



# The Alentejo

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## Why Go?

Go to be bewitched. Portugal's largest region, covering a third of the country, truly captivates. Think dry, golden plains, rolling hillsides and lime-green vines. A rugged coastline, traditional whitewashed villages, marble towns and majestic medieval cities. Plus a proud if melancholic people, who valiantly cling to their local crafts.

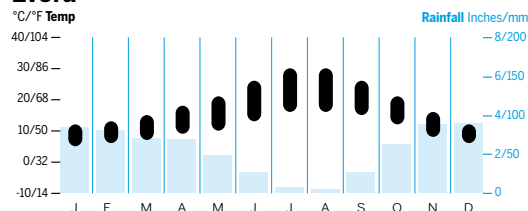
Centuries-old farming traditions – and cork production – continue here. Alentejo's rich past offers Palaeolithic carvings, fragments from Roman conquerors and solid Visigothic churches. There are Moorish-designed neighbourhoods and awe-inspiring fortresses built at stork-nest heights.

And the cuisine? Alentejo is 'it' for traditional food. Gastronomic delights are plentiful – pork, game, bread, cheese, wine, and seafood along the coastline. Bird life and rare plants are prolific, and walking opportunities abound.

The world is (finally) catching on to Alentejo. Get there before the crowds do.

## When to Go

### Évora



**Apr & May** Red and yellow flowers mingle with golden plains, and it's baby stork time!

**Sep & Oct** Enjoy festival frenzy while missing the crowds and the heat.

**Jun & Jul** Pre-August beaches await, plus Festas Populares, Évora's bounciest country fair.

## History

Prehistoric Alentejo was a busy place, and even today it is still covered in megaliths. But it was the Romans who stamped and shaped the landscape, introducing vines, wheat and olives, building dams and irrigation schemes and founding huge estates called *latifúndios* to make the most of the region's limited rivers and poor soil for agriculture.

The Moors, arriving in the early 8th century, took Roman irrigation further and introduced new crops such as citrus and rice. By 1279 they were on the run to southern Spain or forced to live in *mouraria* (segregated Moorish quarters) outside town walls. Many of their hilltop citadels were later reinforced by Dom Dinis, who created a chain of spectacular fortresses along the Spanish border.

Despite Roman and Moorish development, the Alentejo remained agriculturally poor and backward – increasingly so when the Age of Discoveries led to an explosive growth in maritime trade, and seaports became sexy. Only Évora flourished, under the royal patronage of the House of Avis, but it too declined once the Spanish seized the throne in 1580.

During the 1974 revolution Alentejo suddenly stepped into the limelight: landless rural workers who had laboured on the *latifúndios* for generations rose in support of the communist rebellion and seized the land from its owners. Nearly 1000 estates were collectivised, although few succeeded and all were gradually re-privatised in the 1980s. Most are now back in the hands of their original owners.

Today Alentejo remains among Europe's poorest and emptiest regions. Portugal's entry into the EU (and its demanding regulations), increasing mechanisation, successive droughts and greater opportunities elsewhere have hit the region hard. Young people have headed for the cities, leaving villages – and their traditions – to die out. Although its cork, olives, marble and granite are still in demand, and the deep-water port and industrial zone of Sines is of national importance, this vast region contributes only a small fraction to the gross national product. Locals are still waiting for the benefits promised by the construction of the huge Barragem do Alqueva (Alqueva Dam) and its reservoir.

## Getting Around

Buses are the best way to access the region's smaller towns and villages (the few operating train services were unreliable at the time of research). Two bus companies service the Alentejo: **Rede Expressos** ([www.rede-expressos.pt](http://www.rede-expressos.pt)) and the national company, **Rodalentejo** ([www.rodalentejo.pt](http://www.rodalentejo.pt)). Their websites publish up-to-date bus schedules. To get to remote places, including some mountaintop villages and the Alqueva Dam, a hire car is your best option.

## ALTO ALENTEJO

The northern half of the Alentejo is a medieval gem, with a scattering of walled fortress towns (such as Elvas and Estremoz) and remote cliff-top castles (such as Marvão and Castelo de Vide). Only a handful of visitors to Alto Alentejo travel beyond Évora, so once outside the city you'll see traditional life at its most authentic.

### Évora

POP 41,000

One of Portugal's most beautifully preserved medieval towns, Évora is an enchanting place to delve into the past. Inside the 14th-century walls, Évora's narrow, winding lanes lead to striking architectural works: an elaborate medieval cathedral and cloisters; the cinematic columns of the Templo Romano (near the intriguing Roman baths); and a picturesque town square, once the site of some rather gruesome episodes courtesy of the Inquisition. Aside from its historic and aesthetic virtues, Évora is also a lively university town, and its many attractive restaurants serve up hearty Alentejan cuisine. Outside town, Neolithic monuments and rustic wineries make fine day trips.

Évora climbs a gentle hill above the Alentejo plain. Around the walled centre runs a ring road from which you can enter the

## INTERNET RESOURCES

A handy website about Alentejo is [www.visitalentejo.pt](http://www.visitalentejo.pt), presented in several languages. Detailed maps show highlights, bike trails, restaurants, everything for the tourist. Choose your interest, from gastronomy, wine, nature, heritage or just the rhythm of the seasons.