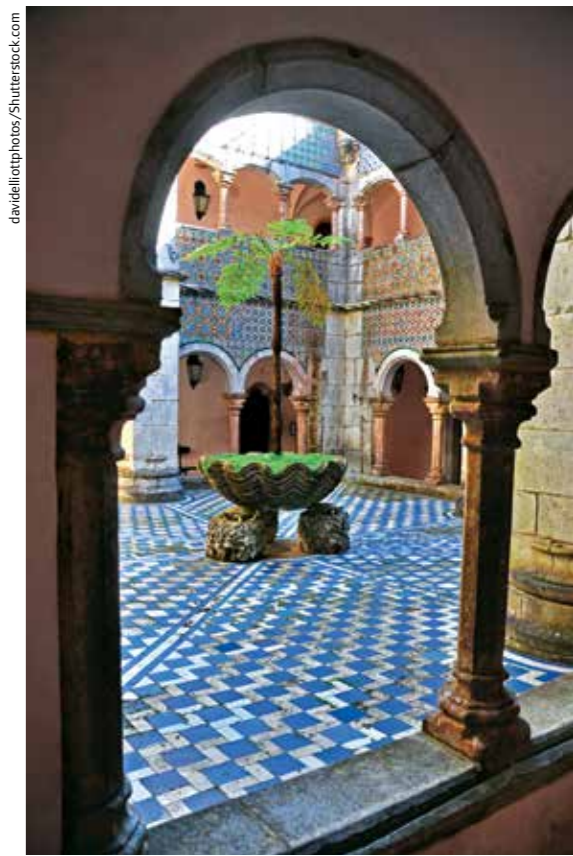


# Heritage stopover

Portugal is known for its ancient structures and castles. Sintra takes this cultural quotient a notch further offering a slice of history atop mountainous landscapes.

Text **G Venkatesh**



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If a foreigner visits Delhi, he always uses the opportunity to visit Agra and see the Taj Mahal, unless he has already seen it on an earlier visit. Likewise, if one would journey to the Portuguese capital city of Lisbon, the sojourn would be incomplete without a hop-over to neighbouring Sintra. While Delhi and Agra at any given time of the year have the same weather, Sintra is much cooler than Lisbon all through the year—thus serving as what one may label a ‘retreat from a retreat’ for tourists.

## The train stops here

Firstly, it’s fairly easy to travel from Lisbon to Sintra. In southern Lisbon, in the region called Baixa is a train station called Rossio. From there, a metro train can be taken to Sintra which happens to be the last stop on the journey. Sintra is a mountainous region, almost all the way from the city centre to Cabo da Roca—the westernmost point of the European continental mainland, described by a Portuguese poet as ‘the point where land ends and sea begins’. Trekking along the foothills of Cabo da Roca is a must-try for nature enthusiasts. If time is at a premium, just

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◀ Left: Romanticist in essence, the Pena Palace boasts various architectural influences. Top: Be it a grand palace, church, monastery or simple house, azulejo or blue-glazed tile work is a common sight all over Portugal.



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▲ Clockwise from above: Cabo da Roca falls within the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park and offers a panoramic view of the sea; In the 13th century *queijadas* were used as a form of payment for rent; The Monserrate Palace was used as a summer resort by Francis Cook who commissioned it.

hop on to the Sintra City Sightseeing bus which takes you pretty close to Cabo da Roca (where you would get to see several species of migratory and marine birds on the granite boulders littering the littoral stretch of land) and then back again to the city centre, stopping at over a dozen places on the way. While the biosphere and mountainscapes in Sintra are ‘age-old heritages’, if we could dub them so, the royal retreats, castles and buildings

are between 200 and 1200 years old. For nearly two decades now, Sintra has been on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list.

If a tourist looks for something which is characteristically Portuguese, and which makes for a good keepsake, it is the *azulejo* (derived from the Arabic word *az-zulay* which means polished stone, monochromatic blue-on-white). The use of the *azulejos* on the walls of the houses is unmistakable. There are restaurants where one must (stress on the word ‘must’) taste this particular delicacy which is very typical of Sintra—*queijadas* or cheesecakes dosed with cinnamon!



Gonzalo Azumendi/Agé/Dinodia

### To the greener side

The Park of Monserrate distinguished itself with the European Garden Award 2013...a stroll through the park will tell you why. Its history can be traced back to 1540 when a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Monserrate came up on the site. About 250 years later, Gerard de Visme, the British merchant, set up a neo-Gothic palace here. In 1793 and thereafter in 1856, the park and palace were recreated to resemble what they look like today. The palace, in a curious architectural confluence, blends together Egyptian, Gothic, Moorish and Renaissance elements.

► Clockwise from right: The Convent of the Capuchos is located in rural Sintra. A part of the Sintra mountains, it is marked by dense vegetation; An ancient ducks’ house along the forests and paths of the Pena National Park that lead to the palace; An intricately carved corridor of the Monserrate Palace.

Among other flora from temperate forests, you can find the Norfolk Island pine from the Pacific, Pohutukawa, banyan and tree ferns from Australia and New Zealand, holly from North Africa, Europe and Asia, Arbutus from the Mediterranean, Cork Oak from North Africa, bamboos and camellias from Japan, palms, yuccas, nolinias and agaves from Mexico, Ginkgo Biloba and Mourning cypress from China and wine palm from Chile. India may not be represented in the park, but it surely finds its place in the palace, in the form of Delhi alabaster panels, representative

The mountaintop location of the castle provides a terrific view of Sintra’s forests and valleys and the biosphere which includes both natural and exotic vegetation.



Jose Elias/Agé/Shutterstock.com

of Mughal architecture, and an Indian drawing room with imposing Indian teak furniture. A microcosm of the world is what you feel you have been in when you complete the circuit—which takes about an hour and a half. You can later cool off at the café strategically located close to the entrance of the park.

### Back in time

As you move westward, another notable monument begs your attention especially for its Indian connection. The Convent of the Capuchos was founded in 1560 by Alvaro de Castro. Legend has it that the founder’s father, the fourth Portuguese Viceroy of India in João de Castro had dreamt of a divine revelation to erect a Christian temple on the site, which was duly fulfilled by his son. Lord Byron who was one of the several famous visitors to Sintra over time, was very much inspired by the Convent and its Spartan friars who subjected themselves to rigorous austerities to commune with the Divine.



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▲ Clockwise from above: The impressive Arab room at Pena National Palace; Take a walk around the Castle of the Moors, considered to be one of the oldest here; The open terrace of the Pena palace gives you a great view of Sintra.

The oldest man-made attraction, and the last one on the bus trip, is the Castle of the Moors. The mountaintop location of the castle provides a terrific view of Sintra's forests and valleys and the biosphere which includes both natural and exotic vegetation. When the Moors were defeated, the region came under (Portuguese) Christian domination. The Islamic exterior has been preserved (what with the green flags and the Arabic inscriptions), with the chapel of Saint Peter of Penaferim, built by the victorious Christian monarch within the walls of the

castle, serving as a symbol of the conquest. A classical instance of rainwater harvesting is evidenced by the subterranean cistern in the castle, with a capacity of 648,000 litres, where water was collected from openings in its roof.

South of the Moorish castle, is the grand Palace of Pena which also happens to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Surrounded by dense vegetation which comprises the Park of Pena, lies an arboretum which was created out of what was once barren land. The history of the Palace of Pena is not very different from that of the Convent of the Capuchos. As is believed, it was an apparition of the Virgin Mary which led to the erection of a church to Our Lady of Pena at the site where the Pena Palace

stands now. Church led to monastery, which was destroyed in the Lisbon earthquake in the mid-18th century. In the mid-19th century, at the site of the ruins, the palace was erected.

Reaching Sintra early in the morning and spending a good 7-8 hours is always a very rewarding experience. If you like walking, it is all the more exciting and satisfying.



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## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways regularly flies to Paris from Mumbai. From there, you can take a flight to Lisbon via our code share partner Air France.

### Accommodation

Sintra offers a variety of accommodation options including homestays, guest houses and five-star resorts.

### Sightseeing

Apart from bus tours and walking trails, bicycle tours are also highly recommended in Sintra. When opting for a day trip, it is advisable to pick a weekday as it tends to get crowded on weekends.

### For more information

Log on to [www.sintra-portugal.com](http://www.sintra-portugal.com)