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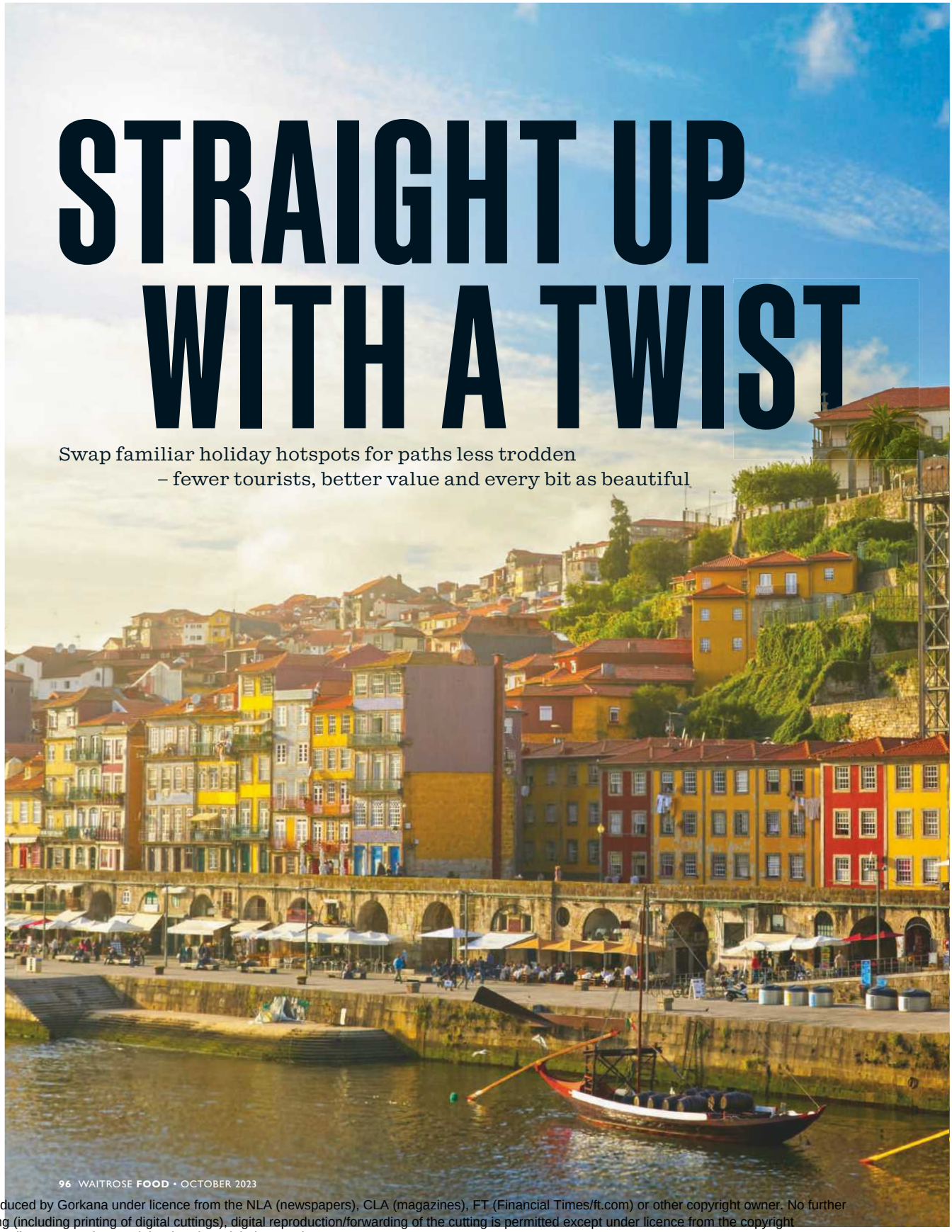
STRAIGHT UP WITH A TWIST

Swap familiar holiday hotspots for paths less trodden – fewer tourists, better value and every bit as beautiful



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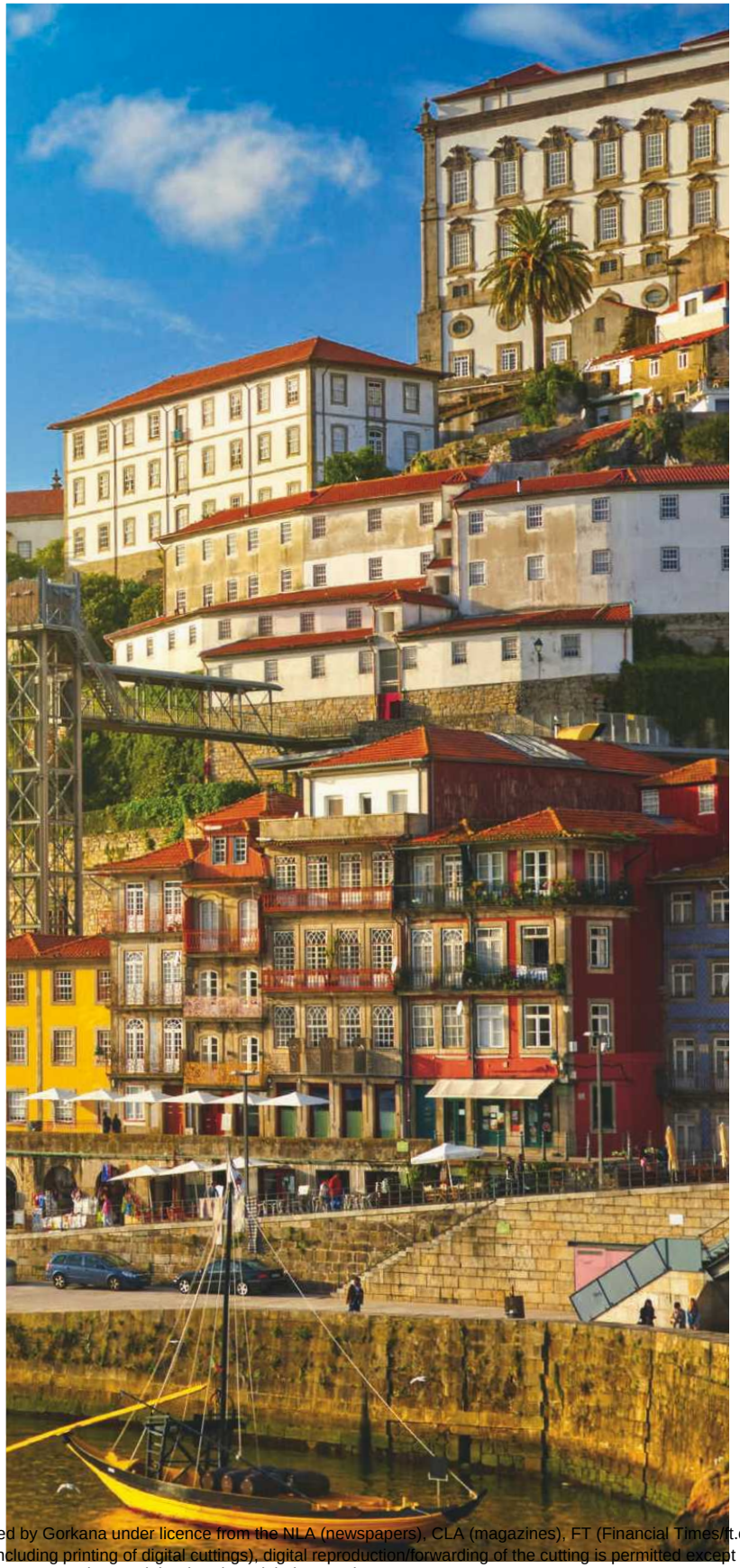


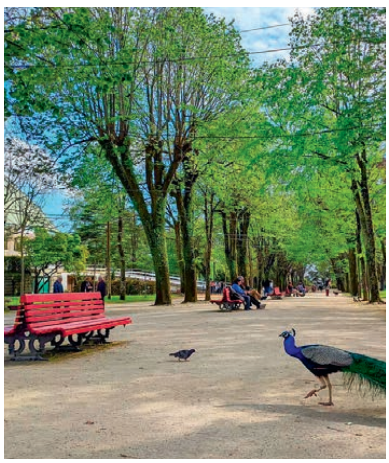
LOVE LISBON?
TRY PORTO

Lisbon's stock has skyrocketed in recent years, thanks in part to its all-star food hall, photogenic coffee shops and bars. But Portugal's second city, Porto, on the banks of the sparkling Douro river, deserves at least as much attention. Once you've ticked off the higgledy-piggledy streets around the riverside Ribeira district, the historic port houses and the lofty Dom Luís I Bridge, head slightly north to Rua Miguel Bombarda. The city's artiest, most cosmopolitan avenue is a perfect base, and Pensão Favorita – a charming guesthouse with a striking red-brick façade and serene gardens (pensaofavorita.pt; from €67.50 a night) – makes an ideal bolthole for a weekend's ambling.

As well as Bombarda's dinky galleries, boutiques and cafés (Hakko Bakehouse is a gem), it's stumbling distance from both the Palácio de Cristal and the Soares dos Reis National Museum – the latter featuring a fine collection of sculpture, paintings, ceramics and glassware. Further afield, the Serralves museum is a no-brainer for botanically minded contemporary art fans; it's set in beautifully sculpted parklands that are also home to the iconic villa Casa de Serralves.

Nuno Mendes is Portugal's most beloved chef, and Cozinha das Flores (cozinha dasflores.com), serving elevated takes on northern Portuguese staples, might be his best restaurant yet. For something more casual, Out to Lunch, back near Favorita, is a delightful Japanese izakaya-style bar at the Época café. Saúde to that! »

WORDS TOM HOWELLS **PHOTOGRAPHS** ADOBE STOCK, ALAMY



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LOVE NICE? TRY MARSEILLE

The oldest, sunniest and, arguably, most charismatic city in France, Marseille feels a little like New York to Nice's Los Angeles. It's been a centre of migration for thousands of years, and the cultural and culinary influence of settlers from the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and far-flung corners of Europe can be felt at every enticing turn. Eat fried plantain from the Côte d'Ivoire at Mama Africa and Syrian snacks at Ashourya – both of which can be found in the Instagram-friendly Cours Julien neighbourhood – or plug into the city's Italian heritage with pizza at the deeply old-school Chez Etienne on the narrow streets of the Le Panier quartier.

Fabulously fishy bouillabaisse (above right) is Marseille's signature dish, and the cliffside restaurant Peron (restaurant-peron.com) serves some of the best. The Vieux Port is still the heart of the action: an ancient waterfront where you can dine on fresh seafood under the gothic gaze of the Notre-Dame de la Garde, a Catholic basilica that looms majestically over an always-buzzing marina. In the home of Ricard, it is imperative that you sip the local pastis – make straight for the atmospheric Bar de la Marine.

Once replete, find art, exhibitions, music and more in the tobacco factory turned arts hub La Friche la Belle de Mai (lafriche.org). And for a little fresh sea air, head to the dramatic coves of the Parc National des Calanques for a boat trip that includes a bracing dip in the ocean.

WORDS LEONIE COOPER PHOTOGRAPHS AWL IMAGES, STOCKFOOD

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LOVE HVAR? TRY VIS

When the producers of *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* were hunting for an unspoilt island to film, they swapped the Aegean for the Adriatic and chose tiny Vis. Like most of the Croatian coast, it's a knockout, with sparkling blue waters and handsome Venetian-influenced architecture. Unlike its neighbours, Vis has been isolated from tourism: until 1989, it was a Yugoslavian military base.

There are two hubs: Vis Town, where the ferry from Split docks, and Komiža. The former is well worth exploring for a day. Linger over tapas on the terrace at Lola before heading to the Vinarija Lipanović winery (lipanovic.com/en); its cellar is in a former military tunnel and it's a great place to enjoy a glass of Vugava, the gutsy local white. But make your base Komiža, a picturesque fishing port with a palm-lined harbour and pristine pebble beaches. The food is a delight (and delightfully good value), from giant triangles of spinach and feta burek (right) eaten between swims and spritzes on the harbour, to the catch of the day at Konoba Bako (konobabako.hr) as the sun sets.

Hotels proper are few and far between (although there are whispers of an upscale establishment coming to the former cannery), but whitewashed self-catering apartments abound, some of which have their own semi-private beaches. Wherever you end up, Vis knocks the spots off many other options along the Dalmatian coast. »

WORDS EMMA HUGHES PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES, STOCKFOOD

'IT'S BEEN MIRACULOUSLY ISOLATED FROM TOURISM'

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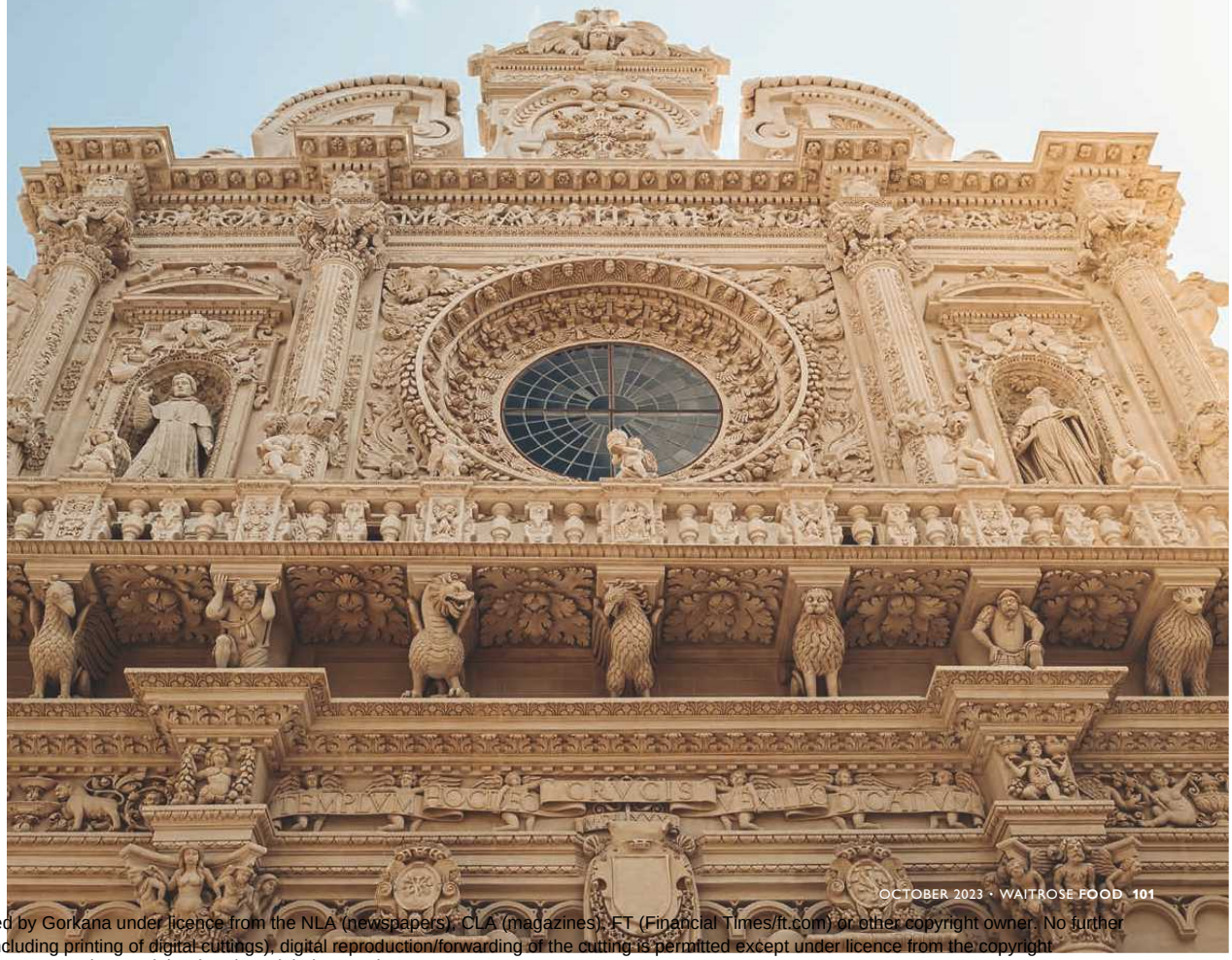
LOVE FLORENCE? TRY LECCE

WORDS OLIVER BERRY PHOTOGRAPH ADOBE STOCK

Beautiful as it is, Florence is far from the only Italian city with architectural star power. If you're a fan of extravagant buildings, few places in Italy compare to Lecce. It's often nicknamed the 'Florence of the South' for its wealth of baroque buildings, built from the creamy-gold limestone known as pietra Leccese. The star of the show is the Basilica di Santa Croce, whose fabulously over-the-top façade is adorned with a menagerie of dragons, gargoyles, cherubs, sheep and even a dodo or two – but there are many more wonders to enjoy here, including one of the grandest central squares in southern Italy: the magnificent Piazza del Duomo.

Lecce is a fantastic city to explore on foot, with a maze of backstreets leading to little chapels, monuments, museums and shady courtyards, as well as traditional trattorie serving cucina povera, the rustic, hearty style of cooking for which Puglia is renowned. Top dishes to try include ciceri e tria (crunchy, fried pasta with chickpeas), orecchiette con cime di rapa (pasta 'ears' with rabe, a type of broccoli) and rustico – puff-pastry parcels filled with tomato, mozzarella and white sauce – the classic Lecce street snack. While you're here, don't miss the fascinating Museo Faggiano (museofaggiano.it), a Lecce townhouse where excavations to fix a faulty toilet revealed a treasure trove of archaeological finds stretching back to the fifth century BC: a Messapian tomb, a Roman granary, medieval catacombs and etchings by the Knights Templar. It's like a real-life stage set from *Indiana Jones*. »

'THE FAÇADE IS ADORNED WITH A MENAGERIE OF DRAGONS, GARGOYLES AND EVEN A DODO OR TWO'



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WORDS LEAH HYSLOP PHOTOGRAPHS ADOBE STOCK

LOVE SEVILLE? TRY VEJER DE LA FRONTERA

A church’s stones always tell a story. In the Andalusian town of Vejer, the church rose from the dust of a Moorish mosque, its minaret making way for a bell tower. It is a rugged monument to the ebb and flow between Islam and Christianity that has shaped this sun-parched corner of Spain for some 800 years, and gave this particular place its name: ‘de la frontera’, or ‘of the border’. Visitors to Andalusia often head to the big cities of Granada, Seville or Córdoba. Yet Vejer offers the same rich history, good food and glorious weather in a prettily pint-sized setting. A classic whitewashed town, or ‘pueblo blanco’, it clings to a hillside so steep that on a good day you can see across the Straits of Gibraltar to Morocco, and is so higgledy-piggledy that you’ll struggle to find a straight line.

The place casts a spell over visitors. Scotsman James Stuart arrived looking for lunch in 1988 and never left; he now runs a handful of boutique hotels and restaurants here. His flagship, the Moroccan-inspired La Casa del Califa (califavejer.com), is a labyrinth of quirky rooms and panoramic terraces, cleverly knitted together from multiple historic buildings, with a peaceful courtyard restaurant at its heart serving fragrant tagines, steaming towers of couscous and mint tea (above). There’s plenty to see and do in the area, from the ‘sherry triangle’ to the golden beach of Trafalgar (yes, that Trafalgar) – but you can easily spend a weekend wandering Vejer’s narrow streets. Stop by Annie B’s cookery school (anniebspain.com) to learn how to make ajo blanco, a delicious chilled almond soup, or relax in the recently opened Hammam Vejer bathhouse (hammamvejer.com). And when the time comes to cross those ancient town walls and board a plane home, you too might find yourself reluctant to say goodbye.