

Discover Portugal and the Azores

Lagoa do Fogo on São Miguel Island, Azores islands.



From castles to volcanoes, the scenery is awe-inspiring

By Wendy and Rob Lindsay

Panoramic view of Lisbon.





Monument to the Discoveries.

On the banks of the mighty Tagus River, along the waterfront in Lisbon, Portugal, stands a massive white statue, dazzling in the sunshine. Named “Monument to the Discoveries,” it’s shaped like a colossal ship in full sail, with Henry the Navigator at the prow and 32 other famous explorers, writers, rulers, and heroes crowding the gunwales. The monument is a celebration of Portugal’s 15th- and 16th-century Age of Discovery.

The Portuguese were matchless navigators and dauntless explorers. It was they who discovered the sea route to India, as well as much of the New World, including Brazil. The small vessel Prince Henry holds in his hand is a caravel, the small, agile sailing ship invented by the Portuguese that was key

to their intrepid exploits. It must have been a magnificent sight on July 25, 1415, when Henry, his two brothers, and their father, King John, set sail from a spot near the statue in Lisbon with a fleet of more than 200 caravels.

Lisbon to Porto

One has to be intrepid and a little fearless oneself to drive in Portugal, where the side roads are narrow, often winding, and the traffic, speedy. It would be downright foolhardy, however, to try driving through downtown Lisbon to the Monument to the Discoveries while jet-lagged—that’s why there are taxis. In fact, we highly recommend not picking up your rental car until you are heading out of Lisbon—which is where our journey begins. It’s a journey of discovery along the western side of Portugal, from Lisbon north to Porto on roads less travelled. The journey continues with a few days of island-hopping through the Azores.

Following winding coast road N247 through Cascais, head north towards Sintra, once a favoured summer mountain retreat for European royalty. However, before you get to Sintra, turn west and explore the road towards the coast and Cabo da Roca. Here the land ends in a 459-foot sheer cliff with the Atlantic Ocean pounding on the rocks below. This is the most westerly point of Continental Europe. On this windswept point are a lighthouse, a museum, and a place to purchase a hand-lettered certificate to prove you were really there.

Be prepared for the crowds in the small town of Sintra. It always seems

full of tourists and tour buses, traffic jams and slowdowns. But it’s worth it.

Make your way along the mountain road to Pena National Palace, which is perched on one of the highest peaks of the Serra de Sintra range. Chances are you’ve never seen anything like it. Built in the middle of the 19th century by King Consort Dom Ferdinand II, the UNESCO World Heritage Site is a fanciful combination of Moorish, Gothic, Manueline (Portuguese late Gothic), and Renaissance styles. Unfortunately, photos of the fantastic interior are not allowed, but we can attest that each room has a different theme, each more elaborate, extravagant, and opulent than the last. Apparently it’s just as the royals left it.

The lovely Pena Park is a forested area that surrounds the palace and includes trees from foreign lands including China, Japan, and North America.

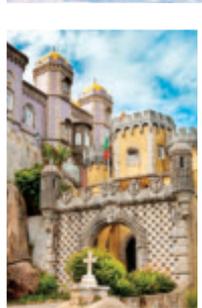
After touring the palace, visit a sidewalk café and try Sintra’s signature small sweet pastries known as “*queijadas*”—essentially single-serving cheesecake tarts. We also recommend a refreshing bottle of Brisa, a carbonated passion-fruit juice sold throughout Portugal.

Along the twisting route heading north towards Óbidos, you may spot a few windmills and perhaps an occasional donkey cart loaded with vegetables. When you reach the walled town, you’ll have to leave your car in a parking lot on the outskirts and explore on foot.

Óbidos is a picturesque place, with white houses, narrow winding streets, and numerous shops and cafés. For hundreds of years, the town was tradi-



Aerial view of Pena National Palace, Sintra.



Cabo da Roca.



University of Coimbra.



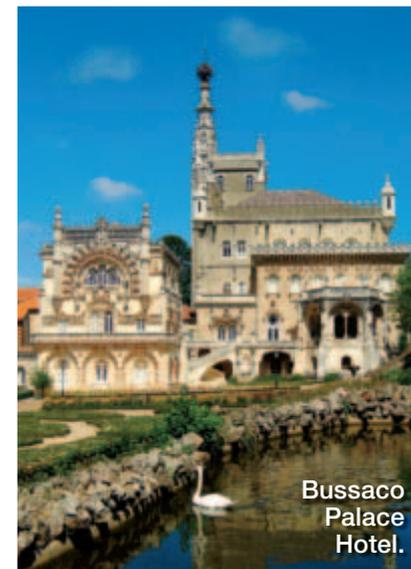
screens and columns. A *pousada* is located here, too—Pousada do Mestre Afonso Domingues—in a former monastery.

We recommend a stop in the charming town of Coimbra, Portugal’s first capital, to tour one of the oldest universities in the world. Founded in 1290, the University of Coimbra features a library filled from floor to ceiling with priceless volumes—such an awe-inspiring place that there’s no need for a librarian to make you speak in hushed tones. Coimbra is a lovely town to stroll through, with many fine houses and lovely gardens. In the shops, you’ll find one of the town’s famous T-shirts featuring the phrase *CLASS OF 1290*.

Next, it’s off on twisting mountain roads to the five-star Bussaco Palace Hotel, hidden away on a mountaintop amid a one-square-kilometre (250-acre) centuries-old forest planted by Carmelite monks.



Óbidos.



Bussaco Palace Hotel.



Batalha Monastery.

tionally a gift the ruling king gave to his queen, so of course there had to be a castle. Óbidos Castle is today a *pousada*—a government-owned but privately run inn located in a historic building.

Next stop is Batalha (Portuguese for “battle”), where the massive Monastery of Saint Mary of the Victory dominates. A magnificent mass of gables, pinnacles, buttresses, turrets, columns, and arcades, the monastery is a masterpiece of Portuguese Gothic art. Built in thanksgiving for the Portuguese victory in the 1385 Battle of Aljubarrota, it took more than a century to complete. Allow a few hours to tour this beautiful structure and don’t miss the Royal Cloister, where light and shadow play on the intricately carved

Photos: Fotolia/Iryna Volina (map) and Taiga (Sintra); Dreamstime/Karol Kozłowski (monument) and Taiga (detail of Pena).

Photos: Turismo de Portugal/Fui Moraes de Sousa (Cabo da Roca), Jose Manuel (Óbidos), and Nuno Calvet (Coimbra); Courtesy of the Bussaco Palace Hotel (hotel); Lindsey Editorial (Batalha and donkey).