PONTÉ DE LIMA is one of the oldest villages in Portugal, an attractive town set back from a handsome, landscaped riverside promenade and surroundings that include lots of historic manor houses and boutique properties.

In the riverfront there is the the Torre da Cadeia Velha (now housing the turismo), an old sixteenth-century keep and former prison, with just beyond here the granite, arcaded Mercado building, overlooking the riverside. If you keep going along the promenade and under the lime trees you’ll see the fifteenth-century convent of São Francisco e Santo António dos Capuchos. The pedestrianized old centre repays a stroll between the restored stone mansions and tangle of back alleys.

Ponte de Lima takes its name from the stone bridge that spans the wide Rio Lima at this point. There’s been a fixed crossing over the river since at least Roman times. The current bridge was rebuilt in 1368 and once had seventeen arches – it’s lost three over the centuries to riverbank improvements and raids during the Napoleonic assault in 1809. On occasions, the river encroaches upon the town – on the Torre de São Paulo, near the bridge, are marks showing the depth of historic floods, including a particularly severe one in 1987.

Ponte de Lima claims the first documented market charter in Portugal, dated 1125, which makes the bi-monthly market the oldest in the country. Every other Monday the huge bi-monthly market Feira Quinzenal sprawls out a sea of stalls across the riverside flatlands. The market goes into overdrive for four days over the second weekend in September with the Feiras Novas, or New Fairs, celebrated since 1826 – as much festival as market, with fireworks, fairground rides, folk music and gigantones (enormous carnival-like statues).

There’s a similarly traditional slant to June’s Feira do Cavalo (Horse Fair), while on the day before Corpus Christi (usually early June) Ponte de Lima comes over positively pagan with its annual ritual of the Vaca das Cordas (literally, “Cow of the Ropes”), which involves an enraged and defiant bull being chased through town. This is one of many traditions with its origins in the ancient fertility cults brought to the Iberian peninsula by the Phoenicians – the bull is tied by its horns, led three times around the main church, and then jabbed with goads, after which the unfortunate animal charges through the town’s streets before finishing up at the river. It is then led off to the abattoir, as the good people of Ponte de Lima prepare for the more sedate procession of Corpo do Deus the following day, which sees the streets covered with ornately patterned flowers.

FORGET IT! IN PONTE DE LIMA

For the Romans in Portugal, the rising mists of the Rio Lima carried troubling echoes of the River Lethe, or the “River of Forgetfulness”, one of the five mythical rivers of the Underworld. The Romans believed that if they crossed the river, or drank any of its water, their memories would be erased and they would never return home – which, according to local legend, is why the otherwise all-conquering Roman legion was brought up short here in the second century BC, its troops refusing to go any further. It took an enterprising general to go across, and demonstrate that his memory remained intact, before the soldiers would follow. It’s a nice tale, embraced by the modern town, which has a phalanx of Roman troop statues lined up on the town side of the river – being encouraged across the Lima by a mounted officer on the other side.