
The Castelo de Vide Jewish Quarter

ABOUT

The best way in which to discover the Castelo de Vide Jewish Quarter is most definitely on foot.

Leaving from the main D. Pedro V square, head along Rua de Santa Maria as far as the Castle. This is the perfect time to take a look around before heading down the North slope (on the left-hand side). Dating back to distant times, the streets you wander feature discreet examples of their antiquity. The medieval lay out of the streets combines with a Jewish influence on their names: Rua da Judiaria (Street of Jews), Rua Nova (New Street), where Jews converting to Christianity lived and were known as new-Christians, Rua do Arçário (Street of Arcades), the source of the community's wealth and the Rua das Espinosas, named in honour of the 17th century philosopher Spinoza, son of a Castelo de Vide resident.

Take a careful look at the houses in the Jewish Quarter. On the ground floor, two doors connect with the exterior. Normally in granite, one leads into the store where the business was done and the other leads onto stairs leading to the two upper floors which were the living quarters. On the doors that still retain their ogival gothic structure, there are sculpted symbols. On the right doorpost, there are small indents of around 10cm. These are "mezuzot" (plural of "Mezuzah") and clear evidence the Jewish faith was practised. They were used to attach a small parchment that represented a profession of faith. On one side, there was the name of God and on the other the word Shemah was inscribed. Shemah is the name given to the first sentence in the Book of Deuteronomy meaning "listen".

At the crossroads between Rua da Judiaria and Rua da Fonte there is the former synagogue, which served as both a meeting place and school for the Jewish community. According to what is known, through to the 12th century, this was but a modest house before being transformed into a place of worship in the 14th century. In the 16th century, with the order given to expel all Jews, it again returned to being a residence. Within one of the walls, a tabernacle and a receptacle were discovered confirming the building's former purpose. The tabernacle, divided into two, served to store the sacred manuscripts and the holy oils used in religious ceremonies. The receptacle, to the left, was used to hold the scriptures.

Also in the Jewish quarter, the first house on Rua do Arçário reveals further history. This was home to the midwife or "quencher" as she was called due to her ability to extinguish or renew life. In the upper window, there are still the granite supports for the lines used to hang out the delivery cloths. Only then would those waiting outside learn what was happening inside.

Heading down the north slope, the stroll inevitably ends in a square pleasantly set off by the Town's fountain. This represented one of the boundaries to the Jewish quarter.

Other information

The Castelo de Vide Jewish Quarter