



Portugal

*"If there is one portion of Europe which
was made by the sea more than another,
Portugal is that slice, that portion.*

Portugal was made by the Atlantic."

~ Hilaire Belloc

To understand Portugal, one must travel there. Listen to the nation's plaintive fado music, gorge on grilled sardines, and sip the young wine, vinho verde. Wander over rocky cliffs, along golden sand beaches, through history-rich museums, on winding cobblestoned alleys, and in churches glittering with colonial-era gold. Go . . . and be amazed.

History, Very Brief Version

Portugal's recorded history reaches back to 1000 BC to the Phoenicians, the seafaring people who settled in the southern coast. In fact, human habitation dates back much farther. Megalithic ruins of stone circles have been dated to 4000-2000 BC and cave paintings to 18,000-13,000 BC. Through the years, Portugal has been colonized by Celtic tribes, Romans, Vandals, Visigoths, and Arabs (Moors). The Moors dominated Christian Portugal from 711 until finally forced out in the 12th and 13th centuries.

In the 15th century, Portugal led the world in ocean exploration primarily to find a sea route to India, which held a monopoly in the lucrative spice trade. Under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portuguese ships rounded Africa for the first time in European history and sailed into the Indian Ocean and on to India. Portugal went on to establish many colonies and create its own monopolies. Brazil was discovered in 1500 and became Portugal's richest colony. Prince Henry never left dry land but it is thought he created a School of Navigation in Sagres in the Algarve.

The once poor kingdom of Portugal became rich from its colonies and a mercantile superpower. It didn't last. In 1580 King Henrique died without an heir. Felipe II of Spain claimed the throne through his mother, a daughter of a previous king of Portugal, Manuel I. Spain's draining of Portugal's treasury as well as inept foreign policies led to a loss of Portuguese and Spanish colonies to the Dutch. The Portuguese throne was reclaimed by the illegitimate side of the royal family in 1640 after a revolt against Spanish rule. The ensuing years brought royal treasury excesses, madness, and other follies common to monarchies. The rococo Queluz Palace and eclectic Pena Palace, both near Lisbon, are fine examples of royal indulgences.

November 1, 1755, All Saints' Day, 9:30 in the morning when most of Lisbon was at Mass, three powerful seismic waves rolled through Lisbon, reducing over half the city to ruins within an hour. Fires broke out after the third shock and raged for a week. As people ran for the harbor to escape collapsing walls and fire, huge tsunamis came rolling into the Tejo River estuary inundating the lower part of the city and sweeping ships and thousands of people out to sea. After many years, the city center was rebuilt on a grid pattern planned by the Marques de Pombal. Today, Lisbon's Baixa and Chiado districts are easy to explore due to the grid.

After a 1910 revolt, Portugal became a republic. King Manuel II fled into exile. Portugal entered WWI on the side of Britain and France. In WWII, Portugal was theoretically neutral but was forced to sell minerals to Germany who threatened Portuguese shipping. Lisbon became a hotbed of WWII spies and a gateway for political refugees escaping the horrors of the Nazis. From 1928 to 1974, Portugal was run by oppressive prime ministers. The country suffered poverty and unemployment under severe austerity measures. The Carnation Revolution of 1974 ended the dictatorship government of António Salazar. Portugal joined the European Union in January 1986.

What's Up Today in Portugal

There's a general feeling of optimism. Lisbon's sidewalks are crowded in the evenings and young Portuguese are much better tuned in to Europe than their parents were. The younger generation is as well versed in the electronic music coming out of London and Los Angeles as in fado repertoires, and more taken with French and Spanish films than with Portuguese lyric poetry. Portugal looks toward Europe, but retains close economic, political, cultural, and personal ties with its former colonies. Brazilians make up the biggest immigrant community and Angola is a major trade partner. Still, as Portugal advances with determination deeper into the 21st century, its people retain pride in their historic culture. The country is now firmly established as a European democracy unrecognizable from the poor, backward dictatorship of the early 1970's. Back then, under four decades of authoritarian rule instituted by the dictator António Salazar, Portuguese women were forbidden to travel without permission of husbands or fathers. Today, women make up 35% of lawmakers (compared to 20% in the United States).

Seafood Cuisine, Of Course

With a coastline of 586 miles, it's not surprising that seafood is front and center of Portuguese cuisine. It's said that there is a cod dish, fried and fresh, for each day of the year. Regional specialties abound. Lisbon offers a range of cosmopolitan restaurants, but you may wish to try the traditional dishes like Frango Piri-Piri (chicken with chili). Be sure to indulge in a local pastry, Pastéis de Nata, delicious custard-cream tarts. In the north, Feijoada, a stew of beans and cured meats is popular as well as Pojoes, a spiced pork stew in wine and garlic. In the Algarve, Cataplana, a fish and shellfish dish named for the cookware used, is a treat.

Portuguese Wine, More Than Port

Portugal is home to the first demarcated (distinguished) wine region in the world: the upper Douro Valley where Port wine grapes are grown along the Douro river in terraces cascading down steep slopes. Port is Portugal's most famous wine. It originated in the 17th century when British merchants added brandy to wine to prevent it from souring in transit. Today it is appreciated world-wide. Port grapes are harvested and transported to Vila Nova de Gaia, across the Douro river from Porto. Here they are aged and bottled. Many of the Port Wine Houses are open for tours and tastings. Portuguese wine is much more than its famous Port. Grapes of many varieties are grown throughout Portugal. The wines from the Dao region are among the finest reds. The white wines of the region north of Porto feature the delightful Vinho Verde – light, refreshing, and slightly effervescent. Wine connoisseurs consider Portugal's wines to be under appreciated and some of the best in the world.

