

# A Portuguese discovery

En route to Cape Town, **Peter Gostelow** cycled south through Portugal and enjoyed one of the best parts of his ongoing trip



**B**ig cities can be difficult to cycle out of. Fortunately Lisbon has another option: the sea. A 10-minute passenger ferry from the port-side suburb of Belem – where Vasco da Gama set sail on 8th July 1497 – took us across the River Tejo.

Rolling off the boat onto the southern banks of the city felt like entering a forgotten quarter. I weaved my way around a near-empty quay. Eager-eyed cats kept vigilance over the odd fisherman tending a net beside half-tilted wooden boats, or sitting at a nearby café waiting for the tide to turn. A thin layer of mist hung over the sea as the Atlantic swell crashed down onto the wide sandy beaches stretching far to the south.

I feared this coastal route from Lisbon would be busy, but the tourist season was largely over when I passed through in October. When the concrete at the roadside soon stopped so too did most of the traffic. A warm sea breeze tailed us south – the sound of the ocean never out of earshot for long. Occasionally a rough track would veer off through the pine trees that now flanked the roadside. There was nothing marked on the map, but investigation was usually rewarded with a deserted beach. The chance to camp was too good to miss.

Pitching a tent outside official campsites is a grey area for some cycle tourers, but the procedure in Portugal is no different from many other European countries I've ridden in: find a discrete spot, pitch the tent when it's almost dark, don't litter, and should someone discover your secret hideaway for the night before you've packed up early the next morning just smile and explain you were too tired to continue.

## Breezing down the coast

The coastal road continued to offer scenic rewards as we lowered the gears and climbed away from the castle-topped town of Sesimbra the next morning into the Serra da Arrabida national park. Here a series of off-road trails disappeared through the scrubland and bushes. Not wanting to turn down a bit of adventure we followed one several miles before it rejoined the asphalt. Turquoise waters of a now placid sea shimmered several hundred metres below.

Soon after we were freewheeling down to an empty bay, resting the bikes under the visible shade of an olive tree and running

into the sea. Any cycle tour that brings with it opportunities for lunchtime swim-stops at beautiful beaches wins big points in my opinion, particularly if there's use of a free shower and an affordable restaurant nearby.

A colourful fleet of fishing boats and a sky full of hungry seagulls greeted us on arrival in the nearby harbour of Setubal. I pedalled onto the quay and stopped to watch the unloading, sorting and weighing of fish before escaping from the gull graffiti raining down from above. From here another quick ferry crossing over the River Sado estuary dropped us on a narrow flat peninsula. Up ahead stretched an empty sand-fringed road. A few holiday resorts lay hidden within the undergrowth of pine trees, and sleepy roadside cafés came appropriately spaced apart for thirsty cyclists.

## Following the birds south

Further south the trees gave way to salt-flat marshlands and rice fields – a wildlife-rich habitat and nesting ground for over 200 species of migrating birds from northern Europe and Africa. The storks were most noticeable as they watched us from

Discretion is the byword for wild camping: cause no disturbance and leave no trace





their enormous nests that crowned the tops of white-washed churches and telegraph poles.

The peaceful coastal road continued to Vila Nova de Milfontes – a village retreating into off-season hibernation now that the holiday homes were boarding up for the coming winter and the tourists had left. One inhabitant told me that the population of 5,000 quadrupled during the summer months as people flocked to enjoy the beaches, some of the best in Portugal. Now they were mostly empty, as were the narrow streets and cafés of the old centre.

Turning away from the sea the landscape began to undulate as we headed east. Wide open fields and hills planted with cork trees brought another change of scenery.

## Into the Algarve

‘Can you smell that?’ asked my companion, who’d cycled in Portugal before. A woody aroma filled the air. ‘That’s the smell of the Alentejo, my favourite region of Portugal.’

I was quick to see why. Here was the country of narrow lanes and small white villages, a picture-postcard backwater clinging to the vestiges of a time that’s hard to find in many other parts of the country.

The hilltop village of Mertola felt very much the heart of this Alentejan region. Climbing over cobblestones, a narrow street wound its way up from the River Guadiana, above which the town is perched. It was the first time



in weeks that I’d used the lowest gear of the Rohloff hub. The short lung-bursting ascent was rewarded with a magnificent panoramic view from the walls of an ancient Moorish castle. A short distance across the river lay Spain, where I would be continuing my onward journey, but that could wait for another day.

South from Mertola the best of Portugal was yet to come as we hugged the riverbank, passing groves of ripening oranges, pomegranates and abandoned villas on the hillside. More perfect camping territory. Like all good things it ended too quickly when the modern concrete towers from Vila Real de Santo Antonio in the Algarve intruded onto the horizon the following morning.

I felt like turning back, until discovering later that afternoon that the Algarve wasn’t the continuous stretch of holiday resorts and golf courses that I’d imagined it to be. Tavira’s sleepy charm and sandy beaches had clearly won over many of the non-Portuguese faces sitting in the cafés and plazas. It did for me too, making a fitting finish to one of the most enjoyable weeks of riding I’d had since setting off from England two months previously.

(Clockwise from top left) You’re never far from the sea in Portugal. Even in October, the weather is excellent. Peter’s Thorn Nomad is going to Cape Town. Out of the holiday season, towns are quiet



## Fact file

### Portuguese End to End

**DAILY DISTANCE:** 70-100km, 4-5 hours of riding

**TERRAIN:** Mostly flat along the coast. Small climbs (100-250m) inland.

**WEATHER:** Perfect conditions in October – 20-25C. Minimal rain.

**ACCOMMODATION:** Mostly wild camping.

Worth noting that municipal campsites are much cheaper than in Spain and France (3-5 Euros) and 50% cheaper between Oct-May. Guest houses/hotels easily found in most towns.

**MAPS:** Michelin map for Spain and Portugal, plus regional Michelin maps.

**GETTING THERE:** I crossed the northern border from Spain. Otherwise flights to Lisbon or Faro are easiest.

**BIKE USED:** Thorn Nomad. Overkill for the terrain but I’m riding to South Africa on it.

**BACKGROUND:** This tour was being ridden as part of much longer one from England to South Africa.

For details, see [www.thebigafricacycle.com](http://www.thebigafricacycle.com)

**MORE INFORMATION:** Expert guidance and advice about cycling in Portugal can be found by visiting [www.cyclingthroughthecenturies.com](http://www.cyclingthroughthecenturies.com) and [www.cyclingrentals.com](http://www.cyclingrentals.com)