



The Grail Quest

Imagine yourself at King Arthur's court, as a Knight on the quest for the Holy Grail. Instead of the Kingdom of Logres, this quest will take place in the heart of Portugal, in the landscapes of Europe's West Coast, once populated by Knights Templars and Cistercian monks. This is the theme underlying a two-day itinerary that enables you to redesign mythical geography and set forth on an inspiring endeavour, that will end in Tomar, the meeting place of the questing knights.

The journey will begin in Alcobaça - in the monastery built by the Order of Cistercians who adapted the pagan tales of the Grail quest in accordance with the precepts of Christian virtues. This is also Portugal's first Gothic temple, reminiscent of the Abbey of Uther Pendragon, where Sir Galahad undertook his vigil and discovered his mission. Continue to the military battlefield of Aljubarrota, where D. João I defeated the Castilian armies and secured Portugal's independence - just as Sir Lancelot once defeated King Lionel at the Painful ground. The monastery of Santa Maria da Vitória celebrates this extraordinary feat through a building of sublime architecture, as epitomised by the Imperfect Chapels.

Continue on to other locales that remind us of tales of chivalry. For example, the Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park is reminiscent of the Waste Land with lakes that suddenly appear or disappear, - such as the Polje de Minde, with its deep caverns and exquisite grottoes. The Castle of Almourol, isolated on a small island in the middle of the River Tagus, was an important defensive bastion of the Knights Templar and serves as an imaginary stage for legends of damsels and giants.

Dedicate your second day to Tomar - a city filled with esoteric symbols. In the Convent of Santa Iria observe the saint's statue in the place where she was martyred. At the base of the statue there is a figure linked to King Arthur - a bull looking north towards the constellation of Bootes where the star Arcturus shines brightly. In the Church of Santa Maria do Olival, a Templar pantheon, discover the signs of Solomon and several stars of David. In our imaginary quest, this represents the Hermitage of the Red Olive Tree, the setting for the prophetic visions of Gawain and Estor.

Around 30 kms away, discover the watchtower of Dornes - a "strange castle" that belonged to the lover of the Knight Dalides. Closer to Tomar there is a cup-shaped natural swimming pool known as "Agroal" - an anagram of the Portuguese word for The Grail ("O Graal"). In the city-centre, observe the water wheel of the River Nabão similar to the wheel-shaped seal of the first King of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques in which we can read the word "Portugal". Is this perhaps, "Door to the Grail"?

Visit the Wood of the Sete Montes, the "Garden of Urganda", and discover the "Charolinha" (small round chapel) in the midst of the leafy vegetation. Then walk up the hill to visit the castle and Convent of Christ. This architectural complex reproduces the layout of the walls of Jerusalem, housing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and where the Manueline Church is a copy of Solomon's Temple in terms of its proportions. The beautiful round Chapel, ("Charola"), where the Templar Knights attended mass, surrounds the altar - a round table. This could be the spiritual palace where the holy chalice once appeared, thus rounding off this itinerary, a quest in which the "Grail" doesn't have the form of a chalice, but instead corresponds to the discovery of spectacular landscapes and monuments.



Points of interest along the Itinerary

- Mosteiro de Alcobaca
- Centro de Interpretação da Batalha de Aljubarrota - CIBA
- Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Vitória - Batalha
- Parque Natural das Serras de Aire e Candeeiros
- Castelo de Almourol
- Tomar
- Convento de Santa Iria
- Igreja de Santa Maria do Olival - Tomar
- Torre de Dornes
- Roda do Nabão
- Mata Nacional dos Sete Montes
- Convento de Cristo e Castelo Templário



Points of interest along the Itinerary

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Parque Natural das Serras de Aire e Candeeiros

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Torre de Dornes

Dornes

(FERREIRA DO ZÊZERE)



Roda do Nabão

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Suggestions

In the heart of Portugal

Alcobaça Monastery

The monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça is a UNESCO World Heritage site. As soon as you enter the church's immense nave - the largest built in Portugal in the Middle Ages - you feel a sense of spirituality that's typically evoked by early Gothic architecture.

In the transept are the most beautiful medieval tombs in Portugal. On the right you'll find the resting place of Inês de Castro and on the left, that of King Pedro I. The King himself ordered them to be placed opposite one another, so when the day of resurrection arrived he would be facing the woman he loved, who was brutally murdered. Pedro's tomb is decorated with delicate sculptures, retelling the story of this tragic love affair.

The layout of the monastery follows that of the Cistercian Order founded in France. Walk through the austere chambers where monks lived for almost 800 years: the refectory, the dormitory, the chapter house, the cloisters, and the monumental kitchen where fish were cooked fresh from the river. On tiles lining the walls of the Kings' Room, read the story of the founding of the monastery in 1153. You'll learn that Portugal's first king, Afonso Henriques, promised to give St. Bernard the lands of Alcobaça if he captured Santarém from the Moors. Consequently, monks settled here, establishing an agricultural college on the fertile land that is still productive today.

Batalha Monastery

UNESCO has included the historic monastery of Batalha on the list of World Heritage sites.

King João I ordered the monastery to be built in gratitude to the Virgin Mary for the Portuguese victory at the battle of Aljubarrota in 1385. The monastery illustrates the history of Portugal and its rich artistic heritage.

On a visit to the monastery, you'll start at the Founder's Chapel where King João is buried with his wife, Queen Philippa of Lancaster. Their son Prince Henry the Navigator is also buried here in the family tomb. In the Royal Cloisters, you'll see arches carved with leaves, flowers, fruit and many symbols used by King Manuel I, including the cross of Christ and the armillary spheres in the typical Manueline style.

The Chapter House is famous for its amazing vaulted ceiling. Without any central support, it's one of the most daring examples in European Gothic architecture. According to legend its architect, Afonso Domingues, slept under it for three days to prove that it would not fall down.

Behind the church, you'll see the unusual 'Incomplete Chapels' extending high above you. Here, there is another example of the Manueline style; a doorway built in a succession of arches and slender columns that are meticulously decorated.

Leiria pine forest

In the midst of this rugged landscape with a great biodiversity, visit the caves of Mira de Aire, Alvados, Santo António and Moeda.

These mountains were first settled back in the Palaeolithic age. You can see prehistoric remains, such as cromlechs and dolmens, as well as traces of the Roman and Muslim civilisations. The Castro de Santa Marta, an interesting Iron Age settlement, is well worth a visit.

Don't miss a trip to the Donkey Reserve, close to the Caves of Santo António. Here, you can take a donkey ride through the mountains and relive the past.



In the area close to the park are the Moinhos da Pena, one of the largest groups of windmills in Portugal. Some have been converted into tourist accommodation and can well serve as the starting point for a country walk or a bike ride.

In the tiny village of Bairro, you will find the Pedreira do Galinha Palaeontological Deposit, classified as a Natural Monument. Here you will find roughly twenty dinosaur footprints, making this the world's longest such trail.

The Tagus Valley

Marshlands dominate the landscape, where bulls and horses go to pasture. The Tagus Valley has proud traditions of bullfighting, dancing and popular music – such as the fandango – in the brightly coloured costumes of the campinos.

Aficionados should make sure that they visit the bullrings, the stud farms and the fairs and festivals that take place in these lovely riverside lands. Lively bullfights can be seen at the Feira do Cavalo (Horse Fair) in Golegã and at the Feira Nacional de Agricultura (National Agricultural Fair) in Santarém. In Vila Franca de Xira, visit the ganadarias, where fighting bulls are raised, and the Centro Equestre da Lezíria Grande (Lezíria Grande Equestrian Centre), with its famous Lusitanian horses.

The whole region is rich in architectural and artistic heritage illustrated by the region's monuments, churches and museums. Don't miss the Almoural Castle, situated on a tiny island in the middle of the river, and nearby areas like Constância and Abrantes, whose castle perched above the town has a view that fades into the horizon.

The region is perfect for walks, horse rides and boat trips on the rivers and reservoirs. It is also a haven for those who like sport fishing, canoeing and other water sports.

It's worth stopping at the estates and wineries that are located on the Ribatejo Wine Route. And top it all off with some of the area's delicious cuisine.

Tomar and its convent

The oldest building in this monastic complex, the Charola or Rotunda, dates back to the end of the 12th Century. It is Syrian in origin, but over time has been subject to various alterations, culminating in the important Manueline work that has earned it UNESCO World Heritage status.

In the reign of King Dom Manuel I, the Charola was adapted to form the chancel of the church. It was opened on one side to form the magnificent Renaissance doorway in which the enthronement of the Virgin Mary is depicted. But the real gem for all those who visit the Convento de Cristo is the famous Manueline window of the Chapter House.

The enclosure of the complex includes a woodland park known as the Mata Nacional dos Sete Montes. It's a fine example of a late Romantic garden, which combines open areas with dense shading and winding paths. The woodland also contains some 17th Century architectural remains and a modern keep-fit course.

Don't leave Tomar without visiting the Templars' Castle; it was the headquarters of the Military Order of the Temple and a fine example of 12th Century military architecture.

Besides having witnessed some of the battles of the Christian Reconquest, Tomar still preserves an interesting Jewish connection, at the synagogue of Tomar. Nowadays, it serves as the headquarters of the Abraão Zacuto Portuguese-Jewish Museum.



Useful contacts

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