

The AIMA Playbook

The problems people actually hit with Portugal's immigration agency, and what you can do about each one.

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Written from real experiences shared by thousands of immigrants, checked against the official rules.

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AIMA, in plain English

AIMA (Agencia para a Integracao, Migracoes e Asilo) is the agency that handles residence permits in Portugal. It replaced the former SEF in 2023 and inherited a huge backlog of legacy cases. By mid 2026 the government reports that legacy backlog as largely cleared, but that does not mean the system is fast: new applicants still wait months for an appointment, everything is now digital first, and an incomplete file is rejected outright rather than fixed at the desk. Almost everything you will read below comes down to one truth: the system is slow and uneven, but it is navigable if you know what each problem means and what your options are.

This guide maps the problems immigrants run into again and again, and gives you a calm, practical response to each. It is self-help guidance. We do not contact AIMA, sit in queues or book appointments for anyone. What we can do is make sure you know exactly what to do yourself, and when it is worth bringing in a lawyer.

The official channels, keep these to hand

- AIMA Contact Centre: +351 217 115 000 and +351 965 903 700, every day 8am to 8pm (Lisbon time). Lines are busy; calling right on opening, with an auto-redial app, is what works for most people.
- Online: the AIMA website (aima.gov.pt) and the Portuguese public services portal (gov.pt) hold the current forms, the renewal portal and the official document lists.
- Appointments: booked and managed through AIMA's scheduling platform (SIGA / [sigaApp](#)). Always check your account to confirm what is actually scheduled.

Important: the blanket permit extensions have ended

For several years the government automatically extended the validity of expired residence permits while people waited. That blanket extension scheme ended on 15 October 2025. Do not assume an expired card still counts. What protects you now is a live application: your online renewal submitted before your card expired, and the receipt or appointment confirmation that proves it. Renew in good time, keep the proof, and confirm your own current status on aima.gov.pt rather than relying on any general extension date you read online.

The journey, so you know where you are

Most routes follow the same path. Knowing the stage you are at tells you which problems below apply to you.

1. Visa. You enter Portugal on your visa (for example D7 or D8) with an initial AIMA appointment usually already booked for you.
2. First appointment and biometrics. You attend in person, hand over documents and give fingerprints and a photo.
3. Temporary residence card. Approved, your card is printed and posted. The first card typically covers two years.
4. Renewals. You renew before it expires, increasingly online through the renewal portal, with biometrics in person when required.
5. Permanent residence, then citizenship. After five years of legal residence you can apply for permanent residence. Citizenship is now a longer road: since Lei Organica 1/2026 (in force 19 May 2026) it takes ten years for most nationalities, including British and American citizens, and seven for EU or Portuguese-speaking (CPLP) countries, counted from the day your first residence card is issued.

The 10 problems

What goes wrong, and what to do.

1. You did not get an initial appointment with your visa, or you cannot find how to book one

Why it happens. Most people are given an initial appointment automatically, but not always, and the booking route is not obvious. Some arrive, find no appointment waiting, and do not know where to look.

What you can do.

- Set up and sign in to your account on AIMA's scheduling platform (SIGA / sigaApp) and check whether an appointment already exists. People regularly find one, or even two, already listed.
- If there is none, use the platform to request one, choosing the residence-permit reason that matches your situation. Keep the confirmation email and appointment code.
- If the system gives you nothing, the AIMA Contact Centre is the official fallback. Call at opening time and keep trying.
- Do not pay a stranger in a Facebook comment who offers to 'get you an appointment'. Use only official channels or a registered lawyer.

2. Your appointment is months after your visa expired, and you are worried you are now illegal or cannot travel

Why it happens. Appointments are routinely scheduled well after the visa or card expiry date, and this is not your fault. Be aware, though, that the old blanket extensions that used to cover this gap ended on 15 October 2025. What keeps you legal now is having a live application in the system, lodged before your permit expired, and the proof of it.

What you can do.

- Make sure your renewal was actually submitted before your card expired, and keep the submission receipt or appointment confirmation. That receipt, showing a pending application, is what demonstrates your stay is legal while you wait.
- Carry your appointment confirmation and your visa or expired card together as evidence that your process is live, along with the submission receipt.
- Do not assume an expired card is automatically extended any more. If yours expired and you had not yet applied, treat it as urgent, submit the renewal immediately and, if there is any gap, take advice quickly.
- For travel, a pending-application receipt is recognised inside Portugal but not automatically by other countries. If you must cross a border, check the current position carefully first, and a dual passport (for example an Irish one) sidesteps the issue entirely.
- Keep every appointment, even an inconvenient one. A missed appointment is far harder to recover than a late one.

3. You were approved, but your residence card still has not arrived

Why it happens. Card printing and posting is a known bottleneck. Waits of several months after approval are common, and there is no clear logic to the order. Two people approved on the same day at the same office can receive cards weeks apart.

What you can do.

- First, confirm you are actually approved (check your portal or approval email). If so, the card is in the printing and postal queue.
- Cards are sent by ordinary registered post, not signed-for, so watch your letterbox and check with neighbours or your building.
- Polite, persistent email to AIMA does eventually surface some cases. Send the same clear message, with your process number, on a regular schedule.

- Visiting an AIMA desk in person and asking them to email the printing office internally has worked for some people. Asking for the complaints book (livro de reclamacoes) is a recognised way to force a logged response.
- Manage your own expectations: front-line staff often genuinely cannot speed up printing. The honest answer is usually that you must wait, while keeping a gentle paper trail.

4. The renewal portal shows a debt or 'under review' message and will not let you proceed

Why it happens. On first login many people see a message that their situation with Social Security and the Tax Authority is under review ('a sua situacao de divida... esta em revisao'). For most people this is a standard automatic check, not a real debt.

What you can do.

- Do not panic. This message appears for almost everyone on first login while the system cross-checks your records.
- If you genuinely have no Social Security (Seguranca Social) or tax debt, it usually clears within a couple of days once your file is verified, and you can then proceed to the payment step.
- Log out and back in later; some people find the block disappears within an hour and they reach payment.
- If it does not clear, check directly with Seguranca Social and Financas that you truly have no outstanding balance, and resolve anything you find. The portal will not advance until both show you as clear.

5. Your renewal was refused for 'lack of means of subsistence'

Why it happens. This is one of the most distressing refusals, and often the most fixable. AIMA must see that you still meet the income the visa requires. A refusal frequently means a document was missing, unclear, or did not match the income basis of your visa, not that you failed outright.

What you can do.

- Read the decision carefully. A first letter is often a notice of intent to refuse, which by law gives you a right to be heard (audiencia previa) and a short window to respond with evidence before any final decision.
- Within that window, send exactly what is asked: bank statements, proof of stable income, your tax return, and anything showing the funds are ongoing, not a one-off.
- Check the income test for your route. A D7, for example, expects stable passive income at least equal to the national minimum wage (920 euros a month in 2026), with more for a partner and children.
- Many of these are resolved at this stage without a lawyer. If the final decision is still a refusal, move to the appeal ladder later in this guide.

6. You are on a D7 but you are working, and you are not sure you are on the right visa

Why it happens. The D7 is built around passive income (pensions, rent, dividends, savings). If your main income is salary or self-employment, AIMA can question whether the D7 fits, and this is showing up in some renewal refusals.

What you can do.

- Be clear in your own mind which income you are relying on. If you have genuine passive income that meets the threshold, lead with that and document it cleanly.
- If you are really living on work income, understand that the D8 (digital nomad / remote work) or other routes may suit you better, and take advice before a renewal rather than after a refusal.
- Do not invent or misrepresent income. AIMA cross-checks tax records, and a mismatch causes exactly the refusals people are reporting.
- If you may be on the wrong route, this is a good moment for a one-off professional review before you submit.

7. An AIMA office asks for documents that are not on the official list (for example a fresh FBI or police check)

Why it happens. Offices are inconsistent. Some ask for documents you already provided at the visa stage, or that are not formally required, and these often have short validity windows that may have lapsed.

What you can do.

- Know the official list before you go. Print the current document list from gov.pt or aim.gov.pt for your specific permit and reason, and take it with you.
- Bring more than you think you need: extra copies, recent statements, and any background check you do hold, even if you believe it is not required.
- Stay calm and polite if asked for something extra. You can reference the official list, but arguing rarely helps in the room. Note who you spoke to and what was asked.
- Where an office is known to be difficult, having a lawyer attend with you can change the tone and prevent an unfair rejection on the day.

8. Your new card arrived with the wrong details, such as the wrong address

Why it happens. Data entry errors happen, even when you submitted the correct information. The fear is being forced to pay for and wait for a whole new card.

What you can do.

- Email AIMA promptly with your process number, the error, and the correct details, and keep the message short and factual.
- Some corrections, such as an address, can be fixed in the system without issuing a new card. Others trigger a physical appointment and a reissue. Ask explicitly which applies to you.
- Keep using your card in the meantime unless told otherwise; an address error does not usually invalidate it.
- Save all correspondence. If a reissue is needed, your paper trail proves the error was theirs, which matters for fees and timing.

9. AIMA will not answer your emails or calls

Why it happens. Silence is the single most common complaint. Inboxes are overwhelmed and phone lines are saturated, so no reply does not mean no progress.

What you can do.

- Be persistent and consistent. Send the same clear, polite email, with your full name and process number, on a regular schedule (for example twice a week). Repetition is what eventually gets a file noticed.
- Call at 8am sharp when lines open, using an auto-redial app, rather than mid-morning when everyone is trying.
- Use the complaints book (livro de reclamações), in person or online. A formal complaint must be logged and responded to, which sometimes moves a stuck case.
- Keep it courteous. The staff reading these messages did not create the backlog, and a reasonable tone gets better results than anger.

10. You have waited far beyond any reasonable or legal time limit and nothing is happening

Why it happens. When AIMA simply does not decide, the law gives you a route to force a decision. This is different from appealing a refusal: here the problem is silence, not a 'no'.

What you can do.

- First exhaust the polite routes above: emails, the Contact Centre, and a formal complaint, all documented.
- If the delay is genuinely excessive, an administrative court action called an intimacao can compel AIMA to make a decision within a set time. It does not force a particular answer, only that they answer.

- This is a legal step, so it is the point where a lawyer earns their fee. Many immigrants have used it successfully to break a stalemate.
- Gather your timeline first: dates of appointment, approval, every email, and every reply or non-reply. A clear chronology is what a lawyer needs to act fast.

If you get a no

The appeal ladder

A refusal is rarely the end. There is a defined sequence of remedies, and most people never need to climb past the first rung.

Step	Portuguese name	What it is
Right to be heard	audiencia previa	Before a final refusal, AIMA usually issues a notice of intent and gives you a short window to respond. Send the missing or clarifying evidence now. This is where the majority of 'rejections' quietly get fixed, often with no lawyer.
Hierarchical appeal	recurso hierarquico	If the final decision is still a refusal, you can ask a higher authority inside AIMA to review it, arguing a factual error, a procedural fault, or a misapplied rule.
Judicial appeal	acao administrativa	Beyond AIMA, you can take the decision to the administrative court. AIMA is not the last word. This stage needs a lawyer.
Action for delay	intimacao	A separate court route used when AIMA does not decide at all. It compels a decision within a legal deadline, rather than challenging the content of one.

The single most useful thing to know

A first refusal letter is often a notice of intent, not a final no. Answer it in time and you may never need a lawyer at all.

When a lawyer is worth it, and when it is not

Probably worth it

- A final refusal you need to appeal to court (acao administrativa).
- An intimacao to force a decision after excessive delay.
- A difficult office, a complex family-reunification case, or a possible wrong-visa situation you want reviewed before you submit.

Often not needed

- Responding to a notice of intent with the documents AIMA asked for.
- Chasing a card that is simply stuck in printing. Many report that a lawyer cannot speed this up, and you pay either way.
- The standard 'under review' portal message, which usually clears on its own.

The honest rule of thumb

From thousands of shared experiences: pay for legal help where the law genuinely needs to be argued, and save your money where the only real cure is patience and a tidy paper trail.

Keep this nearby: your AIMA action list

A calm sequence to follow whenever AIMA is the problem.

6. Find out exactly where you are: visa, appointment, biometrics, approval, card, or renewal. Name the stage.
7. Keep your renewal submission receipt and appointment confirmation to hand, since the old blanket permit extensions ended in October 2025. A live, lodged application is what proves your stay is legal while you wait.
8. Keep one folder, paper and digital, with your visa, appointment codes, approval, process number and every email.
9. Read any AIMA letter slowly. Is it a notice of intent (you can still respond) or a final decision (you appeal)?
10. If documents are requested, send exactly those, on time, and keep proof you sent them.
11. Chase politely and on a schedule. Same clear email, twice a week, plus an 8am call with auto-redial.
12. Escalate formally if stuck: the complaints book, then, for real delay, an intimacao through a lawyer.
13. Match the cure to the problem: patience for printing delays, evidence for funds refusals, law for genuine refusals and silence.

You do not have to work this out alone

This guide is a free sample of how we help people move to Portugal with less fear and fewer mistakes. Not sure which visa or stage fits you? Take our free 2-minute quiz and get matched guides. Ready to do your whole move properly, in the right order? The Move Pack (the complete ebook, the interactive course and ten worksheets) takes you from deciding to settled. And if your case has a wrinkle, the Personalised Plan adds a one-to-one call and your own written move plan. See everything at myportugalmove.com.

Where this comes from, and its limits

The problems and the practical tactics here are drawn from the lived experiences of immigrants in two large communities, the British Immigrants in Portugal and Americans & Friends PT Facebook groups. The official process points (contacts, the renewal portal, the end of the blanket permit extensions in October 2025, the 2026 citizenship rules and the appeal routes) are checked against AIMA and Portuguese government sources in July 2026.

This is general guidance, not legal advice, and AIMA's rules and timelines change often. Always confirm the current position on aima.gov.pt or gov.pt, and take professional legal advice for appeals, court actions or anything specific to your case. My Portugal Move provides information and preparation only; we do not contact AIMA, attend appointments or act for you before any authority.

Sources

aima.gov.pt; www2.gov.pt (Renewing your residence permit); AIMA Contact Centre +351 217 115 000 / +351 965 903 700.