

# Trás-os-Montes



If Portugal often feels like Europe's forgotten corner, Trás-os-Montes takes things a step further. This remote region sometimes feels like the land that even Portugal forgot.

For centuries this rural outpost 'behind the mountains' (*trás-os-montes*) was largely isolated, and it retains a tantalisingly lost-in-time quality, with a culture all its own. In places such as Rio de Onor and Miranda do Douro, ancient Latin-derived dialects have survived alongside Portugal's official tongue. Throughout the region residents dressed as devils and horned beasts through the streets each December, celebrating solstice with revels dating back to pagan times.

Geographically, Trás-os-Montes ranges from the steep vineyard-clad hillsides around Vila Real, to the olive groves, almond orchards and canyonlands of the sun-baked eastern *terra quente* (hot land), to the chestnut-shaded highlands of the *terra fria* (cold land), where villagers must endure chilly, sometimes snowy, winters.

The region's uncommon beauty has led to the establishment of three natural parks: Parque Natural do Douro Internacional, renowned for its raptors and dramatic river gorge; Alvão, home to waterfalls, idyllic swimming holes and alpine vistas; and Montesinho, whose heather-clad hills are threaded with trails and speckled with lovely old stone villages.

Still one of Europe's most economically challenged regions, Trás-os-Montes has witnessed an exodus as young people abandon traditional rural life. With EU support, the region's cities have seen 21st-century development in the form of museums, parks and modern highways. Yet in the hinterlands much remains unchanged, including the robust *transmontano* hospitality, expressed in the phrase '*entre quem é*', meaning 'come in, whoever you may be'.

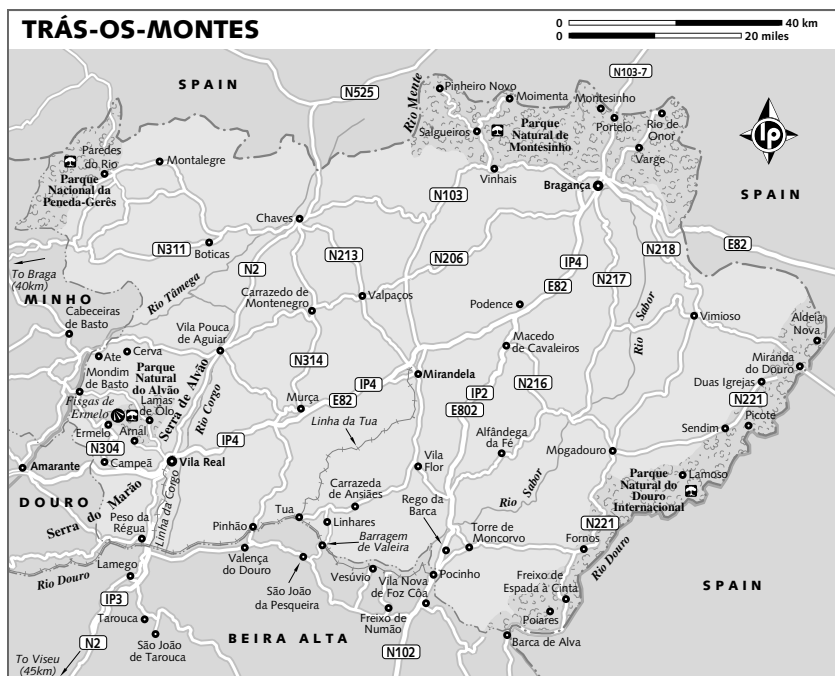
## HIGHLIGHTS

- Strolling the formal gardens and tasting fine wines available only in Portugal at the stately 18th-century **Palácio de Mateus** (p469)
- Cruising between the steep granite walls of the Rio Douro gorge in the **Parque Natural do Douro Internacional** (p490)
- Delighting in the devilish grins of winter carnival masks at the new Museu Ibérico da Máscara e do Traje in **Bragança** (p479)
- Diving, swimming and sliding into natural pools below the dramatic Figsas de Ermelo waterfall in **Parque Natural do Alvão** (p473)
- Watching the sheep return home at sundown in **Rio de Onor** (p483), a town built squarely on the Portugal-Spain border



■ POPULATION: 281,900

■ AREA: 11,772 SQ KM



## WESTERN TRÁS-OS-MONTES

### VILA REAL

pop 24,500 / elev 445m

Clinging to steep hillsides above the confluence of the Rios Corgo and Cabril, the university town of Vila Real is short on charm, although its historic centre, dotted with picturesque old churches, is pleasant enough. Its key attractions lie just beyond the city limits: the dramatically rugged highlands of the Parque Natural do Alvão; and the resplendent Palácio de Mateus, one of Europe's most elegant country houses, surrounded by lovely vineyard country east of town.

### Orientation

Accommodation and food options cluster around the axis of Avenida Carvalho Araújo. The train station is about 1km across the Rio Corgo from the *turismo* (tourist office); the Rodonorte bus station

is 300m northwest on Rua Dom Pedro de Castro. The bus stand for AV Tâmega, Rede Expressos and Santos buses is about a further 100m northwest.

### Information

**Espaço Internet** (Av 1 de Maio; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) Free internet near Hotel Miracorgo.

**Hospital de São Pedro** (☎ 259 300 500; Lordelo)

**Parque Natural do Alvão office** (☎ 259 302 830; pnal@icnb.pt; Largo dos Freitas; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Police station** (☎ 259 330 240; Largo Conde de Amarante)

**Post office** (Av Carvalho Araújo; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat)

**Regional Turismo** (☎ 259 322 819; rtsmarao@gmail.com; Av Carvalho Araújo 94; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-May, 9.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep) Located in a Manueline house in the town centre.

### Sights

#### AROUND THE CENTRE

Once part of a Dominican monastery, the Gothic *sé* (cathedral; Igreja de São Domingos; Travessa de