

Your Trip to Portugal: The Complete Guide...

BY MARLA CIMINI

A top destination in Europe, Portugal is a beautiful country that offers something for everyone, with bustling cities, charming medieval towns and pristine coastal areas.

Home to a vibrant food and wine scene for avid gastronomes, there's also plenty of noteworthy ancient sites and world-class museums for history buffs. Beach lovers adore the dramatic coastline with its magnificent beaches—a popular area with a number of shore breaks that are considered top surfing destinations as well.

Planning Your Trip

Best Time to Visit: Portugal is a welcoming destination that offers the best of both worlds, so if you want to experience a peaceful and pristine trip, you can head to a less populated rural or coastal area. However, if you desire a much more spirited vacation, try to visit the country when there's an annual festival happening. Visit Lisbon in early June for the Feast of Saint Anthony, and Porto around June 24 for the Feast of Saint John the Baptist. For both events, the cities are in full-on celebration mode, with businesses closed, traditional food available everywhere, and outdoor parties throughout the neighborhoods—often with live, loud music that goes well into the early hours of the morning.

Everyone is welcome, and you just can't help but join in the festivities!

If you are seeking a less touristy time to visit, choose the fall or winter, as the climate is relatively mild enough to visit year-round. Keep in mind that some of the interior regions, such as the Duoro Valley tend heat up drastically in the summer.

Language: Obviously, Portuguese is the language spoken here, but all children learn English from an early age in school, so most people you speak with will have some knowledge of English. A few residents know a bit of Spanish, but not as many as you might assume!

Getting Around: Transportation in Portugal is usually solid, but it really depends on where you want to go. In the cities or large metropolitan areas, public transport is optimal—and most places have buses, taxis and ride-sharing services such as Uber. And while in Lisbon, you'll want to experience their famous tram cars for moving around the city. Outside of the cities, it's smooth sailing if you're [renting a car](#), as the roads are paved, clearly marked and traffic is minimal. However, taking a train longer distance can be tricky, as the connections aren't always as expected, so be sure to plan in advance. And keep in mind if you're heading to a rural area, via train, you may need to rent a car when you arrive.

Travel Tip: Portugal is home to miles of scenic coastline along the Atlantic Ocean, and there's always [a beach](#) nearby! Every beach town has its personality, amenities, and offerings, so be sure to do a bit of research and choose the beach that's best for you. If you're into surfing, there are plenty of great surf camps (and places to rent boards) in Portugal, or if you're visiting in the colder months, head to the famous port town of Nazare to check out the massive winter swell, with aggressive waves that can reach over 90 feet high and usually attract world-class big wave surfers each year.

Things to Do

Portugal offers an abundance of exceptional activities and tourist attractions, so you are guaranteed to find many great experiences throughout this rather compact country.

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Noteworthy Sights: Portugal offers countless remarkable destinations in each region—and you'll quickly discover that every city and town offers something memorable, fun, and intriguing. One of the country's top sites includes a pilgrimage to the famous town of Fatima to visit the basilica, the location of where the blessed mother allegedly appeared to young children in the early 1800s. In Porto, you can't miss the opportunity to taste the wine that made the city famous by visiting one or more of the Port Houses along the river.

- **Museums:** History buffs can enjoy world-class museums around the country – focusing on art, design, ancient treasures, and more. A few favorites in Lisbon are the National Azulejos Museum, featuring exquisite examples of classic Portuguese tiles and the expansive Calouste Gulbenkian art museum that showcases thousands of paintings, sculptures, and artifacts. In Cascais, you can explore the Museum Quarter at the Castro Guimaraes art museum, which is located on a sprawling estate adorned with fountains and colorful gardens. Touring the largest University in the country, in the city of Coimbra, is also a fascinating and educational experience.
- **Beaches:** In the summer, plan a beach day (or week)! With over a thousand miles of coastline, Portugal is a beach-lover's paradise. Best of all, every beach town has its own vibe and offerings. So, no matter where you are, you're always relatively close to the coast. Near Lisbon, there are several popular resort towns, such as Sesimbra and Cascais, that are family-friendly, have pedestrian walkways, and feature several fun, protected beaches with plenty of casual dining options by the ocean. A bit further away is the Algarve, Portugal's southern region. It's home to a pristine shoreline, luxury resorts, and a relaxing ambiance.

What to Eat and Drink

The [food in Portugal](#) is genuinely delectable and ranges from traditional seafood stews to contemporary cuisine. If you're into classic Portuguese dishes, there are many options throughout the country, as most restaurants are owned and operated by families who have been creating their own recipes for many years and share a "farm to table" sensibility. Not surprisingly, the restaurants are loyal to their locale, so in the coastal

regions, you will find an abundance of seafood dishes, but you'll find more pork specialties in the mountainous interior areas. In Lisbon, a few top favorites that offer daily local specialties are Varina da Madragoa, Cantinho Lusitano, and the tiny Das Flores. Don't be surprised if there are lines during lunch and dinner hours.

Avid food lovers will certainly want to make a point of dining at one or more of chef Jose Avillez's diverse and hip restaurants, including the Michelin-starred Belcanto. Known throughout the culinary world as Portugal's most famous chef, this award-winning chef owns other restaurants, such as Mini Bar and Café Lisboa. (He also has opened one restaurant in Porto, Cantinho do Avillez). Each one of his restaurants showcases a unique menu, fascinating design, and unexpected culinary concepts that blend the traditional and the modern.

And no worries if you're just up for a snack...you can also find pizza, sandwiches, vegetarian dishes (and plenty of coffee shops) just about everywhere, especially if you are wandering around touristy areas.

Wine lovers should make it a point to enjoy local vintages, such as the "green wine," called Vinho Verde, which is a light, white option that's perfectly refreshing on hot summer days, or the famous Port wine that's made in and around the Duoro Valley and the city of Port, where it got its name. Other exceptional wine regions of the country are also worth visiting, such as the Alentejo, Centro, Algarve, and Beira regions. Many Portuguese wines are not exported, so be sure to taste as many varietals as you can—it's all part of exploring the country.

For dessert or a snack anytime, don't miss the local bakeries, as they serve plenty of unique traditional pastries that you won't find anywhere else, such as the famous, mouth-watering custard tarts, called "Pastéis de Nata." These flavorful, individual-sized treats are sold in just about every bakery in the country, and each place's recipe is a bit different, too. It's not the time to diet...these innocent-looking pastries go down easy, so it's not unusually to devour several in one sitting.

Where to Stay

Portugal has a wide array of modern and traditional lodging options—from budget-friendly to extreme luxury. For an extraordinary experience, check out the selection of over 30 "[pousadas](#)" scattered around the cities and throughout the country. Pousadas are historically significant structures, such as former monasteries or convents that have been transformed into stunning and unique hotels. Each one is distinct, with different types of rooms, but each is sure to offer an incredible experience. While formerly run by the Portuguese government, they are now part of the Pastana Hotel Group. Not surprisingly, the Pousadas have become popular over the years, so it's best to book a room in advance.

Getting There

Both Lisbon and Porto have major airports with many flights each day (and plans are in the works for a new international airport in Lisbon soon, too). Although the airports are a quick taxi ride from the cities, it takes more time than you might think to get through the Lisbon airport security and customs/immigration checkpoints, so be sure to leave yourself extra time. There's also a lot of shopping opportunities at the airport, so it's a great place to pick up those extra souvenirs.

Culture & Customs

Fado Music: Portugal is known for its romantic and melancholy Fado music, which can be heard in many restaurants, cafes, and bars around the country. (In fact, you may get the chance to listen to it while roaming around the touristy neighborhoods, too). Recently, this style of music has experienced a revitalization, and now there are over 40 venues that offer Fado music in Lisbon alone, so it's certainly an activity that you won't want to miss.

Summer Hours: Like most Europeans, the Portuguese take their vacations seriously, and many escape the cities on summer weekends and head to the beaches. The Algarve area gets especially crowded in July and August when many Portuguese go on vacation for a month or so. If you're hoping to spend time at the coast during your visit, plan in advance if it's summer. Some beaches are an easy journey from Porto and Lisbon, while others require a long car ride (or even a flight, if you're heading to the Algarve). Be mindful of your time and transportation options when deciding where to go. Rates will be higher during prime tourist season, but it's a great place to relax and enjoy the warm weather.