A PORTUGUESE MONASTERY

The Convento de Cristo is an expression both of religious devotion and of military might.

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There cannot be many places of worship with a more forbidding aspect than the Convento de Cristo at Tomar, eighty miles north of Lisbon. Built as a fortress as well as a monastery, it lours above the town like Oscar Wilde's selfish giant, its gloomy yellow walls piled on mournful grey ramparts. Your first instinct, on reaching the end of the steep and winding road up to it, is to jump back in your hire car and return to the duel-to-the-death known as Portugal's A1 motorway.

But if you press on through the outer keep, something extraordinary happens. Rounding a corner, you come upon a pair of tall gates which open onto a garden of other-worldly serenity. Delicately sculpted hedges border the path; the chink of birdsong pierces the hum of traffic from the streets below; exotic blooms stretch inquisitively from the flowerbeds; a pair of elaborately tiled benches command an orchard of orange trees. Spring, it seems, has come to the giant's garden after all.

At the far end, a balustraded terrace leads to the extraordinary Romanesque building known as the Charola. On the inside, this shares the circular ground plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the spiritual home of the Knights Templar. On the outside – buttressed, castellated, and sixteen-sided – it resembles a decapitated Dalek.

The Templars were the special forces of Christendom – fierce warrior monks who enjoyed a good massacre and would have scoffed at the notion of locking up their enemies in cissy Guatanamo Bay. They played a leading role in driving the Moors from this part of Portugal, and when

their Grand Master Gualdim Pais began building here in 1160, he created a monument to their schizophrenic pursuit of war and spiritual peace. The knights, it is said, rode their horses not only *to* church, but *into* church.

As it grew to its present enormous size, the monastery developed an ever more extreme multiple-personality disorder. Between the twelfth and nineteenth century (when Portugal's religious orders were abolished, and the monks evicted), it went through seven distinct stages of development, and its architecture ranges from sublime simplicity to Versace-esque extravagance.

Inside the main building, it is the simple you meet first. Although originally used for funerals, the Gothic-arched Cemetery Cloister seems too jolly by half to deserve its name: a lavender bush blooms in the middle, the walls are adorned with intricate blue azulejos (the decorative painted tiles which the Portuguese pirated from their Moorish enemies), and the most potent symbol of mortality you will find is a single fallen orange, glowing beside a dark puddle. In the adjoining Washing Cloister, where the monks' habits were once laundered, the water troughs have been turned into flowerbeds – a small triumph of soil over detergent.

Both cloisters were built under Henry the Navigator, the fifteenth-century prince who transformed Portugal into a major seagoing nation. The ensuing overenthusiasm for anything to do with boats can be seen in the famous Chapter House window, ingeniously carved with the anchor chains, twists of rope, and other maritime motifs which characterise the Manueline style of Gothic architecture. Green with moss, the window looks like a seaweed-smothered wreck freshly hauled from the ocean bed.

But if you think this is over the top, it is nothing compared to the inside of the Charola. Under a high ceiling stands a two-storey octagon – its pillars and arches smothered with Byzantine patterns of painted gold –

looking like a huge ecclesiastical desk-tidy for the monk who has everything. There are murals and painted panels above, behind and before you; there are corbels bearing painted statues of bearded prophets, sallow friars and anaemic archbishops; there are more gilded carvings than you could shake an episcopal crook at. You can almost hear the Grand Master and his architect egging each other on: 'Is there *anything* we've left out? Couldn't we squeeze in just *one* more angel?'

The monastery's comparatively austere Main Cloister is considered one of the greatest examples of Renaissance architecture in Portugal, brimming with splendid arches and ingenious spiral staircases. The real treat, though, is to escape down the long, beautifully ascetic corridors off it – a symphony of red-brick floors, half-tiled white walls, and barrel-vaulted ceilings leading past the monks' abandoned cells.

At this point, the place frankly becomes a bit of a maze, and if you have children you would be wise not to let them out of your sight, or you may never see them again. But it is worth persevering in the search for the magical Sal do Capitulo – another chapter house – on the ground floor. Never finished, it has capitulated to the elements, and stands open to the sky with a lawn for a nave and two pigeons for sacristans, solemnly cooing their vespers under the ruined arches.

The advantage of visiting the monastery off season is that you can experience the kind of moment which crowds make impossible. Mine came when, standing in the empty Philippine Sacristy, I suddenly caught the sound of distant singing: a high, exquisite voice glorying in a mediaeval carol. Baffled, and half expecting to meet a the ghost of a dismembered chorister, I followed it to the heart of the monastery, where I found a boiler-suited young woman halfway up a scaffolding in the Charola, serenading herself as she dabbed at one of the murals. I didn't interrupt, but stood there transfixed for several minutes, watching the

sunlight steal through the stained-glass windows of the church, and listening to a song the Templars might have sung 800 years before.