

Some places in Portugal worth a visit

Here are a few suggestions of places worth seeing in Portugal, which I have been to. I have not been to the Algarve, and spent little time north of the Douro; I have included only a selection of facts and pictures about each case. Some headings refer to several places in the same general area.

Thanks to João Araújo for taking me to these places and for a couple of corrections to my original text.

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December 2022, revised June 2025



Almada

Almada is the town on the south bank of the Tejo estuary opposite Lisbon. You can reach it either by the April 25 Bridge (renamed from Salazar bridge after the 1974 revolution that overthrew his regime) or by ferry from Lisbon to Cacilhas (recommended).



The town is dominated by the statue of Cristo Rei overlooking the river (the best place for viewing the bridge). To the east is Cacilhas, with many eating places; to the west is Caparica, with extensive beaches.



Amarante

An interesting but not specially distinguished town on a tributary of the Douro in the north of Portugal.



A fine collection of old churches presumably have to fight against the baked goods shops downtown, which sell extremely immodest devils. There is a pleasant riverside walk. The town was on one of the pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela.

Aveiro

Aveiro is on the coast between Lisbon and Porto. It is the “Venice of Portugal” and has gondolas (formerly used for carrying seaweed from the shore to fertilise the farmers’ fields, now richly decorated and used to ferry tourists around).



Its many attractions include the beaches of Costa Nova; a richly decorated monastery where royal princess Joana took the veil (until her angry brother, who had lost his heir, came to drag her out), and lagoons where salt was produced by evaporation and many waterbirds including flamingoes can be seen close up.





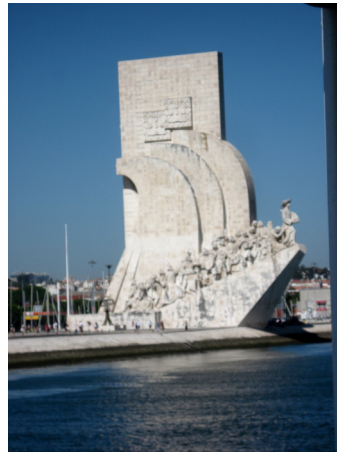
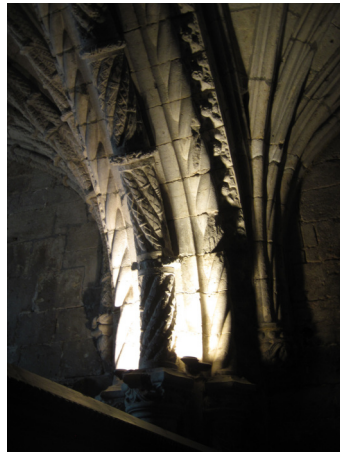
And finally, try the famous Ovos Moles, confectionery produced only in Aveiro; there are now several sources but the picture shows the original one, still doing a brisk trade.



This is a place I strongly recommend!

Cascais

Down river from Lisbon is Belem, famous for the Jerónimos monastery from where the Portuguese explorers set out. It also has the original shop producing the famous Pasteis de Nata (long queues speak to their quality).



Further down are the beaches of Cascais and Estoril, wide sandy beaches broken by rocky outcrops such as the Boca do Inferno (Mouth of Hell), where diabolist Aleister Crowley faked his own death.



Coimbra

A city which contains the oldest university in Portugal (though the university moved back and forth between Coimbra and Lisbon before settling here permanently). The old library contains a colony of bats which help preserve the books by eating the insects which would attack them.



The town has its own distinct type of fado, which nobody except Coimbra students is allowed to play. It gives more prominence to virtuoso Portuguese guitar playing than the more common fado.



Two nearby places of interest are Bussaco and Conimbriga. The first is an extraordinary decorated house (now a hotel). In the surrounding forest is the site of a battle between Wellington's and Napoleon's armies, the first turning of the tide against the latter. Note the dying horse on the right.



Conimbriga is a Roman town with some well-preserved remains. When the Goths invaded the Roman empire, some of the buildings were knocked down to build a rubble wall to try to keep them out (a ploy which was not successful).



Covilhã

Formerly the “Manchester of Portugal”, the mountain town of Covilhã was once the centre of the wool industry of Portugal. Now it is a University town specialising in engineering, and the huge buildings that housed the woollen mills have been put to other uses.



The town has a good museum, but is in some sense itself an art gallery; artists have been encouraged to come and paint on the walls.



Near to Covilhã are several remarkable hilltop towns, the best of which are probably Monsanto and Sortelha.



Évora

East of Lisbon, not far from the Spanish border, Évora has many attractions. There is a cathedral, where you can easily get up onto the roof from which there are very good views.



There are Roman remains, and also churches whose walls are made of human skulls and bones, to remind people of their mortality.



The University, re-founded recently after a gap of centuries, has some remarkable halls whose walls are covered in azulejos (the blue-and-white Portuguese tiles). This one shows Otto von Guericke's famous experiment in which teams of horses failed to pull apart two hemispheres once the air was pumped out. Another has a cherub advising mathematicians, "Semper abstracta".



To the east is another lovely hilltop village, Monsaraz.



About an hour's drive south of Évora is the World Heritage Site (and 2027 European City of Culture), Serpa. It is set in the midst of commercial olive trees as far as the eye can see, but the two ancient and gnarled olive trees in the town centre are very different from the small regimented plantation trees. Serpa boasts a castle, a bit knocked about by the Spanish, but the open space at the top giving stunning views over the countryside; it also contains a small archaeological museum. But perhaps the highlight is a private museum of clocks and watches, ranging from high end Patek Philippe from Switzerland to cheap watches for the masses, and curiosities including a limited-edition Beatles watch and a dog whose eyes rotate to tell the hours and minutes.



Guimarães

If you go north of the Douro valley, the rocky slopes suitable for monocultures of grapes, olives and almonds give way to deep rich soil, thickly covered with forest and mixed farms. In this region is the old town of Guimarães. This was the seed of Portugal; a small Christian kingdom here under Alfonso I (whose birthplace is unknown but may have been Guimarães, which was his capital) began the Reconquista which finally drove the Moors out of the whole country.

It is a town with a fine old centre, though the outskirts are not lovely and navigation is something of a problem. If you

do visit, and are interested in old religious art, take a look at the town museum.



Lisbon

Not to be missed at any cost is the city of Lisbon.



The lampposts tell a foundation legend, about the ravens that accompanied the boat bringing the remains of St Vincent to Lisbon. Everywhere are the calcários, limestone cobbles which pave many of the streets and paths.



Worth seeing: the castle on its hill; the Gulbenkian museum; the zoo; ride in a tram, especially one like the Elevador da Bica; or have a coffee with writer Fernando Pessoa in his favourite café. And keep a lookout for the many azulejos!





There is a bullring in Campo Grande, now mostly used for other entertainments and with many restaurants. But bulls are still bred for the bullring. Unlike in Spain, the bulls are not killed in the ring, but are later butchered; unreconstructed carnivores can have a splendid meal if you can find one of the restaurants that serves their meat.



Mafra

Mafra, north of Lisbon, is the site of a huge monastery.



Whenever you are in a Portuguese town or village which has or had a convent, ask about the local cakes; there is sure to be a speciality. The convents used huge quantities of egg whites to starch the nuns' wimples, and they had to find something to do with the yolks!



Mira de Aire

In this village is the entrance to a huge underground cave system. It runs for something like 10 kilometres, most of

which is not open to the public; but you can do a tour of the part that is open. Recommended!



Óbidos

Óbidos is a lovely walled hill town north of Lisbon. I believe it was given by a Portuguese king to his wife as a wedding present. You have to be prepared to park below and walk up into the town. You can walk on a considerable stretch of the old walls.



End your visit by trying the famous ginjinha, a liqueur made from a cherry-like fruit and served in chocolate cups.

Piódão

A village on a steep hillside in the mountains. There is a good walk down the valley to Foz de Égua, with its scary bridge.



Porto

Portugal's second city (which the British insist on calling Oporto) is famous for port wine; the wine is brought down from vineyards up the Douro valley in special port boats. There are several nice bridges over the river, including the one shown, a two-level bridge (trams go on the top level) designed by a student of Eiffel (you can tell from the style). You can visit several of the port lodges and sample their produce,



Near the centre is Praça de Mouzinho de Albuquerque, a park containing a huge obelisk whose base is surrounded by graphic sculpture depicting the carnage of the Napoleonic Wars.



There is much more to see, but I have not spent very much time in Porto.

Inland from Porto: the Douro valley

The Douro (pronounced Doro, the “Golden River”), has been the centre of the port wine industry for centuries. The grapes are grown in terraces on the sides of the steep hills overlooking the river, and have been for centuries. The entire river is a World Heritage site.



To select one place from many, visit the Vale de Côa. This region, near the Spanish border, belongs to not just one but two World Heritage sites. One is the Douro valley itself, as noted. The other celebrates prehistoric art carved on stones. There were few caves in the area, so the stones are now very worn; but the museum is worth a visit.

We stayed in Pocinho, in the centre where the Portuguese Olympic rowing teams train. The conference ended with a river cruise, where I took these pictures, but the conference dinner was in the museum.

If you are in the Douro valley, take the train from Porto that runs along the valley close to the river. It is a very interesting train ride with its mix of views of the terraced vineyards and towering rugged cliffs. Several of the stations have fine azulejos. (The third picture below shows the train in context. It is taken from a viewpoint at São Salvador do

Mundo, with a small chapel on a hill.) Alternatively, you can take a cruise on the river.



Santarem

High on a bluff overlooking the Tejo some way upstream from Lisbon is the town of Santarem.

At the time of the Reconquista, when Christians regained Portugal from the Moors, Santarem was the scene of a famous incident, when Christian knights scaled the cliffs and entered the town through a small gateway (which is still there) to take the Moors by surprise.

The last picture is the ceiling of the large and ornate church.



Sesimbra

South of Lisbon is a tongue of land between the estuaries of the rivers Tejo and Sado, the largest estuaries in Portugal. This area includes two old castles on hilltops, at Sesimbra and Palmela.



On the south side of the peninsula is the Arrábida national park, a mountainous region which contains an old Franciscan monastery where I attended a mathematics workshop in 2022. Below it is a tiny fishing village, Portinho. Head west to the very tip of the tongue to find a ruined monastery at Cabo Espichel, where there are claimed to be dinosaur footprints (though I never managed to see them).



Sintra

Within easy reach of Lisbon to the west is Sintra, haunt of royalty, nobility, writers and artists. There is a royal palace on top of the mountain and palaces of various nobles (many with nice gardens) in the town. Several can be visited. Note the mathematical cherubs hard at work constructing the world.



Sintra also has an old Franciscan “cork monastery”: the walls and doors are lined with cork, to ensure an atmosphere of peace and quiet for the monks to meditate.

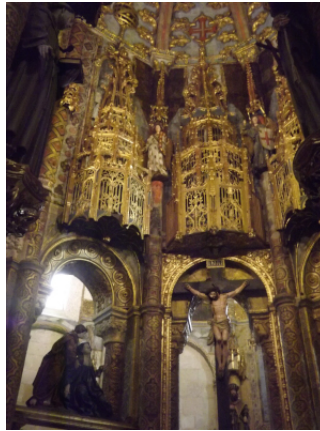


Continue past Sintra, and you come to Cabo da Roca, the most westerly point on the mainland of Europe. Please don't fall off the cliff while taking a selfie (people do!).



Tomar

Tomar was a town belonging to the Knights Templars in the middle ages. The monastery there has much worth seeing, notably the famous window. Much here is in the Manueline style, associated with Dom Manuel, who was king at the time of the Age of Discoveries (notably Vasco da Gama's voyage to India).



Other places

There are many beautiful places in Portugal that I have not mentioned. Here are just three items of interest.

Nazaré is a place of pilgrimage for surfboard riders. When the weather conditions are right, 30-metre waves roll in and challenge the bravest board-riders (though when we were there it was almost dead calm).

Montejunto was an “ice factory” on top of a mountain. The pools were filled with water, and when they froze solid,

a bell roused the workmen who came and cut the ice into blocks ready to be shipped to Lisbon.

Passadicos do Paiva, a spectacular gorge on a river flowing north to the Douro, has a beautiful hike, with transport at the end to bring you back to the start. A huge amount of work has been done providing boardwalks, stairs, and so on.



Just upriver from Lisbon, on the other side, is Evoa, a nature reserve with many different waterbirds including spoonbills, and a variety of passerine birds as well. Watch out for the fierce-looking creatures on the road into the interpretation centre; we thought at first that they were scorpions, but they are Louisiana crayfish, introduced by the Spanish as a food source, but now a nuisance since they have no natural enemies.

