Tour Code
XPD

ADVENTURESABROAD

PORTUGAL & MADEIRA ACTIVE

Historic Villages to Atlantic Peaks

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Lisbon

We arrive in Lisbon, one of Europe's oldest capitals and a city built entirely around its relationship with the Atlantic. Perched above the Tagus estuary where river becomes sea, its hills and pastel facades climb from the waterfront in tiers, castle ramparts and church spires breaking the skyline above.

This was the departure point for voyages that redrew the map of the known world, the threshold from which everything beyond was imagined, then discovered.

We gather this evening for a first meal together and a preview of the journey ahead, with time to settle in before Lisbon reveals itself properly tomorrow.

Overnight in Lisbon.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Lisbon Exploration

Lisbon rewards exploration on foot, and this morning we begin in Alfama, the city's oldest neighbourhood. The Moors built here in the 8th century, choosing these steep hillsides above the Tagus for the same reason everyone before and after them did -- the view is total, the position unassailable. Narrow lanes wind upward past tiled facades and small tavernas to miradouros where the river spreads wide below, carrying the eye toward the Atlantic.

At Sao Jorge Castle, Moorish ramparts offer panoramic views over terracotta rooftops to the estuary below. These walls changed hands between Moors and Christians three times before 1147, when Afonso Henriques took the city for good and Portugal's story properly began.

We descend through Baixa, the elegant 18th-century grid the Marquis of Pombal imposed after the 1755 earthquake levelled medieval Lisbon -- Europe's first experiment in earthquake-resistant city planning. Chiado's literary cafes and the riverside promenade at Cais do Sodre complete our morning.

This afternoon we cross to Belem, where the Tagus narrows before opening to the sea. The Torre de Belem stood here as the last thing departing sailors saw of Portugal, the first thing survivors glimpsed returning. The nearby Jeronimos Monastery was built with spice trade wealth to give thanks for Vasco da Gama's return from India -- stone made from profit, prayer made from relief. Standing at the riverbank here, the threshold the city has always faced becomes tangible.

Walk Summary: 4-5 hours covering 6-7 km/3.7-4.3 mi through historic neighbourhoods. Moderate to challenging terrain with significant uphill walking on cobblestone streets and stone staircases. Mix of narrow medieval alleys and wide boulevards with numerous scenic viewpoints.

Overnight in Lisbon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Sintra Hike & Village Visit

The Serra de Sintra rises just 40 km/25 mi west of Lisbon, but it occupies a different world -- cooler, forested, draped in Atlantic mist that feeds moss and fern in equal measure. UNESCO recognised the entire cultural landscape in 1995, not just for its palaces but for the way successive civilisations layered meaning onto the same hillside across a thousand years.

We take taxis to Pena Palace, bypassing the steep ascent to focus on what matters: the extravagant Moorish arches, Gothic towers, and Manueline ornament collide in deliberate romantic excess (exterior view only).* King Ferdinand II built this in the 1840s as a fantasy of

Portuguese history -- every style the nation had absorbed, compressed into one hilltop confection.

Our circular forest hike descends from the palace through ancient woodland past the 10th-century Moorish Castle, its weathered battlements tracing the ridgeline that once controlled the route between Lisbon and the Atlantic coast. The trail drops to Sintra's village centre, where we break for lunch.

This afternoon we visit Quinta da Regaleira, the eccentric estate of millionaire Carvalho Monteiro. Its famous Initiation Well -- a 27 m/89 ft spiral staircase plunging into the earth -- and tunnels lined with Masonic and Templar symbols suggest a man fascinated by thresholds of another kind entirely.

Walk Summary: 2-3 hours, 5-6 km/3-4 mi, forest paths and stone staircases, 300 m/984 ft descent.

Overnight in Lisbon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Lisbon - Alentejo: Castelo de Vide & Alpalhao

Leaving Lisbon, we head northeast into the Alentejo, where cork oaks cast long shadows across rolling plains and the air carries the stillness of a landscape shaped by centuries of conflict. This is frontier country -- the contested borderland between Christian kingdoms to the north and Moorish territories to the south, where possession changed hands repeatedly across four centuries of reconquest.

Castelo de Vide emerges on a hilltop, white houses cascading below a 13th-century castle. The town contains one of the Iberian Peninsula's most significant Jewish quarters, where Sephardic families built a community that survived precariously until the Inquisition made tolerance impossible.

Narrow streets still carry Hebrew inscriptions above ancient doorways, and the medieval synagogue that served this community for over two centuries remains remarkably intact. From the castle ramparts, the Serra de Sao Mamede's granite peaks explain why this town exists where it does.

We continue to Alpalhao, a small Templar village in the Portalegre region. The Knights Templar established this settlement in the 12th century to control the Roman military road connecting Lisbon to Spain, another line of defenders on ground that has always needed watching.

Walk Summary: 2-3 hours, 5 km/3.1 mi, cobblestone streets and castle ramparts, 150 m/492 ft elevation gain.

Overnight in Alpalhao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Mountain Fortress & Ancient Trails

We enter Serra de Sao Mamede Natural Park in the cool of the morning, where cork oak forests harbour one of the Iberian Peninsula's most diverse ecosystems. Our interpretive trail winds through landscapes that have changed little since Celtic tribes worked these hills for precious metals, numbered discovery points marking endemic orchids and plants found nowhere else at this latitude.

The day's destination announces itself from a considerable distance. Marvao sits atop a granite crag 860 m/2,822 ft above the surrounding plain, its medieval walls following the natural rock contours so precisely that the fortress and the mountain appear to be a single organism. The Knights Templar understood this instinctively -- controlling Marvao meant controlling the passes between Portugal and Spain, which meant controlling everything that moved between two kingdoms.

We climb to the castle's highest tower, where Spain stretches eastward across plains that armies crossed in both directions for centuries. The village's 300 residents still maintain traditions reaching back to the Middle Ages, from stone masonry techniques to recipes passed through generations. This is the frontier made permanent -- a community that endured precisely because the ground beneath it was worth defending.

By afternoon we reach Castelo Branco, an episcopal city known for its baroque gardens and the distinctive embroidered bedspreads -- colchas -- that have been produced here for centuries.

Walk Summary: 3-4 hours, 6-8 km/4-5 mi, cork oak forest trails and castle ramparts, 200 m/656 ft elevation gain.

Overnight in Castelo Branco.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Monsanto, Idanha-a-Velha & the Weight of Centuries

Some villages are built from their landscape. Monsanto is built into it. Houses wedge between granite boulders the size of buildings, walls incorporate living rock, and in places the stone itself becomes roof, table, and foundation. This earned Monsanto its title as "most Portuguese village" -- not for prettiness, but for the ingenuity of people who refused to let the landscape dictate terms.

Our morning begins at Carroqueiro, where we join the GR22 interpretive trail for the ascent to Monsanto, following the "Conquering Monsanto" route that approaches the village from below. Ancient paths thread between glacially scattered boulders to panoramic viewpoints before delivering us into the village itself.

Medieval castle ruins crown the highest outcrop, where Christian forces maintained watch over the same passes the Romans had controlled a thousand years before. The layers here are visible -- stone built on stone, each era adding to what came before.

After lunch in the village, we continue by vehicle to Idanha-a-Velha, where a local guide leads us through what was once the capital of Egitania -- a Roman municipal capital, Visigothic bishopric, and Templar stronghold, now a hamlet of roughly 50 residents living among ruins spanning fifteen centuries.

Walk Summary: Morning GR22 ascent 2-3 hours, 6 km/3.7 mi, granite paths, 200 m/656 ft elevation gain. Afternoon Idanha-a-Velha guided tour on foot, gentle terrain.

Overnight in Guarda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Serra da Estrela & the Descent to the Douro

Portugal's highest mountain range carries a different kind of frontier logic. Serra da Estrela isn't a border between kingdoms -- it's the watershed between Atlantic and continental climates, the line where weather systems collide and landscapes transform. Our walk begins at Torre, the highest point in mainland Portugal, where the plateau opens into glacially carved terrain that feels genuinely remote despite being at the country's geographic heart.

Our guide leads a 5 km linear route across the UNESCO Geopark from Torre toward the valley, ancient glacial amphitheatres stretching below and weathered granite tors standing sentinel across the high ground. Endemic plants cling to crevices where the Serra da Estrela violet blooms at altitudes that defeat most competitors. A mountaineer's cafe halfway along provides a welcome pause -- coffee and the particular satisfaction of earning a view before continuing down.

The walk concludes at the ski resort area, where the transition from high plateau to valley begins. The afternoon descent toward the Douro reveals one of Portugal's great landscape shifts -- granite peaks giving way to river-carved gorges lined with terraced vineyards, the stone and struggle of the morning replaced by something more cultivated and prosperous. By evening we reach Peso da Regua, where the Douro and Corgo rivers meet beneath UNESCO World Heritage hillsides.

Walk Summary: 2-3 hours, 5 km/3.1 mi, linear route Torre to ski resort, 150 m/492 ft elevation change. Altitude: 1993 m/6539 ft at Torre.

Overnight in the Douro Valley.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 The Douro Valley - Terraced Slopes & River Time

The Douro Valley's beauty is entirely man-made, and that's what makes it extraordinary. For two millennia, farmers have cut terraces into near-vertical schist slopes, coaxing vines from soil so thin and summers so harsh that the grapes concentrate everything into small, intensely flavoured fruit. The result -- designated the world's oldest demarcated wine region in 1756 -- reads as both agricultural achievement and stubbornness.

Our morning vineyard hike follows ancient paths between traditional quintas, where families have worked the same terraces for generations. We visit one such estate, where the owner explains how foot-crushing in granite lagares and fermentation in oak casks continue much as they did when these methods were first established.

Winters here drop to -10C/14F and summers climb past 45C/113F; growers have simply learned to work with these extremes rather than fight them. Today's lunch takes place in a winery setting featuring regional specialties.

This afternoon we board a river cruise, drifting past terraced slopes that cascade from ridge to waterline. For three centuries, flat-bottomed rabelo boats carried port wine downriver to Porto's cellars, the valley's produce always bound for the sea and the markets beyond it.

Walk Summary: 2-3 hours, 5-7 km/3.1-4.3 mi, vineyard paths and terrace steps, 200 m/656 ft elevation gain.

Due to our sizeable lunch and possibility of snacks on our cruise, dinner is on your own this evening.

Overnight in the Douro Valley.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 9 The Camino Coast and Arrival in Porto

The Camino Portugues has guided travellers northward toward Santiago de Compostela for over 800 years, and its coastal variant follows the Atlantic edge through fishing communities that have faced the sea for just as long. This morning we join that route briefly, walking a section of one of Europe's great pilgrim paths as our own journey turns toward the ocean.

We drive to Vila do Conde, where the Ave River meets the Atlantic, and follow waymarked coastal paths northward. The terrain here is flat, open, and salt-aired, walking to the rhythm of the waves alongside us.

We pass through whitewashed fishing villages where boats are still pulled up on the beaches, under the same Atlantic light that has drawn painters here since the 19th century.

Our walk concludes at Matosinhos beach, where we transfer into Porto. The city announces itself gradually: industrial waterfront giving way to the layered, slightly crumbling grandeur of a place that has traded with the world for centuries. We check in before dinner, with time to look forward to Porto revealing itself properly tomorrow.

Walk Summary: 2.5-3 hours, 6-8 km/3.7-5 mi, coastal boardwalks and beach paths, negligible elevation change.

Overnight in Porto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Porto - River, Stone, and the Edge of Empire

Porto doesn't ease you in. The city hits immediately -- steep streets dropping to the Douro, azulejo-tiled facades catching the morning light, the smell of strong coffee from doorways that haven't changed their dimensions since the 18th century. This is a working city that became beautiful by accident, a trading port that sent Portuguese wine, cod, and ambition into the Atlantic world for centuries.

Our guided walking tour begins at Sao Bento Station, where 20,000 hand-painted azulejo tiles depict Portuguese history across the entrance hall walls -- battles, harvests, and royal processions in brilliant blue and white. From here we climb through layered neighbourhoods to the Gothic Cathedral where Portuguese princes were baptised, and wind through medieval streets where traditional craft shops survive against

considerable odds.

We descend to Ribeira, the riverside quarter where merchant houses cascade to the water's edge and the Dom Luis I Bridge spans the Douro in two elegant iron tiers. Crossing the upper deck on foot -- 60 m/197 ft above the river -- we reach Vila Nova de Gaia's port wine cellars, carved into the south bank's cliffs. The cellars hold the accumulated product of every valley and quinta we walked through yesterday, ageing quietly in oak before its journey outward.

A tasting here closes the loop between what we saw in the terraces and what arrives in the glass, port wines ranging from crisp white to decades-aged tawny. The evening is free to explore Ribeira's riverside restaurants or simply watch the rabelo boats catch the last light on the water.

Walk Summary: 3-4 hours, 4-5 km/2.5-3.1 mi, cobblestone streets and steep staircases, moderate elevation change throughout.

Overnight in Porto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Porto - Fly to Madeira

Everything the past ten days have built toward finds its logic this morning. Lisbon faced the Atlantic and sent ships into it. The Alentejo frontier towns guarded the edges of a kingdom gathering its strength. The Douro Valley fed the trade that funded the voyages, and Porto loaded the ships.

Now we follow the same impulse that drove Zarco and Teixeira to sail southwest in 1419, past the point where charts gave way to speculation, toward an island that existed in rumour before it existed in fact.

The 1.5-hour flight carries us 978 km/608 mi into the Atlantic, over water that was, for most of human history, the end of everything knowable. Madeira rises from ocean depths of 4000 m/13,123 ft -- not a continental shelf convenience but a genuine volcanic intrusion, new land forced up from the seafloor. The Portuguese named it Ilha da Madeira, Island of Wood, for the dense laurel forests that covered every slope when they arrived.

There was nothing here before them. This was not a frontier between competing civilisations -- it was the frontier between the known world and whatever came next.

Funchal spreads up steep mountainsides from its natural harbour, the old town revealing Madeira's unique mid-Atlantic identity -- a Portuguese city that is also, inescapably, something else entirely. Christopher Columbus stopped here during Atlantic voyages, taking on supplies and, perhaps, gathering his nerve.

Depending on flight scheduling, we may have time for an informal on-foot orientation.

Overnight in Funchal.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Madeira's West Coast Discovery

Madeira's western landscape makes the island's volcanic origins impossible to ignore. The forces that pushed this rock from the ocean floor 20 million years ago left a coastline of vertical drama -- sea cliffs that drop without apology, lava flows cooled into natural sculpture, a high plateau where the Atlantic delivers weather on its own schedule.

We pass through Camara de Lobos, the fishing village where Winston Churchill set up his easel to paint the colourful boats sheltering in a natural harbour that has served mariners for five centuries.

The road climbs to Cabo Girao, where cliffs fall 580 m/1,903 ft to the ocean below, among the highest sea cliffs in Europe. Their faces are still farmed in places by locals who abseil down to tend terraced plots -- the same stubbornness that built the Douro's terraces, here on a steeper scale.

Paul da Serra plateau opens above us at 1400 m/4,593 ft, Madeira's vast highland, where ancient lava flows created a landscape unlike anything on the island below. Our levada hike follows a 16th-century irrigation channel across this mist-fed terrain, carrying water horizontally across ground that would otherwise make farming here impossible.

We descend to Porto Moniz, where volcanic activity created natural swimming pools from black basalt rock at the island's northwestern tip.

Walk Summary: 2.5-3 hours, 5-6 km/3.1-3.7 mi, levada path at 1400 m/4,593 ft, minimal elevation change.

Overnight in Funchal.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 East Coast Wilderness & Coastal Drama

Madeira's northeastern coastline is the island at its most unmediated. No glass skywalks, no famous viewpoints, no Churchill anecdotes -- just ancient laurel forest giving way to clifftop paths above an Atlantic with no land between here and the Americas.

We begin near Porto da Cruz, entering Laurissilva forest, the UNESCO World Heritage ecosystem that once covered much of southern Europe before the ice ages reduced it to this handful of Atlantic islands. These are not young trees in an old-looking forest.

They are genuinely ancient, survivors of climatic shifts that eliminated their kind everywhere else, and walking beneath them carries the weight of encountering something that has no right to still exist.

Moss-covered branches arch overhead, filtering the light to a green half-dusk even at midday, while endemic birds move through the canopy, more often heard than seen.

The trail opens onto clifftop stretches with sweeping vistas over the northeastern coast, where ancient mountains plunge into the sea below. This far corner of the island sees few visitors, which makes it a fitting last stop.

Our peaceful destination offers panoramic views of the coastline before we return to Funchal, with time to reflect on two weeks across Portugal's mainland mountains, river valleys, historic towns, and this volcanic island where subtropical landscapes meet the Atlantic, closing the loop that began on Lisbon's own waterfront.

Activity Summary: 6-8 km/3.7-5 mi coastal and forest trail (3-4 hours) with 250 m/820 ft elevation gain. Return to Funchal with free time for shopping, relaxation, and departure preparation.

Overnight in Funchal.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Funchal, bringing two weeks across mainland Portugal and this remarkable Atlantic island to a close.

The journey home begins with hearts full of Portuguese warmth, cameras filled with impossible landscapes, and palates educated in the wines of two very different terroirs -- the Douro's terraces and Madeira's volcanic slopes.

"Boa viagem" -- good trip!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast