

Destination Portugal

In a tiny windswept hamlet in northern Portugal, goats still trundle through the dusty streets while elderly widows in black keep watch over the village square against the backdrop of a medieval castle. The hillside nearby bear the terraced vineyards that were probably planted by the Phoenicians, centuries before the Romans arrived. The latest buzz here revolves around the upcoming Festa de São João, where villagers will decorate statues of Catholic saints with flowers and process alongside the bishop through the streets, followed by much feasting and celebrating at the country fairgrounds.

Meanwhile, a few hundred kilometres away, a group of young friends have gathered at an art opening in the city. Mingling and cocktails are the order of the evening, then a dance party in the bar below the gallery. But after a flurry of text messages, the group heads to the seaside suburbs for a late-night meal in a chrome-and-glass lounge perched above the crashing waves. Later, around 1am, when things begin to pick up, they'll head for the new club that just opened, where a DJ from LA is spinning.

The once-great seafaring empire of Portugal is today a country straddling two very different worlds. In simplest terms, it's the struggle between old and new, long-standing tradition versus widespread modernisation – a conflict that plays out daily in many different ways and in many different settings. And no matter one's age, ideology or socio-economic status, every person in Portugal has a stake in the outcome.

Traditional villages across the country are at the forefront of this clash, as younger generations – seeking educational and job opportunities, or simply a more modern way of life – abandon the small settlements where they grew up and strike out for the city. Yet even the cities face similar demographic shifts. The young and upwardly mobile still largely favour the suburbs, leaving worn and ageing city centres to the elderly – and to tourists. At the same time, other places are undergoing a cultural renaissance, with shops, galleries, restaurants and bars bringing new vitality (and the complicated baggage of gentrification) into some neighbourhoods.

Portugal's economy has confronted similar challenges. Facing ultimatums from the EU to rein in its debt, Portugal had to decide between modernising its economy and keeping the social welfare state intact. In the end it chose modernising, which meant pension reform, higher taxes and other stringent measures that made a few enemies for Prime Minister José Socrates. Although Portugal succeeded in reaching some of its EU-mandated goals ahead of schedule, it's still lumbering under a long spell of stagnant economic growth coupled with rising unemployment.

On other fronts, Portugal is marching head-on into the future. Over the last half decade, Portugal has invested heavily in renewable energy. It has some of the largest solar- and wind-powered plants on the planet and has even opened an experimental wave power plant, which will harness the ocean's power to create energy. More controversial are Portugal's hydroelectric dams, which provide abundant energy but drown much land in their creation – leading back once again to that struggle between old and new.

For the traveller, Portugal's friction between tradition and modernity presents some rewarding opportunities, from visiting old-fashioned wine estates to gallery-hopping in Porto, staying in a medieval stone village to people-watching at a trendy beach resort. Sometimes Portugal is a country happily in conflict with itself, and, while the scales are even, there's no better time to visit.

FAST FACTS

Population: 10.7 million

GDP: €231 billion (world's 46th-largest economy)

GDP per capita: €14,800

GDP growth: 1.9%

Inflation: 2.4%

Unemployment rate: 7.7%

Average life expectancy: 78 years

Annual fish consumption per capita: 76kg

Annual wine consumption per capita: 49L

Getting Started

Although Portugal is small, there are hundreds of ways to partake of the Iberian experience. You can plan a trip around a traditional festival, plot a route through vineyards along the Douro or slip back in time at Celtic monuments in the Alentejo. Vying for attention are beaches, mountainous national parks, hilltop castles and captivating city neighbourhoods. Whatever your itinerary, you can do it cheaper here than just about anywhere else in Western Europe. Portugal has lodging and dining to accommodate every budget.

When planning a trip, keep in mind that from June to September prices rise as the holiday crowds arrive, and you'll need to book accommodation well in advance. Portugal has efficient buses and a decent train system connecting major towns, but if you're heading to out-of-the-way places, renting a car will save you a lot of time.

Other things to keep in mind: most museums close on Monday, and Sundays are awfully quiet (many shops and restaurants close).

WHEN TO GO

Portugal's high season runs from mid-June to mid-September, when temperatures across the country average around 27°C. In July and August it gets hot, particularly in the Algarve, the Alentejo and the upper Douro valley, where the mercury can climb to over 45°C.

If you'd rather skip the crowds (and the heat), consider a trip in spring, when the countryside is at its most verdant, or in autumn, when it's still warm but the summer crowds have dispersed. During winter (November to March) the rains arrive, falling most heavily in the north and most lightly in the south (the Algarve gets almost year-round sunshine), with a handful of places closing down. Travelling then, however, will net you substantial savings at many hotels, and you'll see the country's most traditional side.

It's worth arriving in time for a Portuguese festival, particularly Carnival in February or March, and Holy Week (the week before Easter) in March or April.

COSTS & MONEY

Portugal remains excellent value for money, whether you're travelling on the cheap or trying to spend your inheritance. If you're on a shoestring budget, you could get by on around €30 per day, as long as you camp (around €4 per person, plus a charge for your tent and car) or stay in youth hostels (€9 to €16 for a dorm bed), buy your own food and do free stuff such as lying on the beach. Travelling in the low season will help, too.

Many museums are free at certain times (often Sunday mornings). Purchasing family tickets to attractions usually saves a few euros, and student or senior cards often get you discounts. In restaurants you can sometimes share a main course or order a *meia dose* (half-portion). Drink promotions are prevalent in the Algarve, particularly during happy hour, making for a cheap night out. See p66 for more on food and drink.

Midrange travellers can expect to pay around €50 to €70 per person per day, while a cushier holiday with more-stylish digs and fancier meals and cocktails starts at around €100 per person per day.

See Climate Charts (p495) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Lisbon to Porto train ticket €20-40

Bottle of *vinho verde* (young wine) €8-16

uma bica (short black coffee) €0.60

Dinner for two in Lisbon's Alfama district €25-35

Full-day boat ride along the Douro river €55-82

See also the Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Every year around six million sun-seeking visitors cram into the over-developed beaches of the Algarve, permanently transforming the coastline and once-remote habitats. You can't halt the inexorable rise of hotel, villa and apartment-block complexes, but if you want to minimise your impact on the south's delicate landscapes, do beware of supposedly 'ecofriendly' tours such as jeep safaris that damage and disrupt natural habitats.

Instead you could choose organised walks, which are far less destructive plus you learn first-hand knowledge of environmental issues. Walks organised by the Associação Nacional de Conservação da Natureza (Quercus; p81), the country's leading environmental organisation, are recommended, but we also note other organisations that offer guided walks in local listings in the regional chapters throughout this guide.

Another way to minimise your impact is to visit outside the high season. Spending your money in less-visited areas also helps to even out tourism's financial impact, while simultaneously broadening your experience in the country.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Living in Portugal (2007), by Anne De Stoop, is a hefty coffee-table book with handsome photographs and accompanying text that explores Portugal's villages, its fertile vineyards, architecture and urban scenery.

The Portuguese: The Land and Its People (2006), by Marion Kaplan, is an excellent one-volume introduction to the country, covering history, culture and other facets of Portuguese identity.

Lisbon: A Cultural and Literary Companion (2002), by Paul Buck, takes readers on a journey through some of Lisbon's well-known neighbourhoods, sharing curious anecdotes spanning the past 500 years or so.

Datus Proper takes readers on a rambling journey in *The Last Old Place: Search through Portugal* (1993). His endearing portrait of the country takes in history, culture, the Portuguese character and a fair bit of trout fishing.

Journey to Portugal: A Pursuit of Portugal's History and Culture (1981) is José Saramago's account of his travels in 1979. Although at times it's slow-going, there are some gems here, as the Nobel Prize winner ruminates on Portuguese identity as he wanders his Iberian homeland.

Stepping back in time, Fernando Pessoa's *Lisbon: What the Tourist Should See* (1925) portrays the many faces of the poet's home town, though it too can be a bit of a plod. A more successful work by a great writer is Almeida Garrett's *Travels in my Homeland* (1846), which is

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- a phrasebook
- sunglasses
- a healthy appetite for salted cod
- brushing up a bit on Portugal's latest football news – it's a great way to break the ice
- a waterproof jacket (particularly in the rainy north)
- a compass (useful for getting your bearings even if you're not planning a trek)

For more info on the ins and outs of travel in Portugal, see the Directory (p492), Transport (p504) and Health (p516).

TOP 10


 PORTUGAL

Spain

NIGHTSPOTS

- 1 Pavilhão Chinês (p139) Lisbon's favourite old curiosity shop is packed with arcana and intrigue.
- 2 A Baiuca (p142) Charmingly intimate fado spot hidden in the narrow streets of the Alfama.
- 3 Lux (p141) A classic on Lisbon's nightlife circuit, with sunrise views over the Tejo.
- 4 Catacumbas (p138) Great Bairro Alto spot for catching live jazz.
- 5 Plano B (p402) Part art gallery, part dance club hidden on a cobbled Porto street.
- 6 Solar do Vinho do Porto (p403) A touch of sophistication with magnificent views over the Rio Douro and dozens of port wine choices.
- 7 Maus Habitos (p403) Porto's most bohemian, creatively charged space throws great dance parties.
- 8 Duna Beach Club (p222) Stylish beach bar on Algarvian sands near Lagos.
- 9 Á Capella (p337) Coimbra-style fado in a stunning 14th-century setting.
- 10 Bubble Lounge (p228) Welcoming low-key hangout for surf lovers in Sagres.

FILMS

Portuguese cinema provides a quick entrée into the culture. (These films are covered on p51 unless otherwise noted.)

- 1 *Fados* (2007; director Carlos Saura)
- 2 *The Convent* (1995; director Manoel de Oliveira)
- 3 *Terra Estrangeira* (A Foreign Land; 1996; directors Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas)
- 4 *Alice* (2005; director Marco Martins)
- 5 *A Lisbon Story* (1994; director Wim Wenders)
- 6 *Noite Escura* (In the Darkness of the Night; 2004; director João Canijo)
- 7 *O Delfim* (The Dauphin; 2002; Fernando Lopes)
- 8 *Aniki-Bóbo* (1942; director Manoel de Oliveira)
- 9 *O Milagre Segundo Salomé* (The Miracle According to Salomé; 2004; director Mário Barroso)
- 10 *Porto da Minha Infância* (Porto of my Childhood; 2002; director Manoel de Oliveira)

BOOKS

Delve into the Lusitanian literary scene by exploring these novels set in Portugal. (See p49 for more on these titles, authors and Portuguese literature in general.)

- 1 *Manual dos Inquisidores* (The Inquisitors' Manual) by António Lobo Antunes
- 2 *Balada da Praia dos Cães* (Ballad of Dog's Beach) by José Cardoso Pires
- 3 *A Caverna* (The Cave) by José Saramago
- 4 *The Company of Strangers* by Robert Wilson
- 5 *Over the Edge of the World* by Laurence Bergreen
- 6 *O Vale da Paixão* (The Painter of Birds) by Lídia Jorge
- 7 *A Ilustre Casa de Ramires* (The Illustrious House of Ramires) by Eça de Queirós
- 8 *Night Train to Lisbon* by Pascal Mercier
- 9 *Contos da Montanha* (Tales from the Mountain) by Miguel Torga
- 5 *O Livro do Desassossego* (The Book of Disquiet) by Fernando Pessoa

full of wry observations about Portugal but also touches on philosophy, poetry, nature and other Romantic-era topics.

Representing one of the country's many expat admirers is the work by 19th-century Gothic novelist William Beckford. He wrote a rollicking tale of his stay in Sintra and travels around Estremadura in *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha* (1835).

INTERNET RESOURCES

At Tambur (www.attambur.com) A fine introduction to Portuguese music, with info on traditional and folk music, dance and current artists.

Library of Congress Country Studies (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/pttoc.html>) Detailed history and socio-economic profile of Portugal.

Lifecooler (www.lifecooler.pt, in Portuguese) Excellent for insider up-to-the-minute reviews, including restaurant, bar, club and hotel listings.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Where else would you go for damn fine travel information, links and advice from other travellers?

Portugal Tourism (www.visitportugal.pt) Portugal's official tourism site; includes tips on itineraries and upcoming events.

ViniPortugal (www.viniportugal.pt) Fine overview of Portugal's favourite beverage, covering wine regions, grapes and wine routes.

Events Calendar

Portugal has some thrilling festivals and events, mostly centred on something religious, and which have often grown out of previously pagan events. Here are some of the best.

JANUARY–FEBRUARY

CARNAVAL 4 days before Ash Wednesday
Although small by Brazilian standards, Portugal's Carnival features much merry-making in the pre-Lenten celebrations. Loulé boasts the best parades, while Lisbon, Nazaré, Ovar and Viana do Castelo all throw a respectable bash.

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DO CHOCOLATE 14-28 Feb
For almost two weeks following Valentine's Day, Obidos in Estremadura celebrates the sweet temptation of the cacao bean.

FANTASPORTO late Feb-early Mar
World-renowned two-week international festival (www.fantasporto.com) of fantasy, horror and just plain weird films that takes place in Porto.

MARCH–APRIL

SEMANA SANTA Mar or Apr
The build-up to Easter is magnificent in saintly Braga, the Minho. During Holy Week, barefoot penitents process through the streets, past rows of makeshift altars, with an explosion of jubilation at the cathedral on the eve of Easter.

OVIJEJA AGRICULTURAL FAIR last weekend in Apr
This huge nine-day festival in Beja, the Alentejo, features concerts every night, with handicrafts booths and abundant food stalls.

MAY

FEIRA DAS CANTARINHAS 2-4 May
In the far north, this is a huge street fair of traditional handicrafts in Bragança, Trás-os-Montes.

QUEIMA DAS FITAS 1st week in May
Join the mayhem of Burning of the Ribbons at the University of Coimbra (Portugal's Oxford), the Beiras, as students celebrate the end of the academic year with concerts, a parade and copious amounts of drinking.

FESTA DAS CRUZES 1st week in May
Barcelos turns into a fairground of flags, flowers, coloured lights and open-air concerts at the Festival of the Crosses. The biggest days are 1 to 3 May. Monsanto in the Beiras also celebrates, with singing and dancing beside a medieval castle.

FESTA DO MAR 1st weekend in May
This colourful festival features fireworks, a parade with floats dedicated to local fishermen's patron saints and a procession of colourfully decorated boats around Nazaré's harbour, Estremadura.

FÁTIMA ROMARIS 12-13 May
Hundreds of thousands make the pilgrimage to Fátima each year to commemorate the apparitions of the Virgin that occurred in 1917. It also happens in October (12-13).

FEIRA DO ALVARINHO late May
The self-described cradle of Alvarinho, Monção, the Minho, hosts a five-day fair (www.feiraalvarinho.pt.vu) in honour of its fine-flavoured wine. There's music, folkloric dancing and much eating and drinking.

JUNE

FESTA DO FADO Jun
Classic and new generation *fadistas* (singers of fado) perform in the atmospheric setting of an illuminated Castelo de São Jorge, Lisbon (www.egeac.pt). Catch free fado on trams every Thursday and Sunday in June.

FESTA DO CORPO DE DEUS Jun
Celebrated all over the north, this is the biggest party in Monção, the Minho. It's held on Corpus Christi (the ninth Thursday after Easter) and features a religious procession and medieval fair, with a re-enactment of St George battling the dragon.

VACA DAS CORDAS & CORPUS CHRISTI

Jun

Dating back many centuries, this strange event features young men goading a hapless bull through Ponte de Lima, the Minho. It's followed by the more pious Festa do Corpo de Deus, with religious processions and flowers carpeting the streets.

FESTAS DE JUNHO

1st weekend in Jun

Highlights here include an all-night drum competition, a livestock fair, a handicrafts market and fireworks, all rounded off with Sunday's procession in honour of the main man – São Gonçalo, in Amarante, the Douro.

FESTA DE SANTO ANTÓNIO

12-13 Jun

The lively Festival of St Anthony is celebrated with particular fervour in Lisbon's Alfama district, with feasting, drinking and dancing in some 50 *arraiais* (street parties).

FESTA DE SÃO JOÃO

23-24 Jun

St John is the favourite up north, when Porto, Braga and Vila do Conde celebrate with elaborate processions, music and feasting, while folks go around whacking each other with plastic hammers.

FEIRA NACIONAL DA AGRICULTURA

late Jun

The 10-day National Agricultural Fair is famed nationwide for its merriment, horse races, bullfights and night-time bull-running through the streets of Santarém. There are lots of children's events.

FESTAS POPULARES

late Jun

This is one of Évora's biggest, bounciest annual bashes, and one of the Alentejo's best country fairs.

JULY**FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE FOLCLORE**

Jul

The week-long International Folk Festival in late July brings in costumed dancers and traditional groups to Porto from across Portugal and beyond.

MERCADO MEDIEVAL

Jul

Don your armour and head to the castle grounds for this lively medieval fair in Obidos, Estremadura. Attractions include wandering minstrels, jousting matches and plenty of grog. Other medieval fairs are held in Silves, Valença do Minho and other castle towns.

AUGUST**FESTAS DE CIDADE E GUALTERIANAS**

1st weekend in Aug

Marked by a free fair, this long-running festival (www.aoficina.pt) in Guimarães, the Minho, has folk dancing, rock concerts, bullfights, fireworks and parades.

FESTIVAL DO SUDOESTE

early August

The Alentejan Glastonbury, in Zambujeira do Mar, attracts a young, surfy crowd with huge parties and big-name bands headlining.

FESTIVAL DO MARISCO

mid-August

This action-packed seafood festival in Olhão features the great Algarvian oceanic dishes, including *caldeirada* (fish stew) and *cataplana* (seafood and meat cooked in a copper dish). Bands add to the fun. For other eating festivals in the Algarve see p212.

ROMARIA DE NOSSA SENHORA D'AGONIA

20 Aug

One of the Minho's most spectacular festivals, in Viana do Castelo, features elaborate street paintings, folk costume parades, drumming, giant puppets and much merry-making (www.festas-agonia.com).

FEIRA DE SÃO MATEUS

mid-Aug–mid-Sep

Folk music, traditional food and fireworks rule the day at the country St Matthew's Fair in Viseu, the Beiras.

FOLKFARO

late Aug

Faro's big folk turns on lots of dance (with local and international folk groups); live music and street fests add to the fun in the Algarve.

NOITES RITUAL ROCK

late Aug

The fine city of Porto hosts a weekend-long rock extravaganza (Festival of Portuguese Rock; www.noitesritual.com) in late August.

FESTA DE NOSSA SENHORA DOS REMÉDIOS

late Aug-early Sep

Lamego's biggest event features rock concerts and late-night revelry, along with a procession on 8 September when ox-drawn carts carry religious *tableaux vivants* (scenes represented by a group of silent, motionless people) through the streets. Hard-core devotees ascend the steep stairway on their knees.

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER

NOSSA SENHORA DA NAZARÉ 8 Sep
Nazaré's big religious festival features sombre processions, folk dances and bullfights in Estremadura.

FEIRAS NOVAS 3rd week in Sep
One of Portugal's most ancient ongoing events, the New Fairs festival has a massive market and fair, with folk dances, fireworks and brass bands at Ponte de Lima, the Minho.

FEIRA DE SANTA IRIA late Oct
In the Algarve, Faro's biggest traditional event honours St Irene with fairground rides, stalls and entertainment.

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER

FEIRA DE SÃO MARTINHO 1st half of Nov
In the heart of horse country, this fair has a running of the bulls, bullfights, parades and nightly parties on the town square of Golegã, the Ribatejo.

FESTA DOS RAPAZES Late Dec
Just after Christmas, the so-called Festival of the Lads is a rollicking time of merry-making by young unmarried men who light bonfires and rampage around in rags and wooden masks. Catch it in Miranda do Douro, Trás-os-Montes.

NEW YEAR'S EVE (LISBON) 31 Dec
Ring in the *Ano Novo* (New Year) with fireworks, free concerts and DJs down by the Tejo.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

ALONG THE ATLANTIC COAST

Ten Days/Lisbon to Porto

Start in **Lisbon** (p99), with an exploration of enchanting neighbourhoods, where fado, cafe culture and street parties are all part of the scene. After this urban revelry, head north for a relaxing stay on the hillsides of **Sintra** (p150), then make your way to the lovely hilltop village of **Óbidos** (p295). Next, drink in the heady architecture of **Alcobaça** (p302) and **Batalha** (p304). For a dose of nature, take a stroll along the coastal pinewood of **Pinhal de Leiria** (p309) before dropping in at the colourful university town of **Coimbra** (p325). From here, it's a day trip to Portugal's best-preserved Roman ruins – the mosaics at **Conimbriga** (p339). More sylvan scenery awaits on a walk to the fairy-tale palace (and hotel) at **Mata Nacional do Buçaco** (p339), a prelude to the imposing sight of the castle **Montemor-o-Velho** (p342). Then, go north to **Porto** (p384), Lisbon's rival in beauty. Enjoy a day exploring the Ribeira, then head across the river to **Vila Nova de Gaia** (p393), for an intro to the country's great ports. End with a boat trip or train trip along the **Rio Douro** (p395), taking in the dramatic gorge scenery.

With detours along the way, it's around 355km from Lisbon to Porto. Frequent and inexpensive train connections link the towns, and there is also a decent bus service, which will be your main transport to the suggested stop-offs on the way.



JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

Two Weeks/Lisbon to Lisbon

The Moorish castle ruins atop **Lisbon** (p99) are an excellent starting point for this journey into Portugal's history. After taking in the capital's fine panoramas, head northeast to **Monsanto** (p354), a fairy-tale village dating back to Visigoth times. From there, stop off in neighbouring **Idanha-a-Velha** (p356), an extraordinary town with Roman and Visigoth roots and, like Monsanto, a fine castle. Head south to the Alto Alentejo's twin fortress hilltop towns of **Castelo de Vide** (p265) and **Marvão** (p268), the latter rising from a craggy peak.

The next stop is **Elvas** (p258), with its extraordinary zigzagging fortifications protecting narrow streets, only 14km from Spain. Its tiny size contrasts nicely with the pristine, walled town of Unesco-listed **Évora** (p236). Take in the cathedral, Roman ruins, plazas, restaurants and lively student nightlife. While there, take a day trip out to the impressive Neolithic ruins, particularly the **Cromeleque dos Almendres** (p247), one of the most important megalithic sites on the Iberian Peninsula. After a bit of Stone Age musing, head to the magical hilltop village of **Monsaraz** (p249), overlooking ancient olive groves. From there, dip down to **Beja** (p275), the sedate, pretty capital of Baixo Alentejo, to access **Mértola** (p270), one of the Alentejo's most dramatic hilltop villages. An open-air museum with a Moorish legacy, it's set high above the meandering Rio Guadiana.



This route is around 850km. It's possible to cover it by public transport, though you'd spend a lot of time on buses, and transport to some of these remote towns is infrequent.

SOUTHERN BEAUTY

Two Weeks/Lisbon to Tavira

This trip will give you a chance to see spectacular contrasts in scenery by following Portugal's southern rivers, beaches and ridges. From **Lisbon** (p99) head to the **Costa da Caparica** (p168), going far south of the tourist hordes to wild, sparsely visited beaches. Next, stop in **Setúbal** (p170) for a seafood feast and a visit to the beautiful protected area of the **Parque Natural da Arrábida** (p174).

From here, it's up to the mountains of **Monchique** (p231), where you'll find densely wooded hills and the Algarve's highest point at 902m. Take advantage of the picturesque walking, biking and pony-trekking opportunities, followed by a spa visit in refreshing **Caldas de Monchique** (p233).

From here you can dive back down to the coast, heading west to the surreal cliffs of **Cabo de São Vicente** (p226), with an overnight in the laid-back town of **Sagres** (p224).

Go straight east along the coast to **Faro** (p181), where you can take in its fine medieval centre before journeying out to the lush **Parque Natural da Ria Formosa** (p192), a lagoon system full of marsh, creeks, dune islands and the wetland birds that live there. From there, head to **Tavira** (p193), set with genteel 18th-century buildings straddling the Rio Gilão. This picturesque river town is a fine base for a boat trip across to the long idyllic beach of **Ilha de Tavira** (p198).

The one-way distance here is around 340km, and can be done largely on public transport, though you'll be able to explore more-remote regions and less-travelled coastline if you hire a car.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

BLAZING THE BEIRA BAIXA Two to Three Weeks/Coimbra to Sortelha

This highly rewarding trip through the Beira Baixa takes you past striking scenery with plenty of opportunity for outdoor adventure; plus, the deeper you delve, the fewer travellers you'll see. Start your foray from **Coimbra** (p325), soaking up the sights before hitting the photographers' paradise and royal retreat and spa of **Luso** and **Buçaco** (both p339).

From here you'll lose the crowds by breaking west to pristine rural idylls such as **Piódão** (p351), or any of the traditional hamlets and villages in the beautiful **Parque Natural da Serra da Estrela** (p358), packed with exquisite scenery, outdoor pursuits and Portugal's highest point – **Torre** (p367), also home to the country's only ski resort. Base yourself bang in the middle at **Manteigas** (p364) to give you the run of the whole mountain range; afterwards, visit beautiful **Belmonte** (p377), a hill town that overlooks the Serra da Estrela and has a fascinating secret history.

You could start the descent from these heady heights via the chilly highland towns of **Covilhã** (p368) or **Guarda** (p374), and then head up north to **Trancoso** (p378), a perfectly preserved medieval walled town.

Other fabulous castles and fortified towns you can visit in the lowland Beiras include northern **Almeida** (p380) and far-flung **Sortelha** (p357), both stunning destinations that see only a fraction of the tourist traffic of coastal Portugal.



This trip has spectacular scenery and sights, but a severe dearth of public transport. With your own wheels you could whiz around this 410km route in two weeks, but relying on buses, you'd have to skip the more remote villages.

MEANDERINGS IN THE MINHO

Two to Three Weeks/Porto to Porto

Portugal's oft-ignored northern region makes a great destination for outdoor adventures, as well as exploring colourful markets or catching a traditional festival. From **Porto** (p384), head up the coast to the beautifully set town of **Viana do Castelo** (p441), which is also just a short ferry ride from the north's best beaches. Continue north to the border fortress of **Valença do Minho** (p446) and **Monção** (p448), both perched scenically over the Minho River.

From here, travel south to the charming town of **Ponte de Lima** (p450), with its garden-lined riverbanks and picture-book Roman bridge. Nearby **Ponte da Barca** (p454) is another handsome riverside town; stock up here before heading to the remote stone village of **Soajo** (p460), a great base for walks amid untouched mountain scenery. For more outdoor adventures inside the **Parque Nacional da Peneda-Gerês** (p457), head to spa town **Vila do Gerês** (p461) and nearby spots for canoeing, mountain biking and hiking.

Next it's on to beautiful **Braga** (p425), a town of magnificent churches and manicured plazas set with fine restaurants and outdoor cafes. For great city views, take in the hilltop sanctuary of **Bom Jesus do Monte** (p431). If you're passing on a Thursday, take a day trip to **Barcelos** (p432) to catch its famous weekly market.

Continuing south, get a dose of early history at the Celtic ruins of **Citânia de Briteiros** (p440), and spend a day (and preferably a night) in **Guimarães** (p436), birthplace of Portugal and home to an immaculately preserved medieval centre.

Leaving the Minho, head to **Amarante** (p409), famous for its monastery, pastries and pretty riverside. For the journey back to Porto, take the narrow-gauge train down to the Douro and transfer to a regular train back to Porto.

Apart from remote corners of the national parks, this route isn't difficult to undertake by public transport. Completing the whole 550km loop will take a long two weeks, or a leisurely three if you want to linger in Peneda-Gerês.



TAILORED TRIPS

A VITICULTURAL VOYAGE

Wine lovers have their work cut out for them on a leisurely journey through the north, Portugal's premier wine-growing region. How quickly you cover this 360km route depends on how much imbibing you plan to do along the way. You can easily cover the distance in under a week, but you may want to linger at some of the delightful guest houses and rural manors along the way.

Any self-respecting port-wine tour will begin in **Porto** (p384), gateway to the world's most famous port-wine region. Hint: don't miss the **Solar do Vinho do Porto** (p403). Across the river from the city is the historic **Vila Nova de Gaia** (p393). Packed with port-wine lodges, this is an excellent place to sample the great fruits of the vine.

After preliminary tastes, it's time to journey up the wine's ancient highway, on a river cruise up the Douro valley to **Peso da Régua** (p417) and beyond to the very heart of vineyard country. The tiny village of **Pinhão** (p419) is ringed with wine estates, many offering splendid overnight stays.

While in the vicinity, take the incredibly scenic drive over the mountains to **Vila Nova de Foz Côa** (p420), famed for the mystifying Palaeolithic stone carvings in the surrounding countryside (don't worry, there are also vineyards nearby). You could also stop in **Vila Real** (p468), erstwhile home of its eponymous rosé wine.

The last stop before returning to Porto is **Lamego** (p413), which is home to one of Portugal's choice sparkling wines.

PORTUGAL FOR KIDS

If you're travelling with children, the Algarve is ideal for long beach days, water parks and abundant youthful amusement. The drive down, however, shouldn't be rushed, as there are some great spots along the way. Start at Lisbon's **Parque das Nações** (p121) with its amazing **Oceanário** (p122). There's also bike rental, air gondola rides along the water and plenty of space for running around. Moseying south, visit the beaches of **Costa da Caparica** (p168) for spade-and-bucket fun. Continue down the beautiful, wild western coast: **Vila Nova de Milfontes** (p283), sleepy **Zambujeira do Mar** (p286) or **Odeixe** (p230), all with stunning beaches. On the Algarve coast, you are spoiled for choice. Base yourself at vibrant **Lagos** (p216) or **Albufeira** (p205), both of which offer dolphin-spotting boat trips. For a quieter scene, choose **Carvoeiro** (p207) or elegant **Tavira** (p193). Supplement beach days with a day at one of the nearby water parks. Kids may enjoy the castle at **Silves** (p209), or a boat trip from Faro to **Ilha Barreta** (p185), a remote sandy island just off the mainland.



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