



MAR.08.001

Paella and Port calls

The Iberian Peninsula's sun drenched beaches have traditionally been the main magnets for tourists. Lately however, there has been a demand for more cultural and active participation holidays in the region. Dubai based freelancer LORIEN CROSS reports

In the past few years both Spain and Portugal have received substantial EU funds to improve facilities for hands on, cultural holiday experiences, and food and wine tourism is leading the way.

The aim has been to create home stay accommodation, guides to the gastronomic opportunities in the region, more wine routes and to support product development and promotion. This financial push has been largely geared towards attracting greater numbers of international tourists.

Spain's tourism trade body Exceltur reported that there were 59.7 million visitors to the country in 2007, which contributed in the region of Dh130 billion to the country's economy. Furthermore, Jose Luis Zoreda, executive vice president, Exceltur, has stated that "we expect 60.7 million tourists in Spain" in 2008.

Meanwhile, Portugal is currently attracting in the region of 12.8 million tourists annually, and that figure is expected to reach 15 million by 2010. In recognition of its steadily growing popularity, the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) has already reported that Portugal is exhibiting particularly healthy booking figures so far this year.

Spain is one of the largest wine producers in the world, and with the support of various institutions viniculture and associated tourism in Spain has undergone a revolution. There are currently eight certified wine routes across the country, with more in the pipeline.

Visitors to these regions have added significantly to the local economy. Tour operators offer packages that include tours of private vineyards, fine cuisine, hospitality and tastings in the numerous bodegas - cellars - that dot the countryside.

Vintage Spain offers combination food and wine tours that include cycling, horse riding, golf and hiking. Cristina Alonso, director, Vintage Spain, says, "This type of tourism offers many benefits to the economy, particularly because it is largely featured in rural areas that might not have very much else to offer. It is amazing to see how it has improved the rural environment, as well as the quality of accommodation and restaurants along the wine routes."

Spain's wine regions encompass Andalusia, Aragon, Castilla-La Mancha and Madrid, Castilla y León, Catalonia, Extremadura, Galicia, Levante, the Navarra, the Basque and Rioja.

Portugal

About eight per cent of Portugal is dedicated to vineyards. A relative newcomer to the world wine scene, Portugal's history has traditionally been linked with the fortified wines of Port and Madeira. Nowadays however, the country produces a diversity of light and fruity table wines off hundreds of small farms across more than 20 regions growing different varieties of grapes. The main regions include the Douro, Dão and Bairrada in the north, and the Alentejo, Ribatejo and Extremadura in the centre and south of the country. The Douro Valley Wine Region - the oldest appellations system in the world - and Pico Island Wine Region, have been classified by UNESCO as world heritage sites.

One of the country's most treasured regions - often referred to as the Provence of Portugal -

is the southern region of Alentejo. Still a relatively well kept secret, it extends from the Sao Mamede Mountains to the Atlantic coast, which is punctuated by bays and coves. The area offers fortified villages, Roman ruins, Moorish castles and Baroque palaces, which are interspersed with grapevines, cork forests, and herds of sheep and black pigs.

Alentejo country, which is within relatively easy striking distance of Lisbon, is one of Portugal's most important red wine regions and produces a variety of traditional, earthy reds as well as the more rich, fruity new world reds.

Alentejotrails promotes active tours in this region, such as guided Jeep and motorbike tours of the vineyards. Meanwhile, Cellar Tours and Active Gourmet Holidays offer regional food and wine tours in both Portugal and Spain. Active Gourmet Holidays also offer cooking lessons in the Alentejo.

Jo-Ann Gaidosz, the owner of Active Gourmet Holidays, says, "My business is continuing to grow, despite the downturn in the value of the US dollar; people love learning while on holiday. Our combination tours are very popular, for instance cooking and wine tours. Tours of this nature aren't yet as popular in Spain and Portugal yet as they are in Italy and France, but I am currently developing more relationships in both countries."

While the Mediterranean climate certainly exerts its influence over much of the Iberian Peninsula providing long hot summers, Spain and Portugal also experience cold winters, and short spring and autumn seasons. As a result, gourmet and wine tourism in the region seems to be a viable option at any time of the year, and thanks to UAE and Spain signing of the Open Skies agreement in the last quarter of 2007, residents in the Middle East might not have to wait too much longer before they have direct access to Spain and Portugal. In the meantime, Madrid, Barcelona and Seville, in Spain, and Lisbon, in Portugal, are accessible via Zurich, Paris, London and Doha.

Visitors from the UAE can obtain visit visas from the Portuguese Trade Centre or the Spanish consulate in Abu Dhabi.