

Aveiro's canals are renowned for their "moliceiro" boats, which are bursting with colour



COURTESY: CENTRE OF PORTUGAL

NESTLED BETWEEN PORTO AND LISBON, THE UNSPOILT HEART OF PORTUGAL OFFERS AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES AWAY FROM THE TOURIST CROWDS

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ON A COOL, CRISP MORNING MY FELLOW travellers and I left Porto, Portugal's second-largest city, for the short drive to our first stop—Cidade de Aveiro on the west coast.

I was exploring Central Portugal's lesser-known towns and villages—well off the tourist trail—with a group of like-minded people. Cidade de Aveiro is defined by a network of canals where colourful, hand-painted *moliceiros* gently bob on the water. Our guide noted that these eye-catching, gondola-like boats were originally used to harvest algae, fish, and seaweed from the lagoon. Today, they carry tourists. Often dubbed the "Portuguese Venice," Aveiro has a distinct character all its own.

We skipped the boat ride and opted for a walking tour of the city's charming streets lined with stunning Art Nouveau buildings. I paused to admire the elegant, pastel-toned façades adorned with intricate embellishments and wrought-iron balconies. Inside the Art Nouveau Museum, I found walls decorated with original *azulejos*—mainly floral motifs and rustic scenes. For lovers of architecture, Aveiro is a veritable open-air museum.



The striking statue of Tomar's founder, Gualdim Pais

We took a break at Confeitaria Peixinho, a pastry shop established in 1856, to enjoy coffee and a taste of the iconic *Ovos Moles* (Aveiro's signature sweet). Shaped like seashells, *Ovos Moles* (soft eggs), originated as a "best-out-of-waste" creation by nuns. They used leftover egg yolks, after the whites were reserved for cleaning and starching, mixed them with sugar and encased the mixture in a delicate, edible wafer.

Next, we drove past Aveiro's famed salt pans, Salinas de Aveiro, on our way to Costa Nova, a breezy beachside strip known for its *palheiros*—striped fishing cottages painted in vibrant hues. We weren't there to surf or swim but to enjoy fresh seafood at Clube de Vela da Costa Nova. I polished off oysters with a splash of lemon and buttery clams bursting with the flavours of garlic.

FLAVOURS OF BAIRRADA

Satisfied, we continued to the Wine Tourism and Passion Store in Curia, located within a beautifully tiled 1944 railway station in this spa town at the heart of the Bairrada wine region. The venue is perfect for learning about Bairrada's wine traditions and

THROUGH PORTUGAL'S SOUL



sampling its local varieties.

We took part in an engaging aroma test, sniffing scent bottles to detect signature terroir notes such as cherry, strawberry, citrus, and earthy undertones. This was followed by tasting Bairrada's rich red wines and sparkling whites and rosés, paired with pecan tarts, croquettes, and roasted piglet—a regional delicacy.

The day's highlight was meeting Luís Pato, a witty and innovative winemaker often called the “rebel producer” of the Bairrada region, for his unconventional ways of wine production. At his winery in Amoreira da Gândara, we explored his barrel

room and wine library and discovered his inventive winemaking techniques, including one that employs natural air conditioning.

WHERE LOVE LINGERS

Arriving in Coimbra by evening, we checked into Quinta das Lágrimas, an 18th-century palace turned tranquil 55-room retreat. The property's highlight is the evocative 12-hectare garden, Jardim da Quinta das Lágrimas, dedicated to the tragic love story of Prince Pedro and Inês de Castro. Day two began with a walk through this garden, where we identified exotic trees like Himalayan cedars, sequoias, Chinese fan palms, and even

COIMBRA IS A CAPTIVATING RIVERSIDE CITY AND HOME TO THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST UNIVERSITY

a majestic Kusamaki, which comes from Southern Africa. I wished I could linger on a shaded bench, but we were soon en route to Coimbra's city centre.

Once the capital of the Portuguese kingdom, Coimbra is a captivating riverside city and home to the country's oldest university, founded in 1290. We explored its historic campus, including several 16th-century colleges, the Royal Palace of Alcáçova, the University Press, and the Botanical Garden. The ornate tilework and coir mats of the 12th-century Cathedral of Santa Cruz and the baroque Biblioteca Joanina were stunning. The library alone, with its painted ceilings and carved shelves, houses over 60,000 volumes.

Strolling downhill into Coimbra's compact *baixa* (downtown), a maze of cobbled streets and centuries-old buildings, we passed under medieval arches, browsed souvenir shops and art galleries, and peeked into Fado bars and cafés once frequented by Portugal's thinkers and writers. Also known as Casas de Fado, they are great places to catch some traditional Portuguese music.

When in Coimbra, be sure to visit the quirky Pharmacia GuestHouse—once a pharmacy, now an eclectic stay. Step in and you see its reception adorned with breathtaking frescoes and antique medicine bottles made of glass.

IN TEMPLAR FOOTSTEPS

We bid Coimbra farewell and drove 45 minutes to Quinta Casal das Freiras, a family-run estate near Tomar in the Ribatejo province, part of the Tejo wine route. Welcomed by a father-daughter duo, we learnt their family had lived on the estate since 1882. We wandered among vineyard-cloaked slopes, olive groves, and cornfields framed by the Serra d'Aire hills. The countryside had an instantly calming effect. Over a long, rustic lunch, we discussed Tomar's winemaking culture and its unique Festa dos Tabuleiros (Festival of the Trays), where girls carry floral trays on their



Biblioteca Joanina is one of the most beautiful libraries in the world

heads in a centuries-old ritual.

Next came Tomar, a town of 20,000 brimming with Templar history. We visited the Convent of Christ—once a fortress of the Knights Templar—before wandering its pedestrian-friendly streets to Praça da República, a chequerboard-paved square. The grid-like layout leads to humble cafés perfect for a leisurely pause. We stopped at one before settling into the riverside Vila Galé Collection Tomar.

COOKING IN THE WILD

The following morning promised some activity. After a hearty breakfast, we ventured to Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park—a 38,000-hectare limestone escarpment rich in flora and fauna, including 35 orchid species, 18 bat species, and over 100 types of birds. We admired traditional stone shepherd huts during a guided hike near Alvados village, soaking in the fresh mountain air.

Hiking worked up our appetite, and next

was a cooking class at the Cooking and Nature Emotional Hotel's rustic kitchen. Over glasses of wine, we prepared a three-course meal under expert guidance: codfish loin with vegetable Brás, an apple tart with caramelised onion and blood pudding rice, and a molten chocolate cake with raspberry sorbet. Our efforts were richly rewarded.

A FAREWELL IN STONE

As we prepared to leave, the skies opened up, but the rain didn't dampen our excitement for we saw the Grutas de Mira de Aire caves—one of Portugal's largest geological treasures and one of its Seven Natural Wonders. Formed over 150 million years ago and discovered in 1947, the cave stretches 11 km, with 600 m open to visitors.

We descended into the Middle Jurassic marvel to see glowing limestone formations, pools, stalactites, and stalagmites. The cave also hosts a wine cellar, thanks to its stable climate. We ended our visit with a wine and cheese tasting—vinho in one hand, Serra da Estrela cheese in the other—a fitting toast to a rich, heartfelt journey through Portugal's Centro. ►OT

PLANNING YOUR TRIP



Hit the Road

The storybook towns of Central Portugal are just a short drive from one another. Renting a car offers both freedom and flexibility to explore at your own pace.



Fly Smart

Skip the crowds at Lisbon and fly into Porto's Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport—the country's second-largest and a great starting point for Central Portugal.



Stay in Coimbra

This historic university town makes for an ideal base, with easy access to nearby villages, forests, and coastlines.



Visa Essentials

Indian passport holders need a Schengen visa to visit Portugal, valid for stays of up to 90 days in a 180-day period.



Clockwise from top: Costa Nova's striped houses; In Costa Nova, dig into fresh oysters and clams; Winemaker Luís Pato, the “rebel producer” of the Bairrada region

