



Palace Hotel
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
do Bussaco

Bussaco Forest

The area around the Bussaco Palace was part of a Barefoot Carmelite convent established in 17th century. Back in the 6th century these woods of the mountain range of Bussaco belonged to a Benedictine monastery close by at Vacariça.

In 1628 the virgin forest was conceded to the Barefoot Carmelites as answer for their wishes of having a spiritual hermitage of their own, to withdraw totally from the outside world, to suit their silent and austere lifestyle, and to dedicate their lives entirely to meditation.

The monks not only built a convent but also created a luxurious garden with many species of trees, supposed to represent Mount Carmel (where the order was founded) and the Earthly Paradise.

In order to isolate themselves and their forest from the outside world, they built a wall round their sacred forest.

Ecologically minded they also planted additional trees each year, native species but also new varieties brought by the Portuguese navigators, so that the convent woods have long been famous for their cypress, planes, evergreen oaks, corks and other forest trees, many of which have stood for centuries and attained an immense size.

A bull of Pope Gregory XV (1623), anathematizing trespassers and forbidding women to approach, in order 'to avoid dangers and scandals', is inscribed on a tablet at the main entrance; another bull, of Pope Urban VIII (1643), threatens with excommunication any person harming the trees – Portugal's first ever document on natural preservation.

Date from the late 17th century a series of chapels with representations of a Via Crucis up the hill the Cruz Alta (1795 feet), the highest point on the mountain range which commands a magnificent view over the Serra da Estrela mountain, the Mondego River Valley and the Atlantic.

Part of the convent, including the church with Baroque altarpieces, is still preserved beside the palace. At the entrance of the old convent, there is a plaque to the Battle of Bussaco which commemorates the fact that Viscount Arthur Wellesley, who later became the Duke of Wellington, spent the night in the convent after the battle on 27 September 1810.



Palace Hotel
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
do Bussaco

The Carmelites left Bussaco in 1834, the religious orders having been dissolved in Portugal as result of a civil war. Monasteries were nationalized, the monks dispersed throughout the country, and the Monastery and the Forest of Bussaco handed over to the State. However the monastery's lack of wealth, the humbleness of the building and the loneliness of the area meant that Bussaco was not a attractive proposition. Therefore, in 1838, the last Prior received permission to return to his monastery with 20 of his monks to live out their days in their "bos sacrum".

More trees were planted from 1850 onwards when the forest was handed over to the Royal Forestry Commission. Some 300 species of trees and shrubs were added to those already flourishing in Bussaco : Sequoias, Eucalyptus, Caledonian Pines among other giant trees joined the Pyrenean oak, the Lebanese cedar, the cork oak and the English oak.

Also by that time there were some plans to turn the ancient convent into a royal residence for Queen Maria Pia, wife of King Luís I, and daughter of Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, who even had the Torino based landscaping architects G.Roda&Figli conceiving the majestically Cold Fountain and the serene Valley of the Ferns, with their giant ferns and gorgeous lakes, at the eastern slope of the hill.

In 1873 a monument was erected, on the southern slopes of the Serra, to commemorate the Battle of Bussaco, in which the French, under Marshall Masséna, were defeated by the British and Portuguese, under Lord Wellington, on 27 September 1810.

By that period Bussaco became one of the regular halting-places for foreign, and especially for British, tourists, on the overland route between Lisbon and Porto.

However, difficult political circumstances soon led to the decision to turn the palace into a hotel, so that the former Hotel da Matta was built between 1888 and 1905.

The forest is nowadays one of the most valuable natural heritages of the country, renowned by arborists worldwide.

Its walking paths, chapels, hermitages, belvederes and the Via Crucis are unforgettable and still exemplify the rarefied atmosphere of serenity and peace of this very special place.

The remarkable forest possesses a vast and renowned dendrological collection of centennial trees of remarkable size, and integrates some patches of natural climax vegetation. This ancient patch of Lusitanian forest is located in the extreme south-



Palace Hotel
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
do Bussaco

west of the wood, and retains the natural forest vegetation and flora that existed in the mountains of Central Portugal, prior to human occupation.

The Bussaco forest is botanically characterized by a mainly Mediterranean type of vegetation where *Phillyrealatifolia*, *Laurusnobilis*, *Arbutus unedo* and *Ruscusaculeatus* are the most representative species, and exhibits some Atlantic influence by the presence of deciduous species such as *Quercusrobur* and *Quercuspyrenaica*. In addition to laurel forest and oak forests of *Quercus*, the forest of Bussaco possesses a vegetal formation of Mock Privet (*Phillyrealatifolia*), tree-sized, with remarkable floristic composition, *Arbutus unedo* forests, but with different relationships of dominance and co-dominance among the species that characterize it (plants of the *Querceteailicis* class, *Ericionarboreae* Alliance).

These formations of Mock Privet trees represent an important part of the forest of Bussaco, and in some places the settlement is practically pure, forming a single wood, where virtually no other tree species occur. Currently, these formations only occur in continental Portugal at Bussaco National Forest, which stresses its uniqueness and vulnerability in the Iberian context.