

EUROPE

# Guimaraes, the cradle of Portugal

Discover the understated charms of this northern city

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Toural Square, in the centre of Guimaraes

ALAMY

Los Angeles has its Hollywood sign. Here, in the northern Portuguese city of Guimaraes, the equivalent adorns the medieval battlements of Largo do Toural square. It's not a place name. Instead, the giant white letters read "aqui nasceu Portugal" — Portugal was born here.

Guimaraes holds such a strong place in Portugal's heart because of a decisive victory in 1128 over Moorish forces in its vicinity that set the nation free — and made the city the country's first capital. When that honour moved to Coimbra and then Lisbon, Guimaraes slipped into relaxed obscurity, leaving tourist hordes to overrun Porto, nearly 40 miles southwest, instead.

The old-time charms remain as beguiling as when I first visited nearly a decade ago. I potter around its compact Unesco world heritage core, a coil of narrow cobbled streets opening on to squares edged by distinctive medieval half-timbered houses. The lush Minho hills beckon with woody trails and grand views, reached by an old cable car that lifts you serenely to the 600m summit of Mount Penha, capped by a striking 1930s modernist church.



Guimaraes has cultural vigour flowing through its historic veins. The most visible symbol is the contemporary gallery Platform for Arts and Creativity; a metallic edifice resembling a loose pile of boxes, built for the town's 2012 stint as the European capital of culture. Permanent collections of such things as African masks and pre-Columbian art jostle with intriguing 21st-century exhibitions.

Old and new entwine enthrallingly throughout the city. I discover ancient metalwork, ceramics and religious art in the Alberto Sampaio Museum, fashioned around the Romanesque cloisters of a 16th-century monastery, then let the FreePass Guimaraes website guide me to a gratis evening of contemporary dance at the Guimaraes Design Institute, a modern space crafted from an old factory on Rua do Ramada.

With half of its population under 30, Guimaraes is bursting with youthful brio. I join the young crowd drinking craft beers at the Rua Nova Brewpub. Most appear to be going on to the local club Projecto, but free jazz at Convivio Associação, on Largo da Misericórdia, is more my scene.

This 50-year-old cultural association organises Portugal's leading jazz fest in Guimaraes every autumn, but it also serves up classical music, art and theatre in an intimate low-ceiling setting where old stone and wood contrasts with the cool modern chairs. Its mustard-yellow walls are echoed in the hue cast by the old lamps lining the streets as I wander, contentedly, back to my hotel after midnight.

I'm staying at the elegant but affordable Hotel da Oliveira. Set on a medieval lane by the cobbled splendour of Largo da Oliveira, this former manor house fuses modern Portuguese design with rich echoes of its past. Ask for a room overlooking the square (B&B doubles from £77; [hoteldaoliveira.com](http://hoteldaoliveira.com)).

Pousada Mosteiro de Guimaraes is another good option. About half of the 51

rooms at this 12th-century Augustinian monastery were once monks' cells, but asceticism has given way to opulence, with fountain-dotted formal gardens, beguiling cloisters and grand views courtesy of a hillside setting (B&B doubles from £120; [pousadasofportugal.com/pousadas/guimaraes](http://pousadasofportugal.com/pousadas/guimaraes)).



Saint Tiago Square in the historic centre of Guimaraes

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This is not a city in which visitors go hungry. The tasting menus at the Michelin-starred A Cozinha, on Largo do Serralho, are enticing, although I opt for a less starry half-bottle of crisp, tart local vinho verde and beautifully cooked black pork with prawns and mustard sauce in the courtyard of Historico by Papaboa, beneath a reddening evening sun.

I spend a morning on the town's two main historic sights: the vast, tapestry-hung rooms of the Palace of the Dukes of Bragança; then scaling the battlements of the compact, prettily crenelated castle on an adjacent tree-dotted hill. Built by a 10th-century countess to guard against Muslim attackers, it's also reputed to have been the birthplace of the first Portuguese king, Afonso Henriques.

A must-do is the cable car ride up Mount Penha. While half the town comes here in high summer, it's surprisingly easy to find tranquillity on the woodland trails winding off into fragrant pine and eucalyptus. I'm soon wrapped up in blissful solitude. Granite boulders the size of houses sit incongruously among the trees, interspersed with little holy shrines.



Explore gardens, churches and galleries

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Another day, I head farther into the Minho countryside to another wooded hilltop with a dramatic view, although here it's a view back in time. Citania de Briteiros, a few miles north of Guimaraes, is perhaps the finest example on the Iberian peninsula of the ancient settlements, or *castros*, that dotted the region from the 9th century BC until the Romans came marching in. Today it's a vast stony reflection on past lives, an eerily deserted melange of once-busy public meeting places, bathhouses and about 150 ancient circular homes.

There is beauty everywhere I look around Guimaraes, even in the sky, where in summer swifts dart overhead, swooping around castle and palace, playing above the cobbled squares. I'm a little sad that the timing of my visit finds them absent. But I know they'll be back, as will I.

## **NEED TO KNOW**

Norman Miller was a guest of the Portuguese tourist board

([visitportugal.com](http://visitportugal.com)). Easyjet flies from multiple British airports to Porto from £42 return. Buses run between Porto airport and Guimaraes from about £7 one way ([fpguimaraes.pt/events](http://fpguimaraes.pt/events))