



Medieval Heart of Portugal

Romanesque and Gothic architecture

19–26 May 2024 (MK 284)

8 days • £2,730

Lecturer: John McNeill

A journey through central Portugal bringing together a superb group of Romanesque and Gothic buildings.

From Coimbra to Évora, we cover historic cities, fortified towns, and much beautiful landscape.

Major roman sites widen the theme.

The area consists of a ribbon of land between the river Mondego at Coimbra and the Alentejo, the region south of the Tagus. The Alentejo is low-lying and fertile, while the land north of the Tagus is hilly, well-wooded and scoured by numerous narrow valleys.

Roman colonisation responded to this geography by creating a province for western Iberia (Lusitania) with a magnificent port at the mouth of the Tagus (Lisbon), a provincial capital at Mérida, and substantial cities to the north and south at Conimbriga and Évora. Rather remarkably, much of Roman Conimbriga is still there, albeit revealed through excavation, likewise Évora.

Notwithstanding these Roman survivals, the core of the tour is medieval. After the Islamic conquest of Iberia, initial steps towards the Christian resettlement of Coimbra and the land north of the Mondego were taken around 1100. The decisive advance, however, was made in the 1130s under Afonso Henriques. Afonso loosened ties with the neighbouring kingdoms of Spain, wrested control of Lisbon and Santarém from the Moors and elevated Portugal from a county to a kingdom.

To consolidate his victories, Afonso founded churches and new towns – thus the cathedrals of Coimbra and Lisbon, the fortified town of Santarém and the dazzling new military complex at Tomar del Cristo. These are the decisive, and very splendid, Romanesque buildings of Portugal. In their wake came the great essays in early Gothic – of the new Cistercian monastery of Alcobaca and the stunning cathedral of Évora.

The second of the tour's themes is the extraordinarily inventive, almost fanciful architecture of the later Middle Ages – climaxing in the architectural style known as Manueline. One might see this at a number of levels – in the traceried cloisters at Batalha

and Belém, the airy elevations of the Carmelite monastery in Lisbon, the fanciful façades of Coimbra or the dazzling arrangement of royal tombs at Alcobaca.

Itinerary

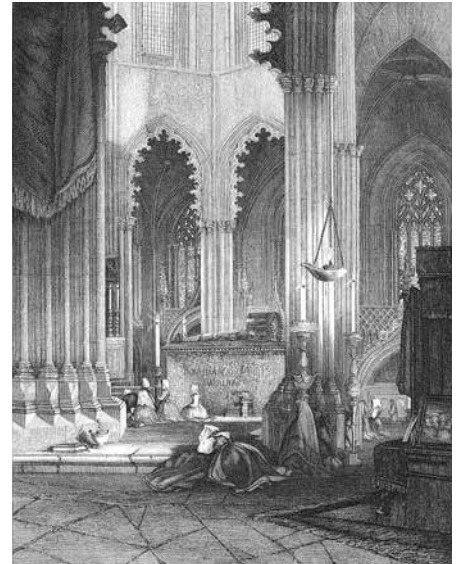
Day 1: Santarém, Tomar. Fly at c. 11.20am from London Heathrow to Lisbon (TAP Portugal). Stop at fortified Santarém, home to the striking early 15th-century church of Nossa Senhora de Graça, before continuing north to Tomar. First of four nights in Tomar.

Day 2: Batalha, Alcobaca, Óbidos. Batalha was founded by King Joan I in 1385 to commemorate his victory over the Castilians, and boasts the greatest set of medieval tombs in Portugal, plus extraordinarily inventive, and English-looking, tracery windows. Alcobaca is the pre-eminent early Gothic monument of Portugal – architecture of breathtaking lucidity. Óbidos is home to a particularly beguiling Renaissance church and town square.

Day 3: Conimbriga, Coimbra. Lovely drive through wooded hills to Roman Conimbriga, Coimbra's predecessor as one of the principal cities of north-western Iberia. Then on to Coimbra, whose 12th-century 'old cathedral' is the earliest and best-preserved Romanesque great church in Portugal, with an elevation related to the major monuments of north-western Spain – above all to the cathedral of Santiago. Above is the Machado de Castro museum, housing a superb collection of medieval sculpture, while across the river is the former royal Clarissine convent of Santa Clara-a-Velha.

Day 4: Tomar. Crowning a hill above the town, the mighty Templar Convento del Cristo is one of the most important medieval military-religious sites to survive in western Europe. Its octagonal Romanesque sanctuary stands at the centre of a record-breaking seven cloisters and courtyards – heaven for anyone interested in cloister design. Free afternoon in Tomar.

Day 5: Lisbon, Évora. A day in Lisbon, starting with the Praça de Rossio and São Domingos – thence to the airy and roofless arcades of Lisbon's late 14th-century Carmelite church, damaged and shored up to act as a memorial to the infamous 1755 earthquake. Final visit to the great Manueline monastery at Belém before driving east into the Alentejo. First of three nights in Évora.



Batalha, steel engraving c. 1850.

Day 6: Évora. A day to savour one of Iberia's most beautiful small cities; including Portugal's best-preserved Roman Temple, the battlemented early Gothic cathedral and treasury, the royal church of São Francisco, and the city museum – home to the stunning remnants of the cathedral's Netherlandish late medieval high altarpiece. Late afternoon drive out to the superlative late Roman villa at São Cucufate.

Day 7: Elvas, São Paulo. Drive east to the late medieval frontier town of Elvas, superbly situated among a range of hills overlooking the river Guadiana and the border with Spain. Visit 16th-century Nossa Senhora da Assunção, Castle and stunning round church of the Dominicans. Return via the convento de São Paulo.

Day 8: Évora. Leisurely morning in Évora. Fly from Lisbon to London Heathrow, arriving c. 5.45pm.

Lecturer

John McNeill. Specialist in the Middle Ages and Renaissance – John lectures for Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. He is Honorary Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for whom he has edited and contributed to collections of essays on medieval cloisters, chantries, Anjou, and King's Lynn and the Fens. In 2010 he

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established a biennial series of international conferences on Romanesque visual culture. His most recent effort in this field – *Romanesque Saints, Shrines, and Pilgrimage* – was published in 2020. He is also author of the *Blue Guides* to both *Normandy* and the *Loire Valley*.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,730 or £2,570 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,040 or £2,880 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class) with TAP Portugal (Airbus 320/321); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel Dos Templários, Tomar (hoteldostemplarios.com): 4-star, modern business hotel. **Pousada dos Loios, Evora** (pousadas.pt): 4-star, installed in a former monastery. *Single rooms throughout are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in historic centres, where coach access is restricted, and a lot of standing. Streets and sites are roughly paved. A good level of fitness is essential. Some days include long drives. Average distance by coach per day: 101 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.