

Portugal: Peneda Gerês National Park

Tour code: JPO

Revised: Nov 06

The Peneda-Gerês National Park (PNPG) is situated in the extreme north of Portugal in the Minho province adjacent to the Spanish border. The area is principally granitic and mountainous with peaks rising to 1545m/5068ft. The many deep valleys are densely wooded with deciduous trees, and have rich meadows and pastures whilst higher ground is bare and often sparsely vegetated. The remoter villages enjoy a rich and varied local life, and tourism is still very much in its infancy in this area. Apart from Gerês itself and the mountain village of Soajo, few other locations in the Park provide for regular tourism.

This is Portugal's only National Park and organisation and infrastructure is not very well developed as yet. As a result there is ample scope for the slightly more adventurous to experience the natural charm and warmth of the locals in many of the lesser visited areas. But on the other hand it does mean that 'haut cuisine' and 5-star luxury is not available.

On a tour like this, lack of tourist facilities involves logistics, which are not very straightforward. Many of the footpaths we use are neither well trodden nor fully waymarked, and hotels and hostals (pensions) are often quite simple, although full of character. However those who are prepared to follow the walks we propose, will discover a very different Portugal from that of the popular image and they will be well rewarded for accepting any infrastructural shortcomings.

The local people are generally warm and welcoming so don't be surprised if you are invited in for a glass of the local vinho at someone's house. Language can be a bit of a problem but the Portuguese are well used to this. You will almost always find someone near to hand who has a smattering of French or English. (It's best to avoid trying to use Spanish).

Our tour takes in the central part of the Park (Gerês) firstly, and then the lesser visited northern (Peneda) area. Starting from the old spa town of Caldas do Gerês (the tourist Mecca of the PNPG) we walk over the Sierra do Gerês (taking in Pe de Cabril 1235m as an option) to Campo Gerês. From there we walk over the Sierra Amarela, passing the picturesque mountain villages of Brufe and Cutelo, through a spectacular valley, and on up to Ermida. From there on to Soajo and the far north of the Park at Peneda. The tour ends at Arcos de Valdevez, an attractive market town with plenty of good food and local colour.

The tour is based on one-night stops at Gerês, Ponte da Barca and Arcos; two nights are spent at Soajo and Covide.

Travel Information

Season: May to October

First Hotel: This is at Caldas Gerês. A taxi from Porto will cost approx. 95 Euros. We can book this in advance and then you pay the taxi driver on arrival. Bus is much cheaper but could be complicated without local knowledge/language.

A possible compromise might be taxi from the airport to Braga (approx 35 Euros, not included) and then bus to Gerês.

End of Tour: From Arcos there are good express buses to Porto (approx 6 Euros, not included), travel time approx. 2 hours.

Level of Difficulty

Please Note: The conditions in the Gerês National Park have deteriorated for walking in recent years, due to the park authority not re clearing or waymarking trails. Our man in the region goes through the area before the season starts to clear and re waymark trails wherever possible. Some of the long distance footpath has also become eroded in places and we do recommend good footwear. Where there is an alternative to avoid the worst of the undergrowth, it will be taken and be indicated in the route notes. We are confident that clients who



are prepared to put up with these difficulties will be more than rewarded by the scenery and the traditional life style they will discover.

Fitness: This holiday should present few difficulties to anyone in reasonable condition and accustomed to hill walking. One or two days are quite long and present fairly stiff ascents (but on good paths); this can become quite arduous in warm weather.

Waymarking: Few paths are waymarked and so clients should have experience of route finding with map and compass.

Singles: Because of the remoteness of this walk, it is not available to single walkers.

Footwear: Some tracks are quite stony and may have loose sand and pebbles; boots are essential. It is also best to avoid wearing shorts.

Day Stages: 4 to 7 hours per day depending on the options taken on days 2 and 3.

General Information

Baths: it is not normal for your room to have a bath, the main reason being that it takes up a lot of space, some hotels/guesthouses may have a separate room in the house where a bath is available to guests, but in the main it is showers.

Breakfast: In Portugal usually consists of coffee and toast/croissant and jams etc. if you want more for breakfast then we would suggest you purchase some food the night before. It is important for you to tell us if you have any dietary requirements when you book your holiday so that we can inform everyone that you are staying with.

Language: When travelling in less frequented areas you will not necessarily come across people speaking English. Remember you have left home to find things different. Buy a phrase book and try to learn a bit of Portuguese!

Luggage: When staying in hotels, sometimes your luggage will have been taken to your room awaiting your arrival. However don't be surprised if your luggage is waiting for you to take it up to your room.

Accommodation & Meals

Accommodation is on a bed and breakfast basis with four evening meals included in the tour cost. The other three evening meals are not included but can readily be obtained near the accommodation.

□ **Night 1:** Is spent in a comfortable 3 star hotel in the centre of Gerês. Bed and breakfast.

□ **Nights 2&3:** Are spent at a simple 'Pension' with comfortable rooms and a lovely terrace view out over the mountains; en suite facilities. Evening meal, bed and breakfast.

□ **Night 4:** Is spent in a comfortable 'Residencial' in Ponte da Barca near to the river and medieval bridge; en suite facilities. Bed and breakfast.

□ **Nights 5&6:** Are spent in an old converted granite house in the heart of Soajo village. A privately run guesthouse full of charm and character. En suite facilities. Evening meal, bed and breakfast.

□ **Night 7:** Is spent in a very comfortable hotel near the Rio Vez (claimed to be the least polluted river in Europe). All rooms have ensuite facilities. Bed and breakfast included. Right next door is one of the best restaurants in the area.

Outline Itinerary

□ **Day 1:** Arrive Porto and own transfer via bus/train/taxi to Braga and on to Gerês.

□ **Day 2:** 10km (with option for extra 5km). 4 to 5 hours walking (waymarked) from Gerês over the Serra Gerês (with a good weather option to climb Pe de Cabril 1226m) on into the Rio Homem valley to Covide.

Our first day's walking takes us over the Serra de Gerês. There is a very stiff climb to start with, (about 600m) after which it is an easy stroll over to Covide. If the weather is clear you will get splendid views of the landscape ahead. There is the option (in good weather) for a walk over to Pe de Cabril (1285m) for the more energetic. This is not a particularly long day's walking and the first part is done before it gets too hot. Overnight in Covide.

□ **Day 3:** 21km. This day is spent exploring the area around Campo Gerês and Vilarinho. Relatively easy excursions (level walking) from Covide to include the Vilarinho de Furnas Visitor Centre which commemorates the way of life in this village, which was drowned by the nearby hydro scheme. The Centre has a fascinating display of traditional implements and techniques, which is well worth seeing as many of these will be seen on our walks. There is also the dam itself, and an old Roman road complete with milestones. Overnight is again at Covide.

□ **Day 4:** A full day's walking, 24km, from Covide down 500m to the Roman bridge over Rio Homem, then back up 500m to Brufe, through the picturesque villages of Cutelo and Germil (with optional side excursion to Carvalhinha 1076m for the energetic). Finally a waymarked track down the Germil valley to Entre Ambos os Rios.

After a relatively easy day 3 you set out on quite a lengthy trek today, crossing the Rio Homem by a medieval footbridge, then climbing steeply up to the village of Brufe. The rest is quite easy going, passing through the delightful villages of Cortinas and Cutelo with plenty of local activity and colour, up to the watershed between the Homem and Lima Rivers where there is an option to climb up to Carvalhinha (1096m) with superb views. Afterwards it is a steady downhill walk through Germil alongside an irrigation channel until we reach another pleasant village at Sobredo. Finally the track takes you down to Entre Ambos os Rios where, from a local cafe, a taxi will be called to take you to Ponte da Barca. Overnight is at Ponte da Barca, a small market town on the Rio Lima. There is a very pleasant waterfront and mediaeval bridge. Plenty of restaurants to choose from too.

□ **Day 5:** 22km. Starting from Ermida in its remarkable mountain setting, past the temporary summer village of Bilhares over to Lindoso, down to the Rio Lima to arrive at the large village of Saojo.

From Ponte da Barca the taxi will take you back to Entre Ambos os Rios and on to Ermida where the day's walk will start from this remote village at the head of a spectacular valley. From Ermida the walk passes through some beautiful woodland up to the summer village of Bilhares, through upland pastures and on over to Lindoso. At Lindoso (with its fine castle and spectacular group of grain stores) the route crosses the new dam and follows a lovely old granite paved track to end at Soajo. Overnight is at Soajo in an old granite guesthouse.

□ **Day 6:** A 15km walk (waymarked) to Peneda, along the valley floor with lots of colour and traditional agriculture to see,

finally ending at Peneda in its wild and spectacular setting. From Peneda back to Soajo.

This day the itinerary follows the old granite track from Soajo up and over a pass to the valley to Peneda. The path goes through many small villages and you will see plenty of local life. At the end you arrive at Peneda with its sanctuary and quite spectacular setting amongst the bare rocky mountains. From here there are many short walks out into the hills if you wish, finally to return on the trail back to Soajo (alternatively you can arrange a taxi for the return). Overnight in Soajo.

□ **Day 7:** 21kms from Mezio to Arcos (via Cabeça dos Bicos 1292m if weather permits).

This day's walking will start at Mezio where there is the option (weather and fitness permitting) to walk on up to

the Cabeça dos Bicos (1232m) well worth doing for the views. The tracks then reunite to walk along another fine granite footpath down to Carralcova and then to follow the valley of the Rio Azere to Arcos de Valdavez. Arcos is the overnight stop and accommodation is in a very comfortable hotel. Arcos itself is a pleasant old market town and gives opportunity for some last minute shopping before your tour ends.

□ **Day 8:** Departure from Arcos back to Porto is best done by one of the regular express buses run by Renex and Caima (the bus station is just along from the hotel). The bus takes about 2 hours 30 mins to reach central Porto from where you will have to take a taxi or airport bus back out to the airport.