

FOOTPATH AROUND PENHAS DOURADAS

Duration: 4 Hours

Difficulty: Easy

Type of Walk: Circular


CASA
DE SÃO LOURENÇO
BUREL PANORAMA HOTEL



1 km



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A walk around Penhas Douradas and its viewpoints (miradouros), including the following places: Fragão do Corvo, Vale das Éguas, Lagoa do Vale do Rossim, and Corgo das Mós. The route is set out with yellow marks painted onto posts, rocks, and 'mariolas' (several rocks piled on top of each other, used by shepherds to mark out their trails).



Note that along your route you might find other marks from other routes that belong to Casa das Penhas Douradas, like Blue and Red, or marks of S.R. (Small Route) or B.R. (Big Route). Parts of your route may coincide with other marks so you should follow the directions given along this text.

The path starts at Casa das Penhas Douradas.

From the Hotel's parking lot, walk towards the Nossa Senhora da Estrela Chapel, which is right next door. Have a look inside at the figure of Nossa Senhora da Estrela with a star on her hand... If the chapel is open, feel free to go inside. Surely, at this altitude, we are closer to the heaven... and feel the silent presence of God.

The first yellow marker is on an electricity pole next to the chapel. Take the Chapel steps down to the road, turn right and walk downhill. On your right you'll see signs to 'Fragão do Corvo' and 'Vale das Éguas', but don't turn to the right yet, keep following the road. A little further you'll see some typical Penhas Douradas houses. If you look between the houses you will see a big rock ('penedo') with the shape of a dog's head... To the right of the road you can see the 'Casa da Fraga' in ruins, which was built between huge granite rocks (called 'poios' in this region) that provide the walls and the roof. This house was home to César Henriques, the first inhabitant of Penhas Douradas who came here at the end of the 19th century. The famous Dr. Sousa Martins advised him to live up in the mountains in order to recover from a tuberculosis infection that had plagued him for years.

Take the footpath that starts between Casa da Fraga and a wooden chalet which, unfortunately, is in quite bad shape. It used to be known as the Bela Vista (Nice View) Chalet, but it "died" when its view was taken from it... It seems that houses can also die of grief... The path takes you through a beautiful forest of Douglas-fir. After about 200 meters of forest you arrive at a crossroad of paths. Take the path to the right, and continue following the yellow marks.

Fragão do Corvo is a huge rock formation with a geodesic mark on the top, which offers a fantastic view over the village of Manteigas. As you continue on the narrowing path, you'll see the Fragão in front of you. Don't worry, the path is easier than it looks and quite safe! To get to the viewpoint, walk up the stairs that have been carved into the rock and follow a narrow path between the rocks. As you climb, the magnificent view shows up... the effort will be worth it! To your left there's the Meteorological Observatory of the Penhas Douradas, which has been providing a daily weather forecast for these mountain range since 1875. Further away, also to your left, you can see the São Romão plateau, where rye is cultivated, and you will see the Valley of the River Mondego as well.

Look down and you'll see the village of Manteigas, which in the past looked quite dark from this point because of all the granite houses. Today it's a town full of white. From here you can see the Zêzere River, a brave and hearty river which begins at the Alto dos Cântaros, passes through the Glacier Valley, runs through the village of Manteigas and continues on through the Beira Provincas. When it reaches Constância village, the Zêzere gets barred by the larger River Tejo (Tagus), which cuts short its journey to the sea... The Mondego, also a mountain river and "colleague" of the Zêzere, is a slower river, home to damsels and flowery poets. This river has a bit more luck and does reach the sea, showing us, it isn't always the brave that are the luckiest... Coming back down from the viewpoint, continue following the path that passes in front of Dr. Afonso Costa's house. Dr. Costa was a conspiring republican in the days of the monarchy, rumored to have sought refuge in these parts for his highly conspiratorial Carbonari meetings (at 1448 meters, the same altitude as the Fragão do Corvo rock formation).

Stand back and take a moment to admire this house, as it is an interesting exemplar of some of the purest 19th century alpine architecture. The house's unusual shapes are an indicator of its consecutive expansions. In the long run, alpine architecture did have some influence on a few of Penhas Douradas' main chalets. However, most chalets were primarily influenced by Lusitanian mountain architecture, which easily rivals with the alpine style. It's a shame that a lot of these chalets have been abandoned. As we say in Portugal: where there are many heirs, there are no owners...

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After you've passed the house, the trail climbs and you'll see another house that belongs to the State; at the moment it has rather a dull tenant, the Forestry Division of the Ministry of Agriculture.

A few meters before reaching the square, next to an electricity pole, the path turns left and becomes a small, downhill trail. The trail passes on the opposite side of Dr. Afonso Costa's house. After about 50 meters it turns right on to a small trail which takes you into an enchanted forest, which is full of squirrels! A few meters into the forest, you'll find a beautiful fountain – have a drink, the water is pure.

After the fountain, but still within the forest, the trail continues to your left (there is a paved road, which isn't visible from where you are, some 30 meters up the hill to your right, and which runs parallel to the trail). The trail continues up and down throughout the forest, and reaches a large granite house in a privileged location – Casa Jones. It belonged to the royalty who was in love with these mountains, and now belongs to the Serra da Estrela Natural Park.

From the square, take the tarmac road for a few meters until you reach another main road. Notice the interesting chalets ahead. Crouching behind these chalets is a famous house known as Noah's Ark, made of black wood and a zinc roof. It was built on top of Mount Hermínio and used as a home by some of our most famous Bishops and Canons, when they were still seminarians. The inhabitants of "Noah's Ark" saw a great similarity between Mount Hermínio and Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark supposedly landed. About the water they were very right too, as the Penhas Douradas is the place with the highest annual rainfall in Portugal...and it is also one of the most mystic places.

Turn left on to the main road and follow it until it turns into a dirt road. This is the beginning of the famous Valley of Mares. According to an ancient legend, the fiery Lusitanian horse was born from mares that were inseminated by the powerful winds of this valley... This is just a legend. But if by chance you face a windy day in the Valley of Mares, you may begin to believe in such tales... The Valley of Mares is a very soft valley. Beautiful. Full of small curiosities... Blocks of granite with strange shapes... Outbursts of white and rose quartz... Small forests with a great variety of species... A place for grazing in the summer... Unique viewpoints...

So, as you begin your walk on the dirt road, notice a huge "decapitated head" on your left, right next to the road (you'll have to use your imagination and observational powers to see it!). A little further along the road, to your right, there is a huge block of granite that looks like it's been cut in slices – it's our local "rye bread"! (rye is the main cereal crop grown in these mountains).

A little further on, to the left of the road, you'll see a path that takes you to a granite small house where sheep, shepherds, and dogs all spend the night in summer time. This hotel has as many stars as the night sky... As you go on up the mountain, these shelters become more Franciscan in nature. Next, to your right, try to discover a long block of granite looking like a fish. Don't follow it, as Alexander O'Neill suggested in his well-known poem, keep to your path. A few hundred meters ahead, towards the end of the path, you may notice an outburst of white and rose quartz jutting out of the surrounding black granite, which is given the name of 'seixo branco' (white pebble) by the shepherds. A strange phenomenon.

The next stop is at a very curious viewpoint, known to us as the "chimpanzee's balcony". The land ahead is practically level, with quite low-lying vegetation, and although there is no proper path marked out through the shrubs, our yellow markers are still there to guide you. With the 'seixo branco' directly behind you, walk due east (towards the large valley, where the River Zêzere runs at about 800m below your feet...). Right in front of you is a rocky formation with an opening – walk towards this "balcony". As you get closer, you'll see the "chimpanzee's head" appearing before you, as if emerging from the ground. It has all the proper features: eyes, nose, mouth... Come closer and sneak up between the rocks, climb up on to the granite slab and glance upon Manteigas village from very high up... Impressive. To your left you'll see Fragão do Corvo, which you'll have just visited (have I really walked that far, you might ask yourself?!) It's time to rest and have a look at, or rather, contemplate the scenery. The houses... The river... The Serra da Estrela, near and far, with Credos (a Spanish Sierra) showing up far on the horizon... Spain... Take the opportunity to have some coffee or tea, prepared for you in your backpack.

Turn back towards the 'seixo branco', taking the marked trail to your left, following the yellow marks and Cairns. Ahead and to your right you'll see a small forest with numerous species, including birch, the tree which so kindly put its wood at our disposal to line the walls of Casa das Penhas Douradas. Have some time to explore of the woods. It's very beautiful. You'll find a picnic table and some comfortable granite chairs. Let yourself linger there for a moment.

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If you look back at the 'seixo branco' you'll see some big granite rocks to the right. Take a good look at those rocks and you may see the shape of a large-nosed man resting his face in one hand.

The trail continues past the picnic table, and leaves the woods to the left of the local plant called 'cervum' (Nardus stricta, also known as Matgrass). Cervum is the sub-alpine prairie shrub that you'll see ahead, and which is only found at these altitudes. This shrub is the staple food of the sheep that roam these hills. This diet gives their milk its characteristic flavor, and in turn makes Serra da Estrela cheese one of the best cheeses in the world.

Following the wooden pillars ahead will take you to a small valley (you'll see that walking through the 'cervum' is not that easy!). The valley has a few small water courses which usually dry up in summer time.

Keeping to the trail, you'll see some typical regional houses to your right, which, as always, are nestled in between the large rocks known as 'poios'. Notice the Eagle House ('Casa da Águia') up above – one of the first houses to be built in this region, and also one of the most well preserved.

Keep following the trail uphill, which will take you through the huge 'poios'. Once you reach the top, the trail turns left. You'll see the magnificent lagoon of Rossim Valley ('Vale do Rossim'). This will be our next destination. The rock cairns will guide you down this soft descent. The trail ends at a large 'poio', which you can climb to get a view of the nearby lagoon. In spring and summer time the water level is high but in the winter it can be kept quite low to be able to cope with the rainfall in this season.

Continue on the trail, passing to the left of the 'poio'. Looking back at the 'poio', try to find out the features of President Pompidou hidden in the contours of the rock. If you happen to be visiting during summer, indulge yourself in a dive in the lake! The water can reach a gorgeous 23° Celsius... the envy of any Algarve beach.

The trail continues along the banks of the lagoon for about 500 meters. Keep the pier ahead as your reference point. To your right you'll see two large rocks next to each other, both with two yellow marks painted on them. The trail continues between these two rocks and takes you uphill until you reach a paved road (which contours the lagoon). Cross the road and continue up the trail, which now becomes a bit steeper.

If you're conjuring up any negative thoughts about the intense steepness of this trail, surely these thoughts will be swept away as you turn around and notice the magnificent view over the lagoon. Across from the lagoon you'll see two large peaks that look down on to it. These are the Penhas Douradas, known fondly by local shepherds as the two little girls, Rasa and Angela. These two peaks lend their name to this very special region of the Serra da Estrela. Why the name Penhas Douradas (which means Golden Peaks)? Because at sunset on a long summer day, the warm light at dusk gives a golden color to the dark hues of these rocks...

Enough poetry for now, let's keep climbing uphill, from rock cairn to rock cairn, until you reach the mother of all rock cairns, which has a height of 3 meters! It is said that shepherds built this rock cairn to have an orientation point over very long distances. It is also a meeting point for shepherds, to organize the seasonal migrations of their sheep from their villages to the mountain and vice-versa.

At this point, take one last look at the lake, as it will disappear from view as you continue on the trail. As you walk on, you'll soon enter a small forest. Follow the yellow marks up the gentle slope that turns slightly to your right into a small forest. All this area where you're walking now was devastated on the 15th September of 2017 by a terrible fire. Plants and bushes are now growing up and pine trees struggle to survive... This is nature showing its power in our Mountain!

Keep climbing and continue following the marks which will take you to a large road where you have to turn right (finally, an easier road after such a steep climb...!).

Forward you will find rock outcrops. This place is known as 'Corgo das Mós' perhaps because of the large rocks you can find around here, that look flat and round like mills ('mós'), which give this place its name. This road takes you back to the Casa das Penhas Douradas.

When you reach a roundabout, known as the "racket", take the paved road ahead, and follow the marks that are now on electricity

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poles. To the right of the “racket” roundabout is the famous Eagle House (‘Casa da Águia’). If you still have the energy, you can visit it and climb up the large ‘poio’ that overtakes and protects the house. From here you’ll get one last view of the lagoon. You’ll also be able to see a rock that looks like a torpedo from here, as well as a rocky formation to its right which looks like an American Indian, including the curved nose... All that’s missing is a feather!

Make your way to the tarmac road that will take you back to the start of your walk.

On your way back, you’ll be able to see some more interesting houses that are typical of this region. As you go down the road, it will slightly turn to the left. Stop there and look to your right. Between rocks, on the top, you will be able to see the highest point in Serra da Estrela, the Torre!

A little further down, to the left of the road, you’ll see an archaic-looking construction, which is in better shape than the house that belonged to César Henriques. Next to this house is a giant stone in the shape of a mummy... A little further ahead on the road, to your left, is a big rock known as the “the black man’s head”. The ancient construction that you can see just below the “black man’s head” used to be a very famous hotel of the Penhas Douradas, called Hotel Pensão Montanha. It was built in 1903 to offer a follow-up for tuberculosis patients, with treatments based on Davo-Platz’s Schatzalp Sanatorium, in Switzerland. In this old hotel’s brochure, you can read: “[the hotel] offers the best commodities and hygienic conditions, has a varied and abundant food menu, superior to all other establishments of this type, magnificent curing galleries, and acetylene lighting....”

Many people were cured at this establishment, including the famous Portuguese politician and writer Álvaro Cunhal, who went on to live a long life, being a living proof of the effectiveness of these Swiss practices, allied to the Penhas Douradas’ purifying air. If you still have the strength, climb up to the heliport which is located before the Casa das Penhas Douradas, on the opposite side of the Parking lot where you have a path. From the heliport you can see the plateaus, the Mondego Valley (with its own magnificent walks), the city of Guarda, and, at night... the stars.