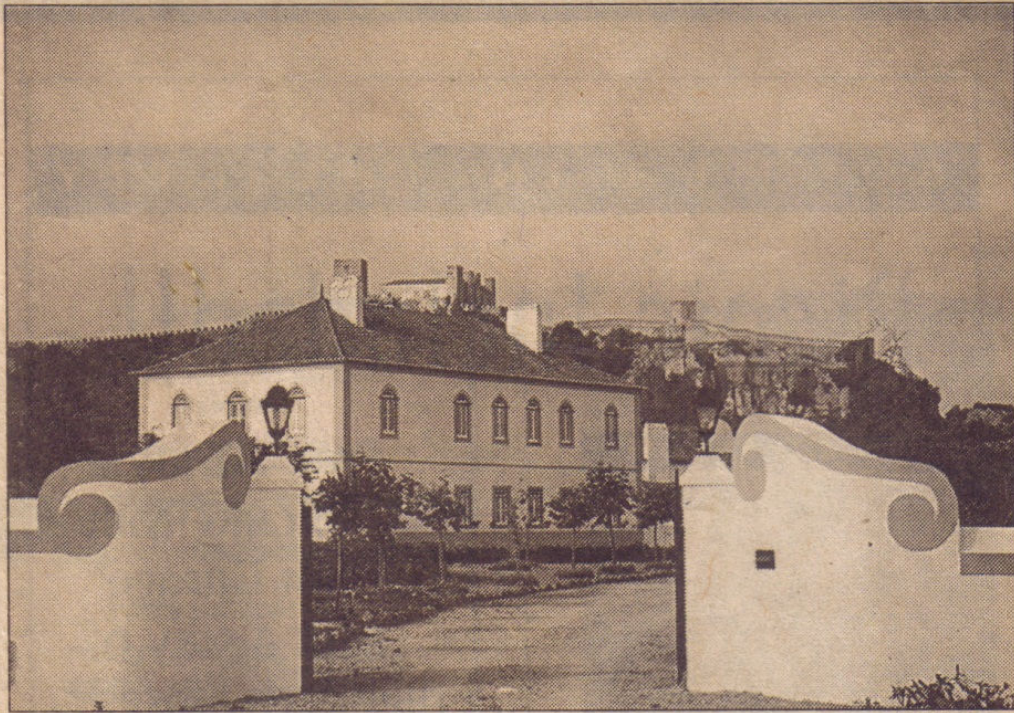


Óbidos



G. J. Weinberger

Casa d'Óbidos, which takes guests. Castle is on the horizon.

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we stopped at the fishing town of Peniche, where rugged cliffs front the open Atlantic.

After busy mornings, we were glad to return to the comforts (and the pool) of Casa d'Óbidos, ably administered by Maria Helena Sarmiento, who with her husband, Fernando, opened their manor house to guests just last year.

Mrs. Sarmiento, we decided, is surely the spiritual, if not the actual, heir to the energetic Catarina of Austria, whose civic zeal led to many improvements in 16th-century Óbidos, including the construction of the town aqueduct. Looking for a retirement project, the Sarmientos bought the manor house, built in 1889 by one of Alexandre Gustave Eiffel's engineers but lately fallen into disrepair. (Eiffel undertook many public-works projects in Portugal, including the Santa Justa elevator in Lisbon and the railway bridge in Oporto.)

The Sarmientos spent two years renovating and decorating the house, searching for antiques and striving for period authenticity. The house seems distinctively and harmoniously Anglo-Portuguese, with enough floral chintz and overstuffed chairs

to evoke an English country house, but decidedly Portuguese in the dark tones of its elaborately carved beds and sideboards.

Although we hardly needed so much space, G. J. and I lodged in the five-room, two-bedroom estate cottage just steps from the main house. The cottage, which was more rustic and homey than the elegant bedrooms in the manor house, was filled with Sarmiento family photos and mementos; indeed, the couple had lived here during the renovation of the manor house. And it smelled wonderfully fruity — Mrs. Sarmiento had been preparing strawberry jam in the tiled kitchen the day we checked in.

The cottage has its own enclosed garden, graced by well-tended fragrant borders of sweet peas. We had only to step out the kitchen door for a private view of Óbidos's castle and walls. There, on our last afternoon, we took tea: a tray of homemade scones and jam awaiting our return from the day's outing, compliments of Mrs. Sarmiento. The custom may have been English, but the hospitality was Portuguese — and in this extraordinary setting, in view of the wedding-gift village, it was fit for kings and queens. ■