

Frommer's



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What's Near Porto: 10 Great Places in Portugal's North

By **Paul Ames**

Porto has established itself as an A-list European city-trip destination for its venerable riverside wine lodges, thriving restaurant scene, and UNESCO World Heritage old town. Its airport also makes it the gateway to northern **Portugal**, a region of myriad attractions that's often overlooked by visitors headed to the country's sun-soaked south-coast beaches or the cultural highlights of Lisbon. The north is covered in-depth by **our Frommer's Portugal guide**, but if you're headed to Porto, here's some of the highlights of the region's heritage, history and landscape that are all within a 2 1/2- hour drive.

Pictured: Pousada Mosteiro Guimarães hotel

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Heritage rivals

The cities of **Braga** and **Guimarães** are just 15 miles apart and they've been rivals for over a millennium. Guimarães (pictured) is the cradle of the nation, the place where 12th-Century warrior Afonso Henriques threw off Spanish overlords and declared the independent Kingdom of Portugal. The city's medieval ramparts and lanes are crammed with history and the old town was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001. Braga is even older. It's been a center for Christianity since Roman times. The granite **cathedral** dates back to the days of Afonso Henriques, but a more recent church put Braga on the World Heritage list last year: **Bom Jesus do Monte**, a lofty sanctuary built in the 1700s atop a 119-meter (380-foot) monumental stairway. Either city can make a great base for exploring the green hills of the **Minho** region. Both have bustling downtowns filled with old cafes, mansion-lined plazas, and restaurants serving hearty regional cuisine.

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Ocean sands

The south-coast beaches closer to Lisbon are world famous, but if you dream of solitude on broad sweeps of soft sand, head north. The **Costa Verde**, or green coast, runs from the family-friendly beach suburbs of Porto up to the mouth of the River Minho that forms the frontier with Spain. Along the way are 60 miles of Atlantic shore strung with beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see. Many rate Praia de Moledo the region's best, thanks to pine-backed expanses overlooked by a conical mountain just across the border. The biggest town on the coast is **Viana do Castelo**, renowned for renaissance buildings, filigree jewelry, and restaurants serving salt cod dishes. Overlooking **Viana** is a domed basilica giving panoramic vistas over the beaches curving to the south. Long favored by Porto families, the Costa Verde is now drawing surfers and sun-seekers from far afield. Excellent seafood joints are scattered down the coast. Be warned: The water can be chilly.

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Wine with a view

The Douro Valley, east of Porto, is one of the world's most beautiful wine regions. Terraced hills ripple out from the meandering river. Slopes draped in vines are dotted with centuries-old manor house wineries. The world's second-oldest demarcated wine area is another of the north's UNESCO Heritage Sites. Among options for exploring: boat tours that range from cheap-and-cheerful day trips to bespoke cruises; riverbank-hugging trains; or roller-coaster roads that twist through the vineyards, such as the **Quinta do Vesuvio** wine estate (pictured). Many of the wine estates (*quintas*) offer visits, tastings, food, and accommodations. As for the local nectars: Although the region is best known for the sweet, fortified port wines matured in lodges over the river from Porto, red and white Douro table wines are increasingly winning world renown.

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Portuguese wilderness

Portugal's north contains spectacular natural areas: mountain reserves, lofty plateaus, and forests where wolves roam, eagles soar, and vultures circle hungrily over clifftop picnic spots. Wildest of all is the Parque Nacional da Peneda-Gerês, covering 699 square km (270 square miles) along the Spanish border. Its unique ecosystem is distinguished by waterfalls, floral valleys, and timeless stone villages. In remote Trás-os-Montes province, the **Parque Natural de Montesinho** forms a bleak-but-beautiful reserve of rolling hills covered with oak and chestnut forests between valleys where villagers maintain ancient communal farming practices. Anglers and kayakers can enjoy the Douro's fast-flowing tributaries, birdwatchers can search for shaggy-headed Egyptian vultures, black storks, and pink hoopoes among the deserted canyon-cut frontier lands of the Parque Natural do Douro Internacional (pictured).



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Meaty morsels

With its long coastline, Portugal is synonymous with seafood. Head inland, however, for the calorific and carnivorous northern cuisine. Local traditions run deep. The handsome border town of Miranda do Douro is famed for its *posta mirandesa* (a thick-cut steak from a local cattle breed); Mirandela serves up grilled *alheira* sausages served with roast potatoes and broccoli rabe splashed with the region's superlative olive oil; in **Barcelos**, try *arroz de cabidela*—farmyard hen stewed with rice, red wine, and blood. Every small town will have at least one treasured traditional restaurant that's been serving up such specialties for generations, alongside the likes of roast lamb, kid, or veal raised right there on the grassy hills. In fall and winter, hunters fill seasonal menus with boar, dear, and hare.

*Pictured: Goat cheese and chouriço sausages at a **Bragança** market*

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The land of green wine

Between the lower reaches of the Douro and the frontier of the river Minho, hillsides are planted with vine-draped trellises to produce *vinho verde* —“green” wine. For the main, the wines are actually white; depending on whom you ask, the moniker derives either from the verdant landscape or because the wines are mostly drunk young. They are crisp and tangy, perfect as a summer aperitive or to accompany local seafood. The storied estates that produce them cluster around delightful small towns like Ponte de Lima (pictured), with its iconic riverside church and ancient bridge; renaissance **Amarante** huddled beside the River Tâmega; or Monção, a fortified frontier outpost whose **Palácio da Brejoeira** is the grandest of the *vinho verde* estates.



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Diabolical carnivals

As the icy winter of Trás-os-Montes draws to an end, demons run wild in the villages. Young men don blood-red masks stitched from leather or beaten from tin, and they dress in outlandish costumes and generate an infernal rhythm from the cow bells strapped to their torsos as they hop, skip and jump through the lanes. Girls risk being jostled and confronted with crudely suggestive hip-swinging. Its origins are prehistoric. Rooted in Celtic fertility rites, the village carnivals upend conventional morality as the masked *caretos* run amok to welcome the new life of spring. The most authentic of them is in the Carnival in **Podence**, where participants dress in shaggy woolen suits of red, gold and green (pictured), much wine is consumed, and bonfires burn into the night. **UNESCO has listed it** alongside Argentine tango and Japan's Kabuki theater as a tradition worth preserving as part of the world's "Intangible Cultural Heritage." Travelers spooked by Podence's pagan excess could head instead to the summer festival in **Viana do Castelo**, where hundreds of local women parade in costumes laden with filigree gold; solemn Easter processions in **Braga**; or **Porto's** city-wide June street parties to honor St. John.

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20,000 years of art

A bucolic spot where the River Côa flows into the Douro is home to some of humanity's oldest art. Scratched into rocks are thousands of images of deer, horses, and long-horned auroch cattle. This **Stone Age graffiti** was discovered in the 1980s when a dam project was poised to flood the area. Now it's another of the north's World Heritage sites. The original etchings lay in a protected area on the riverbank, and a stunning hilltop museum in Foz Côa (pictured) explains the site's significance. The region has plenty of more recent art: from a chain of **early medieval churches** around Penafiel to cutting-edge contemporary exhibitions at Porto's **Serralves** cultural center. Many smaller towns boast excellent art spaces such as **Amarante's museum** dedicated to hometown hero Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, arguably Portugal's greatest modern painter who wowed the Paris avant-garde before he was

struck down by influenza in 1918; or Bragança's center showcasing **Graça Morais**, one of Portugal's leading living artists who takes inspiration from her home region's landscapes and villages.



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Memorable accommodations abound

In the north, you'll find more than mere hotels: You can stay in a palace, working winery, medieval monastery, or grand Belle-Epoque spa. If you're looking for luxury, the **Six Senses Douro Valley** resort (pictured) provides five-star pampering in a romantic quinta in the heart of wine country; or try the **Vidago Palace Hotel** commissioned by King Carlos I in 1908 to give his country a resort to match Europe's most glamorous spas. The **Pousada São Bartolomeu** is a stone 1960s-built lodge where you can dine in the Michelin-starred restaurant admiring sweeping views of **Bragança's** medieval ramparts. On a boutique scale, the **Solar Egas Moniz** provides family-run charm in a restored stone manor house. Take a scenic train ride from Porto to the **Quinta das Amendoeiras**, and the owner will whisk you across the Douro by speedboat for a stay at his small-scale vineyard on the far bank.

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Enchanting Porto

Besides serving as the gateway to this wonderful region, **Porto** is one of Europe's coolest cities to explore and is increasingly accessible from North America and Europe through its international airport. Squeezed into a ravine formed by the Douro, Ribeira (pictured) and other **riverside neighborhoods** are packed with atmospheric alleyways, historic landmarks and cozy restaurants. Spectacular iron bridges span the clifftops, granting access to the port wine lodges of Vila Nova de Gaia on the south bank. Uptown neighborhoods feature stately avenues, churches clad with dazzling blue azulejo tiles and buzzing nightlife. There's award -winning modern architecture in the **Casa da Música** concert hall and Serralves arts center, a scattering of gourmet **restaurants** with rising global reputations, and sandy beaches in the western suburbs.