

Understand Portugal

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A snapshot of a nation at a crossroads, plus key book, film and music recommendations for delving deeper into Portugal.

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Conquerors and kings, demagogues and visionaries, natural disasters and coups d'état – the story of Portugal is anything but dull...

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The horrific Inquisition, super-secret societies and the great mystery of Fátima are all chapters from Portugal's fascinating religious saga.

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That nostalgic, difficult-to-translate melancholy has shaped Portuguese film, music and literature, and even the national identity, in profound ways.

Portugal Today

Since the global financial crisis of 2008 Portugal's economy has been in freefall, with a shrinking GDP and surging unemployment, which reached 18% in 2013. The government's response – cutting public spending and other austerity measures – has not gone down well, with mass protests erupting across the nation. It's not all bad news though: Portugal is reaping the benefits of its investments in green energy and tourism is on the rise.

Best in Film

A Lisbon Story (1994) Wim Wenders' love letter to Lisbon.

Letters from Fontainhas (1997–2006) Pedro Costa's art-house trilogy set in Lisbon.

Capitães de Abril (*Captains of April*; 2000) Overview of the 1974 Carnation Revolution.

Best in Print

The Inquisitor's Manual (António Lobo Antunes; 1996) Story about life under Salazar.

Baltasar & Blimunda (José Saramago; 1982) Darkly comic 18th-century love story.

The Book of Disquietude (Fernando Pessoa; 1982) Literary masterpiece by Portugal's greatest poet.

Best Albums

Fado em Mim (2002) Mesmerising fado album by the legendary Mariza.

Art of Amália (1998) Compilation by one of fado's greats.

Best of Rui Veloso (2000) Portugal's legendary rock-balladeer.

Economic Crisis

Portugal's economy wasn't particularly strong in the years before the economic crisis, making the downturn all the more destructive: GDP growth has averaged just 1% annually over the past decade. Placed into the economically failing eurozone nations known as PIIGS (representing Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain), in 2011 Portugal – in dire financial straits – accepted an EU bailout worth €78 billion.

The younger generation has born the heaviest toll from the crisis, with unemployment above 40% for workers under the age of 25. In addition to this, there are the underemployed and those scraping by on meagre wages; in Portugal, the minimum wage is €566 per month, less than half that of the UK or France.

Mass Demonstrations & Protests

The EU bailout came with the stipulation that Portugal improve its budget deficit by reducing spending and increasing tax revenues. Austerity measures followed and the public took to the streets to protest against higher taxes, slashed pensions and benefits, coupled with record-high unemployment. Mass demonstrations and general strikes have grown, with the largest attracting an estimated 1.5 million people nationwide in 2013 – an astounding figure given Portugal's small size. Those in industries most affected by government policy – including education, healthcare and transport – have joined ranks with the unemployed and pensioners to protest in the largest gatherings since the Carnation Revolution in 1974.

Yet, unlike in Greece or Spain, protests have remained fairly peaceful thus far – some chalk this up to the more melancholy, less fiery Portuguese temperament. Where other southern Europeans throw Molotov cocktails, the Portuguese, well, sing: in one much-publicised