

Oliveira do Hospital

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Here there are dolmens and Roman towns, traces of the Visigoths and Gothic manor houses, ancient villages and more, far more. Wind down the delightful valleys of the rivers Alva and Alvoco, and take a delight in Serra da Estrela , fishing, tennis, rowing and the open air life.

Oliveira do Hospital was founded on a plain dominated by the white peaks of the Serra da Estrela to the east, and to the west by the River Mondego. The town began as a centre for the Hospitalars of Jerusalem, today known as the Order of Malta. It was to this Order in 1120, that the mother of the first king of Portugal gave the early town, already in those days the centre of a region that had been settled from 5000 to 2000 BC. Today the main monuments in Oliveira do Hospital stand around the Municipal Garden . The oldest is the parish church of Santa Cruz , founded on what was once the Ferreiros Chapel, a Roman- Gothic temple dating from the thirteenth century, located inside the church, and built at the orders of Domingues Joanes, a knight of the Order of the Hospitalars. This same knight has been adopted as a symbol of the town and also stands at the highest point in town, Largo do Ameal. The largest lime tree in the country stands in the church courtyard. It is more than 25 metres high and four metres in diameter. Beside the church stands the nineteenth century building housing the Town Hall. In front of the Town Hall is a Manueline pillory dating from the sixteenth century.

At the other end of the Municipal Garden stands the Chapel of Santa Ana, a baroque building dating from the eighteenth century. Behind the Palace of Justice is the Home Museum of D. Maria Emilia Vasconcelos Cabral Metelo, a nineteenth century rural mansion with a chapel and beautiful private gardens, where the art collection of the founding family is exhibited as well as a collection of folk items.

Along the valleys of the Alva and the Alvoco

Welcome to the hidden charms of this region, where green terraced slopes link Estrela to Agor, crossing valleys with streams full of trout and rivers suitable for swimming and rowing, or pass by lovely slate villages until they reach the sanctuaries at the top, closer to the sky.

From Oliveira do Hospital take the EN 230 as far as Catraia de S. Paio, until you are near the Pousada da Povia das Quartas to get a panoramic view of the valley of the Alva and to reach the snowy slopes of the Serra da Estrela . Return to Catraia de S. Paio, along EN 17. passing Venda de Galizes, and in Venda da Esperanca head for Lourosa, which since the year 912 has had a Mozarabic style church, the only one in Portugal. The road to Avo goes through Digueifel, where there are some lovely slate houses at the edge of the River Alva. Cross the river, admire the fertile plains along its banks and head for Avo, where you should visit the twelfth century castle and the hermitage of S. Miguel founded by Bras Garcia Mascarenhas whose sixteenth century manor house faces the lovely river beach of Ilha do Picoto. Do not leave Avo without visiting the pillory, the parish church and taking EN 230 up to the view point of "Varandas de Avo". Continuing the EN 342 in the Alva valley as far as Ponte das Tres Entradas where the river Alvoco empties into the Alva, and where there is a rare three-armed bridge. There is fishing and swimming in the river and boat trips near the camping ground. If it is lunch time try the trout, roast kid, and from the sweet dishes "tigelada" or "coscorees". Then go up to Aldeia da Dez for a magnificent panoramic view before heading on to the lovely Vale Maceira to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Preces, founded in the eighteenth century, and which has a monumental baroque stairway and a chapel to Our Lady of the Via Sacra with eleven chapels dedicated to the Passion of Christ and decorated with life-sized figures carved in wood dating from the nineteenth century. If you have a four-wheel drive vehicle you can continue on up the slate slopes of Serra do Agor, to the endless panoramic views of Monte do Colcorinho at 1,244 m. in altitude. To return down to the valley of the river Alvoco, go through Chao Sobral, Quinta da Tapada and Parente, between spectacular curving terraced slopes that describe man's epic to hold the fertile soil in place. When you reach the river and the EN 230, turn left to Alvoco. At the start the valley is narrow, with pine woods and fields of maize on either side of the river, and home to herons, otters, kingfishers and trout. In Alvoco take a look at the medieval bridge and Moenda weir. Then follow the River Alvoco and the delights of this lovely valley until once again you reach Ponte das Tres Entradas. Keeping company with the River Alva once again, turn right and head for S. Sebastiao da Feira where there is a cool woodland park and a river beach. In Caldas de S. Paulo there is another river beach and springs of mineral waters with medicinal properties, while in Penalva do Alva there is a centuries-old water wheel beside its weir. In leaving Penalva head for S. Giao . After that you cross the river and climb up under leafy chestnut trees through a silent valley carpeted with green river plains overlooked by the white cottages of S. Giao and the town's lofty church, known as the cathedral of the Bairas because of the wealth of its gold leaf decoration and baroque (1795) decoration. Return to Oliveira do Hospital leaving Penalva do Alva for Catraia de S. Paio. Duration: 1 day

Remains and Flavours in the Lands of Dao

This is a tour through five thousand years of history. There are Neolithic funeral temples and traces of the Bronze Age as well as the ruins of the Roman town of Bobadela , travelling through pine woods and villages full of rural and religious remains. You will also stop to taste the nectars and flavours of Dao and to rest in artistic rural mansions and small palaces that provide accommodation for tourists.

From Oliveira do Hospital take EN 230 to Catraia de S. Paio. At the cross-roads with EN 17 turn right and stop to view and buy the artistic covers made here. 4 km along the road, in Senhor das Almas , turn right to visit the co-operative cellar of Nogueira do Cravo and to taste Dao wine. Take EM 510 to Bobadela and the ruins of the Roman town dating from the first to the fourth centuries AD. The visit begins in the church courtyard where there is a fine Roman arch thought to have been the entrance to the Forum. Beyond the Casa dos Godinhos, currently the Bobadela Museum , where most of the finds from excavations are exhibited, there is a handsome Roman amphitheatre and to the left of this a Roman fountain. After Travanca de Lagos stop in Andorinha, 3 kms. along the road, to view the Roman bridge and in Fiais da Beira there is one of the biggest collections of hay or corn stores in the centre of Portugal . In Ervedal da Beira you can have lunch and taste the mountain cheese, oven roast lamb, corn cookies and olive oil cakes, Then visit the historical centre of Ervedal, the seventeenth century rural houses and the manor house of the Viscounts of Ervedal, founded in 1512. The early medieval tower still stands at the manor house as well as the Gothic-Manueline building. Continuing along EN 231-2 head for Aldeia Formosa and then along the earth-beaten track to Vale Verde, until you can see 10 m. from the road the Mamoia megalith. Before Seixo da Beira, turn right to EM 507-1 to visit the Arcainha dolmen which stands 500 m back from the road. On the way to Lagares da Beira the road runs down to the valley of the River Seia. On the bridge of the Casa do Moleiro, where handicrafts are sold, the bed of the river is very deep and narrow, and this is the site of a water mill and to the right an old olive press. In Meruge is the chapel of S. Bartolomeu and a Visigothic burial ground. On the way back to Oliveira do Hospital visit the interesting seventeenth century jail in Lagos da Beira. Duration: 1 day.