It’s around 100km from Porto to the mouth of the Rio Minho, a broad river of even broader historical and cultural significance for the Portuguese since it marks the border with neighbouring Spain. The river has lent its name to the entire northwestern province, the Minho, which tourists may see referred to as a rebranded sub-region of Porto and North Portugal. The area encompasses a range of postcard-worthy landscapes and features that could almost be Portugal in microcosm: dreamy river scenes, high mountains, rolling vineyards, beautiful historic towns, dramatic Atlantic beaches, ancient religious foundations and mysterious archaeological sites. Add a modern network of roads – it takes only an hour or so to get from the main towns to remote hiking villages – and a useful regional bus and train network ensures the Minho is an instantly appealing region to visit, as a sort of Portugal-in-a-nutshell experience, easily accessible straight out of Porto airport.

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For a start, the region features many Portuguese traditions, whether it’s the vast weekly market at Barcelos – a cross between a medieval fair and vast farmers’ market – or the summer romaria, or carnival, at Viana do Castelo. The Minho’s two principal historic towns, both in the south, are also steeped in tradition – handsomely preserved, medieval [Guimarães](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/guimaraes/), Portugal’s first capital, and neighbouring [Braga](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/braga-around/), the country’s ecclesiastical centre. The Minho coast, meanwhile, as little as half an hour’s drive from [Braga](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/braga-around/), is the typical Atlantic swathe of sweeping dunes and wild surf. Known as the Costa Verde (Green Coast), it’s pretty much one unbroken stretch of sand as far as the Spanish border, punctuated by small-scale resorts and the historic maritime town of Viana do Castelo.

Central Minho is characterized by the region’s other major river, the Rio Lima, which idles through a succession of pretty towns where there’s little to do but soak up the scenery – ideally, while staying in one of the manor houses or country homes for which this area is renowned. Further east, the charming [Lima valley](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/lima-valley/) eventually gives way to the mountains of the Parque Nacional da Peneda-Gerês, Portugal’s only national park, which stretches north as far as the Spanish border and east into the province of Trás-os-Montes.

To the north, the Minho region ends – where the country ends – with the Rio Minho, across which lies Spain. A string of compact fortified towns flanks the river on the Portuguese side, and the Minho train line from Porto terminates in the best of the lot, the spectacular walled town of Valença do Minho, a major crossing point into Spain.

**Citânia de Briteiros**

Ancient Portuguese archeological sites don’t come more mysterious or dramatic than the Citânia de Briteiros, an Iron Age hill town that lies roughly halfway between [Guimarães](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/guimaraes/) and [Braga](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/braga-around/). It’s one of dozens in the Minho region, large and small, most of which date back to around 500 BC, although some are considerably older still. Home to a people known as the “Bracari”, the extensive site at Briteiros, straddling a boulder-strewn hill, probably made a last-ditch stand against the invading Romans and was eventually abandoned by around 100 AD. Its significance is enormous – the hillside ruins may appear obscure today, but Briteiros is one of the earliest sites on the Iberian peninsula that could reasonably be described as an urban settlement.

**The site**

The citânia was first uncovered by [Guimarães](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/minho/guimaraes/) archeologist Francisco Martins Sarmento in 1874, who showed evidence of habitation here going back several thousand years, though what’s visible today dates mainly from around 200 BC. This era of the so-called Cultura Castreja (Castro Culture) probably saw Briteiros at its peak, home to as many as two thousand people, living in circular huts in family compounds – Sarmento rebuilt two of the dwellings to give an indication of the settlement’s feel and look. There’s a fair amount of guesswork involved when it comes to interpreting the foundations of more than 150 separate huts, but there are obvious cooking and sleeping areas while the central stones, it’s thought, would have provided support for poles holding up thatched roofs. A few of the foundations are more extensive, including a building with stone benches, which may have been a meeting house, as well as two bathhouses – these had their own water supply and separate steam- and cold-water rooms. It displays a surprising level of urban sophistication for the Iron Age – including a clear pattern of streets and defensive walls – and the entire site is a hugely evocative place for a stroll, along rough cobbles and past ancient cork oaks.

**Barcelos**

There’s little on first view to suggest that the small town of BARCELOS is in any way special – it has a few historical sights, a small medieval centre and an attractive riverside location, and in the normal run of things you might be persuaded to give it half a day. But the truly enormous square in the centre, the Campo da Feira, provides pause for thought, and all becomes clear if you turn up on a Thursday, when you’ll coincide with the Feira de Barcelos, a gigantic open-air market that has few equals in Europe, let alone Portugal.

**Campo da Feira**

The vast Campo da Feira houses Barcelos’ market every Thursday from dawn until late afternoon (around 4pm, or whenever the last stallholder closes) – it’s been held here since at least the early fifteenth century and, save a few modern refinements, there’s still much that a medieval market-trader might recognize. Today the Feira may have its own Facebook page, but the close-set rows of modest smallholders offering up their surplus produce have surely changed little over the centuries. Beyond the fruit and veg, eggs, olives, herbs, cheeses, cured meats, breads and pastries there’s the supporting framework of an entire rural economy on display here, from agricultural implements and animal yokes to chainsaws and wine-making gear – not to mention piles of cheap clothes, big pants, €10 jeans, counterfeit sportswear, lengths of cloth, brassy Portuguese pop CDs and rustic crafts. The local terracotta, white and yellow pottery – the louças de Barcelos – is a big deal, while Barcelos backs up its self-appointed role as “Capital do Artesanato” with a full array of other crafts, from earthenware figurines to traditional basketwork. The market is, in short, as valid a reason to visit Barcelos as you could want; if you can, make a real trip of it by staying the night before and setting your alarm clock for dawn to mingle with the stallholders as they set up for another timeless day at the feira.

**The Barcelos Cock**

The legend goes that a Galician pilgrim, en route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, was wrongly arrested for a crime in Barcelos and sentenced to hang. En route to the gallows, the pilgrim was escorted to the magistrate’s house to make one final plea. The judge and his friends were sitting down to a roast dinner, at which the pilgrim proclaimed “As surely as I am innocent, that cock will crow if I am hanged”. Up rose the bird from the table and the pilgrim was saved. This tale of the “Cock of Barcelos” – its scenes sculpted onto a cross in the town’s archeological museum – has endured over the centuries to become a real Portuguese emblem, and you’ll see the symbol all over the country, from the ubiquitous rooster-shaped ceramic figures to images reproduced on tea-towels and ornaments.

**Viana do Castelo and around**

For a first taste of the Minho coast, the historic maritime town of VIANA DO CASTELO is the principal port of call. Sited at the mouth of the Rio Lima, it has a landscaped waterfront, an appealing old town centre overlooked by the heights of Monte de Santa Luzia, and a great beach that lies just across the river. To call Viana a resort is probably a step too far – people certainly do come here in summer to laze on the sands, but the feel in the town at least is of a well-to-do place built on shipbuilding and trade, with elaborate period mansions and good-looking streets and squares to match. Tradition, too, still weighs strongly here, from the age-old Friday market held outside the former bastion walls to the annual romaria that ranks as one of the country’s most impressive festivals.

**Monte de Santa Luzia**

For a sensational view of the town, river and Atlantic coast you need to make your way up to the unmistakable landmark basilica on top of Monte de Santa Luzia, which looms over Viana do Castelo. The funicular railway is a fun way to get there; otherwise it’s a punishing thirty-minute walk up the steps which start just past the hospital – take note of the inscription at the bottom which translates as “My God help me get up”. At the summit there’s a café and restaurant, picnic tables among the trees, plus plenty of stalls selling “artigos religiosos”. Other than its monumental presence, there’s little interest in the Santuário de Santa Luzia itself, though the climb to the top of the dome (marked Zimbório) is emphatically worth it. A narrow winding staircase leads right through the building, past traffic lights laid on in summer to keep tourist hordes in check, and emerges on top of the dome itself. It’s very steep and – at the top – pretty hair-raising when the wind picks up, but the magnificent views reward every effort.

**The Viana Romaria**

The big event of the year is the pilgrimage-cum-carnival known as the Romaria de Nossa Senhora d’Agonía – dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows. It lasts for several days over the nearest weekend to August 20, and is held in huge esteem by the locals who offer “um abraço dos Vianenses” (a big hug from the Vianense) to anyone who makes the effort to come.

Events kick off with a religious procession on the Friday, complete with carpets of flowers, while the Saturday sees a more carnival-like atmosphere with a no-holds-barred parade of decorated floats, local villagers in traditional costume and exuberant townsfolk. The blessing of the fishing boats on Monday morning is rather moving, when women in the fishing quarter, east of the centre, decorate their streets and bestow good wishes upon the fleet. And into the mix you can add gigantones (carnival giants) at every turn, plus bands, concerts and dances, and spectacular nightly firework displays.

**Along the Rio Minho**

At Caminha, 25km north of Viana do Castelo, road and rail turn decisively northeast and inland to run along the south bank of the Rio Minho. With Spain ever-present – just across the wide river – and crossings easily made, it’s a fairly well-trodden tourist route, and the succession of historic frontier towns are used to Spanish day-trippers and visiting foreigners. You could just about see the lot in a day – from pretty Caminha to the country’s northernmost town, Melgaço, 70km further east – but that would be to rush a region that’s more suited to a leisurely stroll in the countryside, old-town rambles and summer afternoons spent at the nearest praia fluvial (river beach). With a night to spare, a stay in the fortress pousada of Valença do Minho is perhaps the best option, though admittedly this is the most touristy of the Minho towns. The Linha do Minho train line from Porto, via Viana do Castelo, runs to Caminha and Valença but no further, though there are plenty of local buses onwards to the old spa town of Monção and to Melgaço.

**Valença do Minho**

The must-see historic sight along the Minho is the fortress of VALENÇA DO MINHO (or just Valença), whose walls and ramparts dominate the riverside and speak volumes about erstwhile neighbourly disagreements. The fortress has repelled innumerable Spanish and French invasions over the centuries, though the impeccably preserved old town has surrendered entirely to a modern-day army of wallet-waving visitors who file in through the narrow town gates and descend upon the gift shops. Even the regional tourist office describes Valença as a “shopping fortress”. But most evenings you’ll have old Valença to yourself, and can explore at your leisure – the only disadvantage being that many of the cafés and restaurants are either hauntingly empty for dinner or simply shut up shop once their captive audience has left for the day. There’s a new town, south of the ramparts, home to all Valença’s non-touristy businesses and services, while each Wednesday a huge weekly market is held on the wooded slopes around the old town to the east.

Around the walls and ramparts

The first defensive walls were built here in the thirteenth century, though the current layout – a dazzling system of double ramparts, with two separate old-town areas separated by a deep moat – is a classic piece of seventeenth-century military engineering. The entrance for traffic is through the Portas da Coroada, which leads into an outer town defended by half a dozen bulwarks. Another set of gates, the Portas do Meio, then leads across a stone bridge into the even older medieval town, again defended by an elongated star-shape of steep, angled walls, towers and turrets. Alternatively, you can come directly into this older part of town via the pedestrian entrance of Portas do Sol.

The cobbled lanes and white-painted buildings within the walls have all been handsomely restored, though few visitors do much more than trawl up and down the couple of main streets, which are lined with boutiques and gift shops, pretty much all flogging the same vast selection of towels, sheets, pillow cases, nightwear, T-shirts and cheap souvenirs. Bewitching collection of traditional arts and handicrafts it is not – though if you need another Lionel Messi football shirt you’re in luck.

If you’re to come away from Valença with a more positive memory of its charms, you need to get off the street and up onto the ramparts, which can be accessed from virtually anywhere. From the precipitous walls, grassy mounds and winding footpaths, you can look down upon the buildings and the river far below, while exploring hidden tunnels, archaic towers and sentry-posts, and landscaped battlements complete with cannons. It becomes immediately apparent how difficult it would have been to vanquish Valença – the scale of the fortifications is immense – and you can spend a happy hour or two revelling in the fine views to all sides.

**Parque Nacional da Peneda-Gerês**

Portugal’s first and only national park, the magnificent PARQUE NACIONAL DA PENEDA-GERÊS, was established in 1971, and its 700 square kilometres help protect a natural world and a way of life that’s all but disappeared from the rest of the country’s mountain regions. In the lush valleys oak and laurel line the riverbanks, replaced by holly, birch, pine and juniper at higher elevations; a total of eighteen plant species – including the Serra do Gerês iris – are found nowhere else on earth. Shepherds and farmers inhabit remote granite-built villages, tending primitive domestic animals – cachena and barrosa cattle, bravia goats, garrano ponies and the powerful Castro Laboreiro sheepdog – that are long extinct elsewhere. In distant forested corners, remnants of the wildlife that once roamed all Europe still survive too, from wild boar to wolves.

If it sounds like a back-in-time backwater – well, parts certainly seem so, and there are high roads across boulder-strewn uplands where you’ll rarely see another vehicle (and where goats very definitely have the right of way). But look closely at some of the beautifully kept villages, with their ancient customs and traditions apparently intact, and it’s clear that tourism is playing its part in the park’s preservation. Restored stone cottages and rustic houses are available for overnight guests in even the most remote of hamlets, while the unmade roads and dirt tracks of twenty years ago have acquired a layer of tarmac and a flurry of brown signs pointing out local attractions.

The park divides into several distinct regions, with the southern area easily seen from the spa town of Caldas do Gerês, while mountain-, forest- and water-based activities are centred on nearby settlements like Rio Caldo and Campo do Gerês. In the centre lie the traditional villages of Soajo and Lindoso – beautiful places to stay, if you fancy a quiet week hiking or touring – while the wild Serra da Peneda, in the north of the park, is one for real mountain aficionados. Here, you’ll often have the steep forested valleys, and wind-blown planaltos dotted with weird rock formations, entirely to yourself. There’s also a far eastern section of the park covered in the Trás-os-Montes chapter.

**Soajo**

SOAJO is something of a puzzle. Set in a broad, fertile valley, amid a network of ancient cobbled tracks, cultivated fields and watermills, with higher grazing lands beyond, it’s both a surviving centre of rustic tradition and designated centre for rural tourism. On the one hand, there are goat-herders, elderly black-clad widows and an ancient pelourinho in the time-worn central square; on the other, the stone houses are scrubbed suspiciously clean and linked by pristine paved alleys winding past carefully tended gardens filled with fruit trees and trellised vines. It’s an idealized version of rusticity perhaps, but it does mean the village continues to thrive – and that staying in a beautifully renovated traditional house here or in neighbouring Lindoso is a joy. It also means that there’s a better-than-usual chance of something reasonable to eat with a couple of restaurants on the main road outside the village, and a café or two and a bakery inside the village. As in Lindoso, the main sight is a grouping of preserved espigueiros (grain houses), set apart from the houses on higher ground at the edge of the village. The best local walk is a four-kilometre return route via the neighbouring village of Adrão, along a cobbled lane with ruts worn into the stones over the centuries by ox carts.