



Trás-os-Montes

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Why Go?

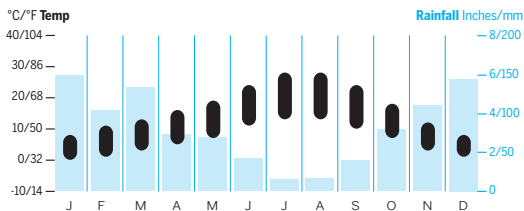
Sandwiched between the Rio Douro and the Spanish border in Portugal's extreme northeast corner, ruggedly beautiful Trás-os-Montes is named for its centuries-long isolation 'behind the mountains'. Despite pockets of wine-based prosperity and EU-supported 21st-century development, it remains one of Portugal's poorest and most remote regions. Young people continue to emigrate in droves, leaving behind ancient stone villages with a tantalisingly lost-in-time quality.

A handful of attractive cities with Roman and medieval roots offer worthy urban diversions, but rural life is still the region's heart and soul, from the southwest's steep vineyard-clad hillsides, to the olive groves, almond orchards and rugged canyonlands of the sun-baked east, to the chestnut-shaded, heathery highlands of the north.

In the hinterlands, millennial traditions persist, including ancient Latin-derived dialects, pagan winter solstice revels and robust *transmontano* hospitality, expressed in the phrase '*entre quem é*' ('come in, whoever you may be').

When to Go

Bragança



March White petals float over the orchard-covered hills of Miranda during almond-blossom season.

September Terraced hillsides hang heavy with grapes; hiking abounds in the natural parks.

December & January Bonfires and masked dancers fill village streets during solstice festivals.

Vila Real

POP 24,000 / ELEV 445M

Clinging to steep hillsides above the confluence of the Rios Corgo and Cabril, the university town of Vila Real is short on charm, although its historic centre, dotted with picturesque old churches, is pleasant enough. Its key attractions lie just beyond the city limits: the dramatically rugged highlands of the Parque Natural do Alvão; and the resplendent Palácio de Mateus, one of Europe's most elegant country houses, surrounded by lovely vineyard country east of town.

Sights

Palácio de Mateus

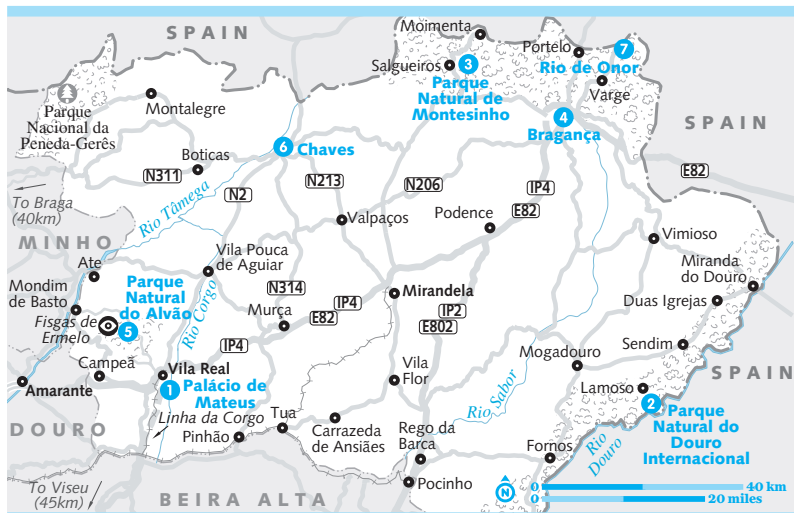
WINERY

(www.casademateus.com, in Portuguese; admission gardens/palace & gardens €4.50/7.50; ☉9am-7pm) Famously depicted on bottles

of Mateus rosé, the 18th-century Palácio de Mateus is one of Portugal's great baroque masterpieces – probably the work of Italian-born architect Nicolau Nasoni.

Its granite wings ('advancing lobster-like towards you', wrote English critic Sir Sacheverell Sitwell) shelter a lichen-encrusted forecourt dominated by an ornate stairway and guarded by rooftop statues. Surrounding the palace is a fantasy of a garden, with tiny boxwood hedges, prim statues and a fragrant cypress tunnel that's blissfully cool on even the hottest days. (Don't miss the fanciful 5m-tall curved ladders used to prune the tunnel's exterior branches!)

Guided tours of the mansion (in English, French, Spanish and German) take you through the main quarters, which combine rusticity with restrained grandeur.



Trás-os-Montes Highlights

- 1 Stroll the formal gardens and taste fine Portuguese wines at the stately 18th-century **Palácio de Mateus** (p446)
- 2 Survey the steep granite walls of the Rio Douro gorge from bird's-eye viewpoints in the **Parque Natural do Douro Internacional** (p468)
- 3 Hike across a medieval bridge or climb heather-

- draped hills to 21st-century windmills in **Parque Natural de Montesinho** (p461)
- 4 Delight in the devilish grins of winter carnival masks at the Museu Ibérico da Máscara e do Traje in **Bragança** (p456)
- 5 Swim and slide into natural pools above the dramatic Fugas de Ermelo waterfall in **Parque Natural do Alvão** (p449)

- 6 Take in the medieval tower and the 17th-century fortifications from the pedestrianised Roman bridge in **Chaves** (p452)
- 7 Watch the sheep return home at sundown in **Rio de Onor** (p462), a town built squarely on the Portugal–Spain border