

Northern Portugal refr

by Edward I. Placidi

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THE astoundingly beautiful countryside of Northern Portugal harbors a strangely time-resistant ambience that is unique and refreshing in cosmopolitan Europe.

Yet even return visitors to Portugal seem to overlook the region, known as the Costa Verde, or the "Green Coast," and only a trickle of the hordes that descend upon Portugal each year venture into its dreamy, remote enchantment.

Turbulent rivers spring from mist-shrouded, foreboding mountains but are slowly subdued as they traverse undulating terrain of red, yellow and green fields. Grape-laden trellises and leafy oak and sycamore shelter stone houses that are overgrown with vines. Miles of sandy Atlantic coastline are punctuated by sand dunes and pine woods.

Wooden-wheeled carts, pulled by pairs of oxen and piled high with freshly cut grass for fodder, rumble down paving-stone roads. Long gold earrings dangle from the lobes of the women dressed in bandanas and smocks, either in bright colors and patterns or head-to-toe black. The hospitable people turn from their work in the fields to smile, wave and shout "*Bon dias!*" [Good day!] as you pass. And atmospheric towns and villages, rich in history and architec-

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ture, are the scenes of weekly open air country markets and numerous festivals and religious processions.

Particularly if you are an independent traveler, offbeat and folkloric northern Portugal is your kind of place — with much more to offer than just its incomparable charm.

SEASIDE resorts with uncrowded, sparkling-clean beaches, excellent seafood, some of the world's most special wines, the country's most diverse and colorful artisanry, some singular lodging experiences, spectacular *miradors* [observation points] and some of Portugal's lowest prices — which means they are among Europe's lowest — are all part of the lure of the north.

Porto, Portugal's second largest city, is the gateway to the north. From here, buses and trains reach all points of the Costa Verde, but renting a car is probably the ideal tack for leisurely exploring. Distances are short and roads

noticeably uncongested.

Porto is an important industrial hub, and with its exhaust-filled air, noise and congestion it's not on many travelers' itineraries. But don't overlook Porto's greatest asset.

Porto is the home of original and authentic Port, the distinctive wine that owes its names to the city — as does the country. The grapes are grown in the nearby Douro Valley but are aged in oak casks, blended and shipped from Vila Nova de Gaia, a suburb of Porto. Many of the wine shippers' lodges offer interesting tours and generous wine tastings.

A few miles north of Porto you enter Vinho Verde, or "Green Wine," country, where some wineries also welcome visitors. This young, quick-maturing wine is pleasantly effervescent and refreshing, with a tingle to it. One oenologist calls it "an experience to count among your best gastronomical memories." And it complements such local dishes as *Bacalhau de Margarida*, dried cod sauteed in olive oil with olives and onions, grilled sardines, lamprey eels or *Caldeirada*, the local bouillabaisse. A full meal for two with a bottle of Vinho Verde runs \$10 to \$15 in local restaurants and portions are always gargantuan.

In the heart of Vinho Verde country is Barcelos, Portugal's richest borough for arts and crafts and site of what is possibly Europe's largest and most enthralling weekly open air market. Every Thursday, artisans, merchants, farmers and shoppers from throughout the region gather in Barcelos for what becomes more a fair than a market.

The merchants erect a tent city to house their wares; peasant women arrive with produce-filled sacks balanced on their heads as the women carry everything here; friends eagerly seek each other out to exchange news and gossip in clandestine little groups; the buying selling and competing hawkers' cries reach frenetic proportions; artisans display and hand-carved ox yokes, baskets, rugs, crochet work, and wood carvings and widely colorful ceramic demons, biblical figures, marching soldiers, country peasants and abstract Mardi Gras-type characters.

Plan to visit Barcelos on a Thursday to both shop and take a step back into Portuguese folkloric tradition.

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Alfonso's intact 10th-century castle and chapel share a green spur dominating the town with the enormous Gothic palace of the Dukes of Braganca, now the official residence of the head of state when he visits the north. Below the spur, Guimaraes is thick with medieval atmosphere, lantern-lit cobblestone alleys weave through granite archways, stone arcades and houses with wooden balconies and tile facades.

Midway between Barcelos and Guimaraes is Braga, an important episcopal see and Portugal's giant for religious pageantry, particularly during Holy Week. And rising above

The buying, selling and competing hawkers' cries reach frenetic proportions at Barcelos' weekly open air country market, possibly rope's largest.

the city is the 1,200-foot-high pilgrimage site of Bom Jesus, the Costa Verde's best known *mirador*. You can reach the summit by the funicular railway or the 1,000-step "Stairway of the Five Senses," which pilgrims ascend on their knees saying a prayer on each step. Up top are a church, flower gardens, gazebos amid trees, two inns, a cafe and a verdant, 20-mile panorama to the ocean.

Guimaraes has its romantic heights too, Penha, also with two inns plus camping grounds and eucalyptus, poplars and black and gray boulders. Barcelos has Franquiera, with a magnificent panorama but no lodgings. The fortress town of Valenca, enclosed in rings of ramparts interlinked by a maze of passageways and archways, has a mirador with a *pousada*, or historic inn, in a 13th-century castle.

ANOTHER *pousada* is near Canicada, at the entrance to wildlife-filled Geres National Park. Or you may want to stay at a privately owned estate house, such as Casa das Pereiras at Ponte de Lima. Double rooms at inns, *pousadas* or estate houses usually run \$20 to \$40, with continental breakfast.

Along the Atlantic coast are a number of resort areas with luxury hotels, many amenities, nightclubs and restaurants, notably Ofir and Espinha. There are also a number of tranquil seaside towns and villages, offering family-run inns and cafes, ideal for peaceful swimming and fishing in summer. The coast is experiencing some development, but the wide, white beaches are still spotless and uncrowded.

The hub of the coast is Viana do Castelo, the folkloric capital of Portugal, recognized for its elaborate

costumery, filigree work and Viana has its *mirador* too, Luzia, also reached by a funicular railway, with a great basilica rising over the town and a four-story hotel.

Viana is rich in granite houses with Manueline windows and balconies. In the north, all streets seem to lead to a square, espalade, fountain or flower garden. The folkloric market is second only to that of Barcelos, with carts and hawkers making the streets all but impossible.

But for the full folkloric flavor, the Costa Verde plan to visit Viana during the third week of August for the gala feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. You will see Viana's costumes in their full glory in elaborate parades through teeming streets with dancing and fireworks.

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