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MUNICÍPIO DE ALCOUTIM

# An Inside Look at the Guadiana

## Geography

The River Guadiana rises in the Spanish province of Albacete. Its total length is 830km and its basin covers an area of 65,000km, including 10,000km in Portugal. After travelling 780km, the river becomes navigable for the final 48km-long stretch between Pomerão and Vila Real de Santo António, where its width varies between 100m and 500m.

The navigable part of the Guadiana has an average depth of over 5m, making it accessible at low tide to boats whose drafts do not exceed 3m.

When you observe the landscape with its spontaneous Mediterranean vegetation, the rural setting of the little hamlets, the riverside plots and the state of conservation

of the habitats of many species of animals, you realise that they are the product of a thousand-year-old relationship between the local community and the river and its surroundings. The environmental, ecological and scenic characteristics of the river and its tributaries, banks and settlements, constitute an inestimable part of Alcoutim's heritage.

## History

The Guadiana provided a natural inroad to the south-western Iberian Peninsula for successive waves of settlers from the Mediterranean basin. The river's name is the result of that ongoing colonisation: initially called Fluminus Anae (Duck River) by the Romans, its present-day name arose from the Arab substitution of Fluminus by their own word, Uadi (river).

During the period of Roman domination, the Guadiana already served as the dividing line between the provinces of Baetica and Lusitana. It is mentioned in the elder Pliny's work, Natural History.

The fact that the Lower Guadiana was navigable as far as Mértola (72km from the mouth) meant that it was possible to conduct commercial and cultural exchanges with the agricultural and pastoral communities inland.

The Guadiana began to feature on the merchant routes between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Gold, silver, copper, wheat, leather, olive oil, honey, salt and fish were just some of the products that kept the river buzzing with traffic over the course of two millennia.

Following the Christian occupation of the Algarve (13th century) and Andalusia (15th century), the Guadiana became firmly established as the border between the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal. The border posts of Castro Marim, Alcoutim and Mértola, run by the religious-military orders of Christ and St. James, ensured the settlement and defence of the surrounding lands and the safety of the river traffic.

## The River Museum

Eight kilometres to the south of Alcoutim, at a place called Guerreiros do Rio, is the River Museum. The theme of the exhibition on display there is "An Inside Look at the Guadiana" and there are exhibits on display about the river, its history, its connection to mining through river transport, and the natural and cultural heritage with connections to the river, namely traditional fishing, gastronomy and smuggling during the period of the New State. One of the highlights is the permanent exhibition "Traditional Boats of the Lower Guadiana" compiled by Mr José Murta and comprising a collection of miniature replicas of the boats that sailed on the Guadiana in the course of a huge variety of activities.

