The Alentejo, a region in southern Portugal, covers a huge area of around a third of the country, stretching south from the Rio Tejo to the northern mountain ranges of the Algarve. The name, Alentejo, derives from the words além do Tejo, beyond the Tejo River. This is Portugal’s garden, the bulk of the region given over to huge cork plantations, wheat fields, and vineyards – and though much of it is flat, the region repays exploration, offering unexpected surprises, from ancient dolmens and superbly sited castles to Roman ruins and sweeping Atlantic beaches.

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Much of the population make a living from the huge agricultural estates known as latifúndios, which are handed down from generation to generation – many have been in existence since Roman times. The vast farms are generally wildlife-friendly – the Alentejo is home to wild boar and hundreds of species of bird, from black stork to great bustard.

**Towns in the Alentejo**

For most visitors, the region’s major draws are its towns, two of which have UNESCO World Heritage status: the spectacular fortified town of Elvas, and [Évora](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/alentejo/evora/), whose Roman temple, medieval walls and cathedral have put it firmly on the tourist circuit. Elsewhere in Alto Alentejo (Upper Alentejo), you’ll find the dazzling hilltop villages of Monsaraz and Marvão, and the marble towns of Estremoz and Vila Viçosa, where the local marble quarries have given an opulent look to many of the buildings.

South of [Évora](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/alentejo/evora/), in the plains of Baixo Alentejo (Lower Alentejo), the attractions lie further apart and can be difficult to see without a car. However, there are some good overnight targets, including the main town of Beja, as well as nearby Moura, Serpa and Mértola, all enjoyable historic towns with a wealth of accommodation. The coast, too, is an unexpected joy. Only a few small resorts – prime among them Vila Nova de Milfontes – attract summer crowds, but the beaches are superb and you can reach them all by public transport.

**Alentejan wines**

The art of wine-making in the Alentejo was already well established when the Romans occupied the country’s vineyards, but it is only relatively recently that Alentejan wines have become widely recognized as some of the best in Europe. Many of the region’s vineyards were torn up in the eighteenth century to protect the newly demarcated port wines from the Douro region, while during the last century the Salazar regime encouraged farmers to replace their vines with wheat. It was only in the 1970s that wine co-operatives were re-established, and heavy investment in modern wine-making techniques saw the quality rise dramatically. What makes the wines stand out from elsewhere is that they are made from local grape varieties which thrive in the harsh soils: Touriga Nacional, Aragonez and Alicante Bouschet, Trincadeira and Periquita for the reds; and Antão Vaz, Arinto and Roupeiro for the whites. The region’s cool winters, warm summers and perfect conditions for ripening grapes give the wines a full-bodied if youngish flavour.

Many of the producers allow visits, where you can find out about the wines, then sample them over dinner – several of the vineyards have restaurants as well as tasting rooms – while the larger ones, such as the Herdade dos Grous, offer tours of their estate by jeep or even horseback. The best place to start is the headquarters of the Rota dos Vinhos do Alentejo in [Évora](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/alentejo/evora/), which can arrange tours to most of the nearby vineyards. Recommended estates to visit include Esporão; Quinta do Carmo near Estremoz, which is part-owned by the Lafite Rothschild group; and Adega Mayor in the Serra de São Mamede, whose landmark heaquarters is a stunning white edifice designed by Portugal’s most famous architect, Álvaro Siza Viera.

**Corking stuff**

While travelling through the southern Alentejo, you’ll pass mile upon mile of cork oak groves – so it may come as no surprise to learn that the district provides around fifty percent of the world’s entire supply of cork. It has been an important Portuguese export since the late nineteenth century and a major crop for over seven hundred years.

Cork (quercus suber) consists of a layer of spongy cells called phellogen that appear under the bark during the first year of growth. The cells grow radially outwards to form a durable, impermeable material with excellent thermal properties – it’s ideal to guard the tree against pests, fire and extremes of temperature, and also ideal as a material for humans to exploit. Importantly, the cork tree is also able to regenerate itself when a layer of cork is removed throughout the tree’s life (usually over a hundred years) – and each regenerated layer is thicker than its predecessor. Using a curved axe, cork farmers are therefore able to strip away rectangular layers of cork every nine years, the time it takes for the cork layers to be 4–6cm thick – ideal for wine stoppers. The world’s most productive cork tree, the 230-year-old Whistler Tree, in the northern Alentejo, has produced enough corks to stop up 100,000 bottles from a single harvest.

Cork trees cannot be harvested until they are at least 25 years old, and as a result, cork groves tend to be superb habitats for wildlife. Unfortunately this self-sustaining crop is under threat because of the growth in plastic and screw-top wine stoppers, forcing many farmers to rip up the cork groves for more viable crops, and destroying ancient habitats in the process.

*Alentejo Coastline © Kingawo / Shutterstock*

**The sounds of the Alentejo**

Every summer, you can enjoy two of Europe’s top music fesitvals on the Alentejo coast. The otherwise missable town of Sines hosts Portugal’s biggest festivals of world music every July. The Festival Músicas do Mundo has taken place annually since 1999, with a main stage alongside Sines’s castle and other events held at the beach or the Arts Centre; some also spill over to Porto Covo. Folk, traditional sounds and jazz predominate and recent acts have included Billy Bragg, London-based the Comet is Coming, Mali singer Oumou Sangaré and Bilan from Cape Verde. Day-tickets are a modest €15 or so.

Just down the coast at Zambujeira do Mar is the Festival Sudoeste, usually held in mid-August. An annual event since 1997, the festival turns this sleepy coastal resort into a mecca for up to thirty thousand music lovers. Three stages are set up for four days of concerts which, in recent years, have included sets by the likes of The Prodigy, Wiz Khalifa, Jessie J and the Ting Tings. One of the stages is dedicated to reggae.

**Estremoz**

The sleepy but highly appealing walled market town of ESTREMOZ lies in the centre of a district rich in marble quarries – so much so that the material is used extensively in the most commonplace surroundings, as you’ll see when you wander its marble-clad streets and squares. It was once an important border settlement where Dom Dinis, an early monarch who set about fortifying Portugal’s frontiers, chose to locate his hilltop palace. Meanwhile, down in the lower town, the vast main square known as the Rossio – properly, the Rossio Marquês de Pombal – has long been the site of one of Portugal’s finest markets, held every Saturday. It starts and finishes early, so it pays to stay over in town on Friday night if you can. The Rossio also hosts Estremoz’s annual festival (first weekend in Sept), as well as the huge five-day agricultural shindig in April known as the Feira Internacional de Agricultura e Pecuária, which mixes cattle shows, concerts and handicrafts.

**Alter do Chão**

North of Estremoz, the narrow but fast N245 thunders across the olive- and cork-lined plains to ALTER DO CHÃO, 48km away. It’s a handsome town, with the rounded towers of its castle facing directly onto a shaded central square, though the chief reason for a visit – well worth the drive – is to see the royal stud farm, the Coudelaria Alter-Real, which was founded by royalty in 1748. Alter-Real Lusitano horses have been greatly sought after ever since – the Lisbon Riding School and the Portuguese mounted police both use them. Guided visits show you the cosseted stallions in their vaulted stables, as well as the picadeiro (riding ring) and a collection of antique carriages. Some tours start with an impressive falcon-flying demonstration, and there’s also a small museum and the possibility of arranging a riding lesson in the picadeiro. The annual stud show and sale is every April 24, a great day for a visit.

**Coudelaria Alter-Real**

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**Marvão**

By the time you’ve negotiated the winding road up to MARVÃO you’re ready for sensational panoramas, and the remote border outpost doesn’t disappoint. From the dramatically sited rocky outcrop high above the undulating serra there are unbeatable views, while within a complete circuit of seventeenth-century walls lies a higgledy-piggledy town of fewer than a thousand residents, inhabiting neat houses with granite windows and pitched red roofs. It’s a fixture on the tourist trail of course, although many do no more than drive up for a quick look around, so spending the night here is an attractive proposition. There are few actual sights in the village save an impressive ruined castle, a couple of historical museums, and some displays in the Casa da Cultura, housed in the old town hall. Useful amenities cluster along the central Rua do Espírito Santo, where you’ll find the tiny village shop, the post office and an ATM. But in the end, it’s just as rewarding to simply climb the switchback cobbled streets or the (unguarded) outer town walls, or sit awhile in the impeccably kept terrace gardens.

**Elvas**

The attractive hilltop town of ELVAS was once one of Portugal’s mightiest frontier posts, strategically positioned just 15km from Spanish Badajoz, to the east across the Rio Guadiana. Its star-shaped walls and outlying forts of Graça and Santa Luzia are among the best-preserved military fortifications in Europe, a factor that subsequently helped gain the town UNESCO World Heritage status. Its military significance long past, and down to a population of around 25,000, it looks largely to tourism these days – Spanish day-trippers pop over to climb the steep cobbled streets and sit in the restored central square, the Praça da República, ringed by cafés and dominated by the mighty but ultimately underwhelming Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Assunção.

The vibrant Monday market (held on alternate weeks) is another big attraction, held just outside town behind the aqueduct. Otherwise, the town’s main annual bash is its week-long Festa de São Mateus, starting on September 20 and including the largest procession in southern Portugal.

**Brief history**

Today’s fortifications date largely from 1643–53, built during the Wars of Restoration with Spain (1641–68). Under the direction of a Dutch Jesuit, Padre Cosmander, an already impressive circuit of walls was supplemented by extensive moats and star-shaped ramparts. The result is considered to be the finest example of the Dutch school of fortifications anywhere in the world. In 1644, the garrison withstood a nine-day siege by Spanish troops, and in 1658, with its numbers reduced by an epidemic to a mere thousand, Elvas saw off a fifteen-thousand-strong Spanish army. During the Peninsular Wars in 1811, the fort provided the base from which Wellington successfully attacked Badajoz.

**Vila Viçosa**

The pretty town of VILA VIÇOSA is dominated entirely by its ducal palace – the last residence of the Portuguese monarchy – and by the coachloads of tourists who descend upon it for a quick visit before being whisked off again. Because of that, it’s actually quite a pleasant place to spend the night, with an unhurried small-town atmosphere that survives the daily imposition of visitors. As at Estremoz, marble is the dominant building material: the road from Borba, 5km away, is lined on either side with enormous marble quarries, and in town everything, from the pavements to the humblest building, is made of the local stone.

**Brief history**

The dukes of Bragança established their seat here in the fifteenth century, originally in the castle and then, from the early sixteenth century, in the Paço Ducal. The family were always an influential part of Portugal’s ruling elite, but it was only after Spain’s Philip II took over the Portuguese throne in 1581, that the Bragança family became truly powerful. After sixty years of Spanish rule, Portuguese soldiers rebelled and occupied the palace at Lisbon. The Duke of Bragança was the obvious choice to take back the throne from the Spanish and he duly became Dom João IV of Portugal. From 1640 to the birth of the Republic in 1910, the dynasty continued to rule as monarchs. Although the Bragançan dukes and kings had lavish palaces all over the country, they often chose to stay in Vila Viçosa – indeed it was here that Dom Carlos slept the night before he was shot in a republican uprising in the capital in 1908. His son, Manuel II, also used the palace frequently before his eventual exile to Britain two years later. Afterwards, the family was banned from entering Portugal until 1950 so, it is alleged that when the current duke, Dom Duarte Pio – who still considers himself heir to the throne – was born (1945) it was in the Portuguese embassy in Berne, Switzerland, to ensure any possible future right of succession.

**Don’t pick the flowers**

Every two years, the pretty little whitewashed town of Redondo (18km southwest of Vila Viçosa) bursts into bloom during the extraordinary Ruas Floridas, a week-long flower festival with a difference. In a revival of a nineteenth-century tradition, the cobbled old-town streets are covered in flowers, shade canopies, human figures, exotic animals and life-size scenes made entirely from coloured paper. Each street is responsible for choosing a theme, so you might walk up to the castle through a steamy jungle complete with elephants and parrots and back down along a Brazilian beach; caricatures of the local women wash clothes in a paper river, while wild boars root in paper acorns. At lunchtime, every single restaurant in Redondo is crammed with local families and visitors; at night there are marching bands, dances, concerts and bullfights. The event is biennial (odd years) and is usually held from the last day or two in July through the first week in August (exact dates on the local town council website cm-redondo.pt).

**Monsaraz and around**

MONSARAZ – known locally as Ninho das Águias (Eagles’ Nest) – is perched high above the border plains, a tiny village nestled into fortified walls close to the Spanish border. With a permanent population of only a few hundred, Monsaraz has just two main streets that run parallel to each other, Rua Direita and Rua de Santiago. The Igreja Matriz lies at the heart of the village, just off the main square that’s home to a curious eighteenth-century pillory. The village does its best to attract visitors with a series of little galleries, craft shops and restaurants, but it’s really the castle, the higgledy-piggledy streets and magnificent views from the walls that keep people coming: to the north and west, you survey a typically flat Alentejan plain of vineyards and olive groves, while to the south and east a watery expanse glitters far below the village, part of Europe’s largest artificial reservoir behind the dam at Alqueva.

Four thousand years ago, the region around Monsaraz was an important centre of megalithic culture, and various dolmens (covered temples or tombs), menhirs (standing stones) and stone circles survive today. An hour and a half’s driving circuit takes in most of these, and if you throw in lunch and a vineyard visit at nearby Reguengos that’s a good day out.

**Castelo de Monsaraz**

The Torre das Feiticeiras (Witches’ Tower) looms from the castle at the southern end of Monsaraz, part of a chain of impressive frontier fortresses, once ruled over by the Knights Templar and later the Order of Christ, who ensured the fortified town stayed in Christian hands long after it was taken from the Moors in 1167. You can clamber along the outer walls for stunning views, around a central space within the castle that was for a time used as a bullring.

**Moura**

The pleasantly provincial town of Moura, 50 km south of Monsaraz, is a surprisingly opulent place full of grand mansions, pretty squares and pedestrianized shopping streets. It’s also the closest town to the controversial Alqueva dam.The Moors occupied the town from the eighth century until 1232 – an Arabic well still survives in the old town – and Moura is named after a Moorish maiden, Moura Saluquia, who ostensibly threw herself from the castle tower in despair when Christians murdered her betrothed and overran the town.

The discovery of naturally carbonated thermal springs in the late nineteenth century prompted Moura’s eventual prosperity; the spa water still dribbles from the Fonte das Três Bicas (Fountain of Three Spouts), but the spa no longer operates. Nevertheless, the adjacent Jardim Doutor Santiago gardens make a pleasant place to stroll, with lots of shady trees. West of here rises the Manueline Igreja de São João Baptista, with the entrance to the castle beyond, just past the large market building.

**Things to do in Moura**

Although this charming little town spills with authenticity of 'true' Portuguese life, there is not much to do in the name of tourism. There is the Museum Arabe with remnants from the Moorish rule and the Church, Nossa Senhora do Carmo, the first Carmelite convent in Portugal.

**Weather in Moura**

The best time to visit Moura is during late Spring and early Autumn, when the weather is warm and calm. The Summer months can be particularly hot and humid, with temperatures around 30 degrees. During the Spring, the average temperature is around 23 degrees, as with Autumn.

**The Barragem de Alqueva**

In 2002 the floodgates opened on the controversial Barragem de Alqueva (Alqueva Dam), filled by the waters of the Rio Guadiana and several tributaries. At 250 square kilometres (of which 69 square kilometres are in Spain), it’s Europe’s largest reservoir. Plans for the project started decades ago under the Salazar regime, with the aim of providing reliable irrigation in this arid region and jobs in the agricultural and tourism industries. There are many who still lament the destruction of over a million oak and cork trees in its construction and the resulting threats to the habitats of golden eagles and the even rarer Iberian lynx, plus the submerging of over two hundred prehistoric sites. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the former village of Luz on the east bank of the Guadiana, now submerged, were relocated to a facsimile village above the waterline which, despite similarities of appearance, has become something of a failed experiment; the younger villagers having left and the older ones are deeply dissatisfied.

The government points to the benefits of the dam, not least the hydroelectric plant, switched on in 2004, which provides enough electricity to supply the [Évora](https://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/portugal/alentejo/evora/) and Beja districts combined. Smooth roads also now radiate from the dam, which has become something of a tourist attraction in its own right, the deep waters lapping on one side, a sheer drop on the other. Small marinas have also been built to provide watersports and boat trips.

**Serpa**

Thirty kilometres southwest of Moura, and the same again east of Beja, the small market town of SERPA offers the classic Alentejan attractions – a walled centre, a castle, and narrow, whitewashed streets of handsome bougainvillea-clad houses and lush gardens.

**Things to do in Serpa**

The town has at various times been occupied by Celts, Romans and Moors, and its highest point is capped by the remnants of its Castelo. The delight of Serpa is in wandering its quiet, little-visited streets that spread just a few hundred metres within the encircling walls. Centre of the settlement is the Praça da República, with its appealing cafés, while arched gates provide access to the more modern town beyond. To the south, the leafy public gardens provide shade in the hottest part of the day. The town’s annual feira takes place on the closest weekend to Aug 24, and there are big celebrations each Easter in honour of Nossa Senhora de Guadalupe.

**Things to do around Serpa**

Serpa, being a small town, often leads tourists to explore it's surronding areas. The Alquera Reservoir is about 30 minutes outside of Serpa and is an ideal location for a range of watersports. Most holiday rentals give the option to rent canoes and paddle-boards specifically for this purpose. Pulo do Lobo, a scenic waterfall amongst rugged stones can be found by following the Guadiana River through the Vale do Guiadiana Natural Park - look out for turtles, watersnakes and a range of bird-life including raptors.

A visit to Serpa's local Tourist Office will leave you with various options, such as guided walks and bicycle tours, hot-air balloon rides and nocturnal activities such as guided star-gazing, thanks to the distant location of Serpa providing a clear view of the night skies.

**Weather in Serpa**

The average temperature in Serpa is relatively pleasant all year round, excluding a few colder months during mid-winter. The hottest months are of course during the Summer, when temperatures reach around 30 degrees. Late Spring and early Autumn are the recommended months to visit Serpa in terms of the weather.

**Beja and Around**

Beja is the main town of the Baixa Alentejo (Lower Alentejo), though its population only numbers around 35,000. Weather-wise, its inland position means that it’s frequently the hottest place in Portugal, something to bear in mind if you plan a visit during the summer months. Once past the modern suburbs, you’ll find a laidback old quarter with a historic convent and an impressive castle dating from the thirteenth century. You can take in the sights in the compact historic centre in half a day, though it’s not a bad night’s stopover in any case, with plenty of good cafés and restaurants.

**Things to do in Beja**

The Torre de Menagem is made entirely from marble and is an impressive spectacle when visiting the grounds of Castelo de Beja. Amongst other monuments, churches and musuems, Beja has plenty to do if you are interested in history. Roman ruins and Moorish castles from Arab rule are present in Beja, showing a clear run through of Portugals everchanging history from invaders. Other top sites include Convento de Nossa de Senhora da Conceicao, hospital da Misericordia and Museum Jorge Vieria. If all else fails, strolling around the old quarter and stopping off in cafes is a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

**Brief History**

Commanding a strategic position in the centre of the plains, it has long been an important and prosperous city. Founded by Julius Caesar in 48 BC, it was named Pax Julia, in honour of the peace accord signed here between Rome and the Lusitanians, but later became Pax Augusta and then just Pax – this gradually became corrupted to Paca, Baca, Baju, and finally Beja. You can still experience the Roman influence to the north, at the atmospheric Ruinas Romanas de São Cucufate, where the history of three separate Roman villas is laid bare in a series of extensive excavations and reconstructions.

**The errant nun**

During the seventeenth century, Sister Mariana Alcoforado lived in Beja’s Convento de Nossa Senhora da Conceição, when her passionate affair with a French officer, Count Chamilly, became the talk of the town – and indeed, the whole country. The nun’s scandalous missives to her lover, Letters of a Portuguese Nun, were published in Paris in 1669 and became the Fifty Shades of Grey of their day. Scholars have debated as to whether the nun actually wrote the original letters, but they were so popular that they inspired several imitations.

**Beja airport**

More than a few eyebrows were raised when a former military airbase opened as Beja International Airport in 2011. The logic was that, roughly equidistant from Faro and Lisbon, it would offer an alternative entry point to the south. But opening just as recession hit – and about as far from the coast as you can get in Portugal and a good 150km from the Algarve – it is perhaps no great surprise that the airport has hardly been a success, with very few airlines using it even in peak season.

**Mértola**

MÉRTOLA, 54km southeast of Beja, is as beautifully sited as any town in the south, set high on a spur above the confluence of the Guadiana and Oeiras rivers, guarded by the ruins of a Moorish frontier castle. It makes a fine place to stay the night, or longer, with a compact, somnolent old town full of attractions, and quiet rural surroundings that form part of the Parque Natural Vale do Guadiana: the N265 through the park to Serpa is one of the loveliest drives in Portugal. The region is home to the rare black stork and other endangered species, and the local hills, riverbanks and valleys have some excellent walks, especially round the old mining village of São Domingos.

Mértola’s history goes back as far as Phoenician times, when it was an important river port, and it was later fortified and expanded by both Romans (as Myrtilis) and Moors (Martulah), before being taken by Dom Sancho II in 1238 as part of the Christian Reconquest. With the walled town occupying such a small area, successive conquerors and settlers simply built on what they found, which provides Mértola with its current fascination – the evidence of thousands of years of habitation visible in almost every building and street.

**Santiago do Cacém and around**

South of Alcácer, the only place that might tempt you to stop before the Alentejo coast is SANTIAGO DO CACÉM, an unassuming provincial town capped by a hilltop castle, with a decent regional museum and the fascinating Roman ruins of Miróbriga on its outskirts. It is close, too, to the impressive lagoon and beach at Lagoa de Santo André, and also marks the starting point of the 340km-long Rota Vicentina walking trail.

**The southern Alentejo coast**

Once south of the industrial town of Sines – avoidable unless you are on the trail of Vasco da Gama, who was born here – you’ll encounter one of the least developed coasts in Portugal, a wild, scrubby expanse of low hills and wave-pounded cliffs. Low-key resorts cluster round the various cove beaches that you can find right along the coast, including pretty Porto Côvo. Further south, Vila Nova de Milfontes is the main – and by far the nicest – Alentejan resort, while Almograve and Zambujeira do Mar, further south still, are both small seaside villages with stupendous beaches, a short drive from the northern Algarve.

**The Rota Vicentina**

The Rota Vicentina is a 340km long-distance footpath which runs from Santiago do Cacém in the Alentejo to Cabo de São Vicente in the Algarve. The northern, Alentejan half has two alternative routes: Porto Côvo is the beginning of the 115km-long Trilho dos Pescadores (Fisherman’s Trail), that follows coastal tracks long used by the local fishermen. Opened in 2012, it’s relatively well marked with coloured arrows, and tracks the coast via Milfontes (a taxing first section, 20km), Almograve (15km further), Zambujeira (another 22km) and into the Algarve at Odeceixe (18km on). It’s tough going, much of it along towering cliffs, but no section is longer than 25km which means – in theory – you always have accommodation and a place to eat at the end of your day’s walk.

The inland alternative is the Caminho Histórico (Historic Way) which follows ancient pilgrimage routes from Santiago do Cacém, mostly inland, to Cabo de São Vicente. Be aware that, as with all Portuguese trails, way-marking can be sporadic and poorly maintained, so if you tackle the path, take a good map or GPS system – but it is worth the effort, as the routes embrace some of the loveliest scenery in the country. Full details are on rotavicentina.com, which also includes five shorter, circular alternatives.

**Vila Nova de Milfontes**

Vila Nova de Milfontes– 20km south of Porto Côvo – is the main and most attractive resort on the Alentejo coast. Although it gets very busy in high season, it is the Portuguese families who predominate, injecting good humour and a relaxed atmosphere. The attractive whitewashed streets of the old town huddle around a striking, ivy-wreathed sixteenth-century castle facing the estuary of the Rio Mira. Built in 1599 to guard the town against North African pirates, the small castle was a hotel for many years, but is now closed to the public.

The town’s long, sandy river beach lies just a few minutes’ walk to the west. Swimmers need to be aware of the strong river currents – the town beach has roped-off swimming areas that you should heed – and even more so at the beaches either side of town, where the breakers can be fierce. Swim close to the locals who know the waters well, and you shouldn’t have anything to worry about. Even though the town beach is spacious, it gets busy in high season, when you might want to take the ferry from the jetty at the foot of the castle across the estuary to Furnas, a long, sandy beach also accessible off the main coast road.

**Things to do in Vila Nova de Milfontes**

During the summer when temperatures are around 35 degrees, it can be tempting to just lay out on the beach. If, however, you are brave and wish to get a little adventurous there are the Rota Vicentina hiking trails. We recommend the Fisherman's trail that ends up at Malhao beach, passing the charming Milfontes harbour along the way. Cycling is ideal here, with quiet and relatively flat roads leading to beaches and coves. Kayaking, stand up paddle boarding and boat trips are also an option.

**Vasco da Gama**

Vasco da Gama (1460–1524) was one of Portugal’s greatest explorers – you’ll find places named after him all over the country as well as a town in India, a football team in Brazil and even a crater on the Moon. He was born in Sines, the son of the town governor. In the 1490s he worked for João II protecting trading stations along the African coast. His successes persuaded the next king, Manuel I, to commission him to find a potentially lucrative sea route to India. He left Lisbon in July 1497 with a fleet of four ships, reaching southern Africa in December – they named it Natal (“Christmas” in Portuguese). By the following May they reached Calicut in southwest India, and obtained trading terms there before departing in August 1498. The scale of their voyage can be gauged by the fact that Vasco da Gama did not return to Portugal until September 1499, and arrived with just two of his ships – half the crew had died. But Vasco da Gama was richly rewarded by the king, his journey inspiring Camões to write Os Lusiadas, Portugal’s most famous epic poem. Vasco da Gama returned to India twice more, the final time in 1524 when he contracted malaria and died in the town of Cochin. You can visit his birthplace in the otherwise missable industrial town of Sines, where the Casa de Vasco da Gama in Sines’ castle records his eventful life.

**Portalegre**

PORTALEGRE is the capital, market centre and transport hub of Alto Alentejo, a busy commercial centre of around twenty thousand people in the foothills of the Serra de São Mamede. Despite its attractive whitewashed old quarter, it’s not the most appealing of the Alentejo’s towns, but it’s Portalegre’s industrial history that makes it warrant a visit. Until the end of the seventeenth century, the town was a major textiles centre, though the 1703 Methuen Treaty largely put paid to the trade. However, reminders of a prosperous past still survive and lend the town a certain character. The largest tapestry factory – once housed in a Jesuit college in the lower town – has been beautifully restored as city council offices, while the great brick twin chimneys at the very top of town belong to the Fábrica Robinson, a cork factory originally established by an enterprising Yorkshireman (there are plans to turn this into a cultural centre).

All roads converge on the Rossio, the nineteenth-century square with a fountain that’s at the heart of modern Portalegre. Beyond here the town gardens flank Avenida da Liberdade, the lower part featuring a renowned plane tree (plátano), planted in 1848, whose spreading branches are now so long they have to be supported by pillars. The old town is reached up steep cobbled streets lined with grand mercantile mansions, a legacy of the wealth from silk workshops and textile factories that once thrived here.

**Castelo de Vide**

Twenty kilometres north of Portalegre, the small town of CASTELO DE VIDE throws up one of the nicest surprises in the Alto Alentejo. A castle rises up above a fairy-tale townscape of bright white houses, while steep cobbled streets and placid squares are lined with well-watered pots of geraniums, tumbling house plants and 2m-high sunflowers. Mineral springs pepper the local hills and the town is full of public fountains in shaded gardens and gleaming praças – at the top of town, Praça Alta provides sweeping views across the plain. It’s one of those places that begs an aimless, meandering stroll, and it’s very easy to find you’ve spent a couple of days here doing not very much at all quite happily.

With a car or a bike you can also spend an enjoyable day tracking down dolmens, menhirs and antas, which are the remains of an important megalithic culture that once flourished between the modern-day settlements of Castelo de Vide, the Barragem de Póvoa and the village of Póvoa e Meadas, 10km to the north. The turismo has useful leaflets and more information.