

NATURAL PARKS AND RESERVES

Vast areas are officially protected as natural parks and reserves and here some of the most precious flora and fauna can be found, safe from the crowds and industry's pollution.

SADO ESTUARY

From rocky shores to beaches, mountains to valleys, rivers to estuaries, exploring the region's nature parks and reserves is the best way to discover the Alentejo's natural wonders. About an hour south of Lisbon, the **Sado Estuary Nature Reserve** features grassy dunes, brackish pools and many species of fauna and flora. At the Sado's mouth, you can hear and see a community of dolphins. This is one of the few places in the world where the species lives in a freshwater habitat.

And, if you listen carefully, you will hear the songs of more than 200 bird species. The biodiversity at the protected Sado River Estuary makes it a sanctuary for many animals and a place where you will be in harmony with nature at its most authentic state.

LAGOAS DE SANTO ANDRÉ E DA SANCHA NATURE RESERVE

Going south along the Alentejo Coast, this nine-mile strip of land near Sines, a bustling port, is a natural oasis. The crystal-blue waters and golden sand of the **Lagoas de Santo André e da Sancha Nature Reserve** are home to rare fish species like eels and roach. And thousands of migrating birds take shelter here between seasons. This protected shore attracts numerous species of birds throughout the year, including Eurasian Coots and the Eurasian Reed Warbler. Although the Reserve resembles a beach, the lagoons are entirely separated from the Atlantic. Swimming in these waters is safe and calm, and recreational areas are marked to protect nesting species in the shoulder season.

SUDOESTE ALENTEJANO E COSTA VICENTINA NATURE PARK

The Alentejo is home to Portugal's best conserved Atlantic coastline, with miles of wild and often secluded beaches carved into cliffs. **The Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina Nature Park** covers more than 60 miles of protected land and shore, stretching from São Torpes near Sines to Cape São Vicente, Europe's most southwesterly point, in the Algarve. This protected area has about 30 certified habitats with more than 100 rare species of plants as well as cliffs that hide nests of white storks.

Driving along the whole coast takes fewer than three hours, giving you time to stop along the way to discover magnificent deserted beaches, taste delicious fresh fish and admire the natural silhouettes of the cliffs. The Rota Vicentina trail features more than 460 miles of breathtaking coastal trails with sandy beaches, cliffs and coves. Here you can bodyboard, windsurf and kitesurf. Stop in a small village for fresh seafood, or relax on the Atlantic sands.

VALE DO GUADIANA NATURE PARK

Flowing along the border with Spain, the River Guadiana is wild, lovely and bordered by a valley. This sparsely populated and green land is set between the olive groves of Serpa and the cork oaks of Mértola. Here you can explore the **Vale do Guadiana Nature Park**. Enjoy the beautiful landscape of hills and fields, and look for the hundreds of protected species like the black stork or the Iberian lynx. Pulo do Lobo is the tallest waterfall in Southern Portugal, standing about 100 feet high. Here, as Portuguese writer José Saramago put it, the "river boils between harsh walls, the rushing of water, hit, flow and wind gnawing a millimeter per century, per millennium, a nothing in eternity." And, the Tapada Grande beach, in Mina de São Domingos, Mértola, provides an opportunity to cool down from the dry Alentejo heat with a swim.

SERRA DE SÃO MAMEDE NATURE PARK

Rising beyond the hills and the Great Lake, the typical landscape of rolling plains is replaced by a mountain range with a diverse fauna and flora that thrive thanks to the high altitude's humid microclimate. **The Serra de São Mamede Nature Park** is home to a forest of oaks, chestnuts, olive trees and more than 800 species of plants that share their habitat with reptiles and birds. The walled village of Marvão, set atop a steep mountain, provides a view of raptors soaring in the sky below.

The Serra de São Mamede Nature Park offers hiking as well as mountain biking, from historic village to historic village. The medieval Castle of Portalegre is located within the park and offers a beautiful view over this important Alentejo city, where the white paint of the houses contrasts with the darker tone of the ancient walls.



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