

Pray 'n Tell

Castelo de Vide – a medieval town in Portugal – is a confluence of Jewish culture and Catholic traditions

:: Rathina Sankari

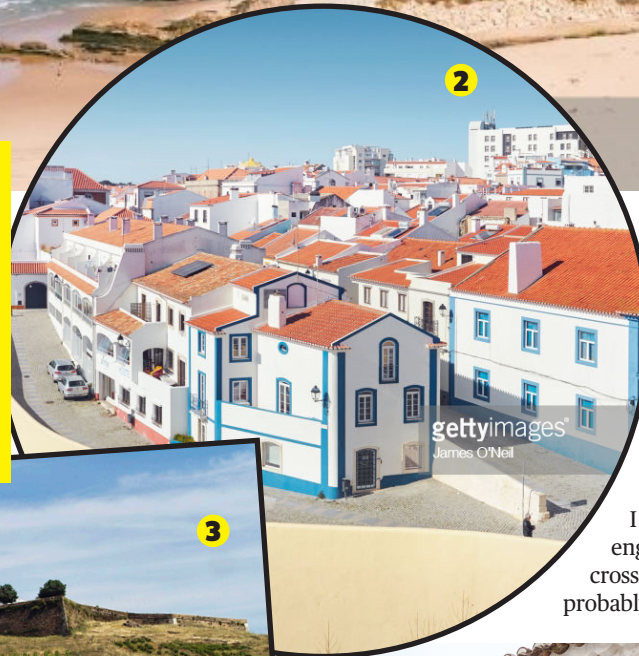
In the Alentejo region of Portugal, one can explore its wine routes and destinations steeped in culture and history like Elvas and Marvão. The signature white-washed houses of Alentejo, with yellow or blue roofs and green shutters, are a welcome sight on a hot day. I am supposed to head back to Lisbon the next day when my host recommends a detour to Castelo de Vide – a town known for its Jewish heritage.

So next morning, I head to the 'Sintra of Alentejo' as nick-named by Don Pedro V, the King of Portugal. Situated on the northern foothills of the Serra de São Mamede, it is very close to Spain. It is said that the medieval burg was earlier called the Terra de Vide (Land of the Vine) and had its share of castle, churches and chapels. I trudge uphill through sinuous narrow cobblestone streets peppered with white houses, potted plants and vines, to the oldest synagogue in Portugal. It is a pleasant change from the warm plains to the nippy hills.

The façade of the 14th century synagogue looks like any unpretentious stone cottage with Gothic wooden doors if not for the signboard 'sinagoga'. At the desk, I ask for a guide and ten minutes later I am greeted by the lovely Patrícia Martins who takes me on a tour through the synagogue, which today is a museum. I find myself in the room which originally housed the tabernacle of the synagogue.

According to Jewish practices, a lamp is lit for Sabbath every Friday at sunset. But during Inquisition, the Jews couldn't do so openly,

1. Panoramic view of Zambujeira do Mar, Alentejo **2.** The coastal city of Sines **3.** Vineyards in Alentejo, with the town of Estremoz on a hilltop **4.** The synagogue was a place of residence before getting converted to a place of worship **5.** The Jewish Quarter called Fonte da Vila **6.** One of the quaint streets of Castelo de Vide



ly, so they lit the candle inside a pot with a small opening to follow the customs secretly. At the synagogue, Patrícia shows me one such earthen pot used by the New Christians. The Anusim Jews were expected to consume pork which was against kosher, but the clever Jews found an ingenious method of using lamb meat as sausages. The practices of the new religion meant cooking using lard – the fat from the abdomen of the pig. To escape persecution for not practicing the Christian norms, Jewish women cleverly fried onions in olive oil using herbs that perfectly disguised the anomaly.

These were few of the many tactics followed by the Sephardic Jews to ensure they could follow their faith discreetly and not break the Jewish traditions. They went to the church, took the communion and baptized their children but at home they followed the Jewish traditions discreetly.

In one of the rooms of the synagogue, Patrícia points to-

wards the names of the New Christians who were executed during Inquisition for allegedly following Judaism clandestinely. A name that has Indian connections is the famous Portuguese botanist and physician Garcia de Orta who produced the masterpiece book – *Coloquios dos Simples e Drogas e Cousas Medicinais da Índia*. In 1534, he set sail for Goa, one of the Portugal holdings and lived there until his demise in 1568. It was believed that despite the obligations of follow-

ing the Christian faith he practiced Judaism in secrecy. So, twelve years later his remains were exhumed and burnt in Goa on the orders of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

As I walk around the Jewry, I notice few Christian symbols engraved on the doorsteps – a cross, a fish with scales. They were probably engraved to show to the external world their allegiance to the new faith. Towards the right doorpost I find the incision to hold the Jewish mezuzah – parchment scroll, with Shema prayer. As per Jewish traditions, before a Jew steps into the house he touches the mezuzah and then kisses his hand as an expression of faith.

Today, Easter in Castle de Vide is distinct due to the confluence of Catholic traditions and Jewish culture even though the town doesn't have any Jewish population. On Easter Saturday, the shepherds herd their sheep in a procession around the town as per the Jewish ritual of the blessing of the sheep. Easter vigil commences that night followed by the Alleluia Procession and the Easter Mass on Sunday. It is indeed a unique celebration that combines the ethos of both the religions and probably pays homage to the Jews who once resided here

and didn't expect much, other than follow their faith openly.

I head to the town square with Patricia when it starts to drizzle. At a nearby cafe, when she asks what will I have, "Boleima," I retort. The indigenous apple and cinnamon sweet which not surprisingly has its roots in the Jewish unleavened bread. As I dig into it, I offer a silent prayer to the Jews who lived here in times of intolerance. ■



The writer is a Pune-based freelancer