Lisbon might be the country’s capital, but Portugal’s second city, Porto, is very definitely not second best. Dramatically situated at the mouth of the Rio Douro, it’s a massively atmospheric place that’s well worth a couple of days of your time – more if you plan to make a serious assault on the famous port wine lodges of Vila Nova de Gaia, located just across the river. In recent years, the city has seen a massive tourism boom and this is reflected in the many hotels now on offer, many of which are of the boutique variety. For eating and going out you’ll be spoilt for choice, as areas have been gentrified with new restaurants and bars opening up.

Continue reading to find out more about...

* The port wine story
* Porto
* Vila do Conde
* Amarante
* Along the Douro
* Peso da Régua
* Lamego and around
* Vila Nova de Foz Côa
* Barca d’Alva
* Penafiel
* Penafiel and around

For a convenient trip to the seaside, the pretty town of Vila do Conde, 45 minutes to the north of Porto, offers a taste of what’s to come as you head up the coast towards the Minho. East of Porto, meanwhile, the N15 or much faster A4 motorway runs inland to the vinho verde-producing towns of Penafiel and Amarante, the latter perhaps the single most attractive town in the region, set on the lazy Rio Tâmega.

Inevitably, however, it’s the Rio Douro (“River of Gold”) that defines the region, winding for over 200km from the Spanish border to the sea, with port wine lodges and tiny villages dotted above intricately terraced hillsides. It was once a wild and unpredictable river, though after the port-producing area was first demarcated in the eighteenth century, engineering works soon tamed the worst of the rapids and opened up the Douro for trade. The railway reached the Spanish border by the end of the nineteenth century, while the building of hydroelectric dams and locks along the river’s length in the 1970s and 1980s turned the Douro into a series of navigable ribbon lakes.

It’s possible to cruise all the way from Porto to Barca d’Alva on the Spanish border, while the drive along the Douro also makes for an unforgettable journey. But take the train at least part of the way if you can, since the main Douro train line is no slouch for scenery – particularly once you’ve reached the rough halfway point, marked by the port wine town and cruise centre of Peso da Régua. Just to the south of Régua, a slight detour takes in the delightful Baroque pilgrimage town of Lamego and the fascinating churches and historic buildings of its little-explored surroundings. Beyond Régua, the main stop is the idyllically set wine-town of [Pinhão](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/porto-rio-douro/pinhao-and-around/), and the train line continues to hug the river as far as its terminus at Pocinho, though the Douro itself still has a way to go, winding on to the border at Barca d’Alva. However, following the uppermost reaches of the Douro is impossible by road beyond [Pinhão](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/porto-rio-douro/pinhao-and-around/), with the N222 finally veering south of the river to reach the extraordinary collection of paleolithic rock engravings near Vila Nova de Foz Côa.

**The port wine story**

If ever a drink was synonymous with a country it’s port – the fortified wine from Portugal’s Douro region. For three centuries wine has been shipped down the Douro River to Vila Nova de Gaia, whose famous wine lodges (Sandeman, Graham’s, Cockburn, Taylor’s) reflect the early British influence on its production. A cellar tour here (see The port wine lodges) forms an integral part of any visit to Porto, while you can also follow the wine trail along the Douro by train, car or cruise boat. To find out more, the country’s port wine institute, the Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e do Porto, has a useful English-language website.

**Developing a taste – the early days**

The clear distinction between port wine (vinho do porto) and other Portuguese wines wasn’t made until the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Britain prohibited the import of French wines during the War of the Spanish Succession. Portuguese wines quickly filled the void and, following the Methuen Treaty (1703), the wine trade became so profitable that adulterated inferior wines were soon being passed off as the genuine article. This led to the creation of a regulatory body in 1756, the Companhia Geral da Agricultura das Vinhas do Alto Douro, and, the following year, the declaration of the world’s oldest demarcated wine region (where port wine could now only legitimately be produced). Yet it wasn’t until the mid-nineteenth century that it began to resemble today’s fortified wine, when the addition of brandy to stop fermentation became widespread, enabling the wines to be transported over even longer distances.

**The Douro wine route**

The port wine grapes are grown in a 600,000-acre demarcated region along both banks of the Rio Douro, stretching from Mesão Frio (near Peso da Régua) to the Spanish border. Sheltered by the Marão and Montemuro mountain ranges, around fifteen percent of the region is under vines, which benefit from cold winters and hot, dry summers. The characteristic terraces can be seen along the length of the Douro, and they form a beautiful backdrop to the small town of [Pinhão](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/porto-rio-douro/pinhao-and-around/), which is now the main centre for quality ports. The grapes are harvested at the quintas (vineyard estates) from September to October and crushed. After a few days fermentation is halted by the addition of brandy – exactly when this is done determines the wine’s sweetness – with the wine subsequently stored in casks until the following March. The final stage in the wine route is the transportation downstream to the shippers’ lodges, where the wine is blended and matures.

**What’s in the bottle?**

Port wine is either ruby (ie deep red), tawny (made from a blend of differently aged wines) or white – the first two are generally drunk at the end of a meal, or with cheese or dessert, the last served chilled as an aperitif. The finest reds are known as vintages, wines from a single year that are bottled two to three years after harvest and left to mature. A vintage is only declared in certain years (just fourteen times between 1901 and 1999, for example), and the wine is only ready to drink at least ten to fifteen years after bottling, when the flavours are at their most complex, the wine deep purple and full-bodied. Late Bottled Vintage (LBV) is not of vintage quality, but is still good enough to mature in bottles, to which it’s transferred after four to six years in the cask. All other ports are blended and are kept in the cask for between two and seven or more years, with the colour developing into various shades of of tawny – they are ready to drink when bottled. Of these, a colheita (“Harvest”) is a tawny port made from grapes from a specific year and aged at least seven years in the cask; other fine wines are superior tawnies dated ten, twenty, thirty or forty years old (the average age of the wines in the blend), while reserve ports (both tawny and ruby) are decent blended wines, the best being the tawny reserve ports which have to spend at least seven years in the cask.

**Porto**

While Portus Cale (the Romans’ “sheltered port”) has a long history, modern PORTO largely eschews its distant past and presents itself to visitors as a busy commercial city rather than a prettified tourist destination. If that puts you off, it shouldn’t, because commerce is written into Porto’s DNA, from the great trading river at the heart of the city to the Baroque churches and Neoclassical buildings funded by merchants who made good. If it’s never quite what you’d call gentrified – especially in the old riverside back-alleys – modern Porto does at least look better now than it has done for decades. Since 2001, when it was declared European City of Culture, many of the streets and squares have been reconstructed and historic buildings restored, particularly in the riverside bairro of Ribeira – now a UNESCO World Heritage Site – where the waterfront cafés and restaurants are an obvious attraction.

Once you’ve scooted around the commercial centre and seen the cathedral, the only two essential cultural attractions are the applied-art collections of the Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis and the world-class Fundação Serralves museum of contemporary art. Otherwise, tourism in Porto generally consists of lounging at a dockside café, enjoying a cruise on the Douro, swigging port across the river in Vila Nova de Gaia or taking the antique tram out to the local beach at Foz do Douro, at the mouth of the Rio Douro.

**Fundação Serralves**

If there’s a must-see cultural attraction in Porto it’s the contemporary art museum and park run by the Fundação Serralves, 4km west of the centre. The Museu de Arte Contemporânea is the work of Porto architect Álvaro Siza Vieira, and is a minimalist triumph of white facades and terraces strikingly set in an overwhelmingly green park. There’s no permanent collection – instead, several changing exhibitions a year draw on the works of Portuguese and international artists, mainly from the 1960s to the present day. Other exhibitions are held in the separate, pink Art Deco Casa de Serralves in the grounds.

You can get an idea of the main building from the outside, and from the terrace café, more formal restaurant and museum shop (all free to enter), which means if the exhibitions aren’t to your taste, you miss nothing by just visiting the park. Indeed, many people prefer this to the museum itself and it’s easy to spend a lazy afternoon here, winding along swept gravel paths and clipped lawns before descending wooded tracks to the herb gardens and farmland beyond, grazed by goats and cattle. There are art installations dotted around and a tea house (open weekends only in winter) in a glade with a vine colonnade. July and August see a sequence of “Jazz no Parque” (Jazz in the Park) concerts held in the gardens.

**Vila Nova de Gaia**

Cross to the south side of the Rio Douro, over the Ponte Dom Luís I, and you leave the city of Porto for the separate town of Vila Nova de Gaia, which has now been absorbed as a neighbourhood. The riverfront here – facing Porto’s Ribeira – also has a long line of cafés, bars and restaurants; cruise boats dock along the esplanade, while the wooden craft with sails are known as barcos rabelos, the traditional boats once used to transport wine casks downriver from the Douro port estates. The views are, if anything, better from Gaia than from the Porto side, looking back across to a largely eighteenth-century cityscape, with few modern buildings intruding in the panoramic sweep from the Palácio de Cristal gardens to the cathedral towers.

Gaia, of course, is completely synonymous with the port wine trade – you can’t miss the dozens of company lodges and warehouses (known as caves), some in business for more than three centuries, that splash their brand names across every rooftop, facade and advertising hoarding. They almost all offer tastings and tours, conducted in English, with a view to enticing you to buy. Tours of the smaller, lesser-known companies tend to be more personal than those of larger producers, but they are all pretty informative and you’ll soon know the difference between a tawny and a ruby, and which vintages are best.

**Porto’s architecture**

Porto’s churches provide one of the country’s richest concentrations of Baroque architecture. The style was brought to Portugal by Italian painter and architect Nicolau Nasoni (1691–1773), who arrived in Porto at the age of 34, and remained here for the rest of his life. The church and tower of Clérigos is his greatest work, though his masterful touch can also be seen in the cathedral and adjacent bishop’s palace, and at the churches of Misericórdia, Carmo, Santo Ildefonso and São Francisco. All are remarkable for their decorative exuberance, reflecting the wealth derived from Portugal’s colonies.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, out went the luxuriant complexity of Baroque and in came the studied lines of the Neoclassical period. Neoclassicism also incorporated hints of Gothic and Baroque art, but most of all, was influenced by an Islamic style, which reached its apotheosis in the Salão Árabe of the Palácio da Bolsa. By the turn of the twentieth century Porto’s Neoclassicism had acquired a distinctly French Renaissance touch, thanks largely to the architect José Marquês da Silva (1869–1947), who studied in Paris. His most notable works were São Bento railway station, the exuberant Teatro Nacional São João, and the distinctly less elegant monument to the Peninsular War that dominates the Rotunda da Boavista.

Not until the 1950s did Porto see the emergence of a style of architecture that it could call its own, with the beginning of the so-called Porto School, centred on the city’s School of Fine Arts. This proved fertile ground for many of Porto’s contemporary architects, including Eduardo Souto Moura (Casa das Artes, and the conversion of the Alfândega), Alcino Soutinho (the conversion of the Casa-Museu Guerra Junqueiro, and Amarante’s Museu Amadeo Sousa Cardoso), and – most famously – Álvaro Siza Vieira, whose masterpiece in Porto is the contemporary art museum at the Fundação Serralves (1999). Earlier works of his can be seen in Leça da Palmeira, north of the city, such as the Piscina de Mar swimming pool (1966) and Casa de Chá da Boa Nova (1963), both hidden in the rocks by the shore – the Casa de Chá was a renowned café-restaurant for years but has currently been sadly abandoned to the elements and vandals.

A word should also be said about the city’s famous bridges – there are five more besides the landmark Ponte Dom Luís I, notably the Ponte do Infante, whose central 280m reinforced-concrete arch is the world’s longest, and further east upriver, Gustave Eiffel’s iron railway bridge, Ponte Dona Maria Pia. The best way to see them all is to take a river cruise.

**Festa de São João**

Porto lets its hair down during the exuberant celebration that is the Festa de São João, St John’s Eve (the night of June 23–24), in honour of John the Baptist, patron saint of the city. Be warned – for one night only it is considered fair game to bash total strangers over the head with plastic hammers, while Chinese lanterns drift off into the night sky. There are free concerts throughout the night and a massive firework display at midnight over the river at Praça da Ribeira. The bacchanalian party forms only part of the wider city festival, the Festas da Cidade, that runs throughout June and celebrates the start of the summer with concerts, dances, vintage car rallies, regattas, sardine grills and other entertainments – like the competitive cascata displays (dolls depicting Santo António, São João and São Pedro, complete with miniature houses, trains and cars).

**Markets, junk and vintage stuff**

If the Mercado do Bolhão (daily except Sun) whets your appetite, you might want to scour some of Porto’s other markets, starting with the long-established Saturday-morning flea market, the Feira de Vandôma (Passeio das Fontaínhas). There’s a more specialist market for coins and collectables (Sun morning, Praça Dom João I), while the Feira dos Pasasarinhos (Sun morning, Campo Mártires da Pátria, in front of the Cadeia da Relação) features birds, cages, and birds in cages. The secondhand scene is centred on the top (ie, grungier) end of Rua Santa Caterina, at shops such as Segunda Mão (Rua Santa Caterina 505), where you can buy anything from dodgy old Portuguese vinyl singles to retro household goods and vintage clothes.

**Ribeira**

Porto’s waterfront – known as the Ribeira – has changed dramatically in recent years, from a rough dockside cargo zone to one of the city’s major tourist attractions. The arcaded quayside, the Cais da Ribeira, is one long run of restaurants and cafés looking across the river to the port wine lodges on the other side. However, come down in the morning – before the parasols and blackboard menus have been put out – and the Ribeira still ticks along in local fashion. Between the postcards and touristy ceramics you’ll find dusty grocery stores and a warehouse or two, piled high with bags of potatoes. Meanwhile, behind the arcades and heading up towards the cathedral is a warren of stepped alleys that thumb their noses at the riverside gentrification.

Porto’s iconic double-decker bridge, Ponte Dom Luís I, provides one of the city’s favourite photo opportunities. You can walk across either level to the port wine lodges, bars and restaurants of Vila Nova de Gaia – there’s traffic on the bottom level, the metro across the top – and the upper level crossing especially (a nerve-jangling 60m above the water) is worth doing at least once. There are steps from the Ribeira up to the lower-level walkway, which lead past a café built on top of the surviving stone piers of an earlier bridge – a great location for a coffee with an unrivalled bridge and river view.

**Vila do Conde**

VILA DO CONDE, 27km north of Porto, has become quite a significant resort over recent years, but despite the increase in visitors still retains much of its charm. In part, it’s because the villas and apartments overlooking the beach are set away from the rest of town; the medieval centre, 1km inland on the north bank of the Rio Ave, still has its traditional fishing port and quiet, traffic-free streets, while the modern town is a handsome place of boulevards, gardens and cafés. Anchoring the old town’s cobbled alleys is the beautiful Manueline Igreja Matriz, while nearby the Friday market takes place, where you’ll find everything from farm produce to traditional children’s toys. Vila do Conde has a fair reputation for festivals too, from food and drink to film, and if you want more than just a beach then it’s the best day out from Porto, especially as you can zip there quickly on the metro. The more developed sands of Póvoa de Varzim are just a few minutes beyond, at the end of the line.

**Vila do Conde festivals**

A good time to visit Vila do Conde is for the nine-day food fair Feira de Gastronomia (third week in Aug), or during the renowned crafts fair, the Feira Nacional de Artesanato (last week July to first week Aug). People also come from far and wide for Curtas, the European short-film festival held here for a week every July.

**Amarante**

A quick drive from Porto takes you to the beautiful riverside town of AMARANTE, which hugs both sides of the Rio Tâmega, a handsome tributary of the Douro. Much of the town’s history revolves around the thirteenth-century hermit Gonçalo, later made a saint, and most of the attractions have some link to him. Although Amarante’s sights are few, save a photogenic bridge, and a riverside main street of granite houses with wooden balconies, it’s popular with weekenders from Porto and foreign visitors. There’s a definite air of prosperity about and it’s a fine place to spend the night, with a wide choice of accommodation, much of it still reasonably priced. Wednesdays and Saturdays, the market days, are the most lively, though the action is all over by 3pm. The local hooch, Gatão, a fruity vinho verde, can be enjoyed at one of the few late-opening esplanade bars found on the south side of the river near either bridge.

**Cycling along the Tâmega**

In days gone by, the approach to Amarante was truly scenic, on the old Tâmega branch train line, with rattling wooden carriages snaking along a single-track route up the valley. Although long discontinued, part of the track now has a new lease of life as the Ecopista da Linha do Tâmega, a “green route” that’s been opened from the old station at Amarante to that of Chapa, a shade over 9km to the northeast. In time, it’s planned to extend the hiking and biking track as far as Celorico de Basto (22km from Amarante) and Arco de Baúlhe (40km), but even now, the shortish stretch to Chapa makes for a lovely day out, along the river valley, through pine and eucalyptus, over the occasional bridge and past abandoned buildings.

**Along the Douro**

The Douro river route is one of the great European journeys, a careering 200-kilometre ride or stately cruise from Porto to the Spanish border. The full river journey there and back is in a class of its own, and pricey, all-inclusive cruises can take as long as a week, though short tours from Porto or Peso da Régua give you a flavour of the river. In many ways the train is best, though you’ll have a lot more scope in a car to visit wineries, stay in rural quintas en route and hang around at the majestic dams to watch the boats come through the locks. Be warned that the roads are very winding and often fairly precipitous, though they are all in good condition. It can also take much longer than you think to get from A to B, so give yourself plenty of time.

**The Linha do Douro – Portugal’s best train ride**

An engineering marvel when it opened in 1887, the Linha do Douro (Douro Line) still thrills passengers today. In its heyday it crossed the border to Spain (for a through service to Salamanca and Madrid) and sprouted some stunning valley branch lines, but even though the branch lines are no more, it’s still some ride – 160km of river-hugging track from Porto to Pocinho, via more than 20 tunnels, 30 bridges and 34 stations.

There are regular daily departures from Porto (São Bento and Campanhã) and you change on to the smaller Douro Line trains at Peso da Régua (just “Régua” on timetables). Régua is where the Douro Line gets most exciting, sticking closely to the river from then on, clinging to the rocks as the river – and track – passes through the Douro gorge. Some of the stations are just a shelter on a platform, used by the local wine quintas, though there are useful stops at [Pinhão](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/porto-rio-douro/pinhao-and-around/) (a pretty port-producing town), Tua (a cruise halt with a good restaurant) and finally Pocinho (for Vila Nova de Foz Câo and its rock art).

Currently five trains a day run from Porto to Pocinho at the end of the line (around 3hr 30min), so you can make the return trip in a day if you take a morning train: there are also summer weekend steam-train services between Régua and Tua. For timetables, see cp.pt or call 808 208 208 (local-rate call in Portugal) or 707 201 280.

**Peso da Régua**

PESO DA RÉGUA (usually just Régua) was declared the first capital of the demarcated port-producing region in the eighteenth century. While it’s [Pinhão](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/porto-rio-douro/pinhao-and-around/), further east, that’s the more interesting place these days, Régua is still a popular stop – not least because it’s the hub of the Douro river-cruise trade, with the boats disgorging hundreds of passengers for lunch, train trips and wine-lodge visits. Although it’s not a particularly pretty place, and is dominated by a motorway bridge, for most of the year there’s an agreeable hubbub along the waterside promenade, where ornamental barcos rabelos lie anchored on the river. What’s more, wine-trade patronage has resulted in some excellent local restaurants and enticing quinta accommodation in the vicinity.

**Lamego and around**

Although technically in the Beira Alta region, the charming town of LAMEGO, 11km south of Régua, is easily accessible from the Douro, with which it shares a passion for wine – in this case, Raposeira, Portugal’s answer to champagne. It’s overlooked by the Baroque shrine of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios – another of those decorative Portuguese stone stairways to the skies – which plays host to an annual pilgrimage from late August to early September. There are scores of noble manorhouses in the handsome town centre, and a series of extraordinary churches, monasteries and fortified buildings in the surrounding verdant valleys, a legacy of the twelfth-century Reconquista, when Lamego was among the first towns to be retaken from the Moors.

Much of Lamego’s early wealth derived from its position astride the trade route from the Beiras to the Douro, but the town’s real importance is its history: in 1143, Lamego hosted Portugal’s first parliament, when a group of clergy and noblemen assembled to recognize Afonso Henriques as the nation’s first king. As such, it claims to be the birthplace of country and crown – a fact hotly disputed by Alfonso Henriques’ birthplace, Guimarães.

**The Entrudo dos Compadres at Lazarim**

The unremarkable village of Lazarim (off the N2 Lamego–Castro Daire road) plays host to one of the oddest rituals to survive in Portugal. The Entrudo dos Compadres is a boisterous carnival that has taken place every Shrove Tuesday since the Middle Ages, with cavorting revellers taking to the streets wearing beautifully carved wooden masks, symbolic of the event’s licentiousness. From a balcony, two colourful dolls loaded with fireworks are presented to the crowd – the compadre, carried by two young women, and comadre, toted by two young men. The couples proceed to recite insulting rhymes centring on sexual behaviour, after which the fireworks are lit and the dolls disintegrate in an explosive fury of smoke and flame, marking the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

**Vila Nova de Foz Côa**

Sitting high above the Côa valley, 60km southeast of [Pinhão](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/porto-rio-douro/pinhao-and-around/), the small town of VILA NOVA DE FOZ CÔA would attract no interest at all had it not been for the discovery in 1992 of the most extensive array of outdoor paleolithic art in Europe. The engravings are of a similar style to those found in caves elsewhere, but their uniqueness lies in the fact that they are carved outside on exposed rock faces in a river valley. With the oldest dated at around 23,000 years, their survival is remarkable, and they are now protected as both National Monument and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

There are three rock-art sites to visit, though the restrictions on numbers and visiting hours mean you can’t see more than two in any one day. Depending on how keen you are, this might mean an overnight stop in Foz Côa, though there is is not really any reason otherwise to stay. Although the blistering midsummer heat and winter cold makes it hard to believe, the town benefits from a Mediterranean microclimate, proof of which is provided by the locally produced almonds, fruit, cheese, wine and – especially – olive oil, which is among the country’s finest. The monthly market is on the first Tuesday of the month next to the football field, and the blossoming of almond trees draws the crowds in late February and early March.

**Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa (PAVC)**

The Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa contains thousands of engravings on several hundred rocks, a good number of which are clustered around the three major sites. The engravings are of horses, deer, goats and other animals, as well as later, Neolithic images of people. Many of the engravings are quite hard to make out, as unlike cave art they are not painted but were scratched or chipped with stones. Depending on the site, visits take place either in the morning or afternoon, though night visits – which benefit from being out of the sun’s glare so you can see the engravings more easily – are also sometimes possible. If you only have time to visit one site, Penascosa is considered the most interesting.

The Museu do Côa (3km east of town, signposted) is the obvious place to start, since it expands in detail upon the discovery and history of the site, and also acts as a booking centre for the park. Visits to the rock-art sites have to be booked in advance, which can be done in person or by phone or email (279 768 260, [[email protected]](file:///C:\cdn-cgi\l\email-protection)) – in summer, two or three days in advance is recommended. The entrance fee includes a guide and 4WD transport from the appropriate visitor centre; each trip has a maximum of eight visitors, and children under 3 are not allowed.

**Canada do Inferno**

From the museum, tours head out to the first site to be identified, that of Canada do Inferno (usually morning visits; tour lasts 1hr 30min), which lies near the abandoned Côa dam. It contains a wide variety of engravings, from bison to horses, some of which are very close to the current waterline and many more that have been underwater since the construction of the Pocinho dam upstream raised the level.

**Ribeira de Piscos**

Trips to Ribeira de Piscos (usually mornings; 2hr 30min) head out from Muxagata, 1km off the N102 to Guarda, which has a bar beside the visitor centre. The engravings are spread out along the eponymous ribeira down to its confluence with the Côa – a beautiful place, but there’s a lot of walking involved. The highlights are a tender engraving of two horses “kissing”, some fine engravings of auroch bison (now extinct) and an exceptionally rare, paleolithic engraving of a man.

**Penascosa**

The least strenuous visit is to Penascosa (usually afternoons, 1hr 30min, plus evenings, 3hr), as the jeeps park right next to it. The starting point is the visitor centre in Castelo Melhor, just off the N322 to Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo. Penascosa’s highlights include an engraving of a fish (one of very few such depictions worldwide), and a rock containing over a dozen superimposed animals, the meaning of which archeologists are at a loss to understand. The village itself has a gorgeous ruined castle and a couple of café-restaurants.

**Quinta da Ervamoira**

There’s also a private site at Quinta da Ervamoira (closed Mon; visits by appointment: t 279 759 229), a secluded vineyard on the west bank of the Côa, accessed from Muxagata. It’s owned by the Ramos Pinto port wine company, whose granite estate house is now a museum housing finds from Roman and medieval times.

**Barca d’Alva**

The last Portuguese village along the Douro, BARCA D’ALVA is less than 2km from the Spanish border. Surrounded by mountains, and on a placid bend in the Rio Douro, it’s a curious spot – on one hand, there’s a long-abandoned railway line and a row of elderly cottages; on the other, there’s a sparkling quayside with huge pontoons to accommodate the large Douro cruisers which disgorge passengers for a souvenir hunt. A few cafés, restaurants and shops soak up any passing trade, but in the end it’s the drive here, from north or south, that really warrants the trip, through beautifully sculpted Douro terraces of olives and vines, with sweeping views across the hills and river gorge. As there’s no road along the Douro River in its latter stages after Pocinho, you have to approach via Foz Côa and Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo (in Beira Alta) or Torre de Moncorvo and Freixo de Espada à Cinta (in Trás-os-Montes).

**Penafiel**

While port wine defines the central and far eastern reaches of the Douro, closer to Porto it’s vinho verde that holds sway, particularly around PENAFIEL, 35km east of Porto. The wine’s origins lie with the Benedictine monks, who first grew vines on precipitous valley terraces, while the Benedictine legacy also extends to a handful of glorious Romanesque churches secreted amid the hills hereabouts. However, despite the promise, Penafiel itself comes as something of a disappointment. The few old streets of granite mansions behind a handsome Renaissance Igreja da Misericórdia are barely reason enough to stop – certainly not if you’re reliant on public transport (the train station is 3km from the centre in any case). Drivers, however, have the option of a pleasant half-day’s tour, with wine tasting and church visits breaking up the journey along the Douro.

On Rua da Aveleda, the charming, ivy-festooned Quinta da Aveleda is source of the local vinho verde. The guided tours include a visit to the bottling hall, and a wine and cheese tasting (and there’s more on sale in the rather nice shop), but it’s really the gorgeously unkempt, wooded gardens and their follies that make the visit.

**Penafiel and around**

While port wine defines the central and far eastern reaches of the Douro, closer to Porto it’s actually vinho verde that holds sway, particularly around PENAFIEL, 35km east of Porto. The wine’s origins lie with the Benedictine monks, who first grew vines on precipitous valley terraces, while the Benedictine legacy also extends to a handful of glorious Romanesque churches secreted amid the rolling hills hereabouts. However, despite the promise, Penafiel itself comes as something of a disappointment. The few old streets of granite mansions behind a handsome Renaissance Igreja da Misericórdia are barely reason enough to stop – certainly not if you’re reliant on public transport (and the train station is 3km from the centre in any case). Drivers, however, have the option of a pleasant half-day’s tour, with wine tasting and church visits breaking up the onward journey along the Douro.