

Portugal - Birding and Stargazing in Rural Alentejo

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1/2 Fly to Lisbon and birdwatch around the Tagus Estuary

Day 3/6 Astronomy and birdwatching excursions in the Alentejo

Day 7 Drive to Lisbon and fly to the UK

Departs

November and February over New Moon

Focus

Dark skies, birds, landscape and culture

Grading

A. Gentle day walks, part-day walks and natural history excursions

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRT14) or brochure

Highlights

- Two-centre holiday combining Lisbon's Tagus estuary with the magnificent steppes of the Alentejo
- Explore the region's Estuarine and Montado habitats
- Observe the stars from one of Europe's best Dark Sky sites
- Iberian Azure-winged Magpie, Black-shouldered Kite, Spanish Imperial Eagle and Common Crane.



From top: Milky Way over Vineyards, Iberian Magpie and Birdwatching on the Tagus (Images by Miguel Claro Dark Sky@Alqueva, Shutterstock & SPEA)



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Starting at the Tagus estuary, on the outskirts of the capital, we have a day of birdwatching at one of Portugal's most important sites for wintering waders and wildfowl. Heading across the plains of the Alentejo we reach an environment where nature reigns and small villages dot the landscape. The Alentejo region is characterised by rolling hills covered with Olive, Holm and Cork Oak woodland – a landscape known in Portugal as Montado.

During the week we will make several evening visits to the observatory located within the Dark Sky Alqueva reserve and, with astronomical guides, you will have the chance to learn and become familiar with the winter constellations. Telescopes will enable you to view planets, star clusters, nebulae and galaxies.

Days 1/2

Lisbon

We begin our holiday with a flight from the UK to Lisbon. Arriving at the capital, we will drive across the River Tagus to our base on the southern side of the estuary.

Once settled into our lodge, set in woodland of Cork Oak and Stone Pine, we will explore the marshes and reedbeds in search of wintering birds such as Greater Flamingo, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. Despite being surrounded by urban areas, it is one of the largest estuaries in Europe and supports many different types of habitats such as the Montado, salt pans, rice fields and mudflats. It shouldn't take long for us to see large groups of Black-tailed Godwit, Glossy Ibis and Kentish Plover.

On day two we will continue to enjoy the birdwatching around the Tagus estuary and also the Montado that surrounds our base where we may encounter the splendid Iberian Azure-winged Magpie (*Cyanopica cooki*), a species that has recently been split from the Asian Azure-winged Magpie (*Cyanopica cyani*). These slender birds move around in small family groups in the winter. Other species that we can find here are Iberian Grey Shrike, Marsh and Hen Harrier, Hoopoe and White Stork.

Days 3 - 6

Alentejo

Driving across the country we will enter the picturesque region of the Alentejo, we will arrive at our accommodation in the early afternoon. The Herdade D Pedro is set in a remote and peaceful corner of the Alentejo surrounded by rolling hills and farmland with cattle. Across the valley lies the small hilltop town of Terena whose thirteenth century castle can be seen from our residence. This idyllic spot is a magical place to enjoy walks in the Montado by day and extremely dark skies at night.

The skies in this part of Portugal are very dark and enjoy cloud-free nights on an average of 280 days each year.

On the first evening our astronomer, in conjunction with 'Dark Sky Alqueva', will set the scene by introducing you to the winter constellations and viewing with portable astronomical telescopes at our lodge. On later nights in the tour we will drive to the observatory near Alqueva where a range of permanently mounted telescopes will be trained on astronomical objects such as stars, planets, nebulae and galaxies.

At different times of year and at different hours of the night the stars and planets move around the sky so no two departures will have the same evening views. In November 2022 the planet Venus will in the evening sky along with the planets Jupiter and Saturn. The Milky Way will arch overhead.

In February 2023 the beautiful winter constellation including Orion, Gemini, Taurus and Auriga will be in the Southern part of the sky with many open clusters and nebulae. The objective will be to show everyone the celestial highlights and explain some of the science behind the objects we look at.

During our days we will explore the surrounding area inspired by the wide-open views, superb birding and the many quaint villages. Making various stops and short walks during the days we will enjoy a wealth of bird species which will hopefully include Black-shouldered Kite, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Cinereous Vulture, Common Crane, Great Bustard, Red-legged Partridge, Stone Curlew, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Crested and Calandra Lark, Iberian Grey Shrike, Spanish Sparrow and countless Corn Buntings. Little Bustards are a possibility but their numbers have decreased on the Iberian peninsula in the last few years.

Layers of history are in evidence in this attractive but little visited region. Prehistoric stone-circles through to forts, castles and cathedrals are a product of settlements, religion and conflicts with the Moors and the Spanish. Perhaps the most spectacular is the fortified village of Monsaraz perched high above the plains and Lake Alqueva. Here the narrow streets are lined with irregular white-washed cottages surrounded by a city wall and a castle dating to 1310.

During our time in the Alentejo we will visit Herdade do Esporao, with around 700 acres of vineyards and olive groves, with over 40 grape varieties. You will have a guided tour of the cellars and wineries in this eco friendly vineyard, where the aim is to reduce the impact on the environment and re-use and recycle the bottles and packaging are as sustainable as possible. You will enjoy a wine tasting of 3 of the fabulous wines produced at the vineyard.

Day 7

London

Regretfully we must make our way back to Lisbon for our return flight.

Tour grading

Most of our nature walks will be taken from the vehicle and will be less than one kilometre in length and at a slow pace so that we can enjoy the birds, plants and other wildlife we encounter. On some days there will be optional early morning or late evening bird walks in the countryside close to the hotel.

We will break each day with a leisurely lunch, generally a picnic, and will usually be back at our hotel in plenty of time to eat before any evening astronomical activities.

All walks and excursions are optional to allow you to take a day off if you wish.

Weather

In November and in February the daytime temperatures average around 15° Celsius and the evenings a bit cooler at around 5° Celsius but it can drop to freezing. It is recommended to bring warm clothes for the evening astronomical events. During these months we can expect a mix of sunshine and cloud by day with cold and clear nights, so a range of layered clothing is required.

SPEA

This trip will support SPEA, Portugal's Birdlife partner, and the conservation work they carry out. Current SPEA projects include: working to save salt pans and develop best practices for bird-friendly salt pan management and working with electrical suppliers to assess and mitigate the impact of electric powerlines on wild birds.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

Regional Departures

Lisbon is a popular destination and subject to confirmation we hope to be able to offer direct flights from a selection of regional airports including Gatwick and Manchester. Contact us for details, or make your preference known clearly to us upon booking.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.