The Minho

Tucked beneath the edge of Spanish Galicia, the Minho enjoys an exceptional reputation among the Portuguese. Its natural beauty encompasses lush river valleys, sparkling beaches, granite peaks and virgin forests. Villages seem particularly in tune with the scenery, whether straddling the banks of an idyllic river or overlooking flower-strewn valleys from mountainous heights.

For the Portuguese, the Minho’s charms go beyond mere aesthetics. This is, after all, the birthplace of the Portuguese kingdom, an idea first conceived in the beautifully preserved medieval centre of Guimarães. It’s also home to one of Portugal’s most impressive Celtic sites, the sprawling Citânia de Briteiros. North of there, the majestic and vibrant city of Braga provides a window into ecclesiastical history, with dozens of baroque churches and a magnificent cathedral that dates back a thousand years.

The Minho remains one of Europe’s most tradition-bound provinces. Old-fashioned market days still draw crowds to small country towns, and the calendar is packed with fervently observed saints’ days – a cause for solemn processions followed by music, dancing, feasting and merriment late into the night.

Yet it’s not all ox-drawn carts and Romanesque churches. The Costa Verde (Green Coast), which stretches roughly from the mouth of the Rio Cávado in the south to the mouth of the Rio Minho in the north, has a blend of old settlements and modern-day resorts. Lovely Viana do Castelo has an old centre filled with 16th-century architecture and sparkling new condos overlooking nearby beaches. The duality continues at the eastern end of the province: inside Parque Nacional da Peneda-Gerês, old stone villages slumber not far from lively spa resorts – all set amid the breathtaking mountain scenery of Portugal’s biggest nature reserve.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visiting historic monuments, followed by dinner at a top restaurant in Braga (opposite)
- Strolling the atmospheric streets of Viana do Castelo (p441), then catching a sunset over the beach
- Lounging at a cafe overlooking the medieval bridge and lush countryside beyond in Ponte de Lima (p450)
- Delving into medieval history inside the striking old quarter of Guimarães (p436)
- Hiking the boulder-strewn peaks and gorse-clad moorlands of the Parque Nacional da Peneda-Gerês (p457)

POPULATION: 1.4 MILLION

AREA: 5265 SQ KM
Braga pop 120,000  /  elev 200m
Portugal’s third-largest city boasts an astounding array of churches, their splendid baroque facades looming above the old plazas and narrow lanes of the historic centre. Braga’s crown jewel is an extraordinary 12th-century cathedral, with its intricately carved facade, atmospheric little chapels and intriguing hidden relics. The constant chiming of bells is a reminder of Braga’s age-old devotion to the spiritual world. Its religious festivals – particularly the elaborately staged Semana Santa (Holy Week) – are famous throughout Portugal.

But don’t come expecting piety alone: Braga’s old centre is packed with lively cafes and trim little boutiques, with some excellent restaurants and low-key bars catering to students from the Universidade do Minho.

Just outside the city stands the magnificent, much-visited hillside church and sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte (p431).

History
Founded by Celts, Braga first attracted Roman attention in 250 BC. The Romans named it Bracara Augusta and made it capital of their province Gallaecia, stretching all the way up into Spain. Braga’s position at the intersection of five Roman roads helped it grow fat on trade. Braga fell to the Suevi around AD 410, and