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Of Ostriches, Eucalyptus, and Fine Port: Our Tour of Portugal

By Ron Keys • GWRRR #220254 • Newcastle, Ontario, Canada

Dipping a wing over the Atlantic, our pilot sweeps inland over a sea of terra cotta roofs and in to Lisbon, Portugal. My wife, Tina, and I wait for Judy, our friend and riding partner, who arrives a couple of hours later on a flight from Toronto. We squish into a taxi and, when our driver learns that the purpose of our journey is to spend seven days touring Portugal by motorcycle, he excitedly tells us in broken English all about his brand-new Busa.

Driving with one hand and gesturing with the other—weaving from lane to lane, careening around corners, and jockeying for position on roundabouts—he delivers us to our hotel. There, Jeff and Debbie and Tom and Dianne, also our riding partners, are waiting. Together we spend the night in anticipation of our first-ever European motorcycle tour, led by Motocadi owner Julian Cade, who hosts tours of Portugal, Spain, Morocco, and Scotland. Our tour, *The Spirit of Portugal*, will introduce us to the unique roads and hospitality of Portugal.

Day One

The following May morning dawns sunny and warm and Julian arrives right on time at our hotel on his Trans Alp, followed by a taxi towing a trailer for our luggage. We head up the autoroute, behind Julian and Judy on her Suzuki 750 rental, to Obidos on Portugal's Silver Coast. That is where the rest of our bikes are waiting. Upon our arrival, Martha—the owner of Casa d'Obidos, our overnight accommodation—greet us. Situated on a low promontory, the casa offers a grand view across a glen of tidy, verdant rows of lush



The group at Torre, the top of Portugal, in the Serra da Estrela (Mountain Range of the Star).

orange and olive trees. In the distance—rising majestically from the valley floor and crowning a high, rocky outcrop—sets the mighty ancient castle and walled city of Obidos.

The pre-ride meeting is scheduled for this evening, so we have the day to familiarize, acclimatize, and wander the walled city. With its granite keep and turrets still intact, and surrounded by high, thick stone walls, this 7th Century Moorish Castle stands silhouetted, serene, and austere against the cloudless blue sky just as

it has for over 1,300 years. Narrow, steep, cobblestone streets beckon us to come and explore.

We meander along the narrow streets lined with shops, restaurants, and homes. Along the way, we sample locally made wines, including the famous Portuguese port. Everything is pristine and clean and draped in lush, green foliage and the deep hues of flowers of every description. Vintage grape vines five and six inches in diameter speak of the age of the greenery suspended on walls and over patios. Bright red flowers even hang over the corners of many tiled roofs.

Up the street a wedding is in progress at a tiny church. Later, a brief tour of the church reveals an age that we in the New World cannot fathom; we North Americans measure the age of structures in hundreds of years, but here the measurement is in thousands. Intricate scenes emblazoned on ceramic tile glorify walls and ceilings, giving a brief glimpse into the shadowy mists of time. Lunch on a patio under an orange tree laden with fruit is the high point of the afternoon. The server invites us to pick oranges from the trees, and the fruit's vine-ripened juices



Mountain roads.



Ron and Tina in the mountains.



Lunch under the orange tree.

virtually explode on our taste buds.

Soon we trek back across the valley to Casa d'Obidos for a swim. At poolside, we meet Herman and Sandra, who have just arrived from England, having ridden and ferried their Triumph Tiger all the way here. After our pre-ride meeting, the ten of us traverse the pathway through the orchard and into town for supper at a restaurant of Julian's choice. Having lived in Portugal for several years, Julian is a connoisseur of the local food and wine and a friend of the restaurant owner. With full tummies and warm cheeks, we walk back together, content and ready to turn in for the night. The silence of the night so intense it almost keeps me awake—but not quite.

Day Two

Day Two starts with a hearty breakfast provided by Martha and her cast of fine helpers, a great way to start the first day's ride of 230 miles. After riding a Gold Wing for years, the Triumph RS 955 Sprint triple is a rather pleasant surprise. (The last Triumph I rode was a Bonneville in the 1960s.) We follow Julian onto the autoroute and he sets a progressive pace, but with almost no traffic on the highway the speed soon picks up. When we pause at a lay-by after a toll booth, Tina informs me that if this is the pace we are going to continue at she would prefer to go back home. The combination of this being her first ride of the year and riding on a sport-touring bike for the first time has caused her some anxiety, but I assure her that it will get better. We tuck in behind Tom and Jeff as we get off the autoroute and venture into Portugal's hinterland of twisting, turning, two-lane heaven.

Suddenly, up ahead, we see several oncoming cars parked on the road and a man dashing toward us, waving his arms and chasing something rather large and gawky. We slow to a stop and stare, jaws

dropping open. I can't quite believe what I'm seeing: A full-grown ostrich running full tilt along the road. Julian rushes to pop open his trunk and retrieve his camera, and I turn to wide-eyed Tina and say, "Now I have truly seen everything."

Runaway ostriches give way to rolling hills and tree-lined valleys, with the occasional glimpse of Serra da Estrela (Mountain Range of the Star), and I wish we had more time to take in the views. However, riding in the mountains on strange roads is not recommended after dark so we motor on, braking hard, and leaning into the corners at ever-increasing angles. The only difficulty of riding two-up is that Tina slides forward against me when I brake hard; I soon learn to brace my arms beforehand. Later, Tina admits to muttering a lot of prayers during each day's ride.

The scenery changes to smooth-barked eucalyptus and huge boulders strewn about the mountain washes. The roads twist back and forth, always demanding my full attention and respect, with the ever-present personal challenge to carve the perfect line in every corner. I've been right behind Jeff and Tom and they both wave me on as I slip in behind Julian on the Trans Alp. On strange roads it's a definite advantage to have a good rider in front who is familiar with the area and knows what line to take on each corner. I process his moves to estimate my own speed, braking, and line. Leading is harder than following.

At Torre—the top of Portugal, and 6,600 feet in elevation—it's cooler. Amidst the final remnants of the winter's snow, we take in the view and a few pictures. On our descent, Julian suddenly pulls over and points to the left at a set of steps, hand-carved into the granite slope leading up to a statue of the Virgin Mary. This craftsmanship and evidence of devout Portuguese Catholicism is every-

where we go. Soon after, Manteigas—at the end of the Zezere Valley nestled against the Serra da Estrela—comes into view. It's about 5 p.m. and we're tired, but we've made good time today.

The slippery cobbled street leading up to the parking area is so steep that the ladies have to dismount so we can safely make it up the grade to park the bikes. Countess Maria Ameilia Carril de Matos Maderia de Portugal, the owner, greets us at the door of the Manor House of Casa das Obras. Casa das Obras was built in the 18th Century by the Judge Dr. João Teodoro Saraiva Fragoso de Vasconcelos as a gift from the king. Countess Ameilia, a direct descendent, graciously shows us to our rooms.

We men head down the hill to a little terrace for a round while the ladies, who have located computers in the Casa, send messages home to kids and friends. Across the road, a church bell tolls relentlessly; it's Sunday evening and the priest is determined to get people out for the evening service. When the ladies arrive, we head a little farther down the steep incline for dinner. Our steak meal—cooked right in the center of our table on a hot granite stone—is superb, but even better is the camaraderie and chemistry that makes this group so much fun to be with.

Day Three

The next morning, we gingerly make our way down the slippery cobblestones to our waiting wives and set out on a 197-mile ride to the famous Douro Valley, the world's Port capital. The demanding roads have established a pecking order, and I follow right on Julian's back fender. His Trans Alp gives away about 300ccs to my Triumph, but I have two saddlebags, a trunk, and a passenger so the match up is probably fairly even. I am now accustomed to the Triumph and scrubbing my toes in the corners has become routine.



This is the group with the bridge in Porto, built by Eiffel's assistant, in the background.



This is the ostrich that was on the roadway.



Ron (right) and Julian under the fort at Nazare.

My personal challenge is to strike the perfect line in every corner but not use the same line as Julian. (I do this whenever I ride with others, a tendency likely left over from my racing days.) Striking a different line from the leader also lends me a better view of what's ahead—I learned long ago that where you look is where you go. Slippery, long shards of eucalyptus bark on the roadways are like banana peels for bikers, and I keep my eyes open for them. Ambrosia cleanses our sinuses each time we pass through the many eucalyptus groves.

We enter a tiny hamlet high on a hill called Belmonte. Belmonte Castle was the home of Pedro Alvares Cabral, a sea captain and explorer, who sailed across the Atlantic to be the first European in Brazil. The castle was built in 1266, the same year that Marco Polo arrived in Beijing, China. For centuries this village has also been home to the largest Jewish community in Portugal. From Belmonte we board our trusty steel steeds and head down the winding cobblestone streets to another medieval village. Sortelha, a walled fortress, was built to protect Portugal from Spanish aggressors. No vehicles are allowed, so we walk through the village's collection of terra cotta roofs crowning homes of stone, climbing stairs carved out of the solid bedrock that pervades the landscape.

Leaving Sortelha, the serpentine roads climb, twist, and turn up to 3,300 feet before winding down into the Douro Valley. As the Douro River comes into view, the steep hills on either side of the mountains are held back by stone retaining walls that form terraces of continuous vineyards punctuated with the deep green of olive orchards. Across the river a railway cuts into the mountains and follows the shoreline to Porto and down to the sea.

We stop at Quinta do Seixo, owned by the famous Port producer Sandeman, directly across the river from our night's lodgings. At the next bridge, in tiny Pinhao, we cross the river, make a hard left, and follow the narrow one-lane roadway that hugs the cliffs and ascends steeply from the valley floor; a limitless, unobstructed plunge to the river far below drops off immediately to our left. At every turn Julian toots his horn to alert approaching motorists. Ten minutes later we stop in front of a grandiose villa, gleaming white in the early afternoon sunshine and capped with yet another terra cotta roof. Casa do Visconde de Chancelieros, our home for the night, is a veritable Garden of Eden to our hot, tired bodies.

Ursula, our host, shows us to our rooms. Our balcony overlooks the courtyard, with its abundant flower gardens, swimming pool, hot tub, sauna made from a massive wine barrel, and million-dollar view of the Douro Valley. We enjoy an afternoon of total, decadent relaxation, drawn to a close with a home-cooked meal on the glass balcony of the dining hall suspended high above the river.

Day Four

We wake in the morning to Day Four, which begins with retracing our steps down the narrow, terraced road and across the river. Today we travel along the river through villages with magical sounding names—Peso da Regua, Boa Vista, Resende, Ribadouro—all the way to Porto. The roads involve more technical riding with hard braking, acceleration to the next turn, and hard braking again. Houses sit so close to the road that many 90-degree turns literally wind through people's front yards. The houses cling to the steep cliffs along roads that take the

path of least resistance through the mountains. Millennia ago these roads were trails and ox-cart paths that gradually morphed into what now exists—some of the best motorcycling roads in the world.

The awesome redolence of another eucalyptus grove sweeps across my sinuses, alerting me to the possibility of calamitous shards of bark on the roadway. Soon, Porto—or Oporto, as it was originally named by the Romans—comes into view as cityscape replaces the many quintas. This ancient city is the birthplace of Port wine, and has always been a prosperous trading hub. We ride over the Douro on the Ponte de Dom Luis, built by Theophile Seyrig, the assistant to Gustave Eiffel of Parisian fame. Overlooking the sea is the ancient fort São João do Foz, right across the street from The Boa Vista Hotel, once a Franciscan Monastery, where we will stay tonight. Across the river, lined with port boats, sits Villa Nova de Gaia where most of the world's Port comes from. Here we tour the W&J Graham Port Company, founded in 1820 and still owned by the same family.

Day Five

Dark, pregnant clouds loom over the dawn of Day Five, and we desperately hope it won't rain. Today we ride the N227—the high point of the tour. Our luck holds. The N227 is indeed a technical, tricky stretch of road. It's not a high-speed road but with trees on both sides and banked corners exiting uphill and down, it's a blissful ride and litmus test of one's skill. Increasing radius corners more than once cause me to straighten up and apply more brake to scrub off speed. I stay tight on Julian's back wheel as Tina and I lean together. I brake hard into hairpin after hairpin, rolling the power on smoothly up and out of each corner. This



The group in Porto.



Unwinding at the end of a hard day's ride.



The happy, but also sad, farewell get-together.

road is perfect for practicing smooth, efficient cornering. Riding fast is not about speed, but the delicate application of brakes at the last possible point, deep into the corner, and the smooth rolling on of throttle right at the fine edge of adhesion. Striking the correct line is optimal because after a wrong line, the next several corners become cumbersome and totally out of synch, much like a downhill skier who misses a gate. This section of road alone was worth the price of admission. Much to my chagrin, the N227 finally ends at Viseu, and we ride on to Tondela for lunch.

We head west to the Atlantic, following a coastal road south from Pedrogao to San Pedro de Muel, a small resort town with a beach and towering lighthouse. After a short walk along the seaside cliffs, we ride through turpentine forests with buckets hanging from pegs on pine trunks. (Portugal is the world's largest producer of turpentine.) Soon we arrive in Nazare, a tourist town, where we spend a free day.

Final Day

We rise on the morning of our final day of the tour. Tom and I are traveling lighter as our wives opt to ride back to Obidos in the luggage taxi. Finally an opportunity to ride solo. This last day is mostly autoroute, which gives us a chance to see what the Triumph Sprints can do on the open road. I obediently follow Julian at a modest 150-160 km/hour, but I see by his furtive glances in his rearview mirror that at 180 he is squeezing everything he can out of the little Trans Alp. At this point I

just can't help myself: I have to see what this bike is capable of. I crack open the throttle and move into the left lane. I tuck down onto the tank and watch the digital readout track upward. I flash by Julian. I reach 220 km/hour, and back off. The bike is nearly maxed out so I shut it down. When we stop for a final gas fill-up, chuckling, Julian says, "I was wondering when someone would do that, and I thought it would be you."

Normally, arrival in Obidos would end our Motocadi vacation but our group has bonded so well that Julian wants to treat us to dinner this evening. He leads us into Lisbon to the Trindade Beerhouse, a former canteen of the Trinos Monks whose convent was established in 1283 and destroyed by the Lisbon earthquake and tidal wave in 1755. In 1834, the Trindade Brewery was established and two years later the Beerhouse opened to the public. We catch taxis from here to the site of Expo 98 and a restaurant named Chimarrao where we have our bittersweet farewell meal.

That night, as we tuck ourselves into bed, Tina and I chat about the past week—the rides, the friends, the food, and the lodgings. All have been magnificent. We agree that this is the best vacation we have ever experienced. I say to Tina, "I keep thinking about riding Julian's upcoming Scotland and Morocco tours." Tina agrees and when she is close to sleep, I whisper in her ear, "How about Julian's Scotland Tour followed by the Isle of Man TT Races?" "What's a TT?" she sleepily says. Tonight, my sleep does not come easily. ●

ACE Motorworks	25
Add On	38
Big Bike Parts.....	34
Bushtec Trailers.....	45
Centramatic.....	63
Champion Trikes.....	99
Chapel Australian Bike Tours	36
Chatterbox, USA	19
Chrome World Inc.	41
Cima International.....	9
Can-Am Spyder.....	5
Cruiserworks	37
Cyclegadgets	40
Deltran.....	6
Cozywinters.Com	6
Doran Mfg	35
F2P Technologies.....	42
Fly-N-Cycle	32
Freymoto Industries.....	13
Gene's Gallery	23
Gerbings Heated Clothing.....	21
Hannigan Motorsports.....	31
Heritage Honda	33
Honda Of Tupelo	35
Honda Of Richmond	36
Honda Powersports Of Fort Smith	63
INB Radio.....	40
J & M Corp.....	2
Kennedy Group	37
LA Honda	39
Lehman Trikes U.S.A., Inc.....	100
Midwest Lists & More/Bradford Group ...	11, 29
Motor Trike	46-53, 62
Neosho Fiberglass	57
Niehaus Cycle Sales.....	17
Overby's	61
Safety Features	36
Schroaders Honda	14
Sierra Electronics	19
The Trike Shop	43
Time Out Corp	35
Tow-Pac, Inc.....	73
Wags Unique Trailers	37
Wing Stuff.Com	26

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