
In the Heart of Portugal

ABOUT



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Come and discover the “heart of Portugal” - following routes that we’ve prepared for you. Over the centuries, this zone - the cradle of Portuguese identity - has served as a vital cultural crossroads and the setting for key historical facts.

We propose **four itineraries**, that include three of Portugal’s most important monuments classified as world Heritage sites by UNESCO – the Monastery of Alcobaça, The Convent of Christ and the Monastery of Batalha. Linked to key episodes in Portuguese history, these exquisite monuments combine various architectural styles. The oldest, the **Monastery of Alcobaça** was founded by Portugal’s first king, and pertained to the Order of Cistercians, which played an essential role in Portugal’s agricultural and cultural development. The **Convent of Christ** - where one still senses the mystique of the Knights Templar - is located next to the castle built in 1160 by the Military Order, that chose Tomar as the bastion for defence and expansion of the territory conquered from the Moors. The **Monastery of Batalha** - a masterpiece of late Gothic architecture - pays testimony to affirmation of Portuguese independence against the powerful Kingdom of Castille.

But there’s far more to discover in this region. The **“Treasure of the Templars”** route is the ideal itinerary for those who enjoy chivalric romances. Starting in Tomar, a sacred geographical centre for the Knights Templar, this itinerary will introduce you to their symbols- in the Church of Santa Maria do Olival, where initiation ceremonies were held, or the Round Church of the Convent of Christ where the knights used to hear mass. Travel through the region and visit the Castle of Almourol, perched on a rocky island in the middle of the River Tagus, or the Tower of Dornes, that once served as a watchtower over the spectacular local landscape.

Surrender to the power of local legends, myths and mysteries in the **“Paths of the Faith”** that will take you to Fatima - one of the world’s most important sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin Mary, built next to the site where three child shepherds saw Our Lady. There are also records of other apparitions of the Virgin - in Nazaré, Póvoa de Cós or Ortiga. You’ll find a genuine medieval setting in the town of Óbidos, and in Ourém learn about the legend of the Moorish princess who fell in love with a Christian knight and changed her name from Fátima to Oureana.

Between the sea and the Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park sense the power of the **“4 Elements”**, the name of the third itinerary. The elements of Water, Air, Fire and Earth have engendered fascinating landscapes that include footprints of the planet’s oldest inhabitants - the dinosaurs.

“The Grail Quest” will fire your imagination, inspired by the search for the sacred chalice by the Knights of the Round Table. We suggest this epic quest be projected into the heart of Portugal, transforming Tomar into the meeting point of these intrepid heroes, their castle into the New Jerusalem and the "Charola" (Round church) into Solomon’s Temple. Follow our suggestions at your own pace - but surrender to the thrill of discovery.

TREASURE OF THE TEMPLARS



Spend two days searching for the “Treasure of the Templars”, hidden in the heart of Portugal.

Dedicate the first day to Tomar. Begin your journey in the Church of Santa Maria do Olival, one of Portugal’s earliest Gothic churches, commissioned in the 12th century by the Grand Master of the Knights Templar, D. Gualdim Pais, as the pantheon for the Order. In the Church of São João Baptista you can see symbols that recount the legend of foundation of the city. Nearby, visit the immaculately-conserved 15th century synagogue. The Chapel of São Gregório embodies the perfect form of the Host, in glorification of the Eucharist. Before ascending to the castle, relax in Mouchão Park divided by the river Nabão. The park has a waterwheel that once served as an essential device for the local economy and is now one of the most frequently photographed sights.

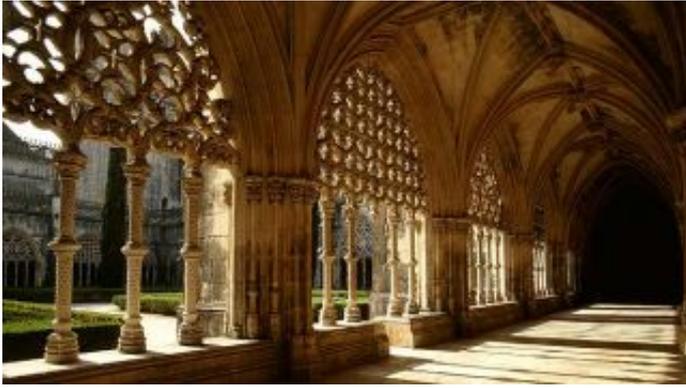
The castle - founded in 1160 by the Knights Templar - was the most modern and advanced military fortress in the kingdom, inspired by fortifications built during the Crusades in the Holy Land. Within the Convent of Christ, admire the “Charola”, a round church of the Templars - the largest and best-preserved of its kind in Europe, perhaps inspired by the image of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the mythic memory of Jerusalem’s Temple, the order’s mythic founding site. After being extinguished in 1312 by Pope Clement V, the Templars were succeeded in Portugal by the Order of Christ - that continued the crusading spirit during the epic era of the discoveries. The exotic sights visited by the caravels provided the inspiration for many of the Manueline decorative motifs, whose apogee is the Convent’s richly ornamented window. Walking through the Convent - that combines Romanic, Gothic and Mannerist styles - is like flicking through an art history book.

On the way down from the Convent, visit the simple Renaissance chapel of Nossa Senhora da Conceição. In the Wood of Sete Montes look for the “Charolinha” - a miniature round church hidden within the leafy vegetation. Further ahead, observe the spectacular, 7 km long Aqueduct of Pegões, an important 17th-century public work. You’re bound to be tired but you’ll also dream about the fantastic locations that you’ve visited.

On the second day you’ll need a car. Follow the road to the dam in Castelo de Bode and if there’s time, take a cruise along the reservoir to appreciate the landscape. In Atalaia, visit the exquisite Renaissance parish church. Continue to Vila Nova da Barquinha, where you can take a short boat ride to the Castle of Almourol, that seems to rise up miraculously from the middle of the River Tagus. This unreal setting conjures up legends of giants and mythic tales. Continue to Golegã - a land of horses and horsemen that contains the Quinta da Cardiga estate, which once pertained to the Knights Templar, but is now privately owned. Further north in Ferreira do Zêzere, you can see the ruins of the Tower of D. Gaião in Pereiro and visit the town of Areias, in the old Templar lands.

Conclude the route with another precious element of this “Treasure” - the Tower of Dornes. A rare example of military architecture, built by the Knights Templar in order to defend the zone, it blends harmoniously with the pretty village overlooking the banks of the reservoir in Castelo de Bode. Another breathtaking image you can take home with you.

PATHS OF THE FAITH



Spend three days sharing faith and beliefs, journeying along paths that will guide you to signs of divine manifestation.

Begin your itinerary in the fishing town of Peniche, to visit the Church of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios, whose fame for working miracles attracts major pilgrimages. In the town of Atouguia da Baleia, that was offered by the first king of Portugal to the Crusaders who helped conquer Lisbon, discover the Church of São Leonardo - built in homage to one of the knights' favourite Saints. Continue to Óbidos, whose walls enclose narrow, mediaeval streets. Stroll between the white houses, visit the castle and enter the churches in order to discover the wonderful relics contained therein. You're bound to want to stay in this beautiful town, so why not spend the night in the Pousada luxury inn or a manor house in order to round off the day in great style?

On the second day, travel to Caldas da Rainha, where Queen D. Leonor commissioned the world's first thermal hospital in the 15th century. Continue to Nazaré and Sítio, perched on top of a high rocky outcrop, where you can see the hoofmark of the horse of D. Fuas Roupinho. According to legend, when the knight was hunting a deer, he was saved from a potentially fatal fall by invoking aid from Our Lady. Visit the Ermida da Memória and the 12th-century church, and then descend to the beach in one of Portugal's oldest funiculars, offering a different perspective of this promontory jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Continue to the Monastery of Alcobaça that D. Afonso Henriques promised to build if he succeeded in conquering Santarém. Built by the Order of Cistercians in 1178 this served as the spiritual centre of these lands consecrated to the Virgin Mary. Enter the church and sense the mystical atmosphere created via its scale and sober architecture. In the transept, admire the exquisite tombs of D. Pedro I and D. Inês, facing one another, as they await reunion on Judgement Day. Then continue to Cós, that contains another Cistercian monastery, where the simple austere exterior hides a rich interior. In the environs, the Chapel of Senhora da Luz in Póvoa de Cós and the Chapel of Senhora das Areias in Aljubarrota pay tribute to the Virgin Mary's intervention in the recovery of the lost keys. Continue to the Monastery of Batalha dedicated to Santa Maria, from whom D. João I requested assistance in order to defeat the Castilians in Aljubarrota. Marvel at the intricate stonework of this Gothic masterpiece that acquires sublime beauty in the late afternoon sunlight.

On the third day travel to the sanctuary of Fátima - the Altar of the World. Sense the unique spiritual atmosphere in Cova da Iria that is visited by millions of pilgrims. The huge site is located between the impressive Basilica of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and the Church of the Santíssima Trindade, but it is the "Little Chapel of Apparitions" that attracts the majority of devout followers. Built in accordance with the instructions transmitted by the Virgin Mary, it is located next to the olive tree where the majority of apparitions took place. Visit the Houses of the three shepherd children in the small village of Aljustrel and discover other locations of the apparitions such as Loca do Cabeço or Valinhos.

Continue to Ourém. The city's name is linked to the tragic romance of Fátima, a Moorish princess who through her love for a Christian knight converted to Christianity and changed her name to Oureana. Visit the castle, one of the most innovative works of fifteenth century military architecture, that today plays host to medieval banquets. Make a reservation and complete your itinerary with a journey back in time, to dine in the company of knights and damsels!

THE 4 ELEMENTS



Sense the power of Nature's four elements in a 3-day itinerary across landscapes that have been preserved for many millennia. Water of the open sea and rivers, Air of startling purity, Fire whose power was manifested when the planet was first formed and Earth - a mixture of fertile ground and hard stone, that provides nourishment to mankind.

Our starting point is the peninsula of Peniche - once an island, that over time was joined to the mainland. Nearby, the picturesque village of Baleal, perched on a rocky outcrop, becomes an island at high tide when the sea submerges the sand banks - the only land connection to the village. Visit Cape Carvoeiro and appreciate the strength of the sea in the form of the rocks sculpted by erosion. In the distance, you can glimpse the Berlengas islands. Add a day to your itinerary and book a boat trip to the small archipelago - a nature reserve, where you'll discover a unique eco system. Walk along the trails that will lead you to grottoes, or beaches with crystalline waters and spectacular views.

Journey inland towards the Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park and be prepared to be amazed by the salt pans in the middle of the peaks, supplied by rock salt mines located in the mountain depths. The Salt Pans of Fonte da Bica, only 3 kms from Rio Maior, cover the ground with a white blanket of geometric shapes. Near to Alcanede, visit the Grotto of Algar do Pena, the largest subterranean chamber ever discovered in Portugal, and spend some time in the Interpretation Centre in order to discover how the water has moulded the complex formations of stalactites and stalagmites.

On the next day, travel to Alcobertas and see a dolmen that has been transformed into a chapel, one of the most important megalithic monuments of its kind in Europe. Continue to Vestiaria and appreciate the notable Manueline doorway of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda. In Valado dos Frades, discover the Roman villa of Parreitas whose foundation dates back to the Iron Age. Far older is the Jurassic belvedere in Alqueidão da Serra - an excellent spot to observe the entire region, including the silhouettes of the castle of Porto de Mós and the monastery of Batalha!

Mira de Aire, Santo António and Alvados are names of grottoes that may be visited in the Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park. If you have time visit them all, or choose one - but don't miss this opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the interior of the Earth, in this huge chalk massif. Above ground, another surprise awaits you. Near to Fátima, in the Galinha quarry, discover the footprints of dinosaurs who lived here around 175 million years ago. This is the longest sauropod trail ever discovered in the world.

For the third day we suggest some lush green landscapes. In the Paul do Boquilobo Nature Reserve, between lagoons, brooks and streams, follow the nature trails and observe the largest colony of white herons in the Iberian peninsula, amongst a total of around 200 different bird species to be found here. Continue to the Castelo de Bode Dam, one of the largest artificial lakes in Europe. Take a cruise and prepare to be amazed by the beauty of the many hidden recesses of this reservoir, as you fill your lungs with fresh air from the pine groves. Or if you prefer an adrenalin rush, practise some water sports and complete this itinerary with renewed spirits - as a result of this privileged contact with nature.

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.