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To Whom It May Concern:

Letter of recommendation for the Quinta de Sao Pedro

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter of recommendation for the Quinta de Sao Pedro hostel and field centre in Sobreda, near Lisbon, Portugal. The University of Nottingham has run a two week residential Behavioural Ecology field course at “the Quinta” for nearly thirty years. It has always been a wonderful haven in which to relax, teach and conduct research, and recent changes introduced by our new hosts Benjamin and Inza Richter have only served to enhance its value.

It is a week since we returned to Nottingham, having spent a glorious two weeks in the spring sunshine, enjoying the superb facilities and fascinating wildlife of the Quinta. Our hosts pulled out all the stops to make our stay a comfortable and productive one. Even before we left Nottingham, Benjamin had helped arrange safe arrival of our equipment by courier, and had searched high and low for a supplier of CO₂ gas – an essential tool for a field entomologist. After a straightforward flight from London, we pulled in through the gates of the Quinta, and experienced the usual warm welcome from Quinta staff and their menagerie of friendly pets (dogs, chickens, goats, and the occasional gecko). Our students settled into their functional but pleasant dormitories, whilst the staff enjoyed the luxurious en-suite private rooms. Every year, the accommodation improves: this year, in addition to lovely new bedding and fresh fruit in all the rooms, a special treat of chocolate eggs and almonds had been left by the Easter bunny.

Our field course requires the students to work on small-group research projects for two weeks. These projects are allowed to run incredibly smoothly as a result of the efforts of the Quinta staff. In spring, the verdant meadows and gardens are perfect for various entomological projects (we work on bees, beetles, hoverflies and crab spiders), whilst the rich variety of habitats packed into the grounds allows our bird ringers to hunt productively (30+ species this year!). Armin Pircher, who has helped manage the Quinta for many years, has worked with us to cultivate the flower species we need for particular projects, and takes great pleasure in telling our students about the botanical charms (and hazards) of the gardens. Benjamin and Inza’s arrival a few years ago has brought all manner of innovations. The introduction of a pond means our bird ringers can intercept what were previously rarities in great numbers as they come to drink, and has provided a new population of frogs we hope to study next year. The reestablishment of active honeybee

hives not only means that there is Quinta honey available, but also that our students working on pollinator projects have an almost endless supply of study organisms.

By the end of our time in Portugal, we have exploited most of the wonderful facilities on offer. The main hall is an excellent lecture theatre, an excellent concert venue when Armin dusts down his amazing collection of flutes, and a great place to host 55 of us for a sit-down meal cooked in the Quinta's amply equipped kitchens. The main area of open-air seating is a great place for the students to set up experiments in the daytime, and to relax around the campfire at night. The library and laboratory provide perfect places for quiet study and a spot of microscopy. And the conference suite is a lovely place to which to retreat with a bottle of wine when it comes to the all-important discussion of the students' marks.

To summarise, it is impossible to think of a better place to conduct an ecological field course. The accommodation is comfortable, the facilities comprehensive, and the hosts welcoming and endlessly flexible. Our time at the Quinta over the past three decades has inspired many a student to develop a career as a scientist or naturalist, and we have published nearly 30 peer-reviewed papers based on our students' projects. We dearly hope to add to this tally by returning to the Quinta for many years to come.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Tom Reader