

A quiet charm in Portugal's offbeat

Minho province

In the extreme northwest corner of Portugal, turbulent rivers spring from the foreboding mountains of Peneda-Geres National Park. They are subdued, though, to a gentle flow as they traverse the verdant Vinho Verde (Green Wine) vineyards to sandy Atlantic shores.

In this lush, serene countryside of Minho province, where every passing peasant smiles a "*Bon dias!*" (Good day!) your way, the founding roots of Portugal still cling to the aged soil. Folklore lives on in ancient, lumbering villages and towns rich in history and architecture; life continues at an anachronistic pace.

Portugal's birthplace today is the country's almost forgotten backwater, a poor, bucolic world where most

subsist off small, time-honored, family plots. And while the south, particularly the booming Algarve, hosts millions of visitors annually, only a trickle of the more curious venture into the dreamy, remote enchantment of the Minho.

But if the Portuguese have forgotten their roots, it has augured only to preserve an irreplaceable majesty and ambiance. And I was immediately caught in the spell of its charm.

Porto, Portugal's second largest city, with excellent international rail

and air connections, is the obvious takeoff point for the Minho. It is about 30 miles by train, bus or rented car to Guimaraes, where it all began.

At the battle of Sao Mamede in 1127, 18-year-old Alfonso Henriques of Burgundy drove the Spanish from Guimaraes — jailing his mother and her Spanish-nobleman lover — and establishing the first sovereign en-

clave of what would lead to the creation of modern Portugal. He later extended his domain as far south as Lisbon, driving out the Moors and becoming Alfonso I.

On a sprawling, green spur, where children romp and young and old enjoy quiet, solitary moments, rests the monumental trinity of Guimaraes: the 10th-century, fairy-tale castle where Alfonso was born, the stone chapel where he was baptized, and an enormous Gothic palace — built by the Duke of Braganza, who came to dominate the region, as a wedding present for his new duchess — with dazzling stained-glass windows and a treasure of ancient documents, portraits and tapestries inside.

Walking around the castle one day, I was suddenly overwhelmed by about 20 school girls charging up the path, laughing, jumping up and down, pulling on my coat, beseech-

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The harbor at Porto, Portugal's second-largest city, an excellent gateway point for a trip to the Minho region

The quiet charm of Minho region

ing me to take their photograph. Their enthusiasm never subsided, and when I finally turned to go, they each kissed me on both cheeks and scampered off with their teacher calling after them.

With a smile ingrained on my face, minutes later I was plying the narrow cobblestone lanes of Guimarães' medieval center, with wood balconies and granite archways, marveling over the contrasts of the Minho.

Ox carts led by men wielding whips rumble down paving-stone roads. The dark-featured women don smocks and bandanas, either all in black or in gay prints, with dangling gold earrings, carrying everything balanced on their heads.

Bound by their roots and their ageless fields, they still haul their produce and handicrafts to weekly markets held in every center, large and small. And for most it is the most important day of every week, bringing in their only income. It is also important because here they meet friends, and pass information and gossip.

Yet in the midst of this sedentary world, to every village, town and city belongs a startling and uncanny noble atmosphere. From medieval Guimarães you can transcend architectural history to renaissance Viana do Castelo to baroque Braga.

There are the tiny regal jewels of Ponte da Lima, Ponte da Barca and Arcos de Valvedez, each in two parts on either end of a centuries-old bridge. Then there is overwhelming, elegant, walled Valença; the extent of 15th-century, Spanish-built rings of ramparts interlinked by passageways and archways rivals the best of Morocco's imperial cities.

In Guimarães' main square the pastel buildings are a collage of white-lattice windows, multicolored-glass skylights and patterned-tile facades, while the red-shingled houses appear tilted, or sinking — all are on different levels in this hilly city.

Braga, 12 miles from Guimarães, is the Minho's capital and an important episcopal see. The bishops of the city's past have wielded more sway than the kings themselves and consequently great wealth was poured into beautifying it. It remains a visual delight, having been laid out without a second thought to being economical with space.

Some 45 miles north of Porto is Viana do Castelo, the hub of the gold-sand coast that is dotted with resorts amid pine forests — the Minho's best-known area to tourists. Viana is rich in granite houses with Manueline windows and, typical of the Minho, all streets seem to lead to a square, esplanade, park, fountain or flower garden. It's also the province's most animated — and animating — center, especially during Friday market when carts and hawkers from throughout the region make the streets all but impassable.

The market tradition, along with numerous village fairs, celebrations and religious processions, is the Minho's living folklore, keeping artisanry an integral part of the economy. In Portugal, Viana is the undisputed folkloric capital, hosting a big festival every August and recognized for its elaborate costumery, filigree work and rugs. Barcelos is the ceramics throne, the seat of "Portugal's Grandma Moses," Rosa Romalho; Guimarães is the fiefdom of lace and linen weaving, while Braga is Portugal's giant for religious pageantry, particularly during Holy Week.

More than anything else, however, foreigners familiar with the Minho know it for its unique wine. Vinho Verde is green only in the sense that it is a young, quick-maturing wine. It's produced from high-trained grapes (while most wine grapes are trained low to the ground), yielding a wine relatively low in alcohol, not too sweet, and refreshing.

Plus every restaurant dishes out gargantuan portions, and so along with easy to drink Vinho Verde every meal is a potential orgy! Seafood is available everywhere and, from February to April, the Minho's great delicacy, lamprey eel, is in season. But if that's too much for you to stomach, start your orgy with *Caldo Verde*, a thick green vegetable soup, followed by *Fajõada*, tripe, marrow and beans, graduate to *Bacalhau à Margarida*, dried cod sautéed in olive oil with olives and onions, and all the while bottles of maybe *Gatao* or *Alvarinho*. And amazingly, the average full meal is under \$5 per person — with plenty of wine.

While there are small, friendly, very inexpensive, often family-run hotels and pensions throughout the Minho, I also discovered its romantic aeries, the *miradores*. Rising 2,000 feet — four miles by road — above Guimarães is cool, breezy Penha. Two comfortable inns, the Penha and the Montanya, and camping grounds share the view and the summit of fir, eucalyptus, poplars and titanic gray and black boulders.

Three miles southeast of Braga is 1,200-foot Bom Jesus, Portugal's most famous *mirador* and pilgrimage site. A funicular railway, a road and 1,000 steps flanked by chapels and statues of saints — "The Stairway of the Five Senses," which pilgrims ascend on their knees saying a prayer on each step — all lead up to a neoclassical church, flower gardens, a panoramic-terrace cafe, gazebos amidst the trees, the four-star Hotel do Elevador, the two-star Hotel do Parque and

Finally, after markets, orgies and *miradores*, if you have time venture into the magnificence of isolated Peneda-Geres. There are no Portuguese roots there, and but few visitors: roe-deer, a one-of-a-kind breed of wild ponies, golden eagles, gray partridges, wildcats, wolves, wild

boar, oak woods, pine forests, lakes mountains, Roman milestones, megalithic ruins, dolmens believed to be as much as 5,000 years old, spas, facilities for camping, riding, mountaineering, shooting, water sports and fishing, and several hotels and a *pousada*, or guest house.

For additional information contact the Portuguese National Tourist Office at 548 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10036.