bedrooms and the limited reservations ensure that guests enjoy a cozy atmosphere, and also that you're not always bumping into someone you've been managing to avoid for three months. Isn't it always that way at those resorts? Breakfast can be taken on the balcony in the morning sun whilst picking from a long list of daily activities.

Fitness fanatics can venture out and tackle the long walk that climbs through the forests and hills to the village above Monchique. Magnificent vistas of rich, fertile valleys on the coast beyond makes the two hour excursion more than worthwhile. White-petaled flowers with yellow centers, known as the "*Flor de Algarve*" dot the hillsides and fill the air with scent. Dense eucalyptus, pine, cork and hawthorn trees give way to pretty clearings full of flowering wild orchids, peonies, Spanish broom and camellia japonica trees. For the lazy, lounging by the pool amongst palms, soaking up the sun, spectacular mountain views and freshly squeezed orange juice is the rugged itinerary for the day.

We arrived in early April and the weather was hot. I tanned within a week. Caldas de Monchique is a spa town and its waters are renowned for their therapeutic values. Every day the five mountain springs pour millions of gallons of water from the volcanic rocks.

In more regal times kings and no doubt queens came to take the cure. Today the spa is open from June to September and you can relax and take the cure for about £ 5. The peacefulness and the special waters offer an ideal environment for people convalescing, particularly after a long illness, or like us, prolonged exposure to wine, work and wayward women! The water really is therapeutic, to drink or bathe in-the soap lathers to soft silkiness and you could lay in the bath for ever.

Although we were the first



**Viewed from any direction, a splendid and inviting guest house.**

women to stay at Casarao Cinzento, we felt very welcomed and at ease. The other couple (male) staying during the same week were pleased to meet new faces, and it was fun to "double date."

Danny and Allen have succeeded in creating a friendly, welcoming and entertaining atmosphere for lesbians and gay men. "This is not a misogynist nor separatist place," Danny says, "scene politics stay at home and everybody who visits merely wants to take a break from the usual routine and relax, enjoy themselves and not have any hassles. Most people do and assure us they'll be back next year." In fact Danny said we were the best harmoniously mixed guests he'd had.

In the evenings we spent chatty sessions around the log fire, taking the chill off an early April night, or explored the small but thriving gay life in Portimao. Your hosts will escort you to the bars and introduce you to the local clientele. Portuguese

lesbians and gay men don't get going until about midnight and we enjoyed some late evenings.

There are several excellent restaurants. Local specialities include *Frango pirri-pirri* (chicken in hot sauce), *Caldelrada* (a selection of fish simmered with onions, potatoes and olive oil), *Lulas rec-headas* (squid cooked with a stuffing of egg yolk) and *Rojoes a moda do Minho* (chopped pork marinated in dry white wine). Meals cost an average of £ 9 for two people.

Naturally we tried the regional liquors - *Honeymel* (a honey liqueur), *Armeghina* (almond liqueur), *Licor berao* (an unusual hodgepodge of natural ingredients and flavors) and *Madronho* (the deceptively mild-tasting but powerful local speciality distilled from the arbutus or strawberry tree).

Trekking off to explore the Algarve was not a problem. The local bus ride from Caldas to Portimao is a must to experience at first hand the local color and idiosyncrasies and enjoy the sheer beauty and

wonder of the winding mountain descent. However, car hire is essential and should be made through an agent in your home country rather than waiting until you arrive in Portugal. Hitch-hiking is possible but the Portuguese don't pick up hitchhikers as a rule and getting stranded for hours in the middle of nowhere is not the best way to spend your day.

Caldas is a fairly central point. To the east, sprawling tourist and time-share apartment blocks line most of the coastline. Sleepy fishing villages have given way to a thriving metropolis and although the timeless Portuguese spirit and humor remains, little of their legendary sea heritage does. However, donkeys can still be seen hauling farmers' loads past village women crouched in doorways weaving baskets famous in the region.

Westward from Lagos to Sagres and Cabo de St. Vincente (the most southwest tip of Europe) lies the sparse coastline, spectacularly

eroded by the unforgiving north wind. Tiny inlet villages are slowly giving way to the tourists, but the ancient Portuguese character can still be experienced in Martinhal and Sagres port.

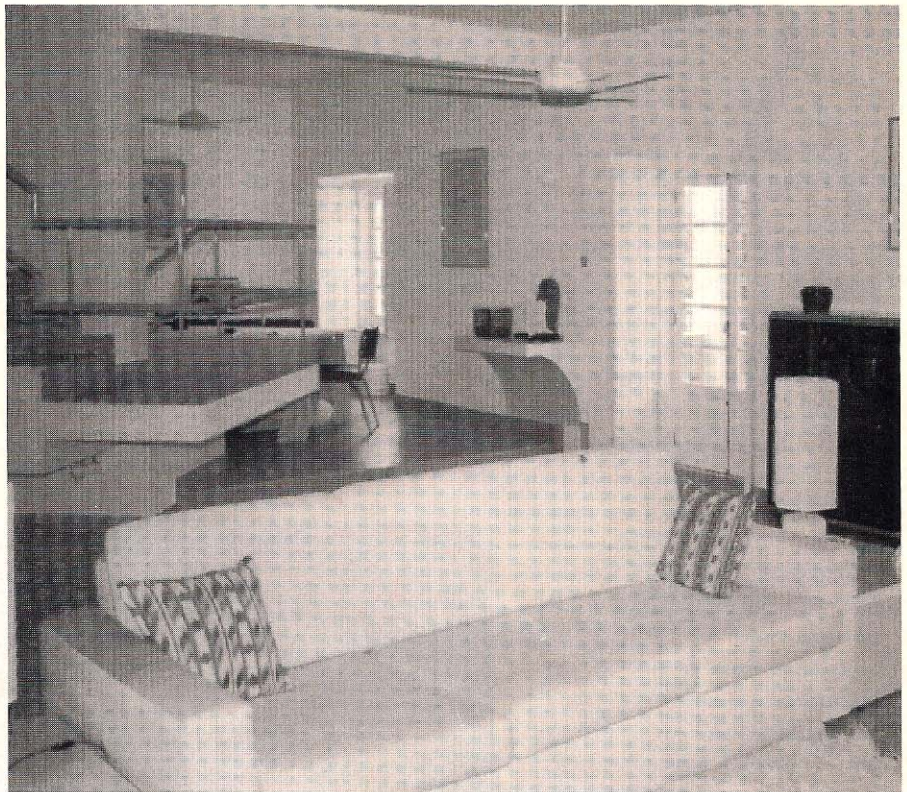
At the Fortealeza, Sagres, history buffs will love the evidence of the navigational feats pioneered by Prince Henry and his students, which made Portugal in its day a mighty merchant power. Inland from Caldas, the road winds through Serra de Monchique, up the slope of Picota, to the peak of Foia, almost 3,000 feet above sea level. Here are the most breathtaking and scenic views of the Algarve. From the fertile valleys with their abundant harvests of bananas, yams, lemons, oranges, chestnuts and arbutus trees, to the panoramic views stretching from Portimao to Sagres.

However, it was the tiny elegant village of Caldas de Monchique that impressed us most. The original setting and timeless atmosphere of old Portuguese ways ensures that the town retains its individuality and attractiveness that is becoming increasingly rare in the Algarve of the 90's.



#### JUST THE FACTS:

For information or reservations on Casarao Cinzento, write Danny Brennan, 48 Wilmington Avenue, Grove Park, London W4 3HA, England or call 44-81-994-5259. Rates per week per person - from a low of £130 to a high of £150 in July & August. Three double bedrooms, spacious and airy, each with their own w.c., shower and view.



**Above: The sitting room, spacious comfort and modern amenities in an old-world atmosphere.**

**Below: Enveloped in a world of relaxed elegance, guests savor the pool and patio at Casarao Cinzento.**

