
Green Portugal

ABOUT



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Portugal by... Condé Nast Traveler

Wild, like it was in the beginning. Portuguese nature reserves can congratulate themselves for keeping the essence of the Iberian Peninsula and the volcanic islands of the Atlantic intact. It's a journey through time that carries us to a world where man lived with nature as an equal. From the mountains to the coast, passing through volcanoes, peaks and gardens, here are ten paradises where green is in the air.

Alvão natural park

It is but a small garden compared to Portugal's other reserves, but Alvão Natural Park's 70 square kilometres offer exclusive panoramas that more than justify its creation in 1983. Two very distinct terrains divide the park in half, one a mountainous area full of ravines and gorges, and another of valleys with woods of birch, oak and heather. The river Olo is its main artery, whose course is fed by fast flowing streams. Amongst its tenants are wolves, wild cats (genets) and peregrine falcons, which are just an appetizer for those passionate about Iberian fauna, who can also see the endangered golden eagles in their natural habitat. The other main attraction in the park is the waterfalls, the best known being at Fiskas de Ermelo, with crystal clear lagoons at their source and a route so long that they are considered the most extensive in Europe. Prepare your visit to the park in Vila Real, where you can find one of the park's information and interpretation centres.

Douro International natural park

Shared with Spain, the River Douro marks the border that divides the Iberian Peninsula. Over a period of thousands of years, its waters have carved the terrain that now forms the Douro Natural Park, with streams that extend between Miranda do Douro and Barca d'Alva in the Portuguese section. Taken together, the two Iberian Douro parks form one of the largest in Europe. Endemic juniper, cork oak, oak and holm oak forests grow throughout the park, but vines are the dominant species. Home to some of the best Portuguese wines, there are many wine routes to choose from. In the interior, the Côa archaeological park is evidence of human presence in the area for thousands of years, with its exceptional Palaeolithic engravings. The origins of a land full of history.

Serra da Estrela natural park

The visiting card for the Serra da Estrela Natural Park is littered with record qualifications. The largest reserve in the country sets the limits of the highest mountain range in mainland Portugal, whose Torre peak is the highlight of the landscape at 1993 metres; it has the highest percentage of rainfall in the area and it is not unusual to see snow on its flanks even in midsummer. This extreme climate, inherited from a glacial past, means it is full of plant and animal life, with endemic species that make it an enchanting natural rarity. There are a number of routes for discovering its natural secrets, and amongst these, Penhas da Saúde and Poço do Inferno should not be missed. Within its borders, certain towns are also worth visiting, including Guarda, Covilhã and Linhares.

Serras de Aire e Candeeiros natural park

It seems like this area has already been a park for millions of years, as proven by the dinosaur footprints that you can see and touch at the edge of the Serra de Aire. A hundred footprints were discovered in 1994 that have been dated back 175 million years, and are probably the best preserved in the world. Now, the Pedreira do Galinha Palaeontological Tracksite is a national monument and one of the great attractions of the Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park. This park has more natural wonders with hundreds of limestone caves on the surface and as many underground, formed by the action of underground streams, probably the largest salt water reserves in the country, all littered with stalactites and stalagmites. About twenty-five species of orchids decorate the landscape of the park that is home to all types of reptiles, birds, mammals and invertebrates.

Sintra-Cascais Natural Park

The two faces of the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park, near Lisbon, are its wild coastline and an extensive range of hills, and it's hard to believe that there is still such intact nature at this point on the Portuguese map. Forests of Portuguese oak, poplar and acacia trees provide a landscape covered by a carpet of green. In the midst of the hills is Sintra, which Lord Byron claimed to be the most beautiful place in the world. Palaces and gardens mix with vegetation and mist, offering an almost magical landscape with many viewpoints, including Pena Palace and the Moorish castle, a site that UNESCO has declared a cultural landscape. On a clear day, one can see the coast, where Capes Raso and Roca mark out the borders of the park. Large stretches of beach such as Guincho, a mecca for windsurfers, and cliffs where the wind and waves impose their own law, creating legends such as Boca do Inferno (the Mouth of Hell) and Ursa beach, are just some of the park's attractions. A leisurely walk through the park will have the Atlantic as the only guide.

Gardens of the Queluz National Palace, Sintra

Setting an example at the time of its creation, the Queluz National Palace garden availed itself of French sophistication and Italian theatricality to create what may very well be one of the most beautiful gardens in the country. The central elements of the statuary decoration are two monumental fountains, one dedicated to Tethys and the other to Poseidon, but the gardens are adorned with dozens of marble figures, a veritable army of gods and sphinxes, located amongst the flowerbeds and hedges. The uniqueness of Queluz lies in the combination of styles, a layout that brings to mind the hand of Le Nôtre, the architect of the gardens of Versailles, and the symmetry of the Italian Renaissance. An unmistakably Portuguese element is evident in the tiles that decorate the large canal and some of the walls that border this green paradise. Exotic plants brought from the colonies and laurel and lemon trees lend a fragrant feel to this garden that is full of clever water features in the most unexpected places. Lisbon is very close, so you can go there and back for a visit that makes the perfect antidote to the bustle of the city.

Estrela Gardens, Lisbon

A taste of the tropics in the heart of Lisbon. The Estrela gardens, right in front of the basilica of the same name, have a large variety of tropical plants, natural wonders brought from the four corners of the globe. When they were created in the 19th century, it is said that there was a Chinese pavilion, greenhouses and even a cage with a lion. In the summer months, the gardens' nine acres are filled with music from the groups playing in its huge wrought iron bandstand. Lisbonites go out of their way to escape from the bustling city to drink a delicious coffee in one of its quaint cafés on the banks of the lake or to enjoy a picnic in the shade of its centuries-old trees.

Southwest Alentejo and Vicentina Coast Natural Park

Just hearing its name is enough for the fantasy to run wild. Fishing villages, a cuisine based on local products (kilometre zero) and a sweeping landscape, the Alentejo is transformed into the natural paradise of the southwest when it meets the Vicentina coast in a combination that offers the best views of the Portuguese coastline. Cape São Vicente dominates this circuit that links the São Torpes riverside to Praia de Burgau. There are about 110 kilometres of practically wild coastal horizons, sand dunes, beaches that are miles long and small coves - as well as an island, the Island of Pessegueiro, and a coral reef at Carrapateira - that win your heart over and rightly so. Flora and fauna accompany this Atlantic awakening in one of the most westerly points on the continent of Europe. Lose yourself in the markets of the coastal villages, and visit this paradise in July so as not to miss the enjoyment of a visit to the Sines World Music Festival.

Madeira Natural Park

The laurel forests with their rough, twisting shapes make you feel as if you're back in Pre-history. In this sense, the Madeira natural park is a real time trap. But the island does not only have the laurel. Justly designated the floating garden of the Atlantic, the park comprises seven natural reserves which occupy two-thirds of the island and much of the rest of the archipelago. Rocha do Navio, the landscape of Porto Santo, Ponta de São Lourenço, Pico Ruivo and the Desertas islands, populated only by reptiles, and the Selvagens islands are just waiting for nature lovers seeking Madeira in its pure state. And that is precisely what they will find.

Vineyards of Pico Island, Azores

Man has been altering the landscape of Pico, one of the paradise islands of the Azores, for centuries. Removing the

volcanic rock and tilling the land to make it arable, and growing vines to be turned into Verdelho wine. Franciscan and Carmelite monks built a maze of disjointed walls overlooking the sea and under the watchful eye of the Pico volcano, the roof of Portugal at 2351 metres above sea level, where the vines are protected from the wind and grow sweet in the heat of the sun. A chaotic landscape, but unusually beautiful, and declared World Heritage by UNESCO. An environment that is unique in the world and that calls for a toast to the setting of the sun.