

The University of Coimbra was founded in Lisbon in 1290, and lived a peripatetic life until coming to rest in Coimbra in 1537, on a hill overlooking the Mondego River.

The second oldest university in Europe, it is centered on the old Alcáçova Palace, once home to the first Portuguese royal family. Here you will find the Sala dos Capelos (Great Hall of Acts), formerly the throne room. For centuries, PhD students have defended their dissertations beneath its magnificent ceiling, resembling the upturned keel of a boat and adorned with silver and gold painted wooden panels.

Standing outside in the giant courtyard, the Paço das Escolas, you might think that you have stepped onto the set of a Harry Potter film due to the vast number of students wearing the traditional academic uniform, the *Capa e Batina*. Also abutting the courtyard is the Biblioteca Joanina, one of the most spectacular and original European libraries in the Baroque style. Built in the 18th century under the reign of João V, it comprises three cavernous rooms with perspective paintings on the ceiling and walls lined with two-tier shelves in gilded or painted exotic woods and decorated with Chinese motifs picked out in gold brought back from Brazil. The 60,000-book collection is conserved in a remarkable way: at dusk each evening, the caretaker spreads large bolts of leather imported from Imperial Russia over the 18th-century tables and closes the main door, giving the library over to a colony of bats who appear from behind the bookshelves and swoop through the magnificent space, consuming the moths and insects that would otherwise threaten its priceless contents. This symbiosis, between bats and books, has persisted happily since at least the 19th century.

As the line from a famous Fado song goes, “Coimbra is a lesson of dreams and tradition,” but it is also a lesson in Portuguese history. Throughout, you will find landmarks left by those who built a nation. Leaving the university’s citadel, a maze of twisting, tiny lanes left over from the Moorish occupation lead downwards to two other major buildings, the Sé Velha de Coimbra (Old Cathedral) and Igreja de Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz Monastery). Sé Velha is the only Portuguese Romanesque cathedral from the Reconquista period to have survived relatively intact. From the outside it looks like an old fortress with high crenelated walls and sparse narrow windows, but closer inspection reveals Arabic and Pre-Romanesque detailing, especially as you enter the church where you are confronted by a glorious wall of 15th-century azulejos tiles. Although the interior has gone through many subsequent embellishments—Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic—the church is relatively simple until you reach the opulently gilded Flemish altarpiece depicting the Nativity of Jesus, Assumption of Mary and Communion of Saints. In the rather cold and damp cloisters there are a series of fine tombs; each of the pointed arches is distinctly Gothic but contains twin rounded, Romanesque-style arches.

The Santa Cruz Monastery is the pantheon to Afonso I and Sancho I, successively the first two kings of Portugal. Father and son lie on either side of the altar, their exquisitely detailed tombs mirroring each other. It has to be one of the most important churches in Portugal, and while many areas of Coimbra dazzle you with their opulence, here the sense of the past is no less breath-taking. An important seat of learning itself, the Monastery provided teaching staff for the university for many years. Wandering around the interior, taking in the azulejos tiles, the cloisters, or the choir stalls above the nave, you feel the rich history of this fascinating city slowly seeping into your skin.

Design for Learning

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