

# Portugal: The Joys of Obidos

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The small city of Obidos, Portugal has a lot to offer, including bookstores, a castle, and friendly locals. Beth Reiber photos.

## Obidos—One of Europe’s Best Medieval Walled Cities

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By Beth Reiber

When we arrived at the Obidos train station, my travel companion and I were surprised to see only two other couples disembark.



A man rests outside the main city gate in Obidos, Portugal.

We were even more surprised to find the train station locked and deserted, with no human being or taxi in sight. Luckily, we could see the [walled](#) fortifications of Obidos high above us on a hill.

It would be a long, winding walk with our roller bags, but I was thrilled. I'd read that [Obidos](#) was one of Europe's prettiest medieval walled villages, but my initial impression seemed to suggest that while tourists were running amok in Lisbon, [Sintra](#) and other popular destinations, we might just have Obidos to ourselves.

So I can be forgiven, perhaps, for thinking we'd discovered the Portuguese equivalent of Shangri-La.

### **Where the Crowds Are**



After a 12-minute slow slog uphill, we finally reached the city's north entrance beside the castle and quickly dropped off our bags at the nearby [Casa S. Thiago do Castelo](#), an eight-bedroom historic lodging where we would be staying the night. We then had a light lunch at [Bar Arco da Cadeia](#) ("Prison's Arch") of olives and a cheese plate made from goat, sheep, and cow milk.

## Lisbon's Highlights

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A typical street scene in Obidos

The restaurant is located in a former jail, with three-foot-thick stone walls dating from the 11th century.

On our way to the restaurant we had seen some tourists milling about, but nothing overwhelming. It was only after our meal and we turned onto Rua Direita, the town's main

street originally laid out in the 13th and 14th centuries to link the castle to the town gate, that we came upon hordes of mostly tour groups, led by leaders on a fast-paced walk through town. I immediately felt sheepish having ever thought Obidos might somehow be undiscovered.

### **A Tiny City**

Obidos is tiny. You can walk from the castle at its northern end to the town's southern town gate in about 10 minutes, making me wonder how many people lived in Obidos. But when I asked locals, no one seemed to know. One person said 100 people, while another ventured 100 families.

So I went to the tourist information office, located outside the town gate along with a huge parking lot filled with tour buses and cars that are obviously the transportation of choice for most visitors.

From Lisbon, located 50 miles to the south, there's also express bus service, which delivers passengers to Obidos in only an hour. The train, on the other hand, takes more than two hours, which explains why so few people use it to get to this region.

I learned at the tourist office that 100 people lived within city walls, though Google later told me that Obidos proper, which extends outside city walls on surrounding flatter ground, had approximately 3,100 residents.

I also asked how many tourists visited Obidos annually. The staff didn't know for sure but said that 227,609 people had come into their tourist office in 2017, the last year for which such data was available.

### **Mostly Day Trippers**

Luckily, most of the hordes are day-trippers. If they're on a group tour, which usually combines stops at several destinations like Fatima and Nazaré, their stay in Obidos is likely to be less than an hour, but they arrive in one bus after the other in droves all day long. To

escape the crowds and understand what makes Obidos special, therefore, you absolutely have to come on your own and spend the night.



The Organic Market/Bookshop offers both used and new books related to the sciences, education, literature and other genres, as well as organic produce and a standup bar

It's obvious to me that this number doesn't include all those tour groups, nor did it include people who never step foot inside a tourist office.

### **Why Obidos?**

The simple answer as to why you should visit Obidos is because of the village itself. It doesn't have much in the way of sights, but it is loaded with charm. Founded by the Celts more than two millennia ago and then occupied by the Romans, Visigoths, and Moors before being conquered in 1148 by the first king of Portugal, King Afonso Henriques, it's a perfectly preserved hilltop medieval town encircled by ancient walls.





Unusual pots outside a private garden

Narrow cobbled streets lead past tidy whitewashed homes, accented with electric-blue detailing, red-tiled roofs, and spreading bougainvillea blooming with purple and crimson flowers.

Despite the town's small size, it's easy to escape the crowds that stick to Rua Direita by wandering maze-like streets and steep steps leading to the ramparts, which you can walk along for views over rooftops and the surrounding countryside.

Interestingly, up until the 15th century Obidos lay on the coast, meaning ships could moor right at the city's base. But then fierce storms and a tsunami dramatically altered the topography, dumping sandbars that moved the coastline five miles to the west.

Obidos itself was a victim to several earthquakes that caused buildings to tumble, including one in 1535 and a whopper in 1755, which claimed an estimated 60,000 lives in

Lisbon alone. But Obidos was so important to Portuguese royalty, it was rebuilt after every disaster.



Whitewashed buildings with blue and ochre details and bougainvillea are part of Obidos' charm

## Obidos: The Perfect Wedding Gift

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In fact, Obidos is such a jewel of a village, that from the 13th to the 19th centuries each successive king presented the town as a wedding gift to his new bride.

That alone should tell you something. Furthermore, because of its more than a dozen bookstores and a literary scene that includes readings and an annual literary festival, Obidos was declared a UNESCO Creative City of Literature in 2015.

It even has a hotel filled with books, called [The Literary Man](#), home to more than 60,000 books and the largest literary hotel in the world. In other words, Obidos is both romantic and a book-lovers paradise. What's not to like?



## What to see

Obidos' most striking landmark is its impressive stone castle, with origins dating back to the Romans and fortified by the Moors. Restored and enlarged by successive Portuguese monarchies, it served as a royal palace from which doting queens bestowed riches, like the 1.8-mile-long aqueduct commissioned by Queen Catherine of [Austria](#) in the 16th century to supply water to the town's many fountains.



Obidos Castle now houses a state-owned inn

Although the castle had fallen to ruins by the 20th century, in 1950 it was restored as Portugal's first state-run pousada (inn) in a historic building, the [Postado do Castelo](#).

Near the center of town, just off Rua Direita, is the main square, Praca de Santa Maria. It contains the Pillory, a gift from Queen Leonor, who came to Obidos Castle at the end of the 15th century to mourn the death of her son.



One side of the Pillory is adorned with her royal coat of arms, while the other side depicts a fishing net, used by fishermen to deliver the dead prince's body.

Although the Pillory was a show of municipal power, it was also used for public humiliation, punishment, and even the hanging of criminals.

Across the square is Igreja de Santa Maria, St. Mary's Church, the main church of Obidos. Originally a temple used by Visigoths in the fifth and sixth centuries and then as a mosque by the Moors, it was transformed into a church in the 12th century but was badly destroyed, like much of Obidos, by a 1535 earthquake.



Rua Direita in the evening

Its restoration added an ornate Renaissance-style portal, while inside are Gothic religious art and decorative Azulejo tile coverings for which Portugal is famous.

The church's most famous day occurred in 1444 when 10-year-old King Afonso V married

his 8-year-old cousin Isabel. To the right of the altar hangs a painting, the Mystic Betrothal of Saint Catherine, by Josefa de Obidos.

The daughter of Baltazar Gomes Figueira, a nationally renowned 17th-century painter who founded the School of Obidos, Josefa was famous in her own right and one of the few female artists of her time.

You can see more of her work at the Obidos Municipal Museum, housed in the 18th-century manor on Rua Direita. She's buried in Igreja Sao Pedro, St. Peter's Church, formerly of gothic construction but rebuilt in simple baroque style after the 1755 earthquake.

### **Santiago Bookshop**

In fact, Obidos has lots of churches dating back hundreds of years. Some now house the town's many bookshops, like the very interesting Santiago Bookshop dating back to the 12th century and located next to the castle.

You'll also find a multitude of souvenir shops along Rua Direita selling the usual Portuguese



Souvenirs for sale along Rua Direita

tiles, magnets, purses made from cork, and other items, including Ginja, a cherry liqueur trendily served nowadays in a chocolate cup.

One shopkeeper commented ruefully that all the souvenirs hanging outside shops lining Rua Direita marred the beauty of his town.

But in the evening, when the tour buses and day-trippers drive away and the shops take in their wares and shutter their doors, the little village comes into its own, peaceful and quiet.

Early evening and morning are perfect times to explore Obidos without the crowds, to get lost in its labyrinthian layout, to gaze upon secret private gardens filled with lemon trees, and to walk its ramparts.

Every turn in the path, no matter which direction you look, reveals another picture-perfect scene. If I were a queen, Obidos would be the best wedding present I can imagine.



