

*Our writer's love story began in Cascais and though her husband's memories are starting to fade, a poignant return visit created some new ones*

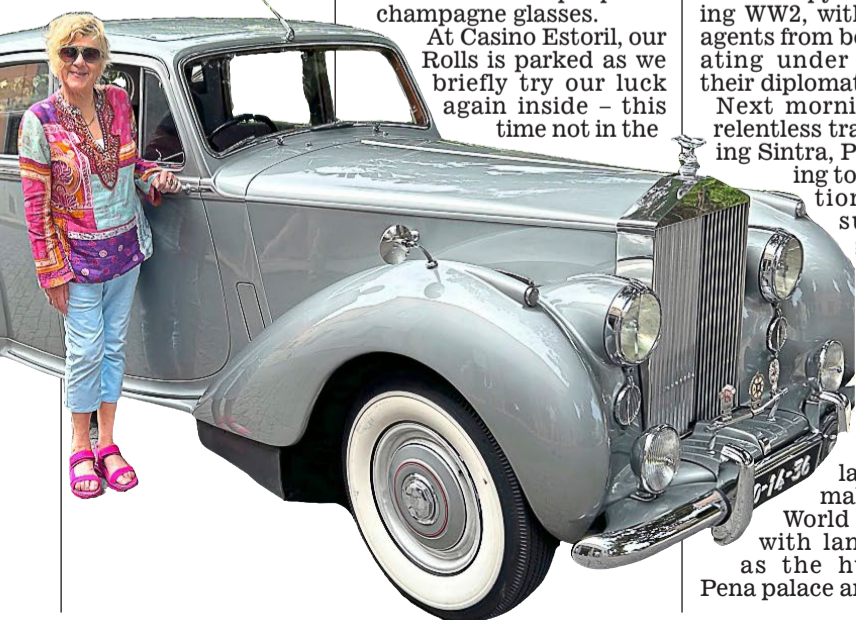
# A trip back in time



Picturesque: The Cascais coastline

BY **ISABEL CONWAY**

**Return: Clockwise from right, one of the many impressive buildings; The Grande Real Villa Italia Hotel; Isabel with the Rolls; and with Carlo**



are further flashbacks to the Queen Mum era, as is the silver vase for flowers above her ear. There was no cubby hole for her favourite tippie – gin and tonic.

'Why is the front mirror so small?' my companion enquires of Jose Miguel.

'Oh that's for discretion, the driver can't see what's going on behind him in the car, he only can view traffic behind the back window,' our chauffeur reveals. I take the chance to top up our champagne glasses.

At Casino Estoril, our Rolls is parked as we briefly try our luck again inside – this time not in the

more decadent roulette area but on insatiable, whirring, jangling slot machines in their hundreds spread out over one of Europe's largest gambling complexes, all high tech turnstiles, escalators and noise.

Winnings of €30 are duly pocketed and we decamp back out into bright afternoon sunlight for a further tour of fascinating nearby wartime espionage sites.

Cascais and Estoril were hives of spying activity during WW2, with many secret agents from both sides operating under the cover of their diplomatic status.

Next morning, we join a relentless traffic jam entering Sintra, Portugal's leading tourism destination, which has suffered congestion and high season over-tourism in the decades since we were there.

The picturesque town's fairytale castles and lush landscapes make it a Unesco World Heritage site, with landmarks such as the huge national Pena palace among fabulous



other examples of Moorish, Gothic, Manueline and Renaissance architecture. It attracts 3 million visitors a year to its six grand palaces, surrounded by magnificent gardens on wooded hills 30km north-west of Lisbon.

Guide Paulo Silva of Tugatrips steers us back through history to times when the Portuguese Court drew noble families to Sintra to see and be seen within the extraordinarily lavish fantasy land of summer palaces. Carlo leans across one of the opulent terraces overlooking the grounds and at last confirms, 'we've been here before haven't we'.

Describing Sintra as 'glori-

ous Eden', the poet Lord Byron stayed at 18th century Lawrence's hotel ([lawrenceshotel.com](http://lawrenceshotel.com)), an elegant oasis tucked back from the bustle of the town centre.

Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones were in Sintra earlier in the summer and sought refuge in Lawrence's after they were recognised and pursued by fans, recalls restaurant manager Alfredo Alves of this oldest hotel on the Iberian peninsula, dating back to 1764.

**M**EMORABLE experiences are also culinary-related, from a signature burger at Lawrence's to a wonderful tapas supper at Senhor Manuel, along the atmosphere-laden pedestrianised foodie district of outside dining tables. We watch the passing parade while charming waitress Mariana presents local garlic shrimp (€13), tuna bites (pica pau €14) and Gambas with coriander and chilli (€16). On the seafront terrace of hotel Baia, overlooking Cascais Bay, we enjoy a delicious take on lobster salad after a splendid walk that takes us past the arts quarter housed in the old fort and a cluster of imposing museums.

Irish visitors love Museum Condes de Castro Guimaraes, boasting a rich history with the Ulster coat of arms of the O'Neills and a shamrock-adorned ceiling. They are both throwbacks to the ancestry of Jorge Torlades O'Neill, part of the dynasty going back to the arrival of Hugh O'Neill on the Iberian peninsula after rebellions against the English.

Jorge had lived in splendour in one of Cascais's most prestigious mansions before declaring bankruptcy connected to a gambling debt. Today the building is owned and run by the municipality as a museum/library.

Great chats with locals are further highlights, such as Carlo's interaction with captain Rue Machado of Aquastart ([aquastart.pt](http://aquastart.pt)), who takes us for a leisurely cruise – meeting fishermen to see their catches of lobster and seabass and a close-up look at Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar's grim castellated summer house on the cliffs.

Afterwards, lunch at O Pescador near the fish market on Rua das Flores, presents another great value, sea-fresh unpretentious array of seafood and excellent house wine.

The Dutchman introduces himself – 'I'm Dutch, by the way' – starting a chat with the couple at the next courtyard table. The man is a Scottish park ranger and together they share knowledge of conservation for fast-disappearing natural habitats in Holland and elsewhere. Now and then Carlo repeats his mantra. Nobody bats an eyelid. We all smile, raising a glass to having good company on holidays.

## TRAVEL FACTS

Isabel was a guest of Cascais Tourism Board, see [visitcascais.com](http://visitcascais.com). She stayed at the five-star Grande Real Villa Italia hotel & Spa, see [lhw.com](http://lhw.com), with rooms from €155 per night.