Monasteries

S. Martinho de Tibães

For centuries S. Martinho de Tibães was one of the most influential monasteries in Northern Portugal. Mother house of the Benedictine monasteries, from the sixteenth century onwards, it became a center of excellence in the arts and in Portuguese aesthetic thought. Founded roughly 1000 years ago, the building that has come down to us resulted from reconstructions carried out in the monastery's golden age when it was a hub for art and culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
Yet throughout its long history, the monastery has also undergone periods of obscurity and even fallen into ruin and abandonment. With the national suppression of the religious orders in 1834, it was closed and its goods sold. Approximately two decades ago, the Portuguese government took ownership of the privately owned parts of the building and began major restoration and rehabilitation.
In the beautiful Monastery and Church of Tibães, stylistic elements range in style from late Mannerism to the Rocaille. Imperative attractions include the main cloister formed by round arches, the huge sacristy covered by wooden ceiling painted in the form of coffins, the extraordinary Rocaille woodcarvings, the sculpture of Christ on the Cross, and the high choir with the magnificent set of Baroque stalls. Across the public square facing the monastery stands the imposing Tibães stone cross.

S. Pedro de Arouca

This tenth century monastery was transformed in the thirteenth century to become home to a group of Cisterian nuns. This came about due to the influence and the inheritance left to Dona Mafalda, one of the daughters of Portuguese king D. Sancho, who chose to enter her religious life at Arouca.

Suppressed in 1836 and with the death of the last nun, the monastery's valuable estate has been preserved and can be seen in the Museum of Sacred Art.

Another famous legacy of the nuns' labor throughout history is the mouthwatering collection of conventual sweets that might make a saint lose their head.

As per the Cisterian philosophy, the current monastery is quite somber in style, which is particularly curious considering it coincided with the exuberance of the Baroque period.
The Museum of Sacred Art holds in its collection, magnificent Gothic sculptures, including a likeness of Saint Mafada made for her funerary ark and a beautiful, yet simple piece of 13th century goldsmithing. Moreover, the church itself merits a long and attentive visit. Of note are the chapels inside the church, one of which holds the urn of Santa Mafalda in ebony worked with silver and copper; the intricate wood carving on the organ loft gallery; the 104 Baroque choir stalls in the high choir, the extraordinary statues of saints, and the two-story cloister.
The sisters of Arouca’s conventual sweets include: pão de São Bernardo, which must broken by hand to preserve its delicacy; sweet morcelas, made with bread crumbs and almond dough stuffed into pig casings and looking exactly like blood sausage; almond rings; sweet chestnuts, pastries made of egg yolk and almond paste and molded to imitate chestnuts; and manjar de lingua, a medieval sweet invented here that mixes almonds, sugar and rice flour and is thickened with ground cow's tongue.These are among the conventual sweets bequeathed by the Cistercian nuns of the Monastery of Arouca, which have brought acclaim to the village and great pleasure to all who taste them.
The Monastery was not the only place in the sweet village of Arouca where sweets were crafted. Popular tradition set out to continue the nuns' legacy, inventing the famous pão de ló húmido, a moist sponge cake, melindres, a ring-shaped crunchy cookie, cavacas, a hollow, crunchy cake, charutos de amêndoa, almond-egg creme wrapped in communion wafers and molded to look like cigars, and barrigas de freira, or nun's double chins, a spoonable platter dessert made with the requisite egg yolks, almonds, and sugar and thickened with white bread.

S. Bento

In downtown Santo Tirso, the São Bento Monastery was founded by a local lord in the last quarter of the tenth century. At the end of the following century, it came under the jurisdiction of the Benedictine order, becoming one of the most influential and powerful monasteries in Portugal.
Upon the national suppression of the religious orders in 1834, the monastery, which had already been secularized, and its grounds became the birthplace of the future municipality of Santo Tirso.
With the exception of a few 12th century tombstones, none of the older structures remain. Nevertheless, the architecture, the gilt work and the sculptures that have been passed down, dating mostly to the 17th and 18th centuries, are of inestimable value. The monastery's church was built over a period of 20 years, between 1659 and 1679. The interior is magical in atmosphere, due primarily to the sumptuous Rocaille gilt work and the barrel-vaulted ceiling embellished with stucco plaster work. The altars, the Baroque sculptures, the Sagrada Família, the sculpture of the Virgin with Baby Jesus, and the magnificent choir stalls, all of it demands our careful attention.
Inside the monastery, highlights include the monastic chapel, the 15th century galleries, and the 14th-century cloister surrounding an elegant granite fountain dated 1649.
Jesuits of Santo Tirso
It is not the monks of the São Bento Monastery who created the local sweets. That genius is rightly attributed to the Benedictine nuns of the Santa Escolástica Monastery in Roriz. The nearby Monastery of Singeverga is associated with a famous liqueur with its secret and hundred-year-old recipe.
And still, perhaps under the influence of its religious heritage, Santo Tirso is particularly famous for a much sought-after specialty: os jesuitas, or the Jesuits. Irregularly rectangular in shape, these pastries are sold by the hundreds in pastry shops like Pastelaria Moura, in the center of town. Finally, before moving on, the São Bento tarte at the Confeitaria S. Bento is not to be missed.

S. Miguel de Refóios

The Monastery of São Miguel de Refóios is a beautiful example of Baroque architecture in the heart of Cabeceiras de Basto. In its better days, it was one of the richest convents in the Minho region. The date and circumstances of its founding are surrounded by legend and a touch of controversy. It is thought to have been built in the 7th century by local men of means from the Basto lands. Paying allegiance to the Benedictine order, it underwent total reconstruction in the 17th century, works which were not completed until the end of the following century, when the monastery took the shape that we see today.
The church has two imposing bell towers and life-size statues of the order’s founder, Saint Benedict of Nursia, and Santa Scholastica. Noteworthy are the demonic and gargoyle-like figures lined up just past the church entrance, the magnificent gilt carvings with astonishing imagery, the 17th century sacristy, the four galleries of cloisters built on full arches with Doric columns, and the huge, 45-seat choir stall.
What is quite remarkable is the stark contrast between the exuberance of the Baroque church and the sober convent quarters, suitable for introspection and recollection.

Convent of São Gonçalo

The Convent and Church of São Gonçalo are breathtaking indeed. But it is the entire setting, the religious monuments, together with the bridge over the Tâmega River, the houses and the historic downtown of Amarante that all come together to form one of the most charming cities in the region. Intended to honor the town's patron saint, the construction of the Dominican convent and church began in the middle of the sixteenth century under the reign of King D. João III.
This stunning historical monument is the ex libris of the beautiful city of Amarante.
Mannerist in style, the complex took eighty years to be built, meaning it was subject to Baroque influences in the sixteenth century. Evidence of this can be found in the portal that incorporates both architectural styles. The bell tower, on the other hand, is pure Baroque. Particularly noteworthy is the so-called Varanda dos Reis, which is composed of arches supported by strong pillars with statues of the four kings associated with the project, from D. John III to Philip II of Spain.

Inside the church, highlights include the altars, for example the Santa Luzia altar, and the chapels, including that dedicated to Santa Rita Cássia, with its gilt wood carvings Also worthy of note are the Baroque saints' statues, the barrel-vaulted ceiling above the sacristy, the exquisite Renaissance lavabo, and the first cloister in the former living quarters.

The Sweets of the Poor Clare Nuns
Gastronomy is one of Amarante's greatest attractions. The egg-based conventual sweets born from the culinary wisdom of the former Poor Clare nuns are famous. Some of the delightful specialties in the city's best pastry shops include papo de anjos, a delicate egg-and-almond pocket, foguetes, long, glazed cylinders filled with egg custard and almonds, lérias, flat coin-like crunchy disks, and brisas do Tâmega, boat-shaped pastries with an almond crust filled with egg yolk cream.

The Poor Clares' legacy extends beyond conventual sweets. They are also known for their hearty chicken and rice stew, for example, which is believed to have developed from their unique method of preparing poultry.

Sta Maria de Refoios

This monastery is of great historical importance, linked to the foundation of the Portuguese nation in the 12th century. Nobleman D. Afonso Ansemondes, lord of the lands of Refoios commissioned this convent in honor of the Virgin Mary in gratitude for his military victories. It was destined for the Augustinian Canons.
The magnificent convent and church that visitors admire today are the result of work that began in the 16th century and finished with the building's recent adaptation as the home of the current Escola Superior Agrária, the School of Agriculture of the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo. In addition to the monument's architectural legacy, its renovation into a polytechnic college is equally noteworthy—responsiblity of architect Fernando Távora.
The imposing ochre-colored building is set amid a bucolic landscape on the right bank of the Lima River. Close attention to the building yields an artistic journey through a range of architectural styles: Baroque, Renaissance, Rococo, Neoclassical and ending with the separate new modernist buildings, yet all of which form one harmonious whole.
Visitors will also enjoy seeing the cloisters, the ancient kitchen with its magnificent chimney, the magnificent stucco ceiling in the music room, the refectory, and the azulejo-clad Prior's quarters.
Other sites in Refóios do Lima
In addition to its monastery, Refóios do Lima is rich in history. Places worth visiting include: the Romanesque chapel of Santa Eulália, the Chapel of São Sebastião, the Solar Tower of Ansemondes, founder of the monastery (which later became known as the Torre dos Malheiros), the Penedo de S. Simão, a grave carved into a granite boulder surrounded by legend, the river beach, and the Vacariça viewpoint.