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Bringing legends to life: Friday 13 - The Night of The Witches



Montalegre, Portugal



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Introduction

Nestled in the remote mountains of northern Portugal, Montalegre is a land steeped in legend—where tales of witches, spirits, and ancient superstitions have shaped its identity for centuries. The “Sexta 13 – Noite das Bruxas” (Friday the 13th – Night of the Witches) festival channels this rich folklore into a dynamic cultural celebration, blending tradition with principles of sustainability.

Originating as a grassroots initiative in the 1980s to safeguard local traditions, it has grown into a major event attracting tens of thousands of visitors. Blending theatrical rituals, fire shows, and community storytelling, the festival exemplifies sustainable cultural tourism—reviving heritage, supporting the local economy, and bringing global attention to a lesser-known region while preserving its mystical soul.



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Context

Montalegre, located in the Alto Tâmega and Barroso region of northern Portugal, is known for its dramatic natural landscapes, traditional granite architecture, and distinctive local cuisine. Its remote and mountainous setting has not only shaped daily life but also helped preserve a rich cultural heritage rooted in

oral tradition, where stories of witches, spirits, and mystical forces have been passed down for generations. These beliefs are deeply embedded in the local identity and have been brought to life through events such as the “Sexta 13 – Noite das Bruxas” (Friday the 13th – Night of the Witches) festival.

This event is a fascinating example of how a local tradition can evolve into a large-scale cultural phenomenon, promoting local authenticity and bringing the benefits of cultural tourism to remote communities.



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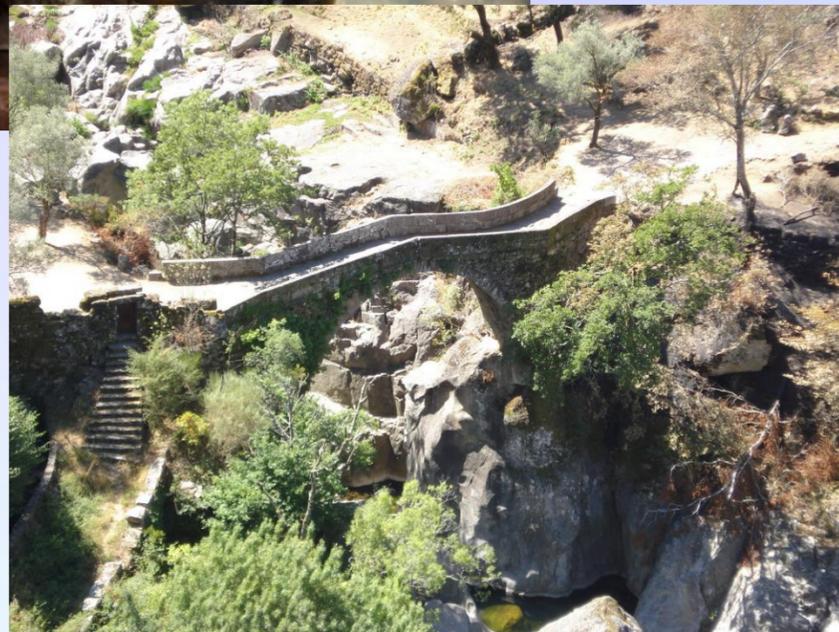
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The roots: ancient tales and traditions



The Friday the 13th – Night of the Witches festival in Montalegre is deeply rooted in the community's connection to local superstitions and enduring pagan practices, while also drawing upon the mystical landscape of northern Portugal.

The festival's origins trace back to Norse paganism, particularly the worship of Freia, the goddess of love and fertility. As Christianity spread across Europe, deities like Freia were reinterpreted as witches.



According to local legends, Freia was banished to the mountains, where, in the mystical location of Ponte da Misarela — known as the ‘Devil's Bridge’, she gathered with 11 other witches and the devil on every Friday the 13th to plot their revenge on the surrounding villages. This tale of 13 mythical figures gathering on an ominous date helped shape the enduring superstitions surrounding Friday the 13th.

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From folklore to festival

The Sexta 13 festival was born in 2002 from the vision of Father António Lourenço Fontes, a Catholic priest and native of a Montalegre steeped in superstition and oral traditions. Though ordained in 1963, he never turned away from the cultural roots of his upbringing—collecting stories, prayers, and folk remedies once used to ward off witches and spirits. Despite being penalized for his passion for preserving pagan-rooted traditions, Father António, aware of their value and deep significance for local identity, remained steadfast in his mission to keep these traditions alive, stating, *"To deny our traditions – our paganism, even – would be to diminish a very rich culture, which, moreover, is being lost."*

His dedication to preserving and celebrating the region's pagan heritage led to the creation of the Sexta 13 festival as a modern celebration of ancestral beliefs that transforms fear of old superstitions into cultural pride and helps safeguard oral traditions for future generations.

Initially a small event organized by local restaurant owners, the festival quickly gained popularity and was eventually adopted by the municipality. It has since evolved into a major celebration rooted in folklore, identity, and community renewal, with significance at the regional level and outreach across the nation.



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Current format

Montalegre, nestled in the northernmost part of Trás-os-Montes (which literally means Behind the Mountains), has long been shaped by its rugged, isolated landscape. This natural seclusion preserved the wealth of superstitions including superstitions and folklore, with witches, rascals, Beelzebubs, druids, and goblins deeply embedded in local culture. As connectivity to the region improved, events like the Night of the Witches, held every Friday the 13th, have evolved into significant tourist draws, celebrating these mystical traditions and attracting visitors from across Portugal and beyond.



The Sexta 13 event begins at 1:13 PM, as visitors and locals alike immerse themselves in a world of theatrical performances, light shows, and fire displays that transform Montalegre into a magical setting within its mountainous landscape. Participants dress as witches, devils, and other supernatural beings, bringing figures from local legends to life. This tradition highlights the community's deep connection to its mythological past and the seamless integration of these symbols into modern celebrations.

The Night of the Witches

However, the highlight of the celebration takes place at nightfall with the ceremonial preparation of Queimada Galega, a traditional drink made from brandy, sugar, coffee beans, honey, fruit, and cinnamon, believed to be an elixir against evil. During the ritual, Father Fontes recites ancient incantations to ward off malevolent forces traditionally associated with Friday 13th. This local beverage, believed to offer protection against evil and ailments while dispelling fear of the unknown and supernatural, is distributed free of charge during a theatrical and pyro-musical show.

Through these rituals, the "Sexta 13" festival not only preserves Montalegre's unique cultural identity but also actively reinforces the community's deep connection to its superstitious and pagan roots, while promoting local heritage and culture to a broad audience.



Impact: Strengthening Cultural Heritage and Identity

"Superstitious Friday 13th" event in Montalegre exemplifies sustainable cultural tourism by addressing overtourism, promoting local authenticity, benefiting the local community, and enhancing Portugal's tourism offerings.

Promoting Local Authenticity

Rooted in Montalegre's unique folklore, the festival began in 1957 as a small local celebration turning superstition into a positive cultural experience. Once a modest gathering with dances, theater, and traditional food, it has grown into one of Portugal's most iconic themed festivals, featuring parades, concerts, exhibitions, and immersive performances. Beyond entertainment, it preserves local heritage and strengthens community identity. By modernizing the tradition, the event helps retain young residents, fosters cultural pride, and builds authentic connections between visitors and the community.



Impact: Community Benefits

Benefits to the Local Community

The event attracts thousands of visitors, boosting local businesses such as accommodations, restaurants, and artisans. Regional lodging from Braga to Chaves often reaches full occupancy during the festival. Local restaurants highlight traditional Barroso cuisine, including Montalegre's smoked meats and Cozido à Barrosã, generating above-average incomes and enriching visitors' gastronomic experience. This influx supports job creation and stimulates the local economy.

Each edition draws tens of thousands of attendees—for example, the September 2023 festival welcomed around 50,000 visitors, injecting approximately one million euros into the local economy per event (held 1 to 3 times yearly). This economic boost is especially valuable for the remote, previously overlooked Trás-os-Montes region, which is now gaining recognition in local and international tourism.

Environmentally, the festival employs sustainable practices such as waste management and promotion of renewable resources to minimize its ecological footprint, on the area.



Impact: Large scale benefits

While the event strongly addresses the needs of both the local community and tourists, it also contributes to the sustainability of tourism at the national level.

Enhancing Portugal's Tourism Offerings

The "Sexta 13" festival enriches Portugal's tourism landscape by offering a distinctive cultural experience that attracts domestic and international visitors alike. It highlights the diversity of Portuguese traditions and offers an alternative to conventional tourist activities, broadening the country's appeal as a destination.

Addressing Overtourism

By hosting the "Sexta 13 - Noite das Bruxas" festival in Montalegre, a town less frequented by mass tourism, the event disperses visitor traffic away from overcrowded urban centers. This strategic distribution alleviates pressure on typical tourist hotspots, contributing to a more balanced and sustainable tourism model across Portugal.



Impact: Visitors Benefits

"Sexta 13" offers visitors an immersive blend of cultural heritage and engaging activities:

- **Cultural Enrichment** - Attendees have the opportunity to delve into the region's folklore, witnessing traditional rituals and performances that showcase local legends and superstitions. This cultural immersion provides a deeper understanding of Montalegre's unique heritage.
- **Interactive Participation** - The festival encourages active involvement, with visitors dressing up as witches, ghosts, and other mystical figures. This participatory aspect enhances the festive atmosphere and allows guests to become part of the celebration.
- **Culinary Delights** - Traditional Barrosão dishes are available, offering a taste of authentic local cuisine. Sampling these specialties adds a flavorful dimension to the festival experience.
- **Spectacular Entertainment** - The event features theatrical performances, light shows, and fire displays that transform the village into a magical setting. These spectacles captivate audiences and create lasting memories.



Impact: Sustainability measures

Leadership in sustainability

In addition to its cultural and economic impact, Montalegre's Sexta 13 – Noite das Bruxas festival has earned international recognition for its commitment to environmental sustainability.

Certified as an EcoEvento in 2019 by Environment Global Facilities and selected in 2024 among the 100 Green Destinations Stories, the festival adheres to rigorous environmental standards. Measures such as waste reduction, recycling initiatives, and resource conservation, through, among others, embracing modern digital technologies, are central to its operations, helping to minimize its ecological footprint.



The event also promotes environmental awareness by educating attendees on sustainable practices, integrating eco-consciousness into the festival experience.

Through these efforts, the Sexta 13 festival not only preserves cultural heritage but also sets a benchmark for sustainable event management.

Community Involvement

The extreme success of the festival is deeply rooted in active and enthusiastic participation of the local community, which plays a pivotal role in its success:

- **Organizational Participation** - Local residents are deeply involved in organizing the event, collaborating with the municipality to plan and execute various activities. This collective effort ensures that the festival authentically represents Montalegre's cultural heritage.
- **Artistic Contributions** - Community members contribute their talents to the festival's artistic aspects, including theatrical performances, music, and dance. These contributions enrich the event's authenticity and showcase local traditions.
- **Culinary Involvement** - Residents prepare and offer traditional Barrosão dishes, allowing visitors to experience the region's culinary heritage. This involvement not only enhances the festival's appeal but also supports local gastronomy.
- **Cultural Preservation** - By actively participating in the festival, the community helps preserve and promote local legends, superstitions, and customs. This engagement ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge to future generations.



Monitoring and Evaluation

The "Sexta 13 – Noite das Bruxas" festival in Montalegre has significantly expanded its outreach and economic impact. Its success is evident, with municipal staff reporting that local restaurants reach full capacity and hotels approach full occupancy months in advance of each event. Local producers also experience substantial economic benefits.

A key measure of success is its rapidly growing attendance. In 2022, the festival attracted 30,000 to 40,000 visitors, including many from Spain.

By September 2023, attendance surged to 50,000, reflecting its expanding appeal. This influx led to full occupancy in local accommodations, extending to nearby municipalities and even across the border to Spanish Galicia. Restaurants reported record demand, increasing outdoor seating to accommodate crowds.

The festival is a major economic driver for Montalegre and surrounding areas. Pre-pandemic studies estimated each Sexta 13 event generated over one million euros in economic activity, benefiting hospitality, food services, and local artisans, reinforcing its role in the region's economic vitality.



Replicability

The festival's concept celebrating folklore, superstition, and mythology through immersive experiences—can be adapted to other locations with similar cultural traditions or historical ties to mysticism and witchcraft. Replicability key elements include:

Thematic Flexibility – Any region with folklore or supernatural beliefs can tailor the event to its own narratives, turning them into relevant cultural and economic value.

Community Engagement – The festival thrives on strong local participation, making it adaptable to other communities where local artisans, performers, and businesses can contribute.

Event Structure – Core activities like theatrical performances, parades, themed fairs, and traditional food & drink can be adjusted to fit different settings while maintaining the immersive experience.

This and others successful supernatural-themed events like Halloween in Salem (USA) and Samhain in Ireland show how tourism and tourism enhancing events can preserve cultural heritage, underscoring the replicability of Montalegre's model.



Scalability

The festival has scaled impressively, growing from a local gathering to an international event with over 50,000 visitors in 2023. Montalegre has also introduced complementary initiatives to extend tourism benefits year-round, supporting local businesses, preserving traditions, and boosting the regional economy beyond the festival dates.



1. Thematic and Seasonal Events

- Montalegre Castle Light and Sound Shows – The historic castle hosts theatrical and multimedia performances that narrate local legends, bringing history and folklore to life.
- Feira do Fumeiro (Smoked Meats Fair) – One of the most important gastronomic events in Portugal, showcasing traditional Barroso sausages, ham, and local products every January, attracting thousands of visitors.
- Summer Cultural Festivals & Music Events – A variety of open-air concerts, folklore performances, and fairs celebrate regional identity.

Scalability



2. Mythology & Superstition Experiences

- Guided Tours on Witchcraft & Legends – Visitors can explore Ponte da Misarela (Devil’s Bridge) and other mythical sites through storytelling tours.
- Museum & Interpretative Centers – Institutions like the Ecomuseum of Barroso provide insight into local superstitions, traditions, and rural life, offering an educational experience.

3. Nature and Rural Tourism Initiatives

- Peneda-Gerês National Park Activities – Eco-tourism options include hiking, birdwatching, and adventure sports in Portugal’s only national park, which surrounds Montalegre.
- Rural & Agritourism Experiences – Local farms and small producers offer cheese-making workshops, wine tastings, and herbal medicine experiences, preserving ancestral knowledge while attracting visitors.

4. Digital Engagement & Off-Season Promotions

- Witch Trails’ and Mobile Apps – Digital storytelling and AR offers supernatural, year-round experiences.
- International Collaborations & Media Exposure – Partnerships with global festivals (e.g., Halloween-themed events in other countries) help keep Montalegre’s supernatural tourism relevant even outside of event periods.

Transferability challenges

Cultural Embeddedness:

The success of the "Sexta 13 – Noite das Bruxas" festival lies in its deep connection to Montalegre's unique folklore, superstitions, and community identity.

While the overall model—using cultural narratives and immersive experiences to drive sustainable tourism—is adaptable, its effectiveness depends on grounding it in local heritage. Transferring the structure without authentic local content risks reducing impact and weakening cultural resonance.



Infrastructure and Logistics:

The event model relies on the capacity to host large-scale, multi-sensory experiences in rural or under-visited areas. This requires adequate infrastructure, including accommodation, transportation, and crowd management systems. Communities aiming to adopt the model must assess their logistical readiness and invest in scalable infrastructure to avoid overburdening local resources.

Transferability challenges

Environmental Sustainability:

Sustainability is a core pillar of the Montalegre model, with measures like reusable materials and eco-certifications (e.g., EcoEvento status) integrated into event planning.

Adopting similar practices in other contexts requires upfront investment and community engagement. Without proper support, environmental goals may be deprioritized in favor of short-term gains.

Identity and Originality:

A key strength of the Montalegre model is its ability to transform intangible cultural heritage into a distinctive tourism experience.

However, replicating the framework without substituting equally meaningful local traditions may result in a generic or inauthentic experience. To preserve originality, each adaptation must be rooted in the specific myths, histories, and creative assets of the host community.



Key Conclusions & Takeaways

The Sexta 13 - Noite das Bruxas festival in Montalegre provides a valuable model for developing sustainable cultural tourism festivals. Its success highlights key principles that can be adapted and applied to other destinations seeking to preserve heritage, engage communities, and create long-term economic benefits while maintaining environmental responsibility.



- Leverage Local Cultural Heritage - Build on authentic traditions, folklore, and storytelling to create immersive and meaningful visitor experiences. Modernize formats thoughtfully to ensure relevance while preserving identity.
- Ensure Community Involvement and Benefits - Engage local residents as active participants—organizers, performers, and hosts—to foster ownership, preserve cultural knowledge, and strengthen social ties. Support local businesses and intergenerational transmission.

Key Conclusions&Takeaways



- Foster Sustainable Regional Development - Use tourism as a tool to revitalize rural areas, create jobs, and reduce youth outmigration. Promote year-round activities to distribute economic benefits and reduce dependency on single events.
- Promote Scalable and Flexible Event Models - Extend impact beyond a single date through complementary programs (e.g., themed tours, workshops, digital tools). Tailor experiences to different audiences to increase reach and relevance.
- Embed Environmental Responsibility - Integrate sustainability from the outset, including waste reduction, eco-certifications, and green mobility solutions. Connect cultural events with nature-based tourism to reinforce environmental awareness.

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