

Getting to know Portugal inside-out!

The forgotten depths of rural Portugal

Most people who visit Portugal head either for the historic cities of Lisbon and Porto, or for the endless sandy beaches of the Atlantic coast and the Algarve. Not many people travel inland, to the depths of rural Portugal. Deep in the countryside, off the beaten track, there are numerous villages where time has stood still for the past 50 years or more, and where few tourists ever pass.

That is, except for two groups of cyclists that travel across the country, passing through these forgotten villages, each year in May and in June. The first group travel slowly, covering the 1,200 km from Bragança in the northeast to Sagres in the southwest in 17 days; the second group fly through, riding almost the same distance in 8 days in a race.

For the past 8 years the Portuguese company, Ciclonatur, has been organising its annual “Travessia de Portugal” (Across Portugal) mountain bike tour. Moving from small town to small town, from hotel to hotel, travelling from north to south and east to west, following the Spanish-Portuguese border down to Monsaraz in the Alentejo, then across the country diagonally to the most south-westerly point of the country, this journey takes dirt roads and trails when possible, occasionally using paved roads when there is no alternative.

Following the success of the tour, and to meet the demands for a greater challenge by strong mountain bikers and serious cyclists, for four years Ciclonatur has also been organising the 8-day Garmin TransPortugal stage race. The race route is slightly shorter than the tour, at 1,000 km, but that is still an average of about 125 km per day, and ridden against the clock!

The journey

The journey crosses plains and mountain ranges, it forges valleys and rivers, it traverses numerous nature reserves and natural parks including the Serra de Montesinho, the Douro International, the Serra da Malcata, the Tejo International, the Serra de Sao Mamede, to name but a few! This is a journey of continuing change in architecture, in the people you meet along the way, in traditions and in gastronomy. One thing that never changes is the friendliness of the people you meet.

The northeast region of Portugal is the Trás-os-Montes region, literally “behind the mountains”, due to the mountain ranges that separate it from the coast. This geographic isolation has meant the region has developed its own idiosyncratic customs, dialects and beliefs, but there is also poverty and under-population in the region, accentuated by emigration to other European countries and the exodus of younger generations to larger cities. The region is rural with a number of small towns, but above all many villages. Most the ageing villagers live off small farms, and their crops such as fruit trees,

olive trees and vines line the trails you ride. Livestock is also common, and it is not unusual to come across a herd of cows, sheep or goats with an elderly shepherd patiently watching over them apparently in the middle of nowhere. Donkeys are still an important means of transport, time has really stopped here!

The people of the Trás-os-Montes, or Transmontanos, are known for their generosity and plentiful tables. Local gastronomy is based mainly on meat, and often chestnuts are used as a substitute for potatoes. Traditional dishes are hearty and portions are not for the feeble hearted or for light eaters! This is perfect for hungry cyclists!

One such village is Pinelo, 8 km from the end of the first stage of the tour. Each year, on seeing the first cyclists appear, the old ladies from the village get out a jug of wine and a box of biscuits or a cake, and invite all the cyclists to stop, sit down and rest for a while with a glass of wine and a biscuit. It is an event for them and your first taste of the kindness of the people you will meet throughout your journey.

The River Douro is the second most important river in Portugal, and for 122 km, in a region of narrow canyons, is the natural border between Spain and Portugal. This is the Douro International Natural Park. These deep valleys and enormous gorges are home for many birds. The tour passes through this park and both before and after the town of Freixo de Espada à Cinta passes via view points such as “Penedo Durão” with spectacular views of eagles and vultures soaring over the river, far below you.

The route follows the Portuguese-Spanish border for a considerable part of the journey. This border is dotted with castles and fortresses. In Almeida there is a particularly interesting fortress, built according to King Louis XIV of France’s military engineer; Vauban’s ‘hexagon’ technique. Each angle of the polygon forms a lance-shaped bulwark, and amongst these stand other smaller ones, the ravelins. According to 17th and 18th century war tactics, this star-shaped configuration meant crossfire could be used. This fortress was to play an important defensive role in 1810, when the French invaded Portugal. However, things took a turn for the worse when a careless soldier managed to blow up the munitions store, killing five hundred men from the garrison and destroying the original medieval castle. Although the castle was never rebuilt, you can still make out the peculiar shape of the castle from the ruins.

Another indication of the historical heritage of the route along which you are riding is the number of mediaeval and roman cobblestone roads you ride. Some are still in almost perfect condition, others have seen better days, few are easy to ride! These builders clearly didn’t foresee mountain biking being so big in only a couple of thousand years time!

In the north the landscape alternates between schist and granite. On top of one of these “piles” of granite boulders, and on your route, is the village of Monsanto. In this unique village the houses are built around, under or between the huge granite boulders. On top of the hill there are the ruins of the castle, which was the stage for an event which is embedded in local tradition. During one of the many wars between Catholics and Moors, the castle was the last remaining Catholic stronghold. After a particularly long siege the Catholics were desperate and only had one cow and a bucket of grain left. They all met to decide what they should do. A faceless woman suggested they should

feed the bucket of grain to the cow and throw her over the wall! They followed her advice, and when the Moors cut open the well fed cow they decided to give up with the siege. The villagers still celebrate this victory, replacing the cow with earthenware pots filled with flowers that they throw over the wall in an annual festival. The faceless woman is remembered in handmade faceless cloth dolls, “marafonas” that the locals sell to tourists, and which are reputed, when placed under the mattress on your wedding night, to guarantee a fertile and happy marriage! In 1938 Monsanto was awarded a trophy, a silver cockerel that crowns Lucan’s Tower, for being the most Portuguese village in Portugal.

The largest river in Portugal is the “Tejo” or Tagus, which divides the country in half, and not only geographically. South of the Tejo there are strong differences in architecture, culture, gastronomy, dialects and even in the physiognomy of the people. Crossing into the Alentejo region, literally “beyond the Tejo”, and already in the first villages, like Póvoa e Meades you can see the traditional white houses with painted borders, either in grey, red, yellow or blue, traditionally depending on the village, today more dependant on the painter’s whim! Another distinct feature of these houses are the huge chimneys, traditionally used for smoking meat, sausages and the very tasty “farinheira”, a spicy blood sausage made of flour and bacon.

The north of the Alentejo is more granite, and provides some of the best mountain biking of the journey, with technical single tracks winding their way through chestnut forests. Following the walled mountain-top town of Marvão, the more well known Alentejo landscape starts, with rolling plains of cereal fields and cork oaks. The Alentejo is known for its huge ranches with livestock. And these livestock are the reason for something that will mark your whole journey across the Alentejo: gates! Portuguese gates come in many shapes and sizes, from sturdy iron gates on hinges that are easy to open and close, to improvised contraptions built out of poles and barbed wire, held closed with any number of systems, according to what the farmer had at hand at the time. These can be awkward to open and close and they are not always easy to see from a distance, so extra care must be taken whilst riding through these fields.

The last castle before the course turns west is Monsaraz. Previously on the banks of the Guadiana River, the town now overlooks the Alqueva reservoir. This reservoir is the largest artificial lake in Europe. It is relatively new; the dam gates were closed in 2002 amid much debate as to whether the ecological and cultural losses caused by the flooding of this 80 km long “lake” were justified by the benefits to agriculture. For 180 km the reservoir dominates your views and the landscape around you.

After crossing the Alentejo from east to west, the terrain becomes mountainous again, entering a region of “montado”, the name given to these small and very abrupt hills by the local “Alentejanos”. The landscape changes dramatically again during these final stages, where eucalyptus and pine forests alternate with expanses of wild cistus plants that cover the hills with a sweet smelling deep green mattress. In the spring this otherwise ugly bush bears beautiful five petal white flowers that look like snow flakes from a distance, transforming the hillsides into a winter-like picture. As we enter into the Algarve we will notice yet another change in the architecture of the villages.

40 km from the end, and you finally see the ocean on the horizon. After so many days in the depths of the countryside this is a welcome sight. But this is not the busy tourist beaches with asphalt almost down to the water. We are in the Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina natural park, where sandy bays are hidden among cliffs, and the last section of the ride is on breathtaking single track trails overlooking these beaches, descending down to beaches, and climbing back up to the cliff top. Here the light, the air, the colours are different, and the journey is ending. This is the most emotional part of the journey. Joy at having achieved this personal challenge, but also regret at leaving the new family of friends you have created during your journey.

The final point is Sagres, the most south westerly point of the Iberian peninsular, a town with considerable associated tradition and legends that add to the symbolism of the journey ending here. The Romans called Sagres the “Sacred Promontory”, and in the Middle Ages this was supposedly where the world ended. Looking down from the cliffs by the name plaque marking the entrance to the town, you can understand why, the ocean stretches out to infinity and the waves crash into the rocks. It is also, according to legend, to here that ravens mysteriously transported the martyr Saint Vincent's relics from the Holy Land and subsequently guarded by them. In 1173 the ravens reputedly then moved the relics to Lisbon where they remain to this day.

Nitty gritty of the journey

In the tour there are three riding levels, so you can decide the speed you ride at, and how long you spend taking photos, paddling in streams, wallowing in lakes and chatting to the locals you meet along the way. The race is a different matter altogether, as you have to reach the finishing line before a cut off time. Both the tour and the race use GPS technology meaning riders are independent and can cycle at their own rhythm, though in the tour most people chose to ride in one of the groups.

The hotels used are generally small, family run businesses, sometimes converted country houses or the famous Portuguese Pousadas (places of notable beauty or historical interest). Comfort is a priority during the journey, after all, it is hard work pedalling all day, every day, so you need to be well rested – and well fed. Each evening the evening meal is either in the hotel or in a local restaurant, and always tasting the regional gastronomy. The food is good and there is always plenty of it!

This is a very special trip, you will get to know Portugal like few other people do, you will be travelling with a small group of like minded people – both the tour and the race are limited to 50 participants maximum, because of the size of the hotels we stay in. Although a lot of the riders are from Portugal, each year there are also participants from other countries as close as home as Spain, and as far away as South Africa. This is a trip you will remember forever, you might even be tempted to come back again, and again, and again, people do, and you will make fantastic friends that will last a lifetime.

Technical details

Dates: 11 - 27 May 2007 (tour) and 10 - 17 June 2007 (race). Registration is already open for the tour and opens on the 1st October 2006 for the race.

For more information see www.ciclonatur.pt/travessia (tour) or www.supertravessia.com (race).