

# The Undiscovered Place In Portugal Where Music Happens



*Trás-Os-Montes* is a region in the north of Portugal. The city name literally translates to "Behind the Hills", and it has been losing people as the days go by. It's estimated that the region has [lost half its population since the 60s](#), and it's not getting any better. If you look at the glass half empty, you can understand why this is happening—old people are getting older, young people are leaving to study in bigger cities and never coming back, the birth rates are falling each year and it is difficult to find qualified jobs locally.

But *Trás-Os-Montes* is more than that. "The Wonderful Kingdom", as Portuguese poet [Miguel Torga](#) named it, is a place of infinite beauty, an ancient culture and a lot of character. The Romans saw healing potential in our spring waters and built ancient cities over it. There is a popular saying: *Beyond Marão, those who rule are those who're there*. Known for their generosity and good food, Transmontanos have been forgotten for too long.



*Chaves, Portugal. All photos courtesy of INDIEROR.*

That was the starting point for us at [INDIEROR](#), a non-profit organization from Chaves, Portugal. We work with the community to develop cultural alternatives in a very isolated and deserted region of the country, in order to give visibility to our town and region.

It was 2010 and we were only teens when we started to feel uncomfortable in the place we lived in. We all did amateur theater together and, as most teens, we complained a lot! We wanted more. We needed more. More art, more culture, more opportunities to see different things, and our small town was not keeping up with our needs.

At some point, our theater and musical directors had enough of it and told us: "Look, you are very good at complaining, but maybe it's time for you to do something about it."



So we did. Five other teenagers and I started *Cri'Arte*, a movement to give young people like us the opportunity to experience performing arts. We had the production capabilities to help youth develop their craft, so we worked as a free production company to help them. All the revenue from those shows were given to a small theater venue that was struggling to stay open at the time. It was not an easy path, we had our bumps along the road and lost some of our founding members, but we met a lot of interesting people and it made us learn a lot.

Then, in 2014, we felt ready to start INDIEROR. There were four of us and this time it was for real. We had the goals, the plans and the will to take a step ahead. We wanted to create cultural dynamics in the region without forgetting our past and our cultural roots. We wanted to give our people access to the arts that they could only get in bigger cities, using this as a way to raise interest in the region. All of that would hopefully have two consequences:

1. Improve the quality of life of our people (and maybe they would not feel that they had to leave).
2. Put our town on the cultural scene of the country, inspiring people from other places to come here and help the locals and their businesses.

We left our jobs and decided we had to give this idea a try.

## Think Local. Act Global!



As it's usually said, you can't start a house from the roof. In this case, the strongest foundation INDIEROR could get was from the community itself. We believe if you want your community to have a full understanding of what you are doing, you have to work your way up by valuing their cultural heritage and teaching them to reimagine it with contemporary references.

This is achieved through education in music, theater, dance and cinema and by promoting local activities that will enhance the cultural knowledge of a

community. We wanted to encourage younger generations to be sensible to arts and culture, hoping it would have an affect on their development as human beings and make them question and judge what's around them—even if that meant eventually questioning us and what we do.



We opened castings and auditions for pretty much anyone that wanted to be involved in the arts. Actors, musicians, dancers, painters and writers. We built a database of anyone who wanted to be on board with us. Then the real work started. We produced workshops, small theater productions and music shows. We taught everyone how to learn with each other. Children with adults, from every background and social status. We reached out for help with well-known actors, directors and choreographers and asked them to come and share their experiences and knowledge. A big part of what we do during the year is give our people the tools to grow and make things on their own, especially the younger generations. And they have grown so much!



With all of these experiences and learning opportunities, people began opening their horizons and sharing the idea that culture and arts can be a way of communication through those huge hills.

Why would we promote shows if our community could not value them?  
Why would we want our younger generations to stay in our city if we were not preparing them to be able to enjoy it?

## **It's NOT Just One More Venue**

We are for the community, with the community.

Artists don't come here only to perform. Our concept is to holistically involve the artist with the character of the place—the people, the streets, the history and all the living parts of the town within the artists' work. Musicians will stay for a few days visiting schools, organizations and old shops where they get to know local artists, they do small history tours and most of all, they enjoy the food and the drinks of a region who lives for it.



*Family style meal in Chaves with Glen Hansard.*

The fact that we promote this interaction between locals and visiting artists amplifies the local generosity of spirit (Town people will talk to you on the streets or the coffee shop even if you don't know them. They will ask you how you are, where you are from, ask you about your whole life!) People all over town have their own stories and interactions with the artists that we don't even know about.

In May 2018, [Mark Geary](#) came to Chaves and was so amazed with this, he decided to write a list of all the people he interacted with during the week and read all their names during his show. Not just small interactions but actual conversations or shared experiences. The list was long!



*Mark Geary exploring Chaves.*

Our way is not the most efficient way on the economics side of things—we realize this. In a world where culture is expected to work like a business, promoting shows with international artists and "losing money" on extra days for them to encourage cultural exchange might not be the best business model around, but we strongly believe it's having an amazing effect on the work we do.

People who visit us realize the effort we make and acknowledge how unique these shows are because it's such a personal experience for both the artist and the community. We have had people in the audience from over 15 different countries, and this is a sign of recognition for us. These kinds of shows have the amazing power to change whoever sees them. That doesn't end after you leave the venue.



I believe this is actually the only reason artists do these shows with us. They understand it's an honest effort to build something that is bigger than all of us and will hopefully set an example for the future.

Our goals are slowly being achieved, although we know there is still a long way to go. At the start, we were very worried about making our message spread through all of Portugal, but I think those thoughts have faded with time. We realize now the work we do with the artists and our community is the important part. Maybe if we focus on that, the message will spread naturally. We want to grow with this—get bigger artists to come, improve the interaction with the community, continue to help develop local interest in arts and most of all, give our people experiences they could not have anywhere else. Maybe that will help them value the place we live in and convince them to stay.

### **There are still reasons to be cheerful!**

We are surrounded by the best people we could have around us. For every negative voice that rises, ten positive voices rise above it and help us continue in our path.

People unite for things they believe in. Artists that came here have taught us so many lessons about humility. They have been the purest and most loving souls we have met—devoting themselves to what we believe was their own project.

They are nervous when they come, we cry when they leave and we all smile when we remember each other. That is the most amazing gift we can get from all of this.

Our plan for the future is to grow and amplify the strategy we have. We want to get more amazing artists to come and share their positive experiences in Chaves with the world. We want to work with our community and help them create their own ways of making the town more interesting and sustainable, making it more of their own.

There is still a lot of work to do.