

DAY 13**CASA de SEZIM is a luxury stop on my trip.**

I have had around twelve of my 21 nights booked over here. They use scare tactics about the lack of accommodation at tournaments like this, but there is always a place to stay.

Last night in Lisbon, there were thousands of English fans about for the Croatia game, but I still found a room with a balcony and a great view for €40 smack bang in the centre of the city — a hotel that my guidebook said, intriguingly, was run by characterful characters.

But Casa de Sezim in Guimaraes has been a place that I've been looking forward to and I'm not disappointed. The place is like a museum. The room is massive with a four-poster bed and it's en suite too — I have my own corridor to get to my own bathroom.

The Mesquitas, Antonio Pinto and Maria Francisa, own the house. It has been in the family since 1376 and was a present for their ancestor's good works and loyalty to the first King of Portugal, Dom Alfonso Henriques.

It is really more of a place you should go on your honeymoon. There is a big courtyard and a swimming pool and the living rooms have panoramic wallpapers depicting scenes from the New and Old World. They also grow wine and the grape is world-renowned. It's like staying in Falcon Crest.

That's not to say it's not friendly. Antonio is pushing his eighties, but he is a sprightly man who is always concerned about your well-being.

He tells me that he was involved in setting up the Portuguese Embassy in Dublin after the War and he was also the ambassador to Turkey, Poland and Norway. His next assignment was to have been Moscow, but he got a promotion instead.

The dogs they own have just had puppies too, four tiny things, still too young to see.

Guimaraes is a beautiful city, a World Heritage site and the first capital of Portugal. But every city I have been in seems to have been the capital at one stage.

Tonight is Italy-Bulgaria and for the first night it is raining. Chris and John are up for this game too, but they are in the better seats. All the better, because they get soaked while I sit dry in my cheap seat behind the goal.

The Italians go out of the tournament, but again they get the award for best turned out. The Italians always look great at major football tournaments and you get the feeling that the more stylish they look, the less effective they are on the pitch.

Just look at Raul and Morientes and the Spanish bunch. They have obviously spent more time on personal grooming in the run up to these championships.

John has come over to support Italy. When Italy get the late goal to go 2-1 up, I have the sad duty to text him the 2-2 score of the Denmark and Sweden game that ensures it is, 'ciao, Italia'.

DAY 14

I WAS not supposed to be at the Holland-Latvia game, but Noel and



Holland's Ruud Van Nistelrooy celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Latvia during their Euro 2004 Group D match at the Braga Muncipale Stadium, in Braga.

Picture: Laurence Griffiths

Can't imagine ever tiring of hammering

ROBERT O'SHEA'S FANTASY FOOTBALL



Robert is a journalist with the Echo and set out to follow the fortunes of the Russians at Euro 2004

Clare have an extra ticket. Clare is good enough to stick around outside the stadium holding the ticket while I get lost sightseeing around Braga.

The Sé Cathedral is a most impressive place. There are Sé Cathedrals all over Portugal. I've been to the ones in Faro, Lisbon and Porto already. It's like that famous book a few years back where a guy called McCarthy couldn't walk past a bar with his name on it without going in for a pint.

Well I can't go past a cathedral that has my name on it (I don't crack open a can once inside or anything though).

The Sé Cathedral in Braga is the most famous. In Portugal, instead of saying 'as old as the hills' they say 'as old as the cathedral in Braga'. The archbishops of Portugal are buried here and they seem to date back to AD45, but the cathedral is only a thousand years old.

You'd like to think the Braga Stadium would be around that long. It is built in an old quarry, which means it is camouflaged in the landscape and quite difficult to find. The stadium is different. Different in every way possible to the multi-coloured Aveiro.

It's supposed to be reminiscent of an Inca Bridge in Peru: the two stands are held together by thick cords that stretch over the field. I guess that the stands hold each other up with their weight by this means, even though I don't know if that's possible.

But when you walk underneath the stand that has no other visible means of support, you can't help feeling it is ready to topple down on you. Before the match I am present as the Dutch team pass on their way to the stadium.

They travel in a coach and not in individual cars as you are led to be-

lieve from the infighting in the camp. Patrick Kluyvert and Ruud van Nistelrooy were born on the very same day, how could they not get on?

The Dutch are fantastic tonight and worthy 3-0 winners. It would have been a travesty if the Germans had got through. They fall to a Czech 'B' team though. The Czechs had nothing to play for, having already topped the group, but I guess that business with the Sude-tenland must still rankle.

But it is the Dutch fans who make the night. The band is superb. No 'Barmy Army' shite here, instead we get tunes as diverse as the Slave's Chorus from Nabucco, Aul Lang Syne, the Red Rose Café and Flower of Scotland. They are always the most creatively dressed too, from samurai warriors to real carrots worn in the hair. But orange is such a distinctive colour. Watching the fans stream out after the game from a position high in the stand, it looks like orange creatures migrating across the savannah.

The Latvian ladies are in even finer fettle tonight. Just in case you missed it last time, I'll say it again: unattractive Latvian women are as rare as floating voters in Northern Ireland.

Outside the stadium I look to get a taxi back to Guimaraes. Instead I head back into Braga and I'm glad I

do. I travel with some people from Inverness, one of whom is a bagpiper called Spud.

The others are David, Gunnar, Caroline and Big Man (I forget his name, but they all called him Big Man, and it was justified.) The Scots on the bus sing a ditty about getting beaten 6-0 in Amsterdam in the play-offs. They then give us a chant of 'What does it feel like to have no hills?' to which a Dutch man gives the witty response of, "F*** off."

After getting on the bus, instead of finding a taxi back to Guimaraes, I stay in Braga and get hammered.

Everyone is getting hammered though: the Dutch, the Latvians, the locals, even the kids. Let me qualify that. It's St John's Eve and he is the patron saint of Porto and Braga and getting hammered on St John's Eve is a bit different to getting hammered on St Patrick's Day, because over here they use real hammers. Well, not real hammers, but inflatable and plastic ones, which are used to hit people on the head.

We make our way through the packed streets looking for somewhere to wet our whistle.

Progress is slow because everyone who is anyone wants their picture taken with the bagpiper. Spud's real name is Calum Fraser. He was the bagpiper at Madonna's most recent wedding. Even more popular than getting your picture taken with the bagpiper, is hammering him until his headgear comes off.

When everyone is hammering everyone else it sounds like a thousand crickets making love; that's the sound the hammer makes on contact. And when you're not being hammered you are having flowers, branches or garlic pushed under your nose.

I stop to enquire about why the tradition is that we are all bashing each other the head. A woman tells me that St John was the patron saint for children. I ask what this has to do with hammering and she implies that St John used to hit children over the head with a hammer, but I'm sure this isn't what she means. So it remains a mystery, but who cares, it's great fun.

If you don't have a hammer, you'll soon want a hammer. I can't imagine tiring of hammering people.

If we could get St Patrick and St John together, with their bashing and our getting rid of snakes, we could have a great Simpsons episode on our hands.

Having stopped to ask about St John I've lost touch with the bagpiper and his buddies. I know you might say it is difficult to lose a man playing the bagpipes, but if you're in Braga on the eve of St John's Day, you'll realise how easy it is.

But it doesn't matter. I'm not going to stand here (I type standing because it makes me feel more objective) and say there is some order or fate behind things that decided the Dutch would win and that they would be here for this great day.

The rest of the night is a haze of Dutch, Canadians, bashing and fireworks.

When I get back to Casa de Sezim it is still dark, but it will soon be time for the other residents to get up. The bitch wakes up and starts yapping at me in a sort of manic defence of her offspring. Antonio has been aroused and he greets me at the door of his bedroom in his pyjamas. Diplomatically, I refrain from hammering him.