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secret

alcoutim

municipality

2013 • 3rd Edition

alcoutim

The blue ribbon of the river framed by the cool green of riverside vegetation, fertile orchards and vegetable gardens; the dark ochre of hills as round as rolled pebbles, flecked with colour by cistus plants, holm oaks and the occasional olive tree; houses with walls of schist or the brightness of whitewash huddled together in hamlets lost among the hills: such are the contrasts to be found in Alcoutim and the surrounding municipality, where, even in midwinter, thousands of almond trees burst into pale pink blossom. There are open spaces whose natural beauty remains unspoilt, where a multitude of wild flowers are to be found and a fascinating variety of bird species can be observed.

HISTORY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF ALCOUTIM

Menhirs and dolmens testify to a human presence at the end of the Neolithic and beginning of the Chalcolithic periods (approximately 4,000 B.C), part of the megalithic culture that covered the whole of what is now Portugal. It was the deposits of copper, iron and manganese, however, that attracted people from about 2,500 B.C. until the time of the Roman occupation, and a number of mines were established. The ores dug from them were smelted locally, then shipped down the Guadiana river to the Mediterranean and from there to the four corners of the Empire.

Human occupation continued under the rule first of the Visigoths and then the Moors (5th to 13th centuries), often on the same sites, giving rise, after the Christian reconquest, to some of the settlements still to be found in Alcoutim municipality.

It is thought that Alcoutim's origins are linked to the fact that it is situated at the place where the Guadiana becomes tidal. The vessels that plied the trade in metals and other wares were obliged to wait at this spot for hours, until conditions allowed them to sail down the river. Consequently there was a need for facilities to support and defend them.

Conquered during the reign of King Sancho II in 1240, the town of Alcoutim was not repopulated until that of King Dinis, who granted it a charter in 1304 and, in view of its strategic position in relation to the neighbouring kingdom of Castile, granted it to the Military Order of Santiago (St. James).

At the time of the wars between Portugal and Castile in the 14th century, a peace treaty between kings D. Fernando I and D. Henrique was signed in the middle of the river, opposite Alcoutim.

There followed centuries of peace, interrupted only by the War of the Restoration (1640-1668) and, in the first half of the 19th century, by the struggle between liberals and defenders of the absolutist monarchy, when the fearless guerrilla leader Remexido hid with his forces in the hills of Alcoutim and the surrounding region. The decline of the mining industry, the difficulty of raising crops on the area's poor soils, the town's distance from the coast and the river Guadiana's diminishing importance as a transport route all led to a lengthy period of economic stagnation for Alcoutim and its municipality that has only gradually been reversed in recent decades.

VISITING ALCOUTIM

The blue ribbon of the river winding between rounded mountains covered with cistus plants; the white houses rising up the slopes of hills in the shape of an amphitheatre, crowned with the belfries of churches and the sombre bulk of a formidable castle; the elegant silhouettes of sailing boats anchored along the shore: impressions of Alcoutim that cannot fail to charm visitors, inviting them to wander its streets or while away a peaceful hour or two on a terrace by the water's edge.



MAIN CHURCH

This is one of the best examples of early Renaissance architecture in the Algarve. Built between 1538 and 1554 on the site of a medieval church, it underwent later alterations. It has an elegant doorway surmounted by the arms of the Marquises of Vila Real and Counts of Alcoutim with the characteristic emblem of interwoven holm oak branches and the inscription "Alleo", associated with the raising of the Moorish siege of the recently-conquered city of Ceuta by Pedro de Menezes (1418/19). Inside there are three naves and four bays. The columns are decorated with attractive Corinthian capitals. There is a chancel and side chapels with carved altarpieces. There is an interesting collection of religious statuary. In the sacristy there are three ogival window slits.



CASTLE

The castle stands on an imposing site overlooking the river which archaeological digs suggest was inhabited during the Iron Age and at the beginning of the Roman occupation. The construction of the castle is thought to date from the beginning of the 14th century, on the orders of the king D. Dinis, in order to defend the border. It was modified in the 16th and 17th centuries. Part of the battlements (circular wall walk) with loopholes can still be seen. Inside there is the Archaeological Museum which has the archaeological finds from the municipality on display, as well as remains from buildings discovered during excavations.



CHAPEL OF NOSSA SENHORA DA CONCEIÇÃO (OUR LADY OF THE CONCEPTION)

All that remains of the Manueline church (16th century) that replaced the original Gothic structure is the doorway. The current building dates from the 18th century. An interesting Baroque stairway gives access to a spacious churchyard which offers a magnificent view over the town and the surrounding fields. Together, the limewashed walls, the round cupola of the main altar and the bell over the doorway, guarded by a storks' nest, make up a typically Algarvean picture. The statue of Nossa Senhora da Conceição and the Baroque altarpiece (18th century) make this chapel well worth a visit.

HISTORICAL CENTRE

Although it has lost the ramparts that for centuries surrounded it and despite some modern additions, Alcoutim's steep and narrow streets retain much of the calm atmosphere typical of a town in the Algarve "serra".

A few minutes' walk is enough to discover simple single-storey houses hundreds of years old and the high white walls of the Misericórdia church, built at the beginning of the 16th century. To finish off, stroll down to the simple chapel of Santo António (St. Anthony), and the former residence of the Counts of Alcoutim (nowadays the exhibition gallery). Afterwards, enjoy a moment's rest in the company of a cool drink on a terrace by the water's edge, and take in the sight of fishing boats returning with their catch, sailing yachts anchored in the little marina, and the Spanish town of São Lucas do Guadiana on the far shore.



AN OLD MOORISH SETTLEMENT- CASTELO VELHO DE ALCOUTIM

Approximately 1 kilometre outside Alcoutim, across the modern bridge that spans the Cadavais river, the ruins of Castelo Velho (Old Castle) are to be found atop a hill overlooking the river, which is considered to be one of the outstanding monuments from the Islamic period in Portugal. It was a rural fortress from the Muslim period constructed to monitor navigation and the mining trade on the Guadiana river. The fortress consists of a series of walls and compartments built of schist or greywacke and it was occupied from the 8th or 9th centuries (period of the Emirate) until the 11th century (period of rule of the Taifas), at which time it was abandoned. Some of the items found on the site are on display in the Archaeological Museum in the town of Alcoutim.

getting to know the alcoutim area

PEREIRO

Archaeological finds from the Roman period bear witness to the distant origins of this settlement. Many of the houses still retain the architecture typical of the Algarve uplands.

MAIN CHURCH 09

Modest in appearance, this church dates back to the 16th century. It houses an interesting collection of painted altarpieces, most notably the “retabulo das almas” (altarpiece of the souls), a unique example of mannerism, the lateral altarpiece on the right in the rococo style, and some fine statues.

PEREIRO MUSEUM

Located in Fonte Zambujo, this museum enables us to find out about the most secret part of the lives of the local communities through their oral culture and their different types of recreation, as well as things of a magical, religious or secular nature.

GIÕES

This region has been inhabited since ancient times. It is spread over a gentle hill, and the architecture of its houses displays the influence of the nearby Alentejo. Archaeological remains from the Roman and Muslim periods have been found in some nearby locations.

MAIN CHURCH 10

The main church dates from the 16th century. It has a Renaissance doorway of great simplicity. The interior is composed of three naves, with columns topped with Doric capitals. The chancel has a neo-classical carved altarpiece and its ceiling is decorated with paintings from the 18th century. There are 16th century altarpieces in the side chapels. Among the numerous fine pieces of statuary, those of Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Our Lady of the Rosary), Nossa Senhora da Assunção (Our Lady of the Assumption) and Apóstolo São Pedro (St. Peter the Apostle) merit particular mention along with those of São Domingos (St. Dominic) and Nossa Senhora das Relíquias (Our Lady of the Relics), which came originally from former chapels. Near Giões stand the ruins of the former medieval chapel of São Domingos (St. Dominic). The Chapel of Nossa Senhora da Oliveira (Our Lady of the Olive Tree) in Clarines is well worth a visit. Dating from the end of the Middle Ages, it is associated with a tradition of appearances by the Virgin in an olive tree which, for that reason, was believed to have curative powers.

GIÕES MUSEUM

This museum is located in Farelós, and its theme is “Tecer e Usar” (Weave and Wear) and it attempts to illustrate the technique or weaving wool and/or linen, which was one of the most important crafts in the municipality of Alcútem.



MARTINLONGO

It is not known when Martinlongo was founded, although it was already inhabited at the time of the Roman occupation. It expanded rapidly from the 16th to 18th centuries, and outgrew the town of Alcútem, a development not unrelated to the presence of a woollen goods industry and the fact that many of its inhabitants dedicated themselves to the lucrative profession of mule driver. As a matter of historical curiosity, it is worth noting the existence at that time of a small community of African origin.

MAIN CHURCH 11

This was originally a mosque, of which the minaret remains, now turned into a belfry. The cylindrical buttresses are probably of Moorish origin too. The church has plain Gothic doorways. The interior consists of three naves, separated by ogival arches. There are columns with inverted truncated-pyramidal capitals, influenced by the Byzantine style and rarely found in Portugal. The main altar and side altars have altarpieces in the Renaissance style, rebuilt in the 17th century. There is an interesting collection of statues, most notable among which is that of Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Our Lady of the Conception) (18th century). The walls are decorated with painted figures from the 16th century. An interesting capital with gargoyles serves as a support for the baptismal font. The church houses some valuable treasures, including vestments from the 16th to 18th centuries and holy objects in silver. Among Martinlongo's sites of cultural interest are the chapels of Espírito Santo (Holy Spirit) and São Sebastião (St. Sebastian), which date from the 16th century, and the chapel of Santa Justa (St. Just), some 5 kilometres away, which was built towards the end of the Middle Ages.

MARTINLONGO MUSEUM

This museum is located in Barrada and its theme is “Espelho de Nós” (Mirror of Ourselves). The aim of the museum is to bring together information about the municipality of Alcútem. Maps, public land records, pictures and (almost) contemporary objects reveal the conditions of land tenure in the region and the forms of social organisation that are characteristic of the municipality.

SANTA JUSTA MUSEUM

This is located in Santa Justa and it focuses on the theme “A Escola Primária” (The Primary School). The museum enables visitors to see a classroom from the 1950s/60s with all the features and materials that were used then, without calling into question the methods that were used at that time.

VAQUEIROS

There are archaeological remains which show that the Romans were present in this parish. Some of the streets that frame the town's small, white church still contain picturesque elements of local vernacular architecture.

MAIN CHURCH 12

This elegant architectural ensemble, which dates from the 16th century, was remodelled in the 18th century in the Rococo style, and is the most important piece of architecture in the municipality. The distinctive feature on the bell tower is the roof with a weather vane in the shape of a cock. The altarpiece on the main altar and the “altar das Almas” (altar of souls) include painted wooden panels (16th century) and there is an interesting collection of religious statuary. Nearby in Alcaria-Queimada stands the Chapel of S. Bento, which dates from the 17th century.

VAQUEIROS MUSEUM

The theme of this museum, which is located in the village of Vaqueiros, is “Vidas no Campo” (Lives in the countryside). Here the aim is to give visitors an idea about rural organisation and to show what life is like for people who live in the country.

FOLLOWING THE GUADIANA

There is a road that winds along the bank of the Guadiana from Alcoutim as far as Álamo. Its route leads it through a landscape of rugged beauty softened by water, vegetation and flowers. But the best way to discover the river's many delights is by boat. In Alcoutim and Guerreiros do Rio it is possible to hire boats that can be taken either up or down the Guadiana. Upstream from Alcoutim, watch out for the interesting Rocha dos Livros (Rock of Books), a rock that looks like a shelf carved from stone, and the island of Ilha d'El Rei. Downstream, the river follows an enchanting course around long, gentle curves dotted with the white houses of riverside villages. As well as the attractions of the countryside, for those who enjoy history the banks of the Guadiana have much to offer in the way of mementoes of the past.



MONTINHO DAS LARANJEIRAS

The excavations that have been carried out demonstrate that the ruins of Montinho das Laranjeiras include three distinct areas: the "pars fructuaria", the "ecclesia" and the "buyut", from the Roman, Visigoth and Islamic periods respectively, and it was occupied from the 1st century B.C. to the 13th century A.D. Mosaics found on the site are held by the National Archaeological Museum.

GUERREIROS DO RIO

This village is home to the Museum of the River. The museum offers an insight into the Guadiana river and its history, the old techniques used to catch fish on the river, the lives of the fishermen and of the inhabitants of the surrounding hills.



ÁLAMO

ROMAN DAM AND "VILLA"

The Roman presence here is evident from a group of buildings and graves belonging to a well-to-do villa, and from the thick dam wall which blocked the course of the Fornalha river (approximately 40 metres long with six buttresses). One of the biggest statues of Apollo in the country was found here, currently on display at the National Archaeological Museum.

ARCHAEOLOGY ROUTE

Alcoutim municipality contains significant evidence of a human presence that dates back to pre-historic times, linked for the most part to efforts to mine the area's deposits of copper, iron and manganese. Huge stones arranged as dolmens and menhirs, deep mine shafts and galleries and vestiges of the walls of fortified villages are among the sights to be seen along this route, which provides a glimpse of the past and a better understanding of the present.



CORTES PEREIRAS MINES

Near an antimony mine there are pit shafts from copper mining, some of which have been filled in, dating from about 1,500 B.C. On the tops of the nearby hills there are necropolises with quadrangular cists (burial chambers) from the Bronze Age (2,000 B.C.), containing an urn and pieces of bone. An inscribed monument from the second half of the 2nd century attests to the presence of the Romans.

LVAJO MENHIR 15

This is a megalithic monument from the Neolithic period, probably erected about five and a half thousand years ago. This monolith, hewn from a block of greywacke, is ellipsoid in section, and it is the largest greywacke menhir found in Portugal to date, and one of the most important in the south of the Iberian Peninsula. It is richly decorated with a variety of circles and other features.

MEGALITHIC TOMB

This is located 30 metres to the south of the menhir. There are only three megaliths, defining a space which is trapezoidal in plan.

CASTELO DE SANTA JUSTA (CASTLE OF ST. JUST)

This settlement dates back to the Chalcolithic period (3,000 B.C.). It is a walled structure with circular towers. Remains of circular dwellings are to be seen inside and outside the ramparts. Archaeological excavations have shown that this was the site of intensive economic activity connected with copper melting and working, as well as weaving and the milling of cereals for flour. On top of the surrounding hills there are Iron Age necropolises (800 B.C.) with quadrangular cists (burial chambers) fashioned out of slabs of schist. Nearby lie the mines of Santa Justa, which were worked from the town.

LABORATO AND AROEIRA MINES

The Aroeira mine was probably worked for the first time in the Bronze Age (1,500 B.C.) - there are burial grounds in the vicinity which date from that period and also from the early Iron Age - and remained in operation until the 2nd century, during the Roman occupation. All that remains of the Laborato mine are two shafts.

CASTELO DAS RELÍQUIAS (CASTLE OF RELÍQUIAS)

Ruins of a fortress of Muslim origin (8th to 9th centuries), quadrangular in floor plan and with two solid towers, on top of two hills overlooking the river Vascão.

COVA DOS MOUROS MINE

This mine was worked to a depth of 30 metres. Archaeological discoveries in the area include remains of Chalcolithic settlements, Bronze and Iron Age necropolises and evidence of the Roman presence.

Today there is a theme park there with the first walk of its kind, on which the old copper mines can be seen as well as pre-historic reconstructions going from the Chalcolithic period (2,500 B.C.) up to the Roman period.

Reconstruction of a castle from the Copper Age.

CURRAL DA CASTELHANA DOLMEN

This is quite a regular construction with seven megaliths in the chamber and six in the corridor, which dates from the transition from the 4th to the 3rd millennium or from the early centuries of the latter.

“THOLOS” OF EIRA DOS PALHEIROS

A Chalcolithic funerary monument (2,500 B.C.) covered by a false cupola and constructed on the basis of a circular chamber with a corridor made of orthostats (large upright stones), sunk into the ground and clad in schist slabs.

THE WORLD OF BIRDS

Thinly populated, with vast expanses of brush and undergrowth, Alcoutim municipality is a paradise for birds and bird-watchers alike. Many dozens of species choose the region's hills for their habitat, including predatory buzzards, black kites, European sparrow hawks, and kestrels, and songbirds such as goldfinches, nightingales and larks. The Guadiana river and its banks are home to a wide variety of birds, including storks, mallards, moorhens, kingfishers, common sandpipers and many others.

THE GOOD FOOD OF THE HILLS

The influence of the uplands is evident in the local cooking of Alcoutim and its municipality, not only in lamb and pork dishes, but also in the rabbit, hare, partridge and wild boar that finds its way to the table during the hunting season. But a fine meal can be had with just a bottle of local wine and a tasty loaf of bread cooked in a traditional wood-burning oven, accompanied by olives, cured ham, a variety of cured sausages and goats' and ewes' cheese prepared according to age-old recipes.

Closer to the Guadiana the menu extends to include fresh mullet, barbel, red roach, black bass, and eel, grilled over cork oak charcoal. And who can resist a plate of freshly caught lamprey?

There are plenty of local cakes and puddings to tempt the sweet-toothed, with such exotic names as “empanadilhas”, “bolos de massa de pão”, “filhós”, “folares”, “suspiros”, “pupias”, as well as more familiar treats like nougat, made with honey and almonds and renowned throughout the Algarve.

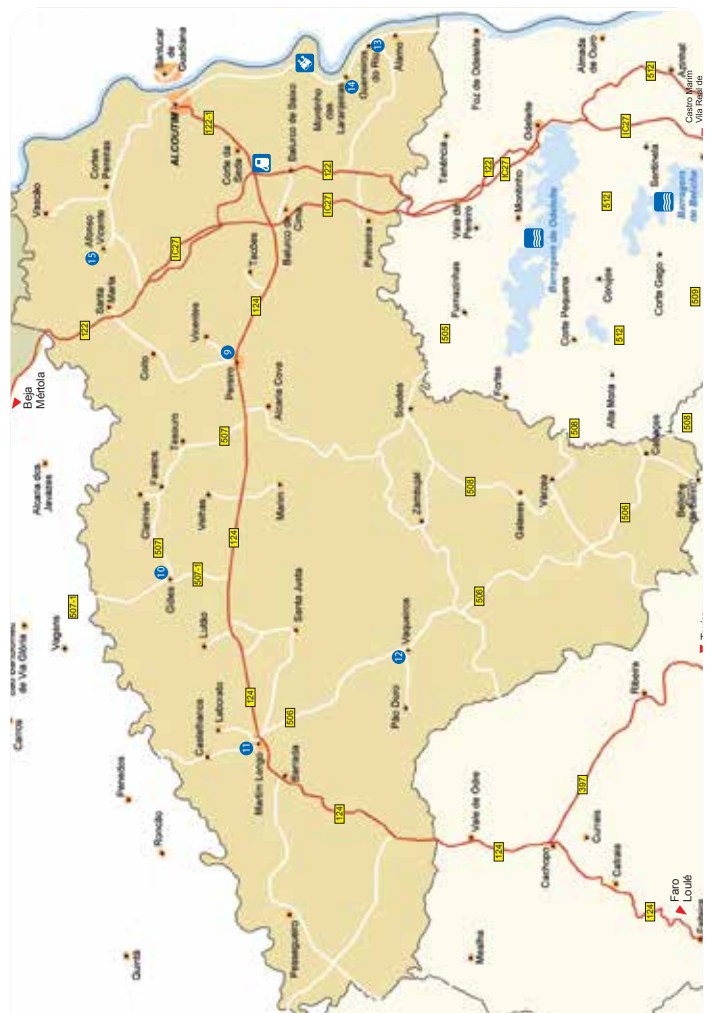
At the end of a meal, there is nothing better than a glass of fig brandy or “medronho” (made from the fruit of the strawberry tree), slowly distilled in copper stills in the villages of the “serra”.



BLANKETS, BASKETS AND MUCH MORE

The old techniques of popular crafts are still preserved in the villages of Alcoutim, where the locals continue to weave rag rugs, bedcovers and linen cloths on wooden looms (in Penteadeiros) and where the women make shawls, linen and woollen stockings, straw hats and lace (Vascão, Penteadeiros, Vaqueiros, Fernandilho). Craftsmen in Alcaria Queimada and Traviscosa still make baskets from the reeds that grow on the banks of the Guadiana river and creeks. The mules and donkeys that work in the fields are shod by blacksmiths in Pereiro, while hoes, scythes and other tools connected with agriculture are produced in Corte Serranos. Also of interest is the work of the saddle-makers in Pereiro who use straw, coarse linen and woollen threads to make coloured collars and other tack for horses and mules.

The wealth of popular crafts in Alcoutim also includes items of metalwork in copper and brass, woodwork miniatures, dolls made from sackcloth representing typical occupations, production of which is centred in Martinlongo, colourful maize-straw flowers from Santa Justa, and pottery, which has seen a resurgence in the municipality in Martinlongo and Cortes Pereiras, produced by young craftspeople.



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Data sheet

Edition and Copyright: Região de Turismo do Algarve

Cartography: IGeoE

Translation: Inpokulis

Printing: Gráfica Comercial

Photography: Hélio Ramos (HR), Luís da Cruz (LC), Miguel Veterano (MV), Vasco Célio (VC)

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