

Portugal: Sintra & Rota Vicentina

Tour-Only Itinerary

Life moves slowly in the coastal reaches of Portugal. And that will suit you fine. With sweeping vistas and sweeping history converging on one epic Portugal self-guided tour, it's best to take it all in at a leisurely pace. Shady forest paths lead to centuries-old hilltop castles. Towering rocky outcroppings frame wide crescent beaches. Cliffside paths hide families of nesting storks and unveil rock walls that stretch for miles, all lashed by Atlantic surf. A marshy river once wide and crowded with trade ships now teems with birdlife. And dense, fragrant forests of cork, oak, and eucalyptus blanket gentle hills. It's all on your map—from Sintra-Cascais Natural Park to the Rota Vicentina stretching into the fabulously scenic Algarve—and you're in absolutely no rush.



Highlights

- Climb the hillside up to Pena Palace, a pink and yellow confection and the pinnacle of Portuguese royalty's lavish lifestyle.
- Follow the cliffside trails of the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park to dramatic seaside overlooks and gorgeous sprawling beaches.
- Walk the Rota Vicentina, a network of inland and coastal pathways and pristine beaches hailed as one of Europe's best-preserved coastlines.
- Watch for the wildlife of coastal Portugal, from the rare cliff-nesting stork to a rabbit species believed to be the source of all rabbits worldwide.
- Descend to a breathtaking beach and cast your gaze 1,000 feet offshore for a view of the spindly Pedra da Agulha—the "needle rock."

On all Self-Guided Adventures you can count on ...



A local representative available 24/7.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Detailed maps & route notes featuring turn-by-turn directions and places of interest.



Experts to handle all the details, including moving your luggage between hotels while you're out exploring.



Scheduled taxi transfers to bring you to and from each day's walks.



Access to a Self-Guided Flight Concierge—ask our knowledgeable team to find flights that sync with your planned trip.



Delicious meals—many are included.

Activity Level

This tour is one of our Self-Guided Walking Adventures, rated easy to moderate, with an average of 4–11 miles of walking per day; options are available on most days. Throughout this tour, cumulative elevation gains and losses are up to 1,800 feet. The first portion of the tour is in the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park. Walks here follow a variety of terrain—over uneven cobbled paths, stone stairways, packed-earth, grassy single tracks, sandy beach, country dirt roads, and paved paths—through forested, cliffside, coastal, and brushland landscapes. Footing in many places may require attention, particularly when wet. The second

portion of the tour follows the coastal Rota Vicentina over gently undulating terrain. Walks here follow both packed-earth and deep-sand single tracks through small sections of pine, evergreen, oak, and eucalyptus forest and along high dramatic cliffs, which may challenge those with vertigo. These walks have little coverage from the sun, which, depending upon the temperature, can increase the rigor of this tour. This diverse and rewarding itinerary leads you through some of Portugal's most scenic corners, from the undulating slopes, hilltop stone castles, and coastal vistas of the Portuguese Riviera to the seaside cliffs, fishing villages, and sprawling beaches of Alentejo and the Algarve. Reaching these locations requires travel times of 2.5 hours on Day 3, 40 minutes on Day 5, and 3 hours on Day 7. Remember: preparation is key to your enjoyment; the more you walk or participate in aerobic exercise prior to your trip, the more rewarding your experience will be!

DAY 1

Your Portugal: Sintra & Rota Vicentina tour begins. Sintra-Cascais Natural Park: Sintra loop walk

3.9 miles, easy to moderate, 850-ft. elevation gain and loss

Make your own way to the Sintra Boutique Hotel in Sintra, situated in the Old Town. Lord Byron called this UNESCO World Heritage site “the most delightful village in Europe.” Plan to arrive early in the day, then set off on a rewarding, mostly shaded loop into the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park. Before you get underway though, consider stopping to pick up ingredients for a picnic lunch that you can enjoy on the trail. Be sure to include a heavenly local treat: Sintra's own *travesseiros*—a flaky, almond-filled, pillowy pastry from a local bakery. We recommend Sintra's oldest and most popular *padaria*, Casa Piriquita, conveniently located along your route.

Your first destination is the Quinta da Regaleira. The eclectic Quinta was designed on a nearby mountainside, adorned with lush gardens, lakes, grottoes, and touches said to have been inspired by alchemy. The 14th-century palace is a beloved landmark for its varied architecture and the elegant, glazed tiles that grace its walls. (Entrance fee is at your own expense and may be booked at time of visit.)

From here, climb the hillside over dirt and cobbled pathways and stretches of roadway to Pena Palace, one of Portugal's most beloved landmarks and the pinnacle of Portuguese royalty's lavish lifestyle. You

may want to tour the interior of this pink and yellow confection, left much as it was in 1910 when the Portuguese Republic was declared and the monarchy left. Its gardens are also a delight to stroll. (Entrance to the palace is at your own expense and must be booked in advance at parquesdesintra.pt/en/parks-monuments/park-and-national-palace-of-pena.) A final short ascent delivers you to the Castelo dos Mouros (Moorish castle) high on granite cliffs before you gently loop back down to your hotel. (Entrance fee to the castle is at your own expense and may be booked at time of visit.)

If time allows this afternoon, you may wish to add on a visit to Villa Sasseti, a pretty castle-like home built by a wealthy local in the 1890s and later purchased by the town of Sintra. Just a short climb from the hotel through lush gardens, this out-and-back walk is also a rewarding option if you arrive later in the day or if you prefer a less demanding start to your adventure.

Early evening, meet a Country Walkers representative for an hour-long orientation meeting, then stroll to dinner on your own. Perhaps try the region's famed Mercês pork or a seafood dish prepared with the daily catch from the Atlantic.

DAY 2

Sintra-Cascais Natural Park: Sanctuary of Peninha to Cascais

4.7–10.7 miles, moderate, 300-ft. elevation gain and 1,800-ft. elevation loss

Enjoy a hearty Portuguese breakfast at your leisure this morning. Then a taxi takes you 30 minutes to the Sanctuary of Peninha, an historic and scenic highlight of Sintra-Cascais Natural Park. This seaside chapel, along with its adjacent palace, strike a dramatic pose atop a 1,500-foot outcrop. Marvel at magnificent views of the Atlantic, the coastal city of Cascais (where you'll stay tonight)—Sintra, and Lisbon. The chapel's origins lie in the 16th century when a young shepherdess claimed to have seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary. But monks did not build the structure until 100 years later, completing it in 1711.

This heavenly perch along the Serra de Sintra mountains is the starting point of your walk. You meander downhill along a dirt road through Mediterranean brushland marked by colorful wild meadows and low bushes, then traverse a coastal forest nourished by frequent misty fogs that roll in from the ocean. Walk

through the charming villages of Biscaia and Figueira do Guincho before you reach the coastline. A cliffside footpath lead you past the remote Praia da Grotta and the Praia do Abano. At the latter, perhaps stop for a refreshment at a beach bar. Later, arrive at the spectacular Praia do Guincho. In the summer, northern winds lure kitesurfers and windsurfers while wintertime easterly winds bring larger swells—and traditional surfers. Explore the ruins of the Fort of Guincho while here, and perhaps grab lunch at a beach bar or eatery in town or on the neighboring Praia da Cresmina or Praia da Arriba. Later, a flat paved path delivers you to the pretty fishing town of Cascais. You'll find benches along the way to rest and gaze out to the ocean. At the outskirts of town, you pass the Farol da Guia lighthouse and the Boca do Inferno, scenic seaside cliffs with an open cave.

Cascais was put on the map as a haven for sea lovers in the 1870s when King Luis I and the royal family claimed it as their September residence. Other Portuguese nobility followed and a summer community blossomed. Royalty from other nations have tested the waters, too, including dukes and kings from England, Spain, and Italy. After settling in to your oceanside hotel, you might walk the ten minutes into the town's historic center, where you can find a tempting spot for dinner on your own.

Included Meals: Breakfast

DAY 3

Southwest Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park: Rota Vicentina from Cavaleiro to Cabo Sardão to Herdade de Touril

5.7 miles, easy to moderate, 350-ft. elevation gain and 300-ft. elevation loss

Another full, locally sourced breakfast starts your day. Then you journey 2.5 hours south along the coast to the southwestern region of Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park. This is one of Europe's best-preserved coastlines, draped in pristine beaches and soaring cliffs dotted with umbrella-like pine trees. You'll witness a rich biodiversity and an authentic, welcoming culture in this exceptional corner of Portugal. For the next several days, you will walk the Rota Vicentina, a long-distance hiking path long used by fishermen and locals to access the best fishing spots and remote beaches.

Begin today's breathtaking walk in the small, whitewashed Cavaleiro. The village's name is Portuguese for "knight," but you'll find it more charming than grand. Perhaps grab a bite to eat or fixings for a picnic at a local restaurant or café. Then head out of the village by foot, following a road that skirts wide farming fields

and leads into coastal scrub. It's just a mile before you reach the lighthouse at Cabo Sardão, the westernmost point of Alentejo. The landmark is rare because the light tower was built on the land side of the site, rather than on the seaside. But this detail surely won't distract from the spectacular ocean and coastal views you'll enjoy. It's the ideal spot for a picnic lunch.

Commence your walk along the Fishermen's Trail, traversing high dramatic cliffs amid red-hued earth and sandstone, keeping your eyes open for the more than 20 species of birds that nest here. Watch for jackdaw, shag, common kestrel, peregrine falcon, and the pure rock dove, the original species of pigeon. Watch also for storks; this is the only place in the world where they nest on cliffs. This spectacular coastal trail reveals Portugal at its wildest, taking you along a passage over high ledges through salt-tinged brush with sweeping views of the Atlantic. Absorb the magnificent beauty at an easy pace before arriving at your next hotel, where dinner is served on site.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 4

Southwest Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park: Rota Vicentina from Odeceixe to Zambujeira do Mar

4-mile, 6.7-mile, or 9.4-mile options, easy to moderate, 850-ft. cumulative elevation gain and 800-ft. cumulative elevation loss

If you wish, request a packed lunch from the hotel before setting out. Or, plan to take a break for lunch at one of the beachside cafés you'll encounter today.

Begin on the White Summit, or Ponta em Branco, named for the color of its sediment. Here, marvel at one of Alentejo's most spectacular views—Odeceixe Beach, or Praia de Odeceixe, against the backdrop of Mount Fóia, part of the Serra de Monchique range. The scenic Seixe River marks the border between Alentejo and the Algarve. Continue walking the cliffside Fishermen's Trail, gazing down at the pristine gold-sand beaches below, many of them only accessible via hanging ropes used by locals to gather shellfish. You'll have a choice of three walks today, from longest to shortest, with each starting point marked below.

The longest option from Praia de Odeceixe leads you into the domain of the Egyptian mongoose, weasel, badger, and other nocturnal mammals. The schist and graywacke of the rocky cliffs were formed by sand,

clay, and ash compressed at the bottom of an ancient ocean over millennia. Soon, you'll arrive at Azenha do Mar (the starting point for today's medium-length walk). This natural fishing harbor is an idyllic spot to pause for a cold drink at an outdoor restaurant. As you continue, you might spot an endemic rabbit species; all rabbits are said to have descended from this local type. As the preferred prey of carnivores, rabbits are crucial to the balance of nature along this coast.

From Praia da Amália (starting point for the day's shortest route), make your way along many ascents and descents to beaches of unimaginable beauty. Packed-dirt trails lead through forests of pine, evergreen, oak, and eucalyptus. Follow deep-sand paths through heath landscapes that hug the shore. At Praia dos Machados, watch for stork nests along the cliffs, and at Praia do Carvalhal, you may catch a glimpse of surfers in the water. Finally, follow the signpost down a staircase to Praia dos Alteirinhos to lie in the sand and soothe your feet in cool, refreshing waters. End the day's invigorating walk in the sleepy seaside village of Zambujeira do Mar, where small shops and cafés beckon. Linger here for a while before returning to your hotel for dinner.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 5

Southwest Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park: Rota Vicentina from Monte Clérigo to Praia da Arrifana

5.1 miles, easy to moderate, 500-ft. elevation gain and 450-ft. elevation loss

After breakfast, a taxi takes you 40 minutes further south into the stunning Algarve region, still within Southwest Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park. Today's walk begins in Monte Clérigo, a charming fishing village of pink and white cottages and a beautiful golden beach backed by cliffs and dunes.

You'll want to linger here for a while, grabbing coffee, pastries, and perhaps trail snacks in the village, before returning to the stunning Fisherman's Trail. Numerous beaches stretch out below you as you trace the cliffside—Praia da Fateixa, Praia do Coelho, and Praia do Medo da Fonte Santa. Later, you reach the breathtaking promontory of Ponta da Atalaia and its adjacent Ribat da Arrifana. Founded by Ibn Qasí, a spiritual guide of Islam's mystical practice of Sufism, it was home to warrior monks who once prayed over the waters here. Marvel at its cliffside setting before continuing to the top of the cliffs, home to a Mediterranean bushland ecosystem filled with aromatic plants that grow on the coastal dunes, including

thyme, rosemary, myrtle, and lavender.

Your footpath leads you next to the ruins of the Fortaleza da Arrifana, overlooking the spectacular Praia da Arrifana, hugged by towering cliffs on either side. The fortress of Arrifana was built in 1635 during the reign of Filipe II to defend the coastline and local fishermen from attacks by sea. Though it has been destroyed twice, the nearby town of Aljezur rebuilt its entry so beachgoers can remember the region's rich past. You'll find several beach cafés and restaurants here for lunch. If you wish, take a dip in the refreshing waters before an afternoon taxi delivers you to your hotel for the next two nights. You can choose from its two restaurants for dinner on your own.

Included Meals: Breakfast

DAY 6

Layover day. Optional walk: Praia do Canal Nature Resort to Praia do Canal

4.6 miles (return), easy to moderate, 500-ft. elevation gain and loss

After a delicious à la carte breakfast, choose from a range of things to do today in and around your resort. An optional walk leads directly from your hotel to nearby Canal beach, another beautiful spot popular with surfers. The descent down to the beach—and your uphill return back to the hotel—is along a quiet country road that is part of the Historical Way, the second of the two long-distance routes of the Rota Vicentina. While the walk to and from the beach is steep, the sweeping expanse of these sands is worth the effort, as is the little-known gem that rises from the water 1,000 feet offshore: the Pedra da Agulha, an astonishing rock formation whose name appropriately means “needle rock.”

A second option is to taxi 20 minutes (at your expense) to explore the lovely town of Aljezur. Though this region has been inhabited for millennia, it was formally founded by Moors in the 10th century. Christians moved in during the Reconquest, but the Moorish Aljezur Castle remains and is even one of the seven castles on the Portuguese flag. After visiting the castle and perhaps a museum or two, enjoy a leisurely lunch of fresh seafood and authentic regional dishes at one of the many nearby cafés or restaurants. Don't leave town without popping into the Mercado Municipal—this small covered market offering fresh produce, meats, seafood, and other local products is a feast for the senses.

The Praia do Canal Nature Resort is a haven of tranquility and you may wish to spend the entire day simply relaxing here. The onsite spa and health club features a heated indoor swimming pool, an outdoor infinity pool with panoramic valley views and poolside dining, two massage rooms, a hammam, two saunas (one bio), indoor and outdoor relaxation zones, as well as a cold plunge tank for the most intrepid souls. Complementary yoga classes are often on offer and a wide range of treatments are available (at your own expense).

Enjoy your final dinner on your own this evening.

Included Meals: Breakfast

DAY 7

Your Portugal: Sintra & Rota Vicentina tour concludes

Depart your hotel at 9:30 a.m. A three-hour taxi ride takes you to Lisbon, where you can make your connections home or onward. Or spend an additional day in Lisbon exploring Portugal's historic capital.

Included Meals: Breakfast

What's Included

Tour Only

Boutique accommodations	✓
8 meals: 6 breakfasts, 2 dinners	✓
Detailed water- and tear-resistant Route Notes and maps	✓
Orientation meeting with a Country Walkers representative	✓
Local representative available 24/7	✓
Scheduled taxi and luggage transportation (Please note: If unable to walk, it is possible to travel with your luggage from one accommodation to the next at no additional charge.)	✓
Access to Self-Guided Flight Concierge—Ask our knowledgeable team to find flights that sync perfectly with your planned trip.	✓