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HISTORY OF GUARDA

Granted its Charter in 1197 by Dom Sancho this town acted as a strong fortified border town to protect the Portuguese from the successive invading incursions of the Spanish forces. It is written that when the King, Dom João I, first visited the town he fell in love with an attractive daughter of a Jewish shoemaker. Her name was Inês Fernandes and from their union was born a son Afonso who was later to be given the title of the Duque de Bragança. It was through this son that 200 years later his descendants acquired the throne of Portugal. In the Peninsular War the town of Guarda was sacked by the French invading army and then used later as an important base for the defending forces under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington.

Description of Guarda

Probably by the fact that Guarda is the highest town in Portugal at 1.056 metres and is influenced by its historic background with the architecture of its buildings presenting a sober and rather heavy visual appearance. In the 1850's it was nicknamed the city of "4 Fs" – "Fria, Farta, Forte e Feia" (cold, well-supplied, strong and ugly). The main church, the Sé, was begun in 1390 and completed as a building in 1540. The stern outward appearance belies the airy and graceful interior. The altarpiece was created in 1552 by Jean de Rouen and consists of 100 carefully carved figures. The nearby Municipal Museum exhibits a collection of paintings and local archaeological finds together with works relating to the town's famous poet Augusto Gil. The main square named Praça Velha, the Rua dos Clérigos and the Judiaria are all worthwhile a visit as many of the buildings date from the 14th Century. The total number of inhabitants is approximately 26.000.

Guarda - Nearby Locations

The area around Guarda is dotted with the remains of castles that were part of the defence system of the kingdom. Three nearby smaller towns are Trancoso, Almeida and Castelo Rodrigo that once were fortified villages that have since lost their most of their defending walls and castles. The later town was the location of the very important "Treaty of Alcanices" in 1297 between Portugal and Spain. The castle of Trancoso was chosen in 1282 as the location in which King Dinis solemnised his marriage to the 12 year old Princess Isabel of Aragon. The King gave the town to his new Queen as a wedding gift and as his love for her grew he followed later by gifting the towns of Óbidos, Leiria, Abrantes and Porto de Mós. A shoemaker by the name of Gonçalo Anes, and poet from this remote town, arriving in Lisbon in the 15th Century and caused many problems bringing him to the attention of the Inquisition with his accurate foretelling of events which meanwhile had gained him general fame.

Further to the north is the town of Marialva. Its recorded history appears in Latin in 179 in the time of Emperor Adriano but its existence was almost certainly long before this date. Located at 613 metres above sea level this rocky location and granite houses offers little comfort. Not much remained of its fortifications when in 1286 King Dinis decided to grant the town to hold Fairs. In 1515 King Manuel gave the orders to refortification which was completed by 1559. However, in the 18th Century the town fortifications was again virtually destroyed due to the effect of war. Regardless, it has still left us with a very medieval picture of what may have existed in those times without the encumbrance of modern man.

The town of Almeida to the northeast of Guarda is surrounded in a well preserved 12 star-shaped fortified walls built in the 17th Century and designed by Antoine Deville. To enter the present town it still may be approached over a narrow ancient bridge and then through a tunnel in the ramparts. Also, to the northeast of Guarda is the town of Pinhel that originally acted as the control point in the 13th Century to a series of defending rural fortresses built by King Dinis to protect his kingdom from the constant threat of invasion from Spain.

Close to Guarda on the northwest is the town of Celorico da Beira with its ruins of a 10th Century castle and its fame for being a centre for the famous Serra made from the milk of ewes. Also to the north, is the ancient triple walled site of Castro do Tintinholo with the first two walls from a pre-Roman period.

The village of Castelo Mendo lies directly to the east of Guarda. At 760 metres above sea level it still presents the stark reality of what medieval living was all about. On the southeast side of Guarda the rugged granite fortified village of Sortelha that seems to show little architectural change from its mediaeval past.

The town of Belmonte which received its Charter in 1199 is directly to the south of Guarda and is well known in the history of Portugal as the home of the famous explorer family of Cabral. Amongst their many historic feats, Pedro Álvares Cabral was the first navigator to land in Brazil in 1500. The town is also connected with the Jewish settlement in Portugal as in 1296 it is recorded that a Synagogue was inaugurated. Just south again the walled village of Sortelha and is another fine example of medieval Portugal.

To the west of Guarda is the range of mountains known as Serra da Estrela. The highest point is 1.9393 metres but most of area is in the region of 1.500 metres above sea level. The area known as Torre is in winter a limited ski resort whilst the road from here southwards takes the visitor down to Covilhã which is known for fine textiles produced from local wool. The whole region is made up of large rugged terrain and it is from here that the famous distinctive cheese "Serra" is made from the milk of ewes. The local farmers have bred a special race of sheepdog named after the area that is known for its hardy and protective qualities. Within the Serra da Estrela there are a number of small villages or towns reflecting the hard and rugged lifestyle of the inhabitants. None more so than Linhares, protectively guarded by towers and a medieval castle and within it a Roman Forum from which in olden time's local justice was handed out. To the south west tip of the Serra da Estrela (ancient Hermínius) is the historic town of Loriga (ancient Lorica and more 2600 years old) in which the famous rebel leader Viriato (180 BC - 139 BC), is reputed to have originated. He led a large force of Lusitanians that took on the might of the Roman Empire in the southern Iberian Peninsula. Their successful campaign was brought to a halt when Viriato's closest followers murdered him for a handsome Roman reward.

Also to the northwest and lying about halfway between Guarda and Vila Real is the small town of Penedono, with its small but impressive castle that records show existed since before 960 AD.
