

# Portugal

Despite its small size, Portugal has played an influential role in determining the course of world history and it is one of Europe's oldest nations. The country's geographical location along the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula has fostered a passion among its people for seafaring, resulting in the Portuguese discovery of ocean routes to India, Brazil, China and Japan in the 15th century, as well as settlements in the east and west coasts of Africa.

Situated on the northern coast of Portugal, the city of Porto provides a base for visitors to experience some of the traditions and charms of the oldest region of the country. Originally called Portucale, the city provided the origin for Portugal's name, and its position at the mouth of the River Douro and on the Atlantic Ocean meant that it was originally an important trading town. One of the most well known

Further down the coast is the capital city of Lisbon, where numerous historic buildings depict Portugal's rich heritage. The city centre retains evidence of its medieval and Muslim roots and the area is characterised by narrow streets, tiled facades and wrought iron balconies. Overlooking the city in the Barrio Alto is the Castelo de São Jorge, which was constructed over Roman ruins in 1147, and was the home of the Portuguese royal family from the 14th to the 16th centuries. Here, in the old part of the city it is possible to listen to traditional *fado* music in the many cafés and bars that come alive at night. *Fado* – which comes from the Latin word for 'fate' or 'destiny' – is popular throughout Portugal and is a style of music which originated from the nostalgic songs favoured by sailors in the 18th century.

As the birthplace of Saint Anthony, the whole of Lisbon comes together in June to celebrate the feast day of its saint. During this time, street entertainers throng the city streets performing theatre, jazz music, circus acts and traditional games, and there are fireworks above the River Tagus. Locals and visitors can sample traditional Portuguese food such as *sardinha assada* (grilled sardines), which are served at most summer festivals throughout Portugal, and *caldeiradas* (stews made from a variety of different fish).

Predominantly a Catholic country, Portugal is home to a number of areas which have a profound religious significance. Fátima, just north of Lisbon, is one of the world's largest centres of pilgrimage for worshippers of the Virgin Mary since she appeared in a vision to three local children in 1917. Each year in May, Catholics worldwide gather in Fátima to celebrate the anniversary of the first vision with a candlelight procession.

Portugal's many beaches are also popular with visitors wanting to make the most of the country's warm climate. While there are many unspoilt beaches to choose from along Portugal's 1,793 kilometres of coastline, the Algarve in the south attracts the most tourists in the summer months. The area is famous for its beautiful sandy beaches and unusual rock formations which have been created through erosion of the sandstone cliffs. Large tourist centres at Carvoeiro, Albufeira and Vilamoura boast an exciting nightlife, while unspoilt fishing villages east of Faro offer a slower pace of Portuguese daily life.

*"Heroic ages are not and never were sentimental, and those daring conquistadores who conquered entire worlds for their Spain or Portugal received lamentably little thanks from their kings."*

Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), Austrian writer



products of the area today is its port wine which can be sampled in Porto at one of the many port-wine lodges in the Vila Nova de Gaia on the south bank of the River Douro. Forty thousand hectares of terraced vineyards line the Douro valley and its tributaries and the consistently hot summers and cold winters ensure the quality and purity of the wines.

Along the River Côa, which joins the River Douro, is the Côa Valley Archaeological Park and the National Rock Art Centre which is home to an extensive collection of rock art dating from the Neolithic and the iron age periods. The pictures, which are engraved into the sides of the rock, include horses, wild bulls, deer and warriors. They can be seen at three archaeological sites at Penascosa, Canada do Inferno and Ribeira de Piscos.