

Medieval Convent Turned into Luxury Hotel

Situated on the slopes of the Serra da Esperanca in the Beiras region of Portugal is the splendid Pousada de Belmonte, once a 13th century convent.

In Portugal Pousadas are historic places made into luxury hotels and the history of Belmonte is truly quite colorful. Belmonte is famous as the birthplace of Pedro Alvares Cabral, the great Portuguese explorer who discovered Brazil in 1500. It is said that he found it by accident. He was on his way to round the Cape of Good Hope in Africa when he was blown off course by a storm and landed in Brazil.



The trade with Brazil brought great wealth to Portugal until its independence in 1822. One of the laws was that all trade between Europe and Brazil must first pass through Portugal which enabled the rich traders to build the magnificent houses and palaces which are a feature of the country. Cabral was born in the castle which was his family residence and is buried next to the 13th Century Church of Sao Tiago near the castle walls.

The small town of Belmonte has one of the largest Jewish communities in Portugal numbering about 120 families. During the 'Inquisition' many Jews emigrated from Portugal and those who stayed had to pretend that they had converted to Christianity. This repression lasted until the downfall of the dictatorship in 1974 and now they can be open about their religious beliefs.



The old Convento de Nossa Senhora da Esperança (Our Lady of Hope), in which the Pousada is housed was built with an endowment from the estate of Jorge Cabral who was a great nephew of the Explorer.

It has been fully renovated and modernized and in 2000 opened as a member of the Pousada Group. Inside, the chapel and sacristy have been turned into a lounge and bar a good example of the harmonious blend of historical architecture and modern construction and comfort.



The Pousada hotel has preserved the Monastery's heritage intact, including amphitheatre architecture layout in the pine woods on the slopes of Esperança's Mountain, and stunning landscape with views over the Cova da Beira region and Estrela's Mountain.

Guests can use this historic luxury hotel as a base for exploring the many historical monuments in the region, including the castle, the burial vault of the Cabral family, the Jewish Quarter, as well as the natural beauty and folk traditions of Serra da Estrela (Estrela's Mountain), one of Europe's most important natural reserves. Also, various activities can be organized in the surrounding countryside. These include fishing, country walks, horse riding and tours in four wheel drive vehicles.

Photos: Belmonte, Flickr

www.pousadasofportugal.com

www.conventodebelmonte.pt

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