

HISTORY AND CULTURE

PRIMITIVE PREHISTORY MONUMENTS OF EARLY MAN

The Alentejo has one of the greatest concentrations of Neolithic dolmens and menhirs in Europe. The Cromeleque dos Almendres is perhaps the most renowned – predating Stonehenge by some 3,000 years, it was only discovered in the 1960s and you are likely to find it free of crowds as the sun sets.

Notable others include the Anta Grande do Zambujeiro (Portugal's largest dolmen), the Menir da Meada at Castelo de Vide (the tallest menhir in the Iberian Peninsula, at 7 metres) and megaliths in Portalegre and Reguengos de Monsaraz.

The Alentejo's megaliths are considerably older than other western Europe monuments, and their creation points to the dawn of ordered society: the development of agricultural practices, religious and spiritual frameworks and communal living.

ROMAN REMAINS LEGACY OF THE LEGIONS

For the Romans the region was a valuable source of wheat and other resources. They brought advances in mining and agriculture, often on large estates, or latifúndios, dominated by lavish villas. They created the infrastructure to control the region, bring authority and develop prosperity.

And the Romans constructed the tools of empire: forts, temples, bridges, paved roads, theatres, dams, aqueducts. They introduced new techniques for ceramic production, salt mining, fish salting and ship building, and enabled more efficient production of olives and vines.

Today, Roman remains are scattered across the Alentejo.

ARAB INFLUENCES SOPHISTICATION AND FLAIR

The Moors arrived in the 8th century and held power until 1249 when the reconquest finally ousted them. This period saw a boom in the artistic crafts, with the production of decorated ceramic tiles, or azulejos, and numerous other artisan activities like the weaving of tapestries and carpets, leather goods and intricate jewellery making.

The Moors introduced navigational techniques that later allowed Portuguese explorers to re-draw the boundaries of the world map.

The narrow streets and cobbled alleys of low, white washed houses, such a feature of the Alentejo's fortified hilltop villages, are often credited to the Moors.

One of the best-known Moorish remains is the church at Mértola, where the slender columns, Islamic 'keyhole' doorways and architecture give away the fact that it was once a mosque, dating from the 12th century.

MEDIEVAL MASTERPIECES RICHS AND RENAISSANCE

During the Christian reconquest of the 12th century Portugal as we know it today was born. The following centuries saw new prosperity from the New World discoveries, and later from the gold boom in Brazil.

Dias paved way for the Golden Age, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. A decade later Vasco da Gama reached India, shortly before Cabral landed in Brazil. Between 1519 and 1521, Magellan circumnavigated the globe and soon Portugal had colonies from the Amazon to Argentina, and from Kerala to Bangkok.

Global trade brought prosperity and flourishing arts and architecture.

Renaissance palaces sprang up, convents and beautiful churches too, with Manueline, Baroque and Rococo influences.

Following centuries saw the Alentejo landscape sprout innumerable castles and fortified towns and villages – defensive measures against the threatening Spanish and today a source of great beauty.

Countless examples well worth a visit include Portalegre, Arronches, Évora, Redondo and Terena. The 14th century castle keeps at Beja and Estremoz are fascinating, and the star-shaped fortifications at Elvas are among the finest examples in the world. The circular castle of Arraiolos is rare and the fortified hill top towns of Marvão and Monsaraz are both unmissable and exquisite.



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