

# Condé Nast Traveler

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

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## the 2024 GOLD LIST

Our Editors' Favorite  
Hotels and Cruises



**PLUS**  
ALASKA  
THE MARQUESAS  
ATHENS  
AUSTRALIA  
MEXICO

From left: Embaixada, a former villa turned shopping gallery; Peña Palace in Lisbon; musicians at Mértola's Islamic festival



# Trace Elements

In Lisbon and southern Portugal, Sarah Khan seeks out a palimpsest of the region's rich Islamic history

**THE MARIGOLD FAÇADE** of the Pousada Convento in Tavira, a town on Portugal's southern coast, gleams in the late-afternoon sun. Refreshing as it is to sip chilled pineapple juice in the Algarve heat, it's not the promise of shade that leads me into its cloisters. The tranquil courtyard, flanked by cheery yellow walls and weathered colonnades, is a portal to the 16th century, when the structure was built for an order of Augustinian nuns.

While transforming the convent into a hotel in 2006, developers began carving out a swimming pool. "A joke that archaeologists and historians make here is that if you dig a hole, you're going to find something," says João Pedro de Matos, a researcher with a postgraduate degree from Universidade de Évora. The excavations revealed vestiges of a medieval Muslim quarter dating back to the 13th century. The site is now a tiny museum under

the hotel bar. The cost of my drink covers my entrance fee. The bartender points me toward a staircase with a tiny placard: Almohad (Islamic) Quarter.

Beginning in the eighth century, Arabs from North Africa reigned over much of the Iberian peninsula, until the Reconquista, a movement by Christian kingdoms to expel Muslims from the region, reclaimed Portugal in 1249 and Spain in 1492. "I like to say they brought the light to Europe," a driver in Lisbon tells me, describing how Muslim advancements in mathematics, medicine, engineering, and astronomy ushered the region out of the Dark Ages. In neighboring Spain, it's easy to trace the footsteps of the Moors in Andalusia, formerly the kingdom of Al-Andalus. But in Portugal you have to work a little harder to see what remains of this inheritance in Al-Gharb, modern-day Algarve.

Southern Portugal is scattered with Arab bastions, ruins, and names in popular holiday hamlets like Silves (formerly Shilb), Albufeira (Al-Buhera), and Faro (Faraon). I set out instead for quieter towns to the east. I visit another museum in Tavira, the Nucleo Islamico. Just steps from the Praça da República, this one is harder to miss. It chronicles the region's history as a Muslim stronghold until the mid-13th century. In nearby Loulé (al-Ulya), where last summer a 12th-century Islamic bathhouse was declared a National Monument, the towering belfry of the church of São Clemente was once the minaret of a mosque. While the Moors may have been vanquished centuries ago, they still loom large in the collective imagination: Getting lost in a web of alleys in the seaside village of Olhão (Al-Hain), I stumble upon statues dedicated to local legends that recount tales of enchanted Moorish sirens and ghosts.

PHOTOGRAPHS: IRINA FOMINA/FAR NIENTE STUDIO, NANCY LOVA, JUAN ANTONIO ORIHUELA SANCHEZ/LAMY



From left: Casa do Alentejo, a cultural center in Lisbon; açorda, a traditional bread soup



After a few days in the Algarve, I detour into Alentejo, minutes from the Spanish border. The town of Mértola (Martula) was an independent Islamic kingdom during the 11th and 12th centuries. Today, it celebrates a biennial Islamic festival. Strolling through the sunbaked menagerie of whitewashed houses draped in bougainvillea, I could easily be in the medinas of Fez or Tunis. The village's most remarkable feature is a church standing below the gaze of a statue of ibn Qasi, a 12th-century governor. While most conquerors promptly razed previous places of worship to erect their own, Mértola's Christian victors simply repurposed an existing mosque; the original horseshoe arches are intact, and the mihrab now houses an altar. It may not rival the grandeur of Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba, the mosque turned cathedral in Cordoba, Spain, but it's the only remaining medieval Islamic place of worship in Portugal that still stands nearly intact.

In Lisbon (Al-Ishbun), the Moorish legacy is more elusive than in the south, largely due to a 1755 earthquake that ravaged the city. But

as Romanticism swept the Iberian peninsula in the 19th century, neo-Moorish splendor became all the rage. Islamic influences appear in the color-blocked fantasia of Sintra's Peña Palace, which King Ferdinand II built in 1854 with cartoonishly dramatic arches and honeycombed ceilings, and in the domed turrets crowning Belem Tower in Lisbon. When I walk into the lavish inner sanctum of Embaixada, an 1800s villa transformed into a hip shopping gallery in the posh Príncipe Real neighborhood, I feel like I've entered a *riad* in Marrakech. And at Casa do Alentejo, a cultural center in what was Lisbon's first casino, I read Arabic letters spelling out "Allah" chiseled into the stucco.

As I continue to search for the Moorish Lisbon, I realize that it is at once nowhere and everywhere. The hands of Fatima, pervasive as embellished door knockers, symbolize the five pillars of Islam. Glossy ceramic tiles with kaleidoscopic motifs may be a Portuguese signature, but their lineage is instantly recognizable to anyone who's set foot in Morocco—even their name, *azulejo*, is derived from the Arabic "al-zillij." The Portuguese language in general has an Arabic pedigree, in words like *laranja* ("orange"), *azenha* ("watermill"), and *bairro* ("neighborhood"). My favorite: *oxala*, pronounced "oshala," derived from "inshallah." No translation needed.

At the restaurant in Casa do Alentejo, I join the journalist and culinary tour guide Célia Pedroso, author of the cookbook *Eat Portugal*, for a lunch of açorda, steaming soup with poached eggs and bread—another Moorish culinary souvenir. Afterward, I follow her deep into the labyrinth of Lisbon's Mouraria, named for the Moors who once inhabited these lanes. Today, little evidence of them remains beyond the name, but newer residents from India, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and elsewhere, many of them Muslim, converge amid its medieval topography.

"Centuries later, these immigrants chose Mouraria," says Pedroso. I trail her down Rua do Benfornoso, now a lively jumble of halal grocers, Bangladeshi restaurants, and jewelry stores, where daily life plays out among a convivial hum of bargaining, gossiping, and singing. I've come searching for Portugal's rich Islamic past, and along the way I've found its present.