



# 25 Essential Tips For Your First Trip To Portugal



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If you've never been to Portugal, you're in for a treat. You might even fall a little bit in love, especially if you know how things work. My insider tips can help you prepare for your first trip to Portugal and make it go more smoothly.

Knowing a little about local customs, especially in restaurants, will help you feel more confident and avoid that nasty suspicion that you've been ripped off. Read on for advice about what to bring, what to expect when eating out and how you can save money on accommodation, transport, food, shopping and activities.

## Before you book your trip to Portugal

1. Try to avoid the hottest, busiest and most expensive months of July and August if possible. You'll find great deals, good weather (most of the time) and less crowds if you **visit Portugal off-season**. Weather-wise, May, June and September are usually hot but not unbearably so and although the risk of rain increases from October to April, and it does get cold at night, it's possible to get lovely sunny days any time of year.
2. Check travel times and distances between places if you're considering visiting more than one region. It makes far more sense to **take your time exploring one area properly** and come back again to see another place than to spend half your holiday travelling between destinations. If you feel you must cram as much as possible into one trip, you can save a few hours by flying between Faro and Porto. There are flights between Lisbon and Porto but when you factor in getting to and from the airport and security checks, I don't think you save much time.

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3. If you're making your own travel arrangements, find out how to get from the airport to your accommodation before you book your flights. If you're relying on public transport for transfers, you could get caught out if services finish earlier than you expected or don't run at weekends.

4. More and more destinations in Portugal offer a tourist card which give free or discounted public transport and discounts on all manner of typical holiday expenditures. Check the local tourist information website before you travel to see what's available and start saving money from the moment you step off the plane.

## Documents to bring to Portugal

5. Double check that your passport is in date and bring a couple of photocopies with you. By law, you have to carry photo ID when in Portugal but won't want to risk losing your precious passport so leave that in your hotel safe and keep a photocopy with you or carry some form of photographic ID like a driving licence.

6. If you live in the EU, apply for and bring your [European Health Insurance Card](#). It doesn't substitute full travel insurance but will reduce the costs of emergency treatment. If you're coming from elsewhere, you should make sure you have insurance to cover health emergencies as the costs can quickly soar.

7. The good news is that you don't need any vaccinations for visiting Portugal unless you're coming from a Yellow Fever zone.

8. If you have an EU passport, you don't need a visa to enter Portugal. Other passport holders should check [Visit Portugal's guidelines](#).

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9. If you plan on hiring a car, don't forget your driving licence. You need to have it with you when [driving in Portugal](#) plus the paperwork for the car and your ID. See these [tips for renting a car in Portugal](#).

## Money matters

10. I always like to have some local currency on me when I arrive in a foreign country but if you do land in Portugal without euros, there are ATMs (look for Multibanco signs) in all international airports and towns so you can withdraw euros directly from your bank account or top up your cash if you run out.

11. Although credit cards are accepted in many places, smaller outlets, including some restaurants, only take cash. If you pay by credit or debit card you will probably be charged for each transaction so check with your bank before deciding how to pay for purchases.

12. If you exchange money before travelling to Portugal, try to avoid bringing large bills, i.e. bigger than 50 euros. If your currency exchange provider has given you a stack of 100, 200 or worse, 500 euro notes, take them into a local bank when you arrive to get a stash of smaller notes.

## Packing for a trip to Portugal

13. When visiting a major tourist destination like the Algarve, Porto or Lisbon, don't worry if you forget to pack something or are hampered by hand luggage restrictions. With the exception of prescription medication, you can buy pretty much anything you're likely to need in Portugal although some things, like sun cream, tend to be a little pricier.

14. If you're venturing deep into rural Portugal, you'll need to be better equipped as local shops stock a more limited range of products.

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15. It's not standard practice for Portuguese accommodations to have tea-making facilities in guest rooms even if they do have a fridge. If you can't live without your cuppa, pack a travel kettle and a few decent tea bags. Be warned that fresh milk is harder to find than UHT though.

16. Even if you're coming in winter, you should bring sunglasses and use sun cream if you have fair skin. Bring an umbrella too, just in case. You'll need a hat in summer and insect repellent if, like me, you attract mosquitoes and other biting insects.

17. Clothes-wise, several thin layers are a good idea as they allow you to adapt to changeable temperatures. Loose, lightweight natural fibres will help you cope with the summer heat but you'll need jeans and sweaters in winter. Bring comfy shoes or sandals, preferably with non-slip soles. When you see the uneven cobbled pavements, you'll understand why. Don't wear spiky heels unless you want to ruin them or break your ankle.

For more detailed advice about what to bring, read my [guide to packing for Portugal](#). If you're coming to do a walking holiday, [this article](#) may be more relevant.

## Learn a little Portuguese

18. While it's perfectly possible to get by in English in the major tourist areas, learning a few simple phrases in Portuguese will go a long way. No one expects foreigners on holiday to be proficient in the language but just saying thank you in Portuguese is appreciated. It's *obrigado* if you're a man and *obrigada* if you're a woman, by the way. There are plenty of free [resources to help you learn European Portuguese](#).

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## Eating out in Portugal

The most common complaint I see on TripAdvisor is from people who think they've been ripped off by Portuguese restaurants. Most of the time, it's simply a case of not knowing the local customs.

19. It's standard practice for waiters to bring you little dishes of olives, bread, cheese and cold meats but they are not freebies unless they are part of a set menu. If you don't want them, just politely send them back untouched and you won't be charged. If you are tempted but worried about the creeping cost of your final bill, check the price before tucking in. The bread and olives are usually very cheap so tuck in.

20. Super-fresh fish and seafood are among Portugal's gastronomic highlights. Seafood restaurants often have a selection of the catch of the day displayed on a bed of ice. You choose the fish and they grill it to perfection. In such cases, it's hard to know how much it will end up costing as the fish is charged by weight. To get an idea of the price and avoid a nasty surprise at the end of a lovely meal, ask the waiter for an estimate. Alternatively, order a *Cataplana de Marisco* (seafood casserole) or *Arroz de Marisco* (seafood rice) which are usually stuffed with ocean goodies for a fixed price.

21. Don't be surprised if your main course seems lacking in vegetables. Most Portuguese people get their greens and other vegetables by starting with a soup. Ask what the dish is served with and order a side serving of salad or vegetables if you feel the need.

22. Unlike in the UK where a waiter will usually take your drinks order while you're contemplating the menu, food gets priority in Portugal. The waiter may bring some unsolicited (but not free – see above) appetizers to your table before taking your order but will not ask about drinks until the food has been dealt with.

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23. A great way of economising on eating out is to **do what the locals do** and have a main meal at lunchtime with a *menu do dia* (set menu of 2-3 courses) or *prato do dia* (dish of the day). Check what is and isn't included before saying yes to everything the waiter offers you but otherwise, you can get a 3-course meal with wine for under 10 euros.

More information in [How To Order Like A Local At Restaurants In Portugal](#)

## Out and about in Portugal

24. It's well worth checking out some of the **local events**. Every town, village and city has at least one food or saint-related festival at some point during the year, especially during the summer. The [Visit Portugal website](#) has details of major events including music festivals, sports championships and film festivals. For smaller events, look out for posters or check with the local tourist information office or regional websites such as [Visit Algarve](#) to find out what's on during your stay but don't expect the information to be published more than a few weeks in advance.

25. If you intend to visit museums and monuments, there are two important things to consider. One is that many offer free admission on Sunday mornings or discounts with the local tourist card. The other is that most are closed on Mondays so you'll need to check and plan around this if you have your heart set on seeing something specific.

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Let me help you make your trip to Portugal unforgettable for the right reasons.

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