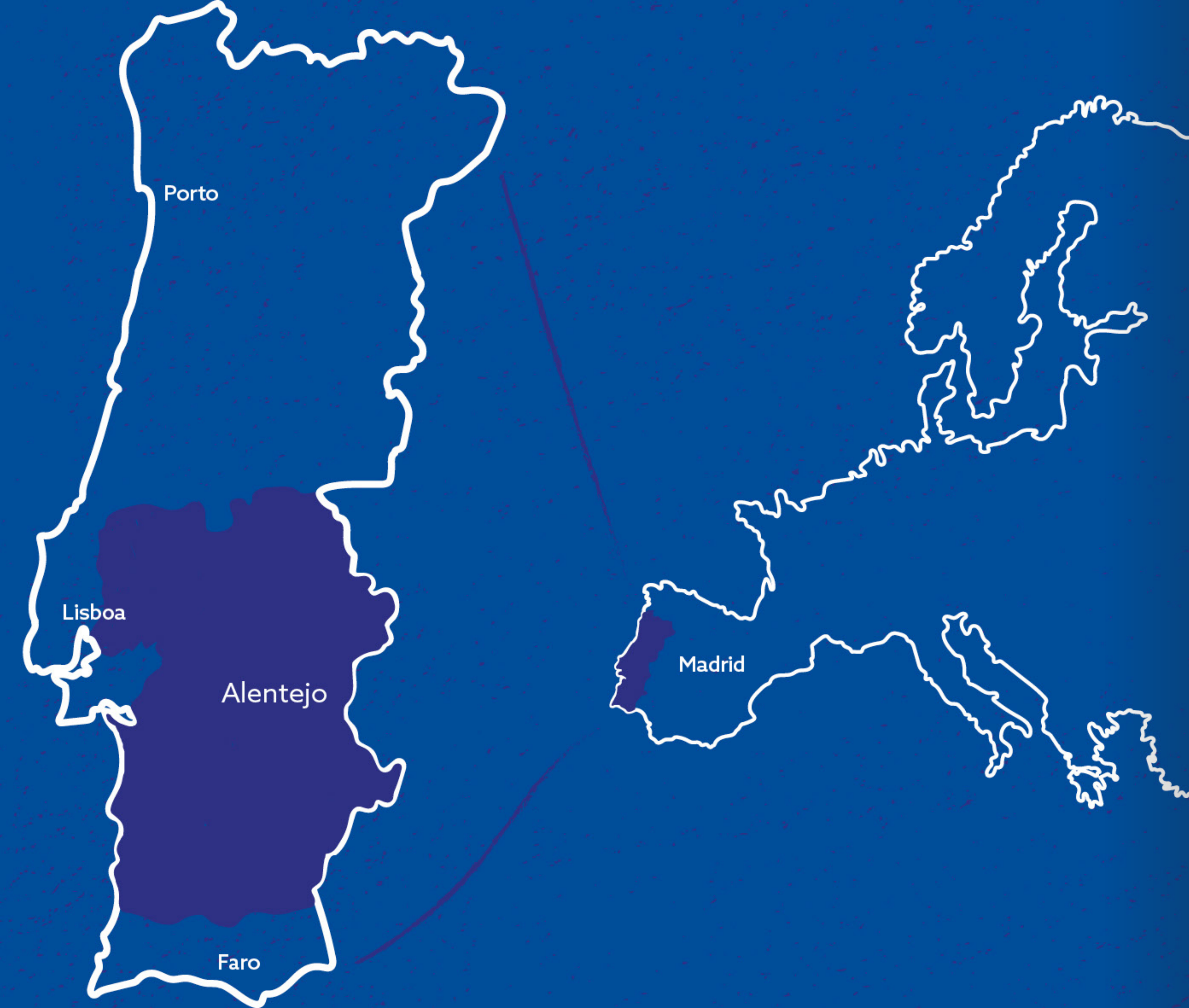


ALENTEJO

COME ALIVE

 visit Alentejo
Portugal

HISTORY • CULTURE •
HERITAGE



ALENTEJO

COME ALIVE





Come alive to the culture of the Alentejo.

It's a region shaped by nature and tradition, as well as by a long history of occupying forces, whose legacies are still evident today.

From primitive Neolithic monuments, through the engineering and organisational prowess of the Romans, to the sophistication of the Moors and the elegance and artistic riches of the Renaissance, this is a region of many cultures.

Come and see for yourself. Come alive to the incredible span of history. Come alive to the stunning architecture, the sturdy castles and the ancient villages. Come alive to the exquisite craftsmanship, the sensational gastronomy and wine. Come alive to the passion of this extraordinary region.

Come alive in the Alentejo.





ALENTEJO



Lisbo



PRIMITIVE PREHISTORY

MONUMENTS OF EARLY MAN

Man has found his home in the Alentejo for thousands of years. Few traces remain from prehistory, but the numerous Neolithic monuments and standing stones littering the region are striking: primitive structures, often in a sublime setting with an atmosphere all their own.

The Alentejo has one of the greatest concentrations of Neolithic dolmens and menhirs in Europe (there are over 150 monuments around Évora alone). The Cromeleque dos Almendres is perhaps the most renowned – pre-dating Stonehenge by some 3,000 years, it was only discovered in the 1960s and you are likely to find it free of crowds as the sun sets.



Notable others include the Anta Grande do Zambujeiro (Portugal's largest dolmen), the Menir da Meada at Castelo de Vide (the tallest menhir in the Iberian Peninsula, at 7 meters) and megaliths in Portalegre and Reguengos de Monsaraz.

The Alentejo's megaliths are considerably older than other western Europe monuments, and their creation points to the dawn of ordered society: the development of agricultural practices, religious and spiritual frameworks and communal living.

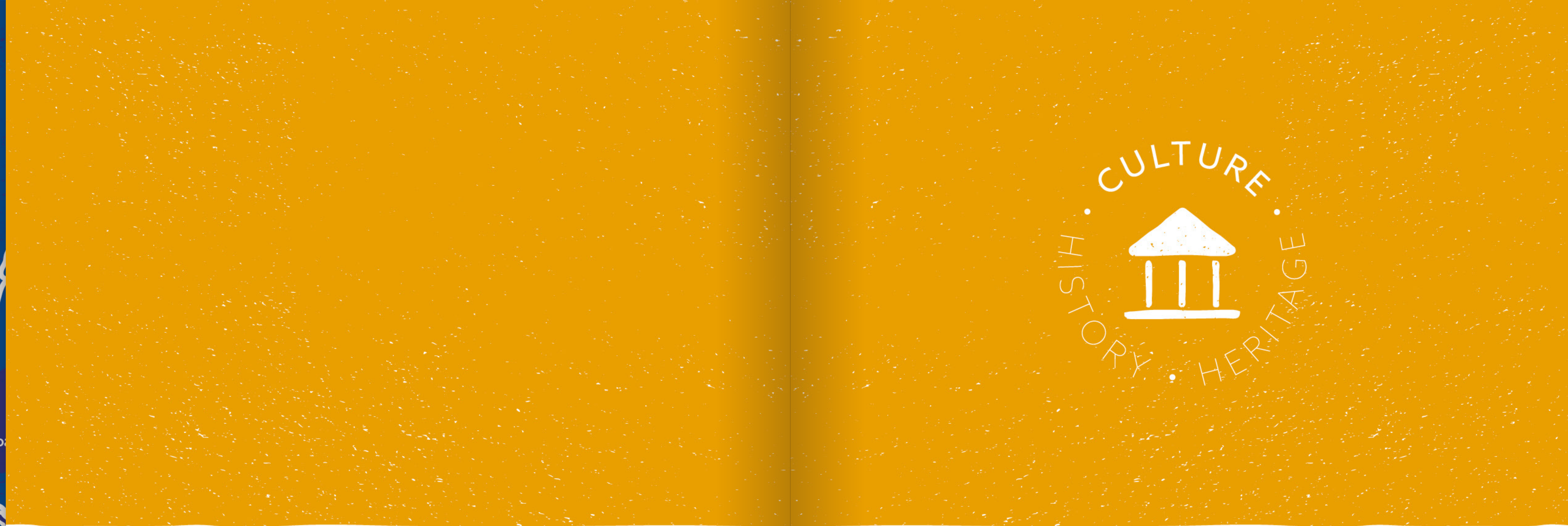
The prehistoric monuments of the Alentejo are a fascinating insight into the beginnings of civilised society. Don't pass by the opportunity to visit a few during your visit.





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INSIDER'S TIP
Why not visit the incredible cave paintings
of Arronches dating back to 3,000 BC.
”





ALENTEJO 





ROMAN REMAINS

LEGACY OF THE LEGIONS

History runs deep in the Alentejo. The Romans held sway from the 2nd century BC until the fall of the Empire in the 5th century, and they left a legacy which exists to this day, not least in the Portuguese language.

For the Romans, the region was a valuable source of wheat and other resources. They brought advances in mining and agriculture, often on large estates, or *latifúndios*, dominated by lavish *villas*. They created the infrastructure to control the region, bring authority and develop prosperity.



And the Romans constructed the tools of the empire: forts, temples, bridges, paved roads, theatres, dams, aqueducts. They introduced new techniques for ceramic production, salt mining, fish salting and ship building, and enabled more efficient production of olives and vines.

Today, Roman remains are scattered across the Alentejo. Évora is rich in history with its Roman temple, dating from the 1st century, still standing in the forum. Its Roman walls, originally 2 km in length, can still be seen along with lavish baths only discovered in 1987.

Important too were Miróbriga, with its forum, two temples and baths, as well as the “lost” Roman city of Ammaia, near Marvão. Elsewhere are remarkable ruins of *villas* like São Cucufate, near Vidigueira.

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INSIDER'S TIP

Visit the important Roman remains in Troia, best-known for the production and trade in the popular Roman fish-based sauce *Garum* as well as for producing salted fish. Visitors can still see the large fish-salting complex, a set of Roman baths, an ancient mausoleum and cemetery, and the remains of the residential areas of the settlement.

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ALENTEJ 

CULTURE





ARAB INFLUENCES

SOPHISTICATION AND FLAIR

The Moors arrived in the 8th century and held power until 1249, when the Reconquest finally ousted them. During their tenure, they improved irrigation techniques further, introducing crops like rice, almond, orange and lemon, which in turn led to additions to the Portuguese language and to the development of new culinary traditions that thrive to this day. Glance at any menu, especially the irresistible desserts, and you'll see evidence of Moorish tastes and influence.

This period saw a boom in the artistic crafts, with the production of decorated ceramic tiles, or *azulejos*, and numerous other artisan activities like the weaving of tapestries and carpets, leather goods and intricate jewellery making.





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INSIDER'S TIP

Visit the museum in the centre of Mértola, with exhibits that have been found in Mértola over the last 30 years due to a vast number of archaeological digs in the area.

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The Moors introduced navigational techniques that later allowed Portuguese explorers to re-draw the boundaries of the world map. And fortifications sprang up in Islamic style, though relatively few survive. Many that did were later put to good use, reinforced and modified by Dom Dinis and other kings.

The narrow streets and cobbled alleys of low, white-washed houses, such a feature of the Alentejo's fortified hilltop villages, are often credited to the Moors.

One of the best-known Moorish remains is the church at Mértola, where the slender columns, Islamic 'keyhole' doorways and architecture give away the fact that it was once a mosque, dating from the 12th century.

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INSIDER'S TIP

While at the Igreja Matriz church in Mértola, take time to visit the atmospheric crypt too, as well the castle behind, before soaking up the panoramic views over the Guadiana.

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ALENTEJ 

CULTURE





MEDIEVAL MASTERPIECES

RICHERS AND RENAISSANCE

During the Christian Reconquest of the 12th century, Portugal as we know it today was born. The following centuries saw new prosperity from the New World discoveries, and later from the gold boom in Brazil.

Dias paved way for the Golden Age, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. A decade later, Vasco da Gama reached India, shortly before Cabral landed in Brazil. Between 1519 and 1521, Magellan circumnavigated the globe and soon Portugal had colonies from the Amazon to Argentina, and from Kerala to Bangkok.

Global trade brought prosperity and flourishing arts and architecture.

Renaissance palaces sprang up, convents and beautiful churches too, with Manueline, Baroque and Rococo influences. Évora, the region's capital, was in its heyday as the residence of the Portuguese kings.



ATURE

Following centuries saw the Alentejo landscape sprout innumerable castles and fortified towns and villages – defensive measures against the threatening Spanish, and today a source of great beauty.

Countless examples well worth a visit include Portalegre, Arronches, Évora, Redondo and Terena. The 14th-century castle keeps at Beja and Estremoz are fascinating, and the star-shaped fortifications at Elvas are among the finest examples in the world. The circular castle of Arraiolos is rare, and the fortified hilltop towns of Marvão and Monsaraz are both unmissable and exquisite.

Each has its own story, complete with epic, wide-screen views to savour, and wonderful walks and historical footnotes to soak up.

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INSIDER'S TIP

Évora is a treasure trove of must-sees. But the 17th-century Chapel of Bones, lined with skulls, is eerily beautiful – if uniquely macabre – and one of the most visited sites.

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ALENTEJ 

CULTURE





UNIQUE UNESCO

CELEBRATING THE EXTRAORDINARY

The Alentejo is a fascinating region with a rich history that runs through thousands of years. Its landscapes, architectural heritage, culture and monumental legacies are all unique and exceptional. UNESCO has recognised so much of this treasured heritage and awarded protected status to many aspects.

ÉVORA

The jewel in the crown, this ancient city is packed with history dating back to Pre-Roman times. Highlights include the Roman temple, the cathedral, Casas Pintadas (Painted Houses), Cadaval Palace, the 16th-century University and the magnificent Praça do Giraldo square. There is so much history that the entire city has been rated as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

ELVAS

Perched high on a hill, this is a fascinating place with narrow, cobbled streets and a compact cathedral set at the head of the elegant central square. The star-shaped fortifications here date from the 17th century and are the largest in the world, with a perimeter of 10 km. Stroll along the town's ramparts for sensational views and a real sense of history.

The castle, forts and majestic 7 km-long Amoreira aqueduct add to the drama and all are UNESCO World Heritage sites.





CANTE ALENTEJANO

A type of traditional two-part singing performed by rural workers, with distinctive melodies and without instrumentation.

CHOCALHOS

These ancestral cowbells have an unmistakable sound and a place in the region's soundscape dating back 2,000 years.

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INSIDER'S TIP

The evocative *chocalhos* (cowbells) make wonderfully unique souvenirs. Pick up a few to ensure great memories of your visit - and to support an ancient art.

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CLAY FIGURINES

Since the 16th century, Estremoz has been noted for its celebrated clay figures – depicting various characters as well as traditions of the Alentejo. Exquisitely crafted and delicately painted, they are now recognised by UNESCO.

THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

UNESCO recognises this diet within Alentejan gastronomy: particular Mediterranean foods, along with the skills, knowledge and traditions regarding harvesting, husbandry, conservation and cooking. As well as the conviviality, celebration and passing on of knowledge at mealtimes.





ARTS & CRAFTS HERITAGE

DISCOVERING THE ANCIENT SKILLS

The Alentejo has a rich heritage of arts and crafts, with skills and traditions handed down through the ages by successive generations.

The tradition of small-scale artisan crafts runs deep. Each utilises the local natural resources, with individual villages and areas often becoming renowned for specific crafts. Portalegre is famed for exquisite tapestries, Arraiolos for its intricate carpets and Nisa for delicate embroidery and red clay pottery. Fine hand-woven blankets come from Monsaraz and Mértola, while painted furniture is made in Redondo and Ferreira do Alentejo.

Portugal is famed for its decorative, ceramic tiles, and none more so than the *azulejos* of the Alentejo. The blue and white designs are often associated with ornate palaces and religious monuments, in vogue from the 18th century, while earthier, brighter colours originated from the Moorish tradition.

The Alentejan crafts are endless: ceramic figures from Estremoz, skilful leatherwork, fine jewellery and high-quality goldsmithery. The practical and the artistic merge happily, with cork used in all kinds of everyday goods and fashion, and time-honoured pottery techniques creating functional objects and spectacular pieces.

Tradition is revered, so ancient Roman wine-making techniques using clay amphorae or *talha* still exist alongside state-of-the-art wineries. And artisans everywhere produce sensational speciality breads, divine cheeses, acorn fed hams, fragrant olive oil and heavenly pastries and puddings (*toucinho do céu*, *tigeladas* and *tecolameco* are but three).

“
INSIDER'S TIP

Cork is the ultimate renewable, sustainable, biodegradable product. The countryside is dotted with cork oaks, their bark intricately harvested by hand every nine years – truly fascinating to watch!

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VIBRANT FESTIVALS

FEELING THE PASSION

Look out for festivals, big and small, as you travel around the Alentejo. They are truly exuberant, often celebrating a religious event, musical traditions or food and wine – more usually all three combined! They are a great way to see the real Alentejo up close and personal.

Many festivals, or *festas*, are linked to the rhythm of the seasons. This is a rural region with deep-rooted connections with the land. As the year passes, the landscape changes and the rural activities change with it.

These moments are celebrated and marked – part religious, part spiritual – with a passion and exuberance that reveres tradition while embracing modernity.

“
INSIDER'S TIP

All Alentejo festivals are colourful, lively and friendly. Visitors are always welcome, so get involved, meet the locals and discover a taste of the unexpected.

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Festas do Povo de Campo Maior: This is a time when the locals join together to decorate their neighbourhood with paper flowers arranged in joyful and brightly-coloured compositions.

Sines: A major World Music Festival held in July, with global stars.

Mértola: Islamic Festival held bi-annually in May and packed with flamboyant entertainment and ancient traditions.

Baixo Alentejo: The Festival Terras Sem Sombra is an internationally acclaimed festival, showcasing the religious and musical heritage of the Alentejo and other countries.

Serpa: The Noites na Nora festival in July offers theatre, music and dance with the monumental aqueduct acting as backdrop.

Marvão: In July, classical music wafts around the dream-like setting of the ancient hilltop village of Marvão.

Arraiolos: The famous carpet festival, with beautiful exhibits suspended from windows and balconies around the town.





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