The province of Beira Litoral is dominated by the city of Coimbra, which, with Guimarães, Lisbon and Porto, forms the quartet of Portugal’s historic capitals. Situated on a steep hill above the Rio Mondego, it’s a wonderfully moody place of ancient alleys and lanes, twisting and climbing around the country’s oldest university. As a base for exploring the region, the city can’t be beaten, with Portugal’s most extensive Roman site, [Conímbriga](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/conimbriga/), 16km to the southwest, the castle at Montemor-o-Velho, 32km west, and the delightful spa town of Luso and ancient forest of Buçaco under an hour’s journey to the north.

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Beira’s coastline, from [Figueira da Foz](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/figueira-da-foz/) north as far as Porto, remains one of the least spoiled in Portugal, backed by rolling dunes and pine forests. There’s some development around the pretty lagoon town of Praia de Mira, but the only major resort is [Figueira da Foz](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/figueira-da-foz/) and even this remains mostly local in character. To the north of the region, [Aveiro](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/aveiro-around/) is one of Portugal’s most attractive provincial towns and sits on an elaborate network of canals.

Following the delightful Rio Mondego upstream from Coimbra, you’ll come to see why it has been celebrated so often in Portuguese poetry as the “Rio das Musas” – River of the Muses. A tributary of the Mondego, the Dão, is the source of some of the country’s finest wines, while there’s an equally beautiful route along the Rio Vouga up to the pretty little town of Vouzela. To the north is the impressive convent at [Arouca](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/arouca-serra-da-freita/), and the serras of Freita and Arada, both peppered with remote hamlets and offering more scenic routes for drivers. To the south lies the Serra do Caramulo, where the village of Caramulo makes a good base for mountain pursuits. East of Coimbra, as the land slowly rises towards the mountainous Beiras region and the Serra da Estrela, the first foothills are encountered in the Serra da Lousã and the Serra do Açor, rustic regions containing a range of pretty settlements such as riverside Góis and the incredibly sited, schist village of Píodão.

**Forest fires and the Bombeiros Voluntários**

Portugal’s famed green countryside is ravaged each year by forest fires, and the problem has worsened markedly in the last decade – it’s estimated that ninety percent are caused by some sort of human activity, whether that be arson or carelessness with cigarettes, bonfires and barbecues. Matters aren’t helped by the country’s timber industry, which has replaced native tree species with the highly lucrative and highly flammable eucalyptus and pine. Peak fire season is midsummer, but in drought years forest fires break out as early as January and as late as November. You don’t need to drive through central and northern Portugal for long before seeing the evidence of past fires – hillsides burned black and torched trees – or the telltale plumes of thick smoke from the latest conflagration. On the worst days, ash falls to the streets in distant towns and cities, and major train lines and motorways are closed.

Extraordinarily, the firefighting service that has the unenviable task of dealing with the problem is almost entirely voluntary. The country’s twenty thousand or so Bombeiros Voluntários make up over ninety percent of Portugal’s firefighting forces, with the few (and far better equipped) professional corps (Bombeiros Sapadores) based in the cities or working privately for the country’s timber and paper-pulp concerns. You’ll see Bombeiros Voluntários vehicles in every region – helping out with ambulance duties too as part of their remit – and the volunteers are usually the first and only firefighters on the scene when a blaze breaks out. Equipment and vehicles are old and often wholly inadequate; in the past, urgent appeals to the EU have led to specialist aircraft and foreign crews arriving to help.

It is, of course, horribly dangerous work and firefighters lose their lives every year. For this reason – and for their astonishing success rate in saving local homes and properties – the Bombeiros Voluntários have an almost heroic status in Portugal. Rare is the town without a street or avenue named after them, while proud municipal statues and memorials to their deeds proliferate.

**Coimbra**

Hugging the banks of a broad stretch of the sluggish Rio Mondego, handsome COIMBRA (pronounced "queem-bra") is famed for its historic hilltop university, dating from 1290, with its awe-inspiring Baroque library. Coimbra was capital of a fledgling Portugal from 1143 to 1255 and, for a relatively small town, retains an impressive number of historical monuments, including ancient convents and two cathedrals. Its old town, curving round the hilltop where the university is located, oozes both history and a vibrancy resulting from the presence of around twenty thousand students who ensure the city is well-stocked with good-value cafés, bars and restaurants, some playing Coimbra’s jaunty version of fado. It’s a worthwhile destination at any time of the year (the depths of winter perhaps excepted), though the best time to visit is May, when students celebrate the end of their studies with a series of festivities – come in August when the students have gone and locals are on holiday, and you’ll find the town strangely quiet.

**Brief history**

There was a settlement here in Roman times and the remains of the Roman Cryptoporticus are on display in the town’s excellent Museu Machado de Castro. The Moors occupied the city from 711, using it as a trading centre for almost three hundred years – today’s Arco de Almedina gateway marks the entrance to a former Moorish medina. In 1143, shortly after the Christian Reconquista of 1064, Coimbra became the country’s capital thanks to its position between the Christian north and Moorish south. During this time, the Sé Velha was built, along with the Convento de Santa Cruz. With Portugal expanding south, Lisbon became the capital in 1255, though Coimbra took on the role of cultural capital with the founding of its university in 1290, one of the world’s first. For a time the university, too, moved to Lisbon before returning to be permanently housed in Coimbra’s former royal palace in 1537. The Biblioteca Joanina was added in the eighteenth century and the university was further expanded by the New State in the mid-twentieth century. During term time its students now make up around a sixth of the population.

**Velha Universidade**

The imposing modern structures that make up the main university – mostly built in the 1940s and 50s – give little hint of the riches hidden away behind the white facades of the broad Paço das Escolas square. Accessed via the seventeenth-century Porta Férrea (the “iron gate” that once stood here), the Velha Universidade is housed in the former royal palaces. You’ll need to buy a ticket to look round it, though you’re free to enjoy the city views from the terrace to one side of the square.

**Biblioteca Joanina and the Academic Prison**

Highlight of the Velha Universidade – and indeed all Coimbra – is the Biblioteca Joanina, a Baroque confection of cleverly-marbled wood, gold leaf, imposing frescoed ceilings and elaborate trompe-l’oeil decorations. The ancient library was installed in 1717 by Dom João V, whose portrait surveys his legacy from the library walls, which are lined with some 250,000 books dating back to the twelfth century – though these do fade into the background a bit against the backdrop of all the Baroque elaboration. The library only opens every twenty minutes – your time will be written on your ticket. With luck you won’t be hemmed in by a big group, but at busy periods, you’ll be ushered on from the library after a few minutes to the so-called Academic Prison in the basement below. This proved that studying was once no laughing matter: until 1832, the windowless cells were used to punish students found guilty of the heinous crimes of disrespect, book damage and contestation (arguing with teachers). The prison’s upper levels were used as a book store.

**Capela de São Miguel and Sala dos Capelos**

After leaving the library, glance into the adjacent Capela de São Miguel (knock for entry), a sixteenth-century chapel with a splendid eighteenth-century trumpet-adorned Baroque organ clamped to the wall and floor-to-ceiling azulejos. Leave the chapel and from the square outside head up the grand double stairway to the Sala dos Capelos. This grand hall was once part of the royal palace and then became an ornate venue for students to sit their exams, beneath the portraits of former monarchs and university rectors and an impressive ceiling of over a hundred wooden panels. The rooms are still used to award degree certificates and for students to defend their PhD theses. Previous graduates include epic poet Luís de Camões, writer Eça de Queiros and twentieth-century dictator Salazar. Don’t miss the narrow, vertigo-inducing balcony outside that affords breezy city views.

**The clock tower**

Those with a head for heights can climb the somewhat claustrophobic 184 steps that spiral to the top of the eighteenth-century clock tower for spectacular views over the entire area. The tower is nicknamed cabra (the goat), an unaffectionate term lamenting its role in summoning students to lessons.

**Repúblicas**

The grid of streets that spread around the university buildings is made up of the so-called Repúblicas, co-operative buildings first set up in the fourteenth century under Dom Dinis to provide subsidized accommodation for students. Generally rambling houses with tiny rooms, they are ideal for a communal student lifestyle – though have the added bonus of coming with their own cooks – and are little changed from the 1960s and 70s, when they were breeding grounds for dissenters to the Salazar regime. You might be able to sneak in for a peek round a República – students are usually quite welcoming to foreign visitors.

**School’s out**

Coimbra’s biggest bash of the year is the Queima das Fitas in May, when the ritual academic “burning of the ribbons” is accompanied by the mother of all parties in a week-long, alcohol-fuelled series of gigs, dances and parties. The coloured ribbons worn by students represent the various faculties, and the week’s main parade sees decorated faculty floats followed by black-caped students winding down the hill from the university; every night the focus shifts to the riverside arena where big names in music rock the city until the small hours.

**Coimbra fado**

Coimbra fado is distinguished from the Lisbon variety by the fact that it uses a slightly different guitar and is sung exclusively by males, usually in the traditional dark cape of the university. Themes are often translations of famous poems, and in general it is slightly more upbeat than the Lisbon variation. It’s performed year-round in the city’s fado clubs, but you’ll find it far more atmospheric if you catch an open-air performance in the old town in summer. The student celebrations in May are a good bet for impromptu fado sessions, and this is also the best time for big-name gigs. Fado ao Centro at Rua Quebra Costas 7 is a good place to get a taster of the music.

**Serra da Lousã**

The rugged hills of the Serra da Lousã, only 25km southeast of Coimbra, make a fine day-trip from the city, though you’ll probably need to stay the night if you’re planning any serious exploration. The handsome town of Lousã is the main base (easily accessible by bus from Coimbra), providing access to a series of aldeias do xisto, or mountain schist villages, that were largely depopulated in the 1960s but are now gradually being revived and regenerated in response to the increasing interest in rural tourism.

**A hike into the Serra da Lousã**

This three-hour, 6km circular hike in the Serra da Lousã provides marvellous views and a fascinating glimpse of mountain village life.

From the Burgo restaurant near Lousã’s castle, walk up the stone steps to the end of the picnic areas, and follow the sign to Casal Novo and Talasnal. The steep rocky path climbs for 1km until it reaches a junction; follow the right-hand fork and after 700m or so you will emerge onto a wider track, which you should follow uphill until it joins a second similar track – turn left and continue the ascent. As the path comes clear of the trees your toil is rewarded by stunning views of the valley below. At the top of this path turn left and continue upwards to where you meet an unsurfaced road; Talasnal is visible to your left, or you can head right to sleepy Casal Novo, which spills down the hillside.

Retrace your steps, ignoring the track you came up, and continue in the direction of Talasnal, probably the most beautiful of the Serra da Lousã’s villages with a harmonious mix of ruined and restored cottages amid stunning mountain views. Once you’ve wound round the side of the mountain you descend to the entrance of the village, whose narrow, higgledy-piggledy passageways are worth a wander.

To exit Talasnal, follow the stream downhill, passing numerous small dwellings in various states of repair to your left and right. Continue downwards on a path mostly marked by dry-stone walls on both sides. When the trail meets a T-junction turn left downhill and cross the river via an old stone bridge. Follow the good, easily navigable path all the way back to the river pools, keeping an eye out for occasional fallen logs blocking the path and the dizzy drop to your right. A well-earned dip in the pools below the castle makes a refreshing end to the walk.

**Aldeias do xisto**

Hard lives in the mountains led to the desertion of many typical upland aldeias do xisto (schist villages), some of which are beginning to develop fledgling rural-tourism businesses. Five villages above Lousã (Casal Novo, Talasnal, Cerdeira, Chiqueiro and Candal) form part of central Portugal’s Schist Village Scheme, which promotes sustainable tourism and other projects, such as establishing waymarked walks and craft shops, and reviving village festivals and customs. The scheme's website includes details of local adventure-tour outfits as well as the limited accommodation that is available in the vilaldeias do xisto lages. You can drive up yourself – even though not all the roads are surfaced, they are usually fine for normal cars – or follow our circular walk from Lousã castle which leads to both Casal Novo and Talasnal, the latter with the bonus of the restaurant Ti’Lena in a restored schist house.

**Serra do Açor**

East of Lousã stretches the Serra do Açor, a mountain range that borders the Serra da Estrela further to the northeast. It’s a very attractive region, a mix of bucolic river valleys, pine and eucalyptus forest and the higher traditional schist villages of the mountains proper. Góis, 20km northeast of Lousã, is the gateway, prettily set in a river valley, with the small market town of Arganil another 13km to the north. Less accessible but worth the effort is the marvellous schist village of Piódão, high in the peaks.

**Góis and around**

GÓIS is beautifully set on the Rio Ceira, crossed by an arched sixteenth-century bridge which leads up to a sloping cobbled square backed by a couple of old-town streets. There’s not a lot to occupy you here, but Góis comes into its own in summer (June to early Sept) when boardwalks are erected and white sand imported to construct a fantastic river beach, with a waterside bar and kayaks to rent. Other favourite local river beaches include that at Várzea Pequena, 5km west, or you can head into the hills for walks around the Góis schist villages – brown signposts off the Lousã road (N342) lead up to the tiny village of Aigra Nova, where there’s a craft shop/café run by a local not-for-profit agency, Lousitânea, at Rua dos Bois (235 778 644) and a good circular waymarked mountain hike (10km; 4hr) through three other ancient schist villages in varying stages of restoration.

**Góis motorbike festival**

Góis is pretty quiet for most of the year, though it perks up in August, no more so than for the huge motorbike rally (Concentração de Góis) organized by the Góis Moto Clube. This attracts up to forty thousand bikers for a good-natured four-day festival of bike shows, radical sports, live bands and DJs – a tent city lines the river just outside town in the middle of the month.

**Piódão**

From Arganil, it’s around an hour’s beautiful drive via Coja to PIÓDÃO (pronounced pee-oh-dow), a traditional schist village set on a steeply terraced mountainside. Despite the slight theme-park atmosphere, its narrow streets are great to explore and the whole village affords superb valley views. There’s a small museum on Largo Cónego Manuel Fernandes Nogueira, which provides an insight into traditional village life with displays on subjects such as emigration, local industries and agriculture. You can follow a couple of short walks from Piódão into the countryside – these are well signposted from the village, or pick up walk leaflets from the information office in the museum.

**Penacova and around**

PENACOVA, 22km northeast of Coimbra, is spectacularly sited on a crag high above the Rio Mondego. There is little to the place itself – a pint-sized square overlooked by a town hall, and a modest cobbled historic quarter laid out along the ridge – but for stunning views of river and valley make a beeline for the terrace of the Café Turismo, by the side of the town hall. You can walk the 2km from the café down to a great little river beach, Reconquinho, where you can swim alongside a seasonal café. Penacova’s market is on the second Thursday of the month – look out for the highly elaborate toothpicks that are a local speciality, hand-carved from willow.

**Kayaking the Mondego**

The Mondego is one of the only rivers in Portugal in which it’s possible to kayak comfortably all year round, and the 18km, 3–4 hour kayaking trips are a real highlight of any visit to the region. Penacova-based O Pioneiro do Mondego (239 478 385) was the first company to offer kayaking tours and can arrange pick-ups or meeting points at various spots along the river between Penacova and Coimbra. Once on the river you’ll be guided downstream with a gentle current – and the odd set of gentle rapids – taking you down pine- and eucalyptus-lined valleys, where black kites fish in summer and grapes vines dangle over the river in autumn. You end up on a river beach where you can swim before being taken back to your starting point.

**The Mata Nacional do Buçaco and Luso**

Around 30km northeast of Coimbra, the Mata Nacional do Buçaco (National Forest of Buçaco) is a walled, former monastic hilltop retreat, with its own royal palace, the Palácio do Buçaco (now a five-star hotel). These days the forest – partly wild and partly landscaped – is a hugely popular outing for Portuguese day-trippers, who descend in droves at weekends for picnics, but it’s large enough to escape the crowds and makes a great day out. It’s easily accessible by car or bus, or you could walk the 2km (steeply uphill) from Luso, a little spa town famed for its mineral waters, which bubble out from the main square.

**The Dão valley wine route**

The route northeast from Coimbra along the IP3 sweeps through the valley of the Rio Dão, a name synonymous in Portugal and beyond with high quality wine. The Dão is a tributary of the Mondego and flows through the heart of the demarcated region where some of the country’s finest red wines are produced. Most of the wine estates lie either side of the river valley to the northeast of Santa Comba Dão, and you can spend a happy day pottering through the region’s small country towns, following winery signs on the Rota do Vinho do Dão to pretty villages like Santar. It’s a hilly, granite area, cold and rainy in winter, but hot and dry in the sweltering summers, when the wooded slopes are particularly susceptible to ravaging forest fires.

**Serra do Caramulo**

Beyond Santa Comba Dão, the IP3 bears away from the Dão valley and the views are soon of the Serra do Caramulo, breaking to the northwest. The eastern turn-off point for the mountains is the small, unassuming town of Tondela, 20km from Santa Comba Dão, from where the minor N230 winds through a succession of tiny villages at the heart of the mountain range, including Caramulo itself, a twisting 19km from Tondela. This is the only worthwhile overnight stop, with a fantastic museum, and makes a good hiking base; most of the other serra villages are little more than hamlets, surrounded by rhododendrons, brightly coloured azaleas and thick green shrubs growing wild on the hillside. After Caramulo, the N230 descends to Águeda, western access point to the mountains, 37km from Caramulo, which is close to the main north–south routes between Coimbra and [Aveiro](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/aveiro-around/)/Porto.

**Caramulo**

Tucked beneath the granite outcrops and wind turbines of the high Beiras serra, the straggling village of CARAMULO glories in some staggering views. It’s a somnolent place, with a belvedere garden and vast, shady chestnut trees at its heart, while several waymarked footpaths radiate from the village through neighbouring hamlets and up to the local peaks. The summit of the highest, Caramulinho (1075m), is a 5km drive from the village, while at Cabeço da Neve (a 4km drive) there’s another sweeping viewpoint. The best walk is the circular Rota dos Caleiros (8.2km; 3–4hr), which is detailed in a leaflet available from the turismo: it picks its way past the old stone aqueducts (caleiros) and granite boulders around Caramulinho, with magnificent views east to the Serra da Estrela and west to the Atlantic Ocean.

The extraordinary Museu do Caramulo was founded by two brothers with a love of “art and automobiles” and displays everything from primitive religious sculpture to souped-up Harley Davidsons. Once you’ve browsed through the Picasso sketches and sixteenth-century tapestries, it’s on to the superb collection of vintage and 21st-century cars and motorcycles, most of which are in working order and given a run-out every September for the Caramulo Motorfestival.

**Vouzela and the Rio Vouga**

North of Caramulo, and just beyond the fast Aveiro–Viseu road (A25), Vouzela is an attractive Beira town set on the beautiful Rio Vouga and makes a fine destination if you feel like taking in a little of backwater Portugal. Bus services run from Coimbra and [Aveiro](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/aveiro-around/) and, on reaching the Vouga, follow the route of the old train line along the river on the N16. For drivers there are equally bucolic approaches, from Caramulo to the south (N228) or from Viseu and the IP5 to the east, from where the minor N337 makes a particularly memorable approach. Beyond the town lies the spa resort of São Pedro do Sul, on the Rio Sul, which flows down from the lovely Serra da Arada that flanks Vouzela to the north.

**Vouzela**

VOUZELA’s old centre is built around a shallow river, crossed by a low Romanesque bridge, overhung by willow and bordered by attractive manor houses. Beyond are the riverside gardens, manicured lawns and municipal pool, all towered over by the viaduct of the former railway which stretches across a narrow terraced gorge. You can cross both bridge and viaduct on an 8km circular walk – a board at the top of the gardens by the viaduct shows the route. Within Portugal, the town is best known for its pasteis de Vouzela (a very sweet egg-based pastry) and the local vinho Lafões (a wine similar to vinho verde).

From the Rio Vouga, narrow Rua São Frei Gil climbs up past manor houses to a small square where you’ll find the Museu Municipal, housed in the attractive building of the eighteenth-century law courts. The museum has a fairly uninspiring collection of archeological remains and sacred art, though the room of old toys is more diverting. A third room hosts temporary exhibits.

**Praia de Mira**

South of [Aveiro](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/aveiro-around/), PRAIA DE MIRA is the only resort of any size until you reach the full-scale development of Figueira. Though very quiet and a bit dreary out of season, from June to September it’s a lively place set on a small lagoon known as Barrinha, its cobbled quayside planted with palms. The one long main street barrels past the lagoon towards the sea, where a seemingly endless dune-backed beach stretches to either side. It’s ideal for beach-lounging, though the resort also makes a good base for local walks or cycling.

The coastline immediately south of Praia de Mira consists of a virtually deserted 30km stretch of stupendous beaches, mostly backed by pine trees, planted to stabilize the low-lying dunes. The sands are only easily accessible at a couple of points – Praia de Tocha, with its unusual wooden fisherman’s houses, around 12km south of Praia de Mira; and the even quieter Praia de Quiaios (pronounced key-aysh), another 11km south (avoid the extremely rutted forest road to get here, sticking to the N109–8 instead). Both are popular summer resorts but dead out of season, and you’ll need a car to get to them.

**Hikes and cycling round Praia de Mira**

Praia de Mira is very well set up in terms of local walks and cycle routes. The tourist office has leaftlets detailing two great walks: the Route of the Lakes is a four-hour route round the Barrinha lagoon inland to the Lagoa de Mira and back, while the Route of the Mills is a little longer walk via a series of watermills. Alternatively, you can follow the Pista Ciclo-pedonal, a 25km cycle route that heads inland along canals towards Mira then north towards [Aveiro](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/coimbra-beira-litoral/aveiro-around/).

**Montemor-o-Velho**

Thirty-two kilometres west of Coimbra, the keep and crenellated silhouette of the castle at MONTEMOR-O-VELHO brood over the flood plain of the Mondego. After it was taken back from the Moors at the end of the eleventh century, Montemor became a favoured royal residence – it was here in 1355 that Dom Afonso IV met with his council to decide on the fate of Inês de Castro, and here, thirty years later, that João of Avis received the homage of the townspeople on his way to Coimbra to be acclaimed Dom João I. Despite this royal attention, the town never really prospered, and there’s not a lot to modern-day Montemor-o-Velho, though come on the second and fourth Wednesday of the month and you can experience the sprawling morning market which spills across the plain in the lee of the castle.

**Castelo de Montemor-o-Velho**

Originally built in the thirteenth century, but with sixteenth-century additions, the Castelo de Montemor-o-Velho has little to see inside, save a Manueline church with a beautiful wooden ceiling, said to have been designed by Diogo de Boitaca of Belém fame. However, the views of the surrounding countryside from the walkways are stunning, the lawns are a good place to let children run free and there’s a nice terrace-café.