Knowing very little of Portugal beyond its grand capital city, I decided it was time to turn the tides and explore it for myself. Although my voyage of discovery would follow the dramatic coastline south of Lisbon, I figured that a galleon wasn’t the ideal mode of transport, so I opted for a rental car instead.
Positioned on the edge of the Iberian Peninsula, Portugal is the westernmost country in mainland Europe. There’s very little besides ocean separating it from the East Coast of the United States, perhaps explaining why the Portuguese were seafaring pioneers who were skilled at discovering new worlds, and why even today, they appear to be instinctively lured by the sea.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, an era known as the Age of Discovery, Portuguese sailors were vanguard explorers. Nobleman and Naval Commander Pedro Álvares Cabral is celebrated for discovering Brazil, while fellow explorers like Vasco da Gama discovered and mapped the coasts of Africa and Asia, establishing lucrative spice trade routes.

When news came of Christopher Columbus’ first voyage to the Americas in 1492 under the flag of the Spanish crown, a dispute arose between Portugal and Spain about exactly who’d discovered the New World. It was settled by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, an agreement that divided newly discovered lands outside of Europe between the two countries. This agreement marks the start of centuries of Spanish and Portuguese dominance across much of the Americas.

Portugal’s Age of Discovery has left a lasting impression. Grand historic buildings in places like Lisbon, Porto, Braga, and Sintra remind us of Portugal’s prosperous past, while former colonies like Brazil have a massive cultural impact on modern-day Portuguese life.

Rather than discovering new worlds, today there are initiatives emerging throughout Portugal that endeavour to preserve the world that we know, with everything from luxury Lisbon hotels to remote businesses looking at ways to safeguard our planet. It’s also unnecessary to sail 5,000 km across a torrid ocean from Lisbon to find somewhere new and wonderful, because there’s plenty to discover within easy driving distance of this beguiling capital city, including wineries, national parks, dolphins, dinosaur footprints, and stunning gay beaches.

After collecting a rental car at Lisbon International Airport, our first stop was Lisbon itself. For gay and lesbian visitors, adjoining districts Bairro Alto and Príncipe Real have the most potent appeal. Here, you’ll find many stylish shopping and dining options, plus a vibrant nightlife scene, encompassing everything from live fado performances in an atmospheric bar to Beyoncé hits being spun in rammed gay clubs like Trumps and Construction.

There are numerous places to stay hereabouts, ranging from indulgent five-star Bairro Alto Hotel to inexpensive options like Anjo Azul—a simple gay hotel in an historic blue-tiled building. Bairro Alto literally means “high neighbourhood,” and its steep, heady, narrow streets aren’t easy to ascend in a rental car (especially after dark when they’re overrun with partying Portuguese), so I opted for somewhere more approachable.

One of a handpicked selection of gay-friendly accommodation, the contemporary four-star Inspira Santa Marta Hotel sits discreetly behind a historic façade just one block from Avenida da Liberdade, Lisbon’s grand main boulevard.

Designed using the principles of feng shui, part of the hotel’s philosophy is to treat everyone equally regardless of factors like wealth, status, and sexuality. This idea of universal equality means there’s no downgrading when it comes to amenities in the 89 rooms and suites: all come fully loaded with state-of-the-art technology like plug-and-play-
Dominated by high-rise apartment blocks and camping sites, Caparica has limited appeal, but beyond here there’s a sweeping expanse of beaches, and the farther south you go, the more unspoiled and secluded it gets. From the boardwalk of Caparica a rickety little tourist train accesses 21 km of beaches, with stops approximately every km. At the end of the line is **Fonte da Telha**. Described as a fishing village, but in reality it’s no more a dishevelled cluster of shacks, beach bars, and fishing boats. It’s popular with surfers, kitesurfers, and hipsters, hence there are some effortlessly cool spots to eat and drink.

The rustic, whitewashed terrace of **Cabana Beach Bar** is ideal for toasting the sunset with a Sagres beer or a caipirinha cocktail, while **Beira Mar** is a casual beach restaurant specializing in freshly caught fish, which you can enjoy within earshot of the sea. Fonte da Telha is so laid-back that even the main road is covered in sand, so it’s definitely a place to wear flip-flops or go barefoot.

If you like to bare more than your feet at the beach, just north of here is **Praia 19**, the tourist train’s 19th stop. This stunning stretch of beach is
where Lisbon’s gay community congregates and where nude sunbathing is permitted. The backdrop of dunes and woodland is not only beautiful, but also facilitates cruising—venture into the bushes behind the railway track, and you’ll encounter guys from across Europe and beyond.

To drive here from Lisbon, follow signs for Caparica then continue south all the way to the final beach access road, just before the main road veers uphill and inland. Take this dusty turn, passing various beach clubs, until you reach the last one, Bela Vista. Continue south on foot for approximately 1 km to Praia 19. If you’re approaching from the opposite direction, drive to Fonte da Telha then continue 1 km north along the beach on foot.

Farther south along the coast, Praia do Meco attracts gay sunbathers, although not nearly as many as Praia 19. In the 1970s, this idyllic spot was acknowledged as one of the first nudist beaches in Portugal, indeed in Europe, and remains popular with an alternative-lifestyle crowd.

Should the lure of the sea prove irresistible, you could consider staying near to Praia 19. Fonte da Telha has a couple of small hostels, but there are better options inland, such as four-star Evidencia Belverde Atitude Hotel. The dramatic black and gold swimming pool and decadent décor of this new hotel has made it a popular photoshoot location. I noticed a bridal fashion shoot and a magazine shoot with a pair of Portuguese TV stars during my stay. I also spotted other same-sex couples at the pool.

Surrounded by a residential urbanization, with just a small local bar within walking distance, the hotels immediate environs aren’t perfect, but it’s well placed for the gay beach, and for exploring the area south of Lisbon by car.

Just 20 minutes southeast of here by car is the charming village of Vila Nogueira de Azeitão with its abundance of gastronomic delights. There’s Azeitão cheese, a creamy and gooey chunk of deliciousness that’s handcrafted from raw unpasteurized ewes’ milk, thickened with cardoon thistle instead of rennet to give it a nutty, herby-flavoured—i-it’s served with the top sliced off for you to scoop it out with a spoon or hunks of bread. Then there’s tortas de Azeitão (sweet lemon and cinnamon flavored rolls) and esses de Azeitão (traditional “S” shaped cookies).

It’s also home to Portugal’s oldest wine producer, José Maria de Fonseca. Founded in 1834, this family-run business is best known for its Periquita (table wine), and Moscatel de Setúbal fortified wine. The former family estate and old, cobwebbed cellars in the heart of Azeitão are open for tours and tastings.

A great place to sample the many tasty things on offer here is Casa Das Tortas 1910, a popular restaurant facing Azeitão’s main square. Its shady garden has an outdoor barbecue for grilling squid or skewers of Iberian black pork, another local speciality.

Continue driving for 35 minutes to this region’s southwestern tip, and you’ll reach Cabo Espichel, a desolate headland lashed by the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. You can gaze back from here along the coast, taking in Meco, Fonte da Telha, Praia 19, Caparica, Lisbon, and the distant resort of Cascais, but visitors don’t just flock here for the far-reaching view.

In the 14th century, local fishermen saw an apparition here, of the Virgin Mary riding a giant mule up the near-vertical cliffs. It’s said
that the mule’s footprints remained when the apparition disappeared. These indentations were later identified as being prehistoric footprints of massive Sauropod dinosaurs. The small 15th-century Ermita da Memória (Chapel of Memory) was built on the cliff’s edge above the footprints. It became such a popular pilgrimage destination that a large religious complex, the Santuário de Nossa Senhora, grew up around it from 1701 to provide lodgings, kitchens, and prayer space for the pilgrims. Today, there’s also a lighthouse here, while in a nearby bay, the 150-million-year old footprints of Theropod and Ornithopod dinosaurs have also been discovered.

Our next discovery was Setúbal, a 20-minute drive east of Azeitão. More a thriving fishing town than a pretty fishing village, Setúbal is nevertheless worth visiting if only to try the local speciality choco frito (deep-fried cuttlefish). The classic version is similar to calamari, but some places add the black cuttlefish ink to dramatically color and flavour the batter. For those journeying farther south it’s also a strategically advantageous spot, because from Setúbal you can take a car ferry across the mouth of the Sado Estuary to the beautiful Tróia Peninsula—if you’re fortunate, you may even spot some of the bottlenose dolphins that live within the estuary.

A narrow, low-lying sandbar blanketed by pine forests, much of Tróia is a protected nature reserve. Apart from a luxury resort on the peninsula’s northern tip, there’s relatively little development, so the landscape and beaches like Praia Comporta are truly unchanged.

The old fishing community of Carrasqueira also appears to be untouched by time. Here you’ll see traditional reed houses with walls and thatched roofs, and boats that are reached via creakily raised walkways.

As we continued to drive south, vistas of pine forests were replaced by cork oak, and the sense of nature intensified. Our overall drive was only around two hours, but it felt a world apart. Indeed, this is a part of Portugal where few international tourists venture.

Tucked away amid rolling hills and meadows, and reached via a rough dirt track, Três Marias provides a unique taste of rural Portuguese life. A former ostrich farm, it evolved into a restaurant and is now a simply stylish turismo rural retreat. There’s just the one remaining ostrich, although she now has donkeys and other wildlife for companions.

This gay-friendly property has eight cool and minimal guestrooms with whitewashed walls and polished concrete floors, softened with homely touches like bunches of wildflowers. There’s no TV, DVD player, or telephone here, adding to the sense of tranquility and escapism (although there is Wi-Fi on the main terrace if you absolutely must stay connected).

A scrumptious breakfast is included, while the half-Portuguese, half-Swiss owner Balthasar Trueb and his friendly team will provide picnics or prepare a delicious evening meal if required. Balthasar is generally on-hand, cycling between the two main buildings, and can advise on the numerous available activities.

Três Marias is situated on the 350 km Rota Vicentina, a series of designated walking trails along Portugal’s stunning southwest coast, so it’s perfect for a hiking vacation. Other activities make equal use of the natural environs, including horseback riding along the beach with Herdade do Pessegueiro, boat trips up the River Mira with Duca, canoe-
ing with Ecotrails, and relaxing massages with Stress Free Zone.

All these businesses are part of Casas Brancas, a non-profit association established in 2002. It comprises a network of accommodation, restaurants, and outdoor activities, and it aims to promote quality rural tourism, in turn protecting the region’s identity, culture, landscape, and ecological balance. The idea is that if this region, much of which is designated natural parkland, can sustain a profitable tourist industry in its unspoilt and natural state there’ll be no need for mass-development.

The nearby town of Vila Nova de Milfontes is popular with Portuguese tourists during the peak of summer, but otherwise seems remarkably undisturbed. Of the numerous restaurants, our favorite was Porto das Barcas, also part of Casas Brancas. Situated on the edge of town beside the peaceful old harbor, this long-established restaurant has recently been overhauled by new owner Sofia, a lawyer who came from Lisbon with her husband in 2011 to start a new life. The result is a subtly modern twist on a typical Portuguese restaurant.

A two-hour drive south of here, the Algarve, was our final destination. This coastal region of southern Portugal is characterized by huge resort hotels, golf courses, yacht marinas, shopping malls, and other consequences of mass-tourism. Yet, alongside all of this, you’ll still find beautiful beaches, like gay-frequented Praia de Cabanas, and delightful little seaside hamlets, like Cacela Velha.

Owned by Rupert and Andrew, a gay couple from the UK, Casa Rosada is a charming boutique B&B in the sleepy town of Castro Marim on the Algarve’s eastern edge. Having vacationed nearby in the town of Tavira for over 25 years, they’d grown to love this corner of Portugal. They sold their London home and relocated here in 2006 to breathe life back into a traditional old townhouse with wrought iron balconies and tall wooden shutters.

Andrew was a photo editor for glossy magazines including Marie Claire, Rupert had a catering company, and, with their combined skills, they’ve created a wonderful, warm, and welcoming place to stay. A breakfast of fresh fruit, homemade preserves, and Portuguese pastries is served amid lavender bushes and fruit trees in the rear walled garden, which dramatically overlooks Castro Marim’s medieval castle. You may also dine here by candlelight in the evening. Rupert is a passionate cook, goes to the market daily to shop for fresh, seasonal produce, and is happy to cater for all tastes and dietary requirements.

It’s worth noting that Castro Marim is close to Portugal’s border with Spain, and it takes around 15 minutes to drive across for a meal of Spanish tapas—something we couldn’t resist doing.

What’s fantastic about Rupert, Andrew, Sofia, Balthasar, and many others I met while on this Portuguese roadtrip is that they show a real pioneering spirit. The same sort of spirit Pedro Álvares Cabral must have had when he sailed from Lisbon to discover Brazil. Perhaps these are the first ripples of Portugal’s new Age of Discovery, so why not come and discover it for yourself?
Bairro Alto Hotel, Praça Luís de Camões 2, Lisboa. Tel: +351-213-408-288. Luxury five-star boutique hotel with 55 guestrooms and suites. A local hotspot, it’s worth visiting even if you’re not a guest. Café-Bar BA features DJs and bands performing everything from jazz to bossa nova, while the rooftop terrace offers unique views and is a perfect sunset spot. Rates from €260. www.bairroaltohotel.com

Casa Rosada, Rua Dr Silvestre Falcão 6-10, Castro Marim. Tel: +351-281-544-215. Charming B&B with three spacious guestrooms, owned and operated by a gay couple from the UK. The lovely private garden is the perfect spot for breakfast, and even more magical by candlelight should you opt to take dinner here too. Rates from €75. www.furtherafield.com/casa-rosada-portugal

Evidencia Belverde Attitude Hotel, Avenida de Belverde 70, Amora. Tel: +351-210-426-900. Newly constructed hotel with black and gold swimming pool and other decadent design touches. There’s also an indoor pool, spa, restaurant, and bar. Located in a residential area, it’s nevertheless close to Praia 19 gay beach. Rates from €70. www.evidenciabelverde.com

Hotel Anjo Azul, Rua Luz Soriano 75, Bairro Alto, Lisboa. Tel: +351-213-478-099. Simple and inexpensive gay hotel with 20 guestrooms in an historical, blue-tiled building. Although it doesn’t provide services such as breakfast, there are many options in the nearby streets. It’s also conveniently located for Lisbon’s gay scene. Rates from €40. www.anjoazul.com

Inspira Santa Marta Hotel, Rua de Santa Marta 48, Lisboa. Tel: +351-965-666-231. Tranquil, gay-friendly rural retreat surrounded by meadows of wildflowers. The eight rooms are cool and contemporary, each with private terraces. Rates from €70. www.furtherafield.com/inspira-santa-marta-lisbon-portugal

Três Marias, Ribeira da Azanza, Vila Nova de Milfontes. Tel: +351-965-904-231. This tranquil, gay-friendly rural retreat is sited in the heart of the countryside. The eight rooms are cool and contemporary, each with private terraces. Rates from €70. www.furtherafield.com/3-marias-south-west-portugal

Restaurante Porto das Barcas, Estrada do Canal, Vila Nova de Milfontes. Tel: +351-283-997-160. A classic Portuguese restaurant, but with subtle contemporary twists to both the menu and the décor thanks to new owner Sofia. A part of the Casas Brancas network of rural businesses. www.casasbrancas.pt

Trumps, Rua da Imprensa Nacional 104, Lisboa. Open Fridays, Saturdays and Public Holidays from 11:45 P.M. to 6 A.M., Lisbon’s leading gay club has two dance floors and chill-out lounge. It’s popular with a young, predominantly gay male crowd. www.trumps.pt

Dub River Trip. Captained since 2004 by Rui Catalão, this little boat sails up the peaceful River Mira from Vila Nova de Milfontes to the historical town of Odemira, providing opportunities for sun-bathing, swimming, and birdwatching. The schedule is determined by the tides, but options include daytime and sunset sailings. Fishing trips are also available. Prices from €20 per hour. www.duca.pt

Ecotrails. Heralding from Germany, Anke Ruschhaupt provides canoeing on the River Mira—a great way to discover its landscape and biodiversity. The lightweight canoes have a capacity of two or four people. Anke can also provide picnics, as well as renting tents and mountain bikes. Canoe rental €30 for one day. www.ecotrails.info

José Maria de Fonseca, Rua José Augusto Coelho 11/13, Azeitão. The former family residence and vineyard are open for guided tours, followed by tastings in the wine shop. www.jmf.pt

Stress Free Zone. Judith and her colleagues Daniela and Anna offer a host of holistic treatments, including reiki, shiatsu, and watsu—perfect for alleviating aches from hiking, horse riding or canoeing, or as an indulgent treat. Massage from €40. www.stress-free-zone.org