

Portugal: forget about the footie – it's a great place to ride!

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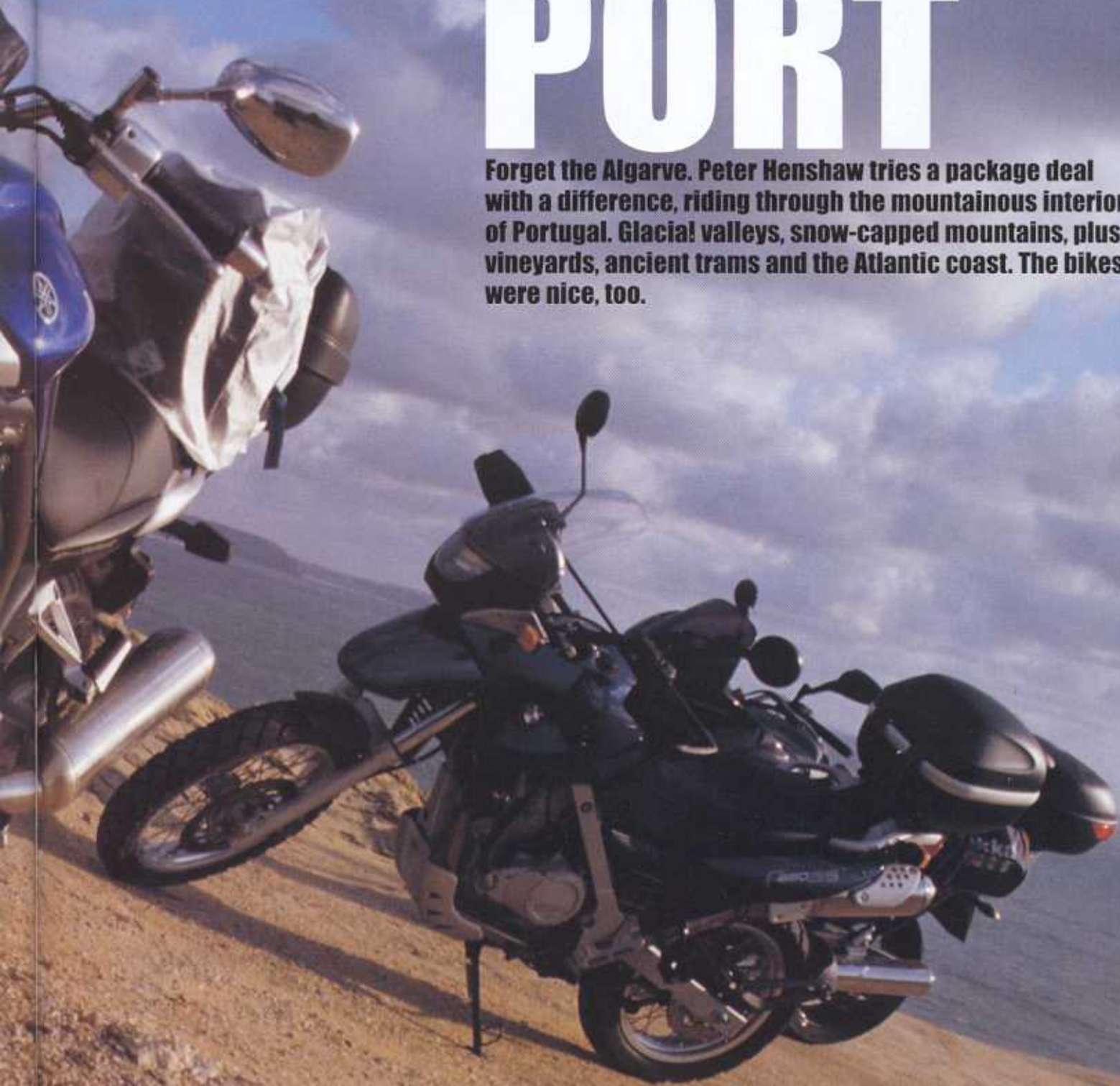
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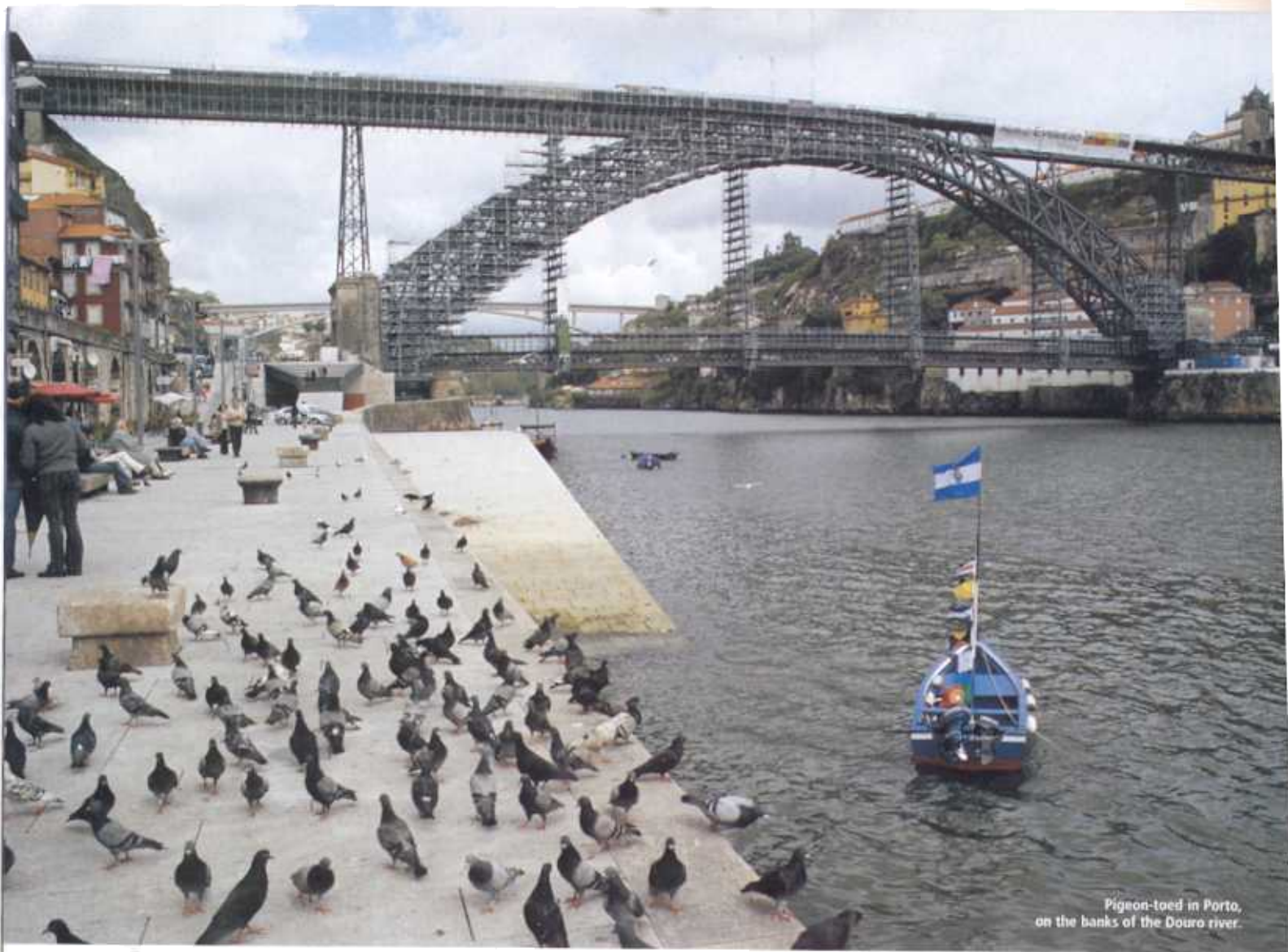
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PASS THE PORT

Forget the Algarve. Peter Henshaw tries a package deal with a difference, riding through the mountainous interior of Portugal. Glacial valleys, snow-capped mountains, plus vineyards, ancient trams and the Atlantic coast. The bikes were nice, too.





Pigeon-toed in Porto, on the banks of the Douro river.

The N230 to Covilha stretches to 46 miles, and there's hardly a straight piece of tarmac in any of them. Heeling through bend after bend after bend, the F650GS spends more time at an angle than it does upright. The corners are tight and blind, but the tarmac is perfect and (best of all) the traffic almost non-existent – in all those 46 miles, we see maybe two dozen cars.

I'd heard all the horror stories about Portugal. The worst accident rate in Europe; crazy drivers and crazy-paved tarmac – so why would anyone want to ride a bike here for fun? Julian Cade is convinced that they will, and just to prove it, he and his wife Alicja have given up good jobs in the UK to move out here and offer motorcycle tours. So here we are, myself on the F650, Gunnar from Denmark on a TDM and Julian leading us through those seemingly endless bends on his Yamaha Bulldog.

"The thing is," he tells me, "people have the wrong image of Portugal. Keep out of the Algarve, which is pretty awful, and there are loads of great biking routes. The beauty of it is that the country has lots of roads, but only 10 million people live here, and most of them are in the

cities – the result is lots of empty tarmac."

We kick off just outside Obidos, a medieval walled town about an hour's drive north of Lisbon. Installed in a luxurious guesthouse, I open the shutters that first morning to see the town's battlements framed against a brilliant blue sky. It's apparently a marvel of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture, the result of centuries of building, destroying and rebuilding.

Motocadia clients normally get half a day to look around Obidos, but as hard working journalists we don't have time – within 20 minutes of breakfast we're on the road. I'm happy to be on the F650, perfect for all those twisty mountain roads we've been promised today, though the first hour is spent on a motorway, to get to the scenic bits. We stop at the tollbooth as Julian juggles credit cards and tickets – in Portugal, bikes have to pay to use motorways, the same as cars, and the A1 north is an efficient but dull means to whip us towards the mountains.

Things get more interesting when we turn off, on to fast single-carriageway, then to the N236, a mountain road that gets twistier and more circuitous as the mountains close in on either side. Portugal

isn't particularly mountainous, but it is hilly, and N-roads (the equivalent of English Bs) tend to follow the topography rather than level it out. This is a very different Portugal to the package tour Algarve. Almost every village (and there are plenty of them) has cobbled streets, with teenagers and old men hanging out in the square. Always teenagers and old men, never anyone else, just watching the world go by – and if it rains, they take an umbrella. By the side of one road, we catch a glimpse of an old woman tending half a dozen goats in the sunshine – she's knitting. Portugal is still a country of farmers, but not farmers like the wheat barons of East Anglia – many don't even own tractors, but tiny sit-on rotavators, with trailers attached, which crawl along the hard shoulder of main roads as the traffic whips by at 60mph.

We stop for lunch in one of the villages, which for five euros each delivers a tasty and filling mixed grill. If you're a vegetarian, rural Portugal is not a gastronomic treat, although if you can eat fish, you should be OK. Language isn't a problem either, and almost everyone we encounter speaks a few words of English, which with a smattering of sign language



is enough to make ourselves understand

After lunch, that N230 with its 46 miles of bends beckons, and then it's up into the Serra Da Estrella mountain twisting and turning, up and up toward the summit of Torre. At 2,000 metres, this is the highest point in Portugal, and despite the May sunshine there are big patches of snow at the top, though the ski lift stretches out over barren rock. A bit of a honeypot, with a car park at the summit, and the café does a roaring trade while families build snowmen and snowball each other. But none of us are really at 2,000 metres, if you really want to know the truth. The mountain actually measures a mere 1,993, but a Portuguese head of state ordered a seven-metre high tower to be built here, to make up the difference. Portugal's mountains, it has to be said, are not craggy and dramatic like Alpine peaks, but riding over them is pretty spectacular. A vertical rock face rising on one side, a sheer drop on the other, and sometimes there's nothing but a clump of dandelions between your front wheel and oblivion.

Corkscrew

North of the mountain, the glacial valley of Zezere – Europe's longest, at 10km – cuts down to the village of Manteiga. More hairpins and blind corners, with some little S-bends so tight that you can ride straight across, as if they're there. In the village, we turn up what looks like an impossibly steep cobble street, and park up in front of Casa das Obras, our hotel for the night. From

Far Right: Atlantic waves batter the Portuguese coast. Not quite Cornwall, but it feels like that in place. Right: Julian Cade and family gave up secure jobs in the UK to offer motorcycle tours of Portugal.

outside, this looks like any other village house, but stepping inside is like walking into a medieval castle. Walls two feet thick, stone flagged floors... I half expect Michael Palin to leap out from behind a balustrade screaming, "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" Except that being in Portugal that'd clearly be absurd.

That night, Julian takes us to a tiny restaurant, a ten-minute hair-raising ten-minute ride down the valley. It's an extraordinary little place, with no menu as such: the waiter just lists the three or four items on offer that night. On the other hand, this is Portugal, and bottles of red wine line the walls. Julian is a bit of a wine buff, and walks up and down the serrated ranks of ruby red, like a sergeant major inspecting the troops. Eventually, he picks one out so that's what we have.

This is clearly a fine place to eat (not to mention the only restaurant for miles around) but it's almost empty. Julian explains that we're well off the tourist track here – they get a few French and Belgians, mountain walkers in the summer, but hardly ever see Brits. It's becoming clear that Motocadia takes a pride in showing bikers parts of Portugal they would never otherwise see. Even in Porto, which is a tourist trap, Julian has sniffed out a Brazilian restaurant in the back streets that gives a unique eating experience. Again, there's no menu, but every few minutes the chef arrives at your table with what looks like a large sword impaled on which are several pieces of roasted meat. This happens every few minutes, and carries on until you say so.

MOTOCADIA

It sounds like something out of a Channel 4 reality show – Julian and Alicja Cade had well-paid professional jobs in the UK, but they gave it all up and remortgaged their house to start a motorcycle tour business in Portugal. "It would never have happened without Alicja," Julian told me. "She speaks fluent Portuguese, and the red tape to set up a business here can be a nightmare, so you really have to speak the language. It's also a case of who you know – once you've made a few contacts, it all becomes easier."

Still, it now looks like it was worth the hassle – Motocadia is the only company based in Portugal offering bike tours, and Julian hopes to attract affluent bikers who may have already done France, Germany and Italy, and are looking for something different. Hence the emphasis on good restaurants and characterful

places to stay. The basic week-long package consists of four core riding days (around 160-180 miles each, which is a lot of twisty road), two shorter ones (about 70 miles) and a settling in day, allowing time for sightseeing or shorter rides.

Prices are reasonable, considering the standard of accommodation and the quality of bikes they provide (all new, or nearly so). One rider on one of the bigger bikes pays 1,695 euros, but if you're willing to share a room, and take the BMW, prices start at 895 euros. This includes the bike, insurance, all accommodation, breakfast and one evening meal. They'll also pick you up from Lisbon airport. Flying there direct from Heathrow costs around £130 return.

www.motocadia.com
Tel. 00351 262 950 006





FACTFILE > PORTUGAL

If you have a sneaking suspicion that Portugal is at the 'primitive' end of Europe, forget it. Superb restaurants and affordable hotels are commonplace (it's still one of the cheapest places in Europe), the currency is the euro, and the ATMs accept all major credit cards. Despite the modern influences, the traditional, relaxing Portugal is still there, amid mountains, beaches and rolling hills. The best time to go is early summer, before it really heats up, but crowds of tourists aren't a problem in the areas we visited. Festivals are well worth looking out for, especially Porto's Feira de Sao Martinho in June, where everyone dances through the streets, hitting each other over the head with leeks. Sounds so unlikely, it must be true.

Guidebooks

Portugal, John King, Lonely Planet, £13.99

Websites

www.lonelyplanet.com

www.portugal-info.net

www.visiteurope.com/Portugal



Motocadía tour (left) took in mountains, vineyards and the Atlantic coast. Religious imagery (top) is everywhere in this overwhelmingly Catholic country.

– the chef looks surprised when I call a halt after his fifth visit. Not a first choice for vegetarians, that one.

So the accommodation (and food) are top notch, but I'm beginning to wonder if 180-mile days on twisty mountain roads aren't a tad ambitious for less experienced bikers. (I later learn that one American woman, who rides 50 miles a day back home, did the whole trip and loved it, which shows how wrong you can be.) This seems confirmed next morning, when

our first job is to climb out of the glacial valley, up what looks like a vertical rock face. "This," announces Julian, "is supposed to be the most treacherous road in Portugal." Crawling round one hairpin after another, we corkscrew our way out of the valley, and I curse my decision to opt for the Bulldog today. Its heavier steering flops into the 180-degree bends, needing more muscle than the F650. Only later, back on the motorway, do I appreciate the Yam's smooth motor

Porto, our next hotel, and dry socks.

Port city

Porto (as you might expect) is where the port comes from. It lies at the mouth of the Douro River, and the long, twisting valley inland is lined with vineyards. A couple of centuries ago, the port was carried downstream in open boats, a dangerous job on this treacherous stretch of water, to enormous warehouses in Porto itself, where it was (and is) stored in vast casks, each one holding over 20,000 litres of the stuff. For a few euros, nearly all the warehouses offer short guided tours, with a couple of tastings thrown in.

Despite hordes of tourists buzzing around the port houses, this is a working town. Take the waterfront apartments. In any other European city these would have long since been snapped up by developers, modernised, and sold on at a fat cat profit. But in Porto they get passed down the generations within families, so rarely come up for sale. Peeling paint, missing frontage tiles and washing hanging from dilapidated balconies – Porto may look out over the Atlantic, but it has a Mediterranean feel. We could almost be on the waterfront in Naples.

Except that they don't have trams in Naples, but Porto does. Built in the 1920s

Once we pass the logging trucks it's another curve fest, with bend after bend offering fine tarmac

and comfy seat. But heading up that corkscrew climb on wet roads, the others soon romp ahead as I tour up, peeking over the edge of sheer drops, down to the red roofs of Manteigas, far, far below. Finally making the top, we hit thick mist – this is not how I expected motorcycling in Portugal to be, and as we wind down into the next valley, it begins to rain. Sipping a café gallan (delicious milky coffee served in a glass – just right to warm your hands on) later on, we decide to head straight for the coastal city of



Two Yamaha twins: both TDM and Bulldog proved competent tourers, but Henshaw preferred the slim BeeEmm for the twistier bits.

and '30s, these seem to have trundled straight out of a Gracie Fields movie, creaking and groaning their way past the traffic at 15mph. For a flat fee of 1.30 euros, they'll take you right into the middle of town, the female driver clanging her bell at dreamy pedestrians wandering across the tramlines. And as this is Porto, they are completely unrestored (the trams that is, not the pedestrians), complete with flaky paintwork and threadbare reversible seats. If you're into trams, there's a museum as well. Later, delivered safely back to the hotel, we sit in the rooftop bar, watching the Atlantic breakers roll in. Gunnar observes that motorcycle journalism is jolly hard work.

But Julian isn't letting us off that easily, and the third and final day sees us heading out of Porto and up the Douro valley. The sun is shining as we settle in for another morning of bend swinging, and as the industrial outskirts finally fall away, the road curves and twists its way higher up the valley side, giving us just occasional glimpses of the Douro itself, far below. I'm told the best way to see the river is to take a train from Porto, which follows the valley floor all the way up.

Best for sightseeing maybe, but the road is more involving. Once we get past a couple of logging trucks – they farm eucalyptus trees all over this part of Portugal, and you see them everywhere – it's another curve fest, with bend after bend offering fine, grippy tarmac. After a while, the constant cornering becomes almost automatic, and you just turn in, power out without really thinking about it. That said, despite the horror stories, Portuguese drivers are fine. In three intensive days of riding, we hardly see any bad behaviour. Some tailgating on the motorway, but nothing worse than you'll see on the M25 every day of the week. Local drivers seem quite bike aware, and give us room to pull in when we overtake. Our guide reckons it's all



changed since the drink/drive laws were seriously tightened up, adding that the police are friendly, but won't hesitate to impose roadside fines if they catch you. They can even impound your bike, so beware.

Not that there are many bikes in northern Portugal. In every village, you'll find fleets of little two-strokes: modern twist & go scooters for the teenagers, elderly Sachs or Zundapp motorcycles for the middle-aged, often with a canvas apron to keep the weather off. But big bikes are few, and in Portugal two wheels are still at the transport, not the hobby, stage. Instead, young bloods go for quad bikes, either expansion-chambered two-strokes or meaty big bangers of 600cc or more. At weekends you'll see them heading off for some of the country's miles of gravel and sandy tracks, of which there are many – not signposted, but all legal to ride on, apparently.

We'd had mountains, rivers, snow and eucalyptus plantations, and those endless bends, so it is a surprise to find an absolutely straight road along the coast, at the end of our last day. At first, just sand dunes lie between us and the sea, but further south, they give way to rocky cliffs. We stop at a lighthouse, and I'm instantly reminded of Cornwall, as Atlantic waves batter the cliffs in a hail of spray. Somehow, I'd imagined Portugal to be an arid place, but here there's nothing between us and Newfoundland but a few thousand miles of salt water.

We'd covered a lot of ground in three days, ending at the seaside resort of Nazare, where my hotel room window looks out over the bay and the setting sun. It hadn't been easy cruising, but we'd ridden some magnificent roads through country that I never knew existed. There's more to Portugal than boring golf courses on the Algarve. ■



Julian Cade offers his customers a choice of four bikes: the little GS, Bulldog and TDM, plus a Dragstar 1100. "The trouble is," he said, "the roads we cover are so varied that no one bike would ever be perfect, so I offer a choice instead."

I was keen for a go on the Bulldog, if only because the poor thing has had such a slating in the press. If this naked V-twin has a problem, it's that the butch name and looks lead people to expect more than it can deliver. This is not a Buell, or a Speed Triple: it's a soft and friendly bike that happens to look like a 100-horsepower streetfighter. And if the steering proved a little too cumbersome for the tighter Portuguese hairpins, the Bulldog is otherwise supremely easy to ride. The seat is low, the controls (steering apart) light and positive; the mild 1,100cc V-twin will trickle away from 2,000rpm in top gear, so twiddling up and down the ratios is purely optional. It's even got shaft drive – heavy, but clean, fuss-free and convenient. Out on the motorway, the bike was stable, smooth and comfy.

Having said all that, I have fonder memories of the little BMW in Portugal. It's my sort of bike, light and slim and easy to throw around. Twitch the wide bars as you approach a corner, and it tips in obediently. Then power out using the single's surprising surge of torque, keeping in the 3,000-5,000rpm band to feel its strong mid-range. The red line's at 7,500, but to be honest it's better to change up, as the single gets vibey and fussy at high revs. It had no trouble keeping up with the other bikes on Portuguese motorways, at 80-90mph, but it was working harder. And it is physically small (my own Transalp feels big by comparison) so it won't suit everyone. If we'd been two-up, or carrying a lot more luggage, the bigger bikes might have made more sense, but I much preferred riding the GS through the twisties.

There's one more thing – it's got the range of a big tourer, thanks to astonishingly low fuel consumption. Fuelling up after our first 200km, it took just 6.4 litres – in old money, that's 85mpg, and a range of over 300 miles.

SPECIFICATIONS

BMW F650GS
Price £5,160
Engine Liquid-cooled DOHC single
Capacity 652cc
Power 50bhp @ 6,500rpm
Torque 44lb ft @ 4,800rpm
Transmission Five-speed/O-ring chain
Weight 175kg
Fuel capacity 17 litres

Yamah Bulldog
Price £6,549
Engine Air-cooled SOHC V-twin
Capacity 1,063cc
Power 65bhp @ 5,500rpm
Torque 65lb ft @ 4,500rpm
Transmission Five-speed/shaft drive
Weight 230kg
Fuel capacity 20 litres
Range 240 miles

