

Playing it again in Portugal

Bettany Hughes and her husband retrace their honeymoon route — this time, with the children

DISASTER. No hankies. We were in the middle of the Portuguese medieval walled city of Obidos and I had no alternative but to wipe baby May's streaming nose on the back of my husband Adrian's T-shirt. Then, distracted by the snivelling baby, we lost five-year-old Sorrel as she wandered, daydreaming through the doll's-house pretty lanes.

When we found her she was standing, mesmerised, in a tiny shop stacked floor to ceiling with hand-painted cockerles, tambourines and drums; a child's fantasy, a parent's nightmare.

Our first visit to Portugal was rather different. It was our honeymoon and we spent driving around remote hideaways and luxurious pads. Obidos, perched on top of a hill, an hour north of Lisbon, was the site of a particularly romantic afternoon.

Known as the "Wedding City", Obidos has been given a wedding gift by Portuguese kings to their queens since the 1200s. As newlyweds, we found it fairytale perfect. We'd lounged in the castle with its beautiful Renaissance tiles, drinking *vinho verde*, before drifting down to the town at sunset, when the gorgeous

streaks of colour on the buildings — vertical shafts of blue, walls of yellow ochre — gave the impression of walking into a life-sized canvas.

Seven years on, convinced that the flush of new love and complimentary champagne weren't the only reasons we'd found rural Portugal entrancing, we thought we'd try to recapture the magic — with our two children and their nanny in tow.

Despite the odd hiccup the experiment was going extremely well. When we visited Obidos for the first time it was August and packed with tourists. This time, in early October, despite a faultlessly blue sky and soft warm air, we often had the little flower-filled terraced streets to ourselves.

For old times' sake we visited the restaurant in the castle for lunch. One of a necklace of *pousadas*, historic buildings turned state-run hotels, that decorate Portugal, it was surprisingly child-friendly — baby May even had a high chair that matched the Gothic interior. The *maitre d'*, who looked like he might have tended the castle's bygone aristocracy, now served our girls pizza, as well as paper and crayons, with a flourish.

A new highway system made retracing our steps rela-



Adrian and Bettany take baby May and sister Sorrel around the grounds of the Hotel Palacio de Seteais in Sintra, seven years after they visited on honeymoon

tively painless. Starting in the south, we whiled away the miles driving west by spotting road signs that forbade horse-driven carts to join the motorway.

Our route took us through the caramel-coloured Algarve landscape, sprinkled with olive trees and dry-stone walls. But we also drove down many Wild-West style roads crowded with badly designed signs and shoddy looking adverts.

It was with some relief, therefore, that we arrived at Villa Gilliana, with its covering of exotic pale pink bignonia and magenta bougainvillea. The children were delighted to find a wood-burning stove inside, grapefruit trees at

the bottom of the garden and a sandpit that had obviously been filled from the beach.

The villa sleeps ten, and next time we would probably team up with another family to share in the fun. On a honeymoon all you need is each other's company, but with kids the more youngsters and pairs of hands around the better.

Our mission was to match our honeymoon miles, so we were soon on the road again. Arriving at our next destination, the Vila Vita Parc hotel, about 45 minutes west of Faro, was like walking into fairyland with one fountain full of metal dolphins and another on the same scale as the Trevi in Rome.

Here, although we had opted for childcare, we found we were having so much fun exploring the hotel's 55-acre grounds that we tended to do everything *en famille*. Entertainment was provided by two fabulous playgrounds, crazy golf and, of course, the sea.

Dining culture in Portugal welcomes children, so we always ate together. Children staying at the hotel, mainly German and British, ran around the tables and formed packs on the dusky terraces. As new friends melted away into the balmy night, waiters would take over as entertainers. Adrian and I ordered our traditional honeymoon wine and, while our girls were kept amused, we even managed to complete a whole conversation.

The atmosphere at Vila Vita was so heavenly that perched, after a week, we began to yearn for a bit of grime, and slipped out to hit the road again. Driving through the



while we leant against the sun-baked walls, imagining what conversations and sights those stones must have witnessed.

The bells of the huge, ancient white and aubergine cathedral of Sé pealed out that it was lunchtime. Keen to get out of the heat, we stumbled into the Casa Velha restaurant on Rua 25 de Abril, where the food — fresh mountain cheeses, excellent chips with grilled fish and sticky local walnut tart — was superb and reasonably priced.

After lunch, we continued on our way up through the mountains until we reached the spa town of Caldas de Monchique, where the waters reputedly enable the drinker to discover instant happiness. We denied the kids a taste in case joy came with bacteria and instead filled up our beach bag with fruit sold by the old women in the town square. Organised for our surge north, we took to the road.

We passed through cork plantations and the candy-coloured high-rises that mark the start of Lisbon, and drove another 40 minutes to Sintra, where Byron famously stayed.

Our idea was to finish our second honeymoon where we started our first — the Hotel Palacio de Seteais.

Despite the hotel's exquisite elegance the children were clearly welcome. One night the cocktail pianist even stopped playing ambient classics so he could teach Sorrel *Jingle Bells*.

Ten minutes up the road — or a half-hour horse and carriage trip if you want to do Byron-style — are the gardens of Monserrate, where our two girls played at princesses and dragons in grottoes and under banyan trees. The place still had the melancholic, poet aura that we remembered, but we thought it a shame the entrance was spoiled by an incongruous visitor centre.

While we were there, the skies opened for one of Sintra's frequent rain showers. As we sheltered under a strawberry tree — or arbutus — with Sorrel pretending it was a palace made of berries, we had the feeling that Portugal's palpable rosy glow was as romantic for our children the second time around as it had been for us the first.

Need to know

■ **Getting there:** Bettany Hughes and family travelled with Powder Byrne (020-8246 5300, www.powderbyrne.com) and Something Special 01455 852229, www.somethingsspecial.co.uk).
 ■ **Where to stay:** During the summer holidays, Powder Byrne offers long weekends (Wednesday to Sunday) at the Vila Vita Parc hotel in a family suite with scheduled flights from £1,046 per adult, £931 per child (two-12), £688 babies up to two). Club activities (Monday-Friday during school holidays) are free for children aged four to nine, £140 per week for children ten to 14. A crèche for babies aged six months to three years is available for £200 per week from April to September.

■ **Further information:** Portugal Tourist Board 0906-364 0610; www.portugalinfo.pt).

■ Bettany Hughes is a historian and television presenter. She is fronting this month's *Dream Ticket Guide to the Canadian Rockies* on LWT



In the pink amid floral beauty at Villa Gilliana