

# The big trip

## Football crazy? Join the pilgrims at Braga's shimmering new shrine

This city has a long history as Portugal's religious and cultural capital, says **Robert Nurden**. So how will it cope with waves of soccer fans supporting their teams at the futuristic mountain-side stadium?

Jose, my taxi driver, got out of the car, put his hands on his hips and looked up at the slopes of Monte Castro towering above us. Yellow cranes swung against the backdrop of dark granite, and dumper trucks chugged and spluttered amid the heaps of bricks and girders. The foetal form of Estadio Municipal de Braga was maturing by the minute. Jose expressed awe with an Iberian intake of breath. I managed an Anglo-Saxon "wow".

The £52m stadium built in Portugal's oldest city, Braga, for Euro 2004 is drooled over as much for its architectural majesty as for anything to do with football. A shimmering diamond carved out of the rock halfway up a mountainside, a graceful amphitheatre of seats at both ends, it hovers like a silver dragonfly over the green Cavado valley.

But anyone who knows Braga would have expected nothing less. It would be hard for the country's religious capital, where the bells of 36 churches and Portugal's oldest cathedral ring out, to construct a piece of urban utilitarianism. Just as the red and green shirts of the Portuguese team traditionally weave spell-binding Rococo patterns on the turf, so the eight new stadiums built for next week's tournament are nothing less than eye-catching.

Bringing Euro 2004 to Braga is a bit like staging the competition in, say, Canterbury. In this hotbed of faith, the clergy always had more clout than royalty. The sprawling mass of the archbishop's palace and the plethora of pilgrimage trails snaking their way across the eucalyptus-clad foothills of the Minho region are testimony to that. Consider, also, the deep conservative streak which spanned the infamous 1926 coup that put the dictator Antonio Salazar in power for 36 years, and you have a profile of a place that is, well, rather reactionary.

"That was true for a long time," said Filomena Alves, the chief of tourism, sitting in her refurbished art deco office overlooking Praca da Republica. "But things have changed. You'd be surprised to know that Braga has the youngest population of any city in

Europe, and it's been nicknamed the Silicon Valley of Portugal.

"Old and new have already combined here, so an invasion of a few football fans - even English ones - doesn't worry us. And don't think that we're just a sleepy old city with no interest in football. We're fanatical about sport, and visiting fans will have no problem fitting in."

Whether marauding supporters from northern climes will warm to the finer aesthetic points of Bom Jesus remains open to question. Braga's main tourist attraction is this neoclassical church perched above the city, reached by way of a steep, switchback staircase of 365 steps. Real pilgrims negotiate the route on their knees, via chapels marking the 14 stations of the cross and spooky allegorical fountains

### Bringing Euro 2004 to Braga is a bit like staging the competition in, say Canterbury

depicting the five senses. Secular souls can use the funicular.

Even on a Monday in late autumn, when I visited, with the next shower set to sweep off the Atlantic at any moment, families were enjoying picnics in the ornate gardens. Amid rows of box hedge and purple chrysanthemums, one mother unfurled a vast, white linen cloth to release hefty chorizos, hunks of cheese, and bunches of Minho grapes.

Maybe it's just a bit too fanciful to posit the notion that this holy monument provided the inspiration for architect Souto Moura's contemporary masterpiece - the cathedral to the beautiful game - hanging off a mountain just down the road. But the similarity of position is uncanny.

The cathedral proper - Se in Portuguese - is dark, brooding and cavernous, devoid of baroque belligerence. While the sombre nave stalks towards the east, side chapels twinkle with censers, their metal shapes caught by shafts of light from far-off windows.

A tour of the upstairs treasury will

lighten the mood - if you're lucky enough to get Jorge to show you round. Rotund, shuffling, short of breath and greasy of hair, the first thing this gargoye of guides does is to double-lock the door behind you. Then he rolls from glass case to glass case, each stuffed with vessels and crucifixes of gold, silver and ivory, encrusted with precious jewels.

"This casket is in 18-carat gold, with eight diamonds and 22 amethysts," he recited. Then he let out a sepulchral chuckle and his face split asunder in an unholy grin. At that moment a discordant peal of bells reminiscent of Stockhausen on a bad day added to the cacophony.

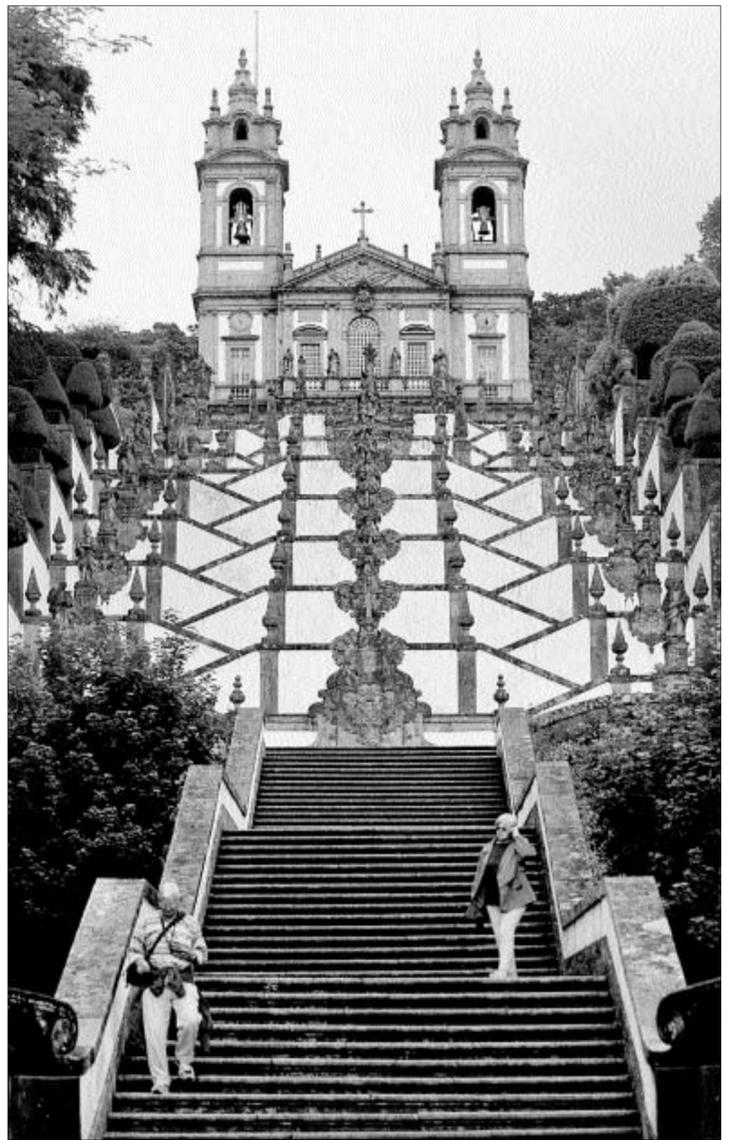
For the phalanxes of men in rumpled jumpers nursing minuscule coffees for hours on end at the Café Astoria, Euro 2004 seemed a distant prospect, too. They sat at rickety tables, serious in check shirts, seldom smiling.

These are hard times for Portugal, and many hope that a successful tournament will provide a much-needed economic boost. But sceptics doubt that even the football fiesta will rescue them. As economist Paulo Pimenta told me: "Even if it does go well, the question is: what happens afterwards? I have my doubts that anything will improve."

Braga is, however, one of Portugal's richest cities, with a host of swanky boutiques to prove it. Bizarrely - in an attempt, perhaps, to be ultra trendy - one fashion house has named itself Open while its rival has opted for Closed.

Fine craftsmanship extends to the world of pastries, too. Fans would be advised - just once at least - to dispense with their customary hamburger and lager diet and go for the frigiditas, the local meat-filled pie, accompanied by vinho verde, the sparkly wine with a greenish tinge.

Whether supporters will feel relaxed enough to enjoy the easy charms of this delightful city depends, I suppose, on the fortunes of their team. But even in the case of disaster, Portugal has a palliative: fado, the traditional blues in which singers in cafés and restaurants mournfully pour out their grief on acoustic guitar, late into the night. It may not turn defeat into loss but it'll help.



Stairway to heaven: the Baroque, granite staircase leading to Bom Jesus, one of 36 churches in the city  
PAULO ESTEVEZ/AP



### GIVE ME THE FACTS

**How to get there**  
TAP Air Portugal (0845 601 0932; www.tap-airportugal.co.uk) offers return fares from London Heathrow to Porto from around £103 return. Up to 14 trains a day leave for Braga from Sao Bento station in Porto. The journey time is one hour and the standard fare is €6 (£4) return. Buses leave every half hour from the Paragem Atlantico terminal in Porto. The journey time is 90 minutes and the fare is €3.60 (£2.40).

## On your bike: rev up for Portugal

Continued from page 1

Julian that, until he and his wife Alicia set up Motocadia last year, there was no motorcycle-touring company in Portugal. Given all this, you might prefer, as I did, to dawdle rather than ride hard. So should you be considering a bike tour of Portugal, think carefully about what it is you want and plan accordingly with the guide.

If you're there as a biker, then some of the roads that Julian led me up and down represent, I would guess, the best riding in southern Europe.

But should you plan to sight-see, don't be too ambitious with your expected mileage. In retrospect, I could have reduced my daily distance down to 120 miles and spent longer off the BMW - in the ancient university town of Coimbra, for instance, which went by in a blur, or more time at the Convento de Cristo in Tomar.

After a long first day in the saddle, I admit that I worried about what greasy pit stops might be passed off as accommodation on a motorbike tour. I needn't have - Motocadia has taken much care in choosing hotels.

The Casa das Obras in Manteigas, for example, is an 18th-century manor house as rambling and noble as the name of its current owner: Maria Amelia Carril de Matos Madeira of Portugal.

Amelia, to her guests, is a descendant of the aristocratic family who originally built Casa das Obras. Breakfast is taken in the dining room, and its original ceiling, faded frescos and wonderful 17th-



Stop, look and listen: take time to enjoy the scenery JULIAN CADE

century family portraiture will cause you to linger for an hour or two over the charcuterie, cheese and home-made cakes that the Portuguese enjoy in the morning.

The Casa d'Obidos, another hotel we stayed in, is also an elegantly restored manor house, with a pool, and a 10-minute walk from the small, medieval walled town from which it takes its name. Obidos, an hour north of Lisbon, is a World Heritage Site

and is a fine place to see the blue and white tiling which is characteristic of the region. In particular, be sure to visit the town's main gate and spectacular oratory in the southern wall and St Mary's Church (the tiling here lends its Baroque interior a bright coolness that's very welcome on a hot afternoon).

You'll work up quite an appetite on your bike. Simple grilled meat and fish dishes predominate in the country's

### GIVE ME THE FACTS

**How to get there**  
Mike Higgins travelled courtesy of Motocadia Motorcycle Tours (00 351 262 95 00 06; www.motocadia.com), which offers trips of various lengths on a choice of motorcycles. A six-day tour on a BMW F650 for one rider costs €995 (£662), including airport transfers,

use of the motorcycle, third party, accident and repatriation insurance, seven nights' b&b in minimum three-star accommodation, a guide, luggage transfers, and one dinner with wine. Flights and petrol cost extra. Air Luxor (0870-750 5747; www.airluxor.com) flies daily from London Gatwick to Lisbon from £121 return.



cheaper cafés - bacalhau, salted cod, is a staple. At the better restaurants (the excellent Restaurante Vallecula, for example, 15 minutes' drive from Manteigas) you will find more rewarding local dishes, such as sucking pig (leitao assado) and pork and clams (porco a alentejana, the Portuguese surf'n'turf).

After these, it's difficult to see how Portuguese diners find room for their famously elaborate and egg-heavy puddings such as heaven's lard (toucinho do ceu) or nun's tummy (barriga de freiras). Portuguese wines, such as those from the Dao region or the Douro Valley, need no introduction, least of all port, but the cherry liqueur (ginginha) was new to me, and proved to be irresistible.

A word of warning though: make sure that you eat plenty of greens before you head for the hills of Portugal because you're unlikely to see many on your dinner plate.

A motorbike tour of northern Portugal presents a quandary, then: once you start riding, you might not want to stop and get off; and once you stop and get off you might not want to get back on.

But there are worse problems in life to solve.

## CHECK IN

### Fly the flag

The number of British beaches flying Blue Flags has climbed by 18 this year.

In all, 123 resorts, including Margate, Eastbourne and Bognor, have the award, indicating that visitors can expect immaculate sands and seawater that has met strict European quality standards. Wales, with 35 flag fliers, is the area with most Blue Flag beaches, followed by the South-west with 25. The North-west has its first Blue Flag winner, Ainsdale in Merseyside, where the Grand National winner Red Rum was trained. When Britain joined the scheme - run by the non-profit Foundation for Environmental Education - in 1987, just 12 beaches qualified.

### American beauties

All 388 national parks in the United States can now be found at a single website, www.seeamerica.org.

"Most people probably don't know there are 11 national parks within an hour's drive of Boston and you can dive in Texas as well as in Hawaii," said Betsy O'Rourke of Travel Industry Association USA. "Now you can find out about a park by name, location or activity."

### Green tour

The end could be in sight for the fume-belching tour bus, with the introduction of an environmentally friendly sightseeing bus in Bath.

The bus, which goes into service this week, will run hourly, except Tuesday. Its tour will feature the city's National Trust properties,

including Prior Park landscape garden and the Bath Skyline, a six-mile walk through hills and woods owned by the Trust.

The bus is soundproofed and carries 80 people. It is the first open-top bus to be purpose-built for the English market since 1939. The vehicle emits 90 per cent less of the four main pollutants than existing tour buses, and more than meets all EU regulations for emissions.

**Germ warfare**  
Hotel star ratings will not protect tourists from food poisoning, a hygiene training consultancy has warned.

The star system, which indicates the standard of a hotel, fails to account for poor food hygiene, according to Steve Tate of checksafety-first.com, which offers hygiene training and appraisals to holiday resorts.

"The ease of global travel has increased demand for accommodation," Mr Tate said. "The more hotels there are, the greater the chance of corners being cut to get the punters rolling in."

### Shangri-La expands

The luxury Asia-Pacific hotel group Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts will open a second hotel in Australia this year.

The Shangri-La Hotel in Cairns will open in August after a £9m renovation. The 256-room hotel will include 36, contemporary, marina-view rooms, with wooden floors, luxurious furnishings and ocean-view bathrooms. For more details go to www.shangri-la.com.

Mark Rowe

THE INDEPENDENT HOLIDAYSAVER

**A superb new deal for readers of The Independent**

**Save a fortune on your holiday costs**

- ✓ Annual family travel insurance  
Covers two adults and up to four children
- ✓ Emergency medical assistance  
24-hours a day - 365 days a year
- ✓ Free HolidaySaver vouchers worth over £500  
To spend on holidays, shortbreaks and cruises
- ✓ Interest free holiday loans
- ✓ Free car parking at over 20 UK airports and free car hire at your destination for the first 24-hours of every trip
- ✓ Free pre-travel advice - Know Before You Go
- ✓ Access to hundreds of holiday bargains and special offers
- ✓ Fantastic savings on film-processing, ski-wear, travel accessories, luggage, sun-care products, guidebooks and much more

**Where else can you find such a great package of benefits and savings?**

Annual subscription to HolidaySaver normally costs £99.95

**Special price - only £69.95**

**Save 30%**

Terms and conditions apply - see HolidaySaver information leaflet.

**0870 830 0660**

www.holiday-saver.com

Customer Code HOLID

ARBITA 59521

tei

holiday saver