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Tours

Curves, Culture, Cuisine



Either the flight to Portugal took more out of me than I thought or my normally nutty dream pattern has been kicked up a notch. Somewhere within the jet-lagged haze of a nap, a distant cuckoo clock chimed fifteen, paused, and began another rhythmic announcement of an hour well past twelve. Rising to locate and silence the malfunctioning clock, following the birdcall into the bathroom, I looked out over the garden of the Casa d' Obidos manor. There's no clock in sight. It's a real cuckoo!

Text and Photography: Chris Myers





Ⓐ *Smooth, winding roads are everywhere in Portugal. Best of all, there's very little traffic.*



Ⓑ *Riding through the vineyards above Pinhao leaves little room for error.*

It flies off. I pad back to bed. A cooling breeze circulates an unnatural silence through my lovely room, punching my return ticket to dreamland. When meeting me after the long flight, my host and Motocadia tour operator, Julian Cade, suggested that I unwind, sleep, and freshen up a bit before we went for a little orientation ride. Advice gladly taken, I woke, had a soak in the giant claw-foot tub, donned some fresh duds, and despite the rather unc customary avian interruptions, I was ready to motor when Mr. Cade came a knocking.

As we're getting ready to ride, Julian promises that his standard seven-

day tour will show me the best of northern Portugal. Most visitors gravitate to the southern Algarve region's warm beaches and robust nightlife, which is great for some, but a northern itinerary, loaded with little-used curvy roads and hearty dinners holds more attractions for avid motorcyclists like me. Julian assures me that all of that and more will be delivered in spade:

We agree on a light lunch and mount up for the short ride to Obidos. I'm riding out the drive on a Yamaha TDM900 pursuing Julian on his Yamaha Bulldog. Neither machine is available in the US, so that in itself is a treat; and

the mere sight of Obidos sends the amazement factor to 11. An ancient walled city, straight out of a storybook, Obidos was given to Isabella of Aragon as a wedding present by King Dinis in 1282. This presentation of the town continued to be a traditional wedding gift to all Portuguese queens until 1834. We find a café on the narrow, cobbled streets and dive into a delicious, fresh baked roll stuffed with Portuguese chorize (spicy sausage). Julian suggests continuing to ride for a bit, as I'll have a free day later in the week to return for leisurely, in-depth explorations.

We head north along the coast at a relaxing pace, perfect for shaking out the flight cramps. Obviously very knowledgeable about the area, Julian wowed me several times on this short jaunt with spectacular views of rugged shoreline and sandy beaches.

Arriving back at the Casa d' Obidos, my guide says he knows a great place for dinner that fits my request that no American food is placed before me all week. Julian then asks if I'd like to go up in an ultra-light aircraft. I politely refuse. Climbing aboard *light* aircraft is unnerving enough, and any *ultra*-light trip without a ripcord handy sounds ultra-iffy to me. But I'm interested enough to meet the pilot. Ken McKay is the proprietor of Insideout, an outdoor adventure firm, and his easygoing, somewhat eccentric nature immediately wins my confidence. And like that, he has me in the copilot seat for a half-hour of bird's-eye Portugal that I'll never forget. Old hat for that cuckoo and McKay, I guess, but not for me. Julian has recently added these ultra-light flights as part of the Motocadia experience and it's an option that shouldn't be missed.

An appetite is the least of my day-to-day worries and I'm blown away by my first taste of Portuguese cuisine. A house favorite at O Caldeirao is a tender and delicious smoky pork served skewered and hanging from a hook above a plate of perfectly seasoned rice and beans residing next to a large and equally tasty helping of greens. The bottle, or two, of red wine that Julian orders has a light-bodied fruitiness that goes maybe a little too well with our hearty meal. Best of all, the prices are exceptionally reasonable.

Let's Get It Started

I rise early and pare choices down to three days' worth of clothes I can shove into the Oxford soft luggage supplied by Motocadia. I'm told I'll be reunited with my big bag in the coastal city of Nazare. For the next few days, we're on our own. I hurry downstairs to grab a quick bite of breakfast and find the dining room spread with fresh baked breads, fruits, cheeses, jams, and coffee so good and rich I've rarely quaffed its equal just prior to hitting the road. The Portuguese know how to send you out the door happy.

Out in the drive, I meet our riding companion for the day. Marcos Leal, on a Harley Street Rod test bike, is a fellow moto-journalist with Portugal's *Motociclismo* magazine and a guide for Motocadia. He's also an instructor

U Unusual rock formations are not the least bit unusual in Portugal.



Tours

📍 *The lighthouse near Sao Pedro de Moel tells ships and riders alike that Nazare is close at hand.*



📍 *Time for lunch near a granite gateway in Sortelha, a twelfth-century stronghold.*

at Portugal's Estoril road race circuit. Not to worry, though, Marcos shares Julian's philosophy: The clients dictate the pace.

Our day begins with a brisk ride up the near-empty Portuguese equivalent of our interstate system. About an hour later, we hop off at Pombal and head east, straight into Fun. The IC8, a fast section of sweeping pavement, is the perfect appetizer for a daylong serving of asphalt gluttony. We swing north on N236 and delight in the road's twists as it winds its way into the Serra da Lousa (Lousa Mountains).

A quick coffee stop in Castanheira de Pera is instructive. The Portuguese prefer espresso but they happily oblige

me with a *café Americano*: half espresso, half hot milk, and completely delicious. Back on the road, it's the curves that really start to percolate. The flawless tarmac slithers into the mountains with the ease and grace of a serpent on the hunt. These roads were built at one with the land, not despite it; and though straights are few, the curves never become so demanding the fascinating scenery can't be admired.

We ride through mountainside villages that were likely here pretty much as they are since well before there was a United States or even Amerigo Vespucci for that matter. A multitude of ancient stone structures – barns, houses and entire villages – dot the fields and hillsides with postcard images. We arrive in the

charming town of Lousa as hunger calls and stop to enjoy a popular Portuguese lunch of toasted ham and cheese sandwiches at a small café.

Following lunch, a leisurely ride through the countryside lands us on N230, the kind of road any committed motorcyclist appreciates. We choose to make the ascent (nearly 3,000 feet) at a rather brisk pace, easy to do considering the mint condition of the surface, as close to perfection as a stretch of road can be for any bike. At the top of the mountain, Marcos heads home and Julian and I shoot north on N231 toward Seia. Again, the road and mountain scenery are unbelievable. In Seia, we begin our charge to the Torre, the top of Portugal. Our climb,

to nearly 6,000 feet, winds us into the clouds. The visibility, near zero at times, improves dramatically as we punch our way out into the clearest day imaginable. At the top, looking west over the cloud cover we just rode through, it feels like we've conquered Everest without the oxygen masks.

With the day waning, we begin our descent through what seems an extra-terrestrial landscape dominated by gargantuan rock formations and eerie precipices. The view is simply stunning as we travel down into the Vale glacario

do Zezere. This glacial valley's steep walls nearly block out what little sun we have left, and the narrow, curvy road offers beauty wherever the eye wanders. In the town of Manteigas, we twist through impossibly narrow streets to our home for the evening, the Casa das Obras, an eighteenth-century manor house still occupied by descendants of the original owners. The family's heirloom furnishings grace the common rooms and exploration is encouraged. Julian and I eagerly hoof it down into town and enjoy a small feast at the Serra d'Alto restaurant where searing

hot slabs of granite are brought to the tables for patrons to cook thinly sliced, perfectly seasoned steaks to their liking. That and the local wine, cheese, and sausages made for one incredible meal. Yeah, I'm ready for bed.

Can It Get Any Better?

After a wonderful continental breakfast in the grand dining room, we ride out of Manteigas into another beautiful day. Olive trees appear in abundance as we near Belmonte. Ruins of the castle of Belmonte overlooking the town are open to visitors. The site is said to be the birthplace of Pedro Alvares Cabral, the Portuguese navigator who discovered Brazil in the early 1500s.

We wander south from Belmonte and head toward the Spanish border. At Penamacor, Julian offers his groups the option of visiting Monsanto. It's a little off the beaten path but well worth the ride. This unusual village sits atop a large, steep mound seemingly composed of huge boulders. The streets, homes and businesses are built among these natural barriers, and a walk through the narrow alleys offers stunning views of the plain below and glimpses of a lifestyle that's quite unique. If you find



0 A traditional fishing boat on the beach in Nazare.



2 Perfect roads wind across the plains near Belmonte.

yourself in this part of the world, don't miss Monsanto. The same can also be said for the nearby thirteenth-century city of Sortelha. A colossal wall built of granite surrounds the village, and it's hard to imagine the amount of manpower it must have taken to construct it. Amazing. Anywhere else, a place like this would be swarming, a tourist trap; but here, we relaxed over lunch in the courtyard and enjoyed a crowd-free slice of everyday life.

Leaving Sortelha, we make our way to Viseu and head north on the IP3. Now, normally, neither Julian nor I would recommend four-lane highways, but this stretch is different. The European Union has invested a lot of money in the infrastructure of Portugal. The road system has been drastically improved,

and this brand-new four-lane offers perfect evidence. There is almost no traffic as the wide sweepers wind to nearly 3,000 feet and then plunge us into the fabled Douro Valley.

In Peso da Regua, we exit and head east along the Douro River toward our evening stop. To one particular set of wine aficionados worldwide, this region is a mecca, as all the grapes that comprise true Port Wine are grown here. The steep, rugged valley has been worked into terraces planted with the legendary vines, prized since the time of the Romans when Portugal was known as Lusitania.

We motor through the small town of Pinhao and begin yet another steep ascent on a road arguably best suited

for mountain goats. Once at the top we are warmly welcomed at the Casa de Casal Loivos by Senor Sampayo and his staff. This restored manor house has been in the Sampayo family since 1658, and its guest rooms lead onto a terrace revealing, as a BBC travel program described it, "one of the six best views in the world." A nice bottle of wine anyone?

A New Call of Port

Over breakfast in yet another grand dining room, Julian shows the map for today's destination. The city of Porto doesn't look that far away, but the sheer number of curves and small villages promises a challenge if we're to arrive in time to sample vintages at one of the city's many Port houses. Unfortunately, rain is delaying our

❶ Gustave Eiffel's Maria Pia Bridge (1877) in Porto remains resplendent despite ongoing renovations.



departure. But just as things are starting to look like we'll have to resort to the highway, the sun appears and we're off on our original route down N222 and N108, running the length of the Douro River to the Atlantic. The road is in great shape, traffic minimal, and the scenery is spectacular. Almost everywhere you turn, there's another gorgeous composition worthy of an artist's labors at the easel: innumerable arrangements featuring the vivid colors of the river and villages ringed with vineyards and cherry orchards.

Nearing Porto, N108 plunges us into city traffic. It feels strange to be among other vehicles. We leave the bikes and our gear at the 150-year-old, but thoroughly modern Hotel Boa Vista, overlooking the Atlantic, and hop a bus into town for the Graham Port House. Tours in the ancient building are given while the work of making Port proceeds much the same as it did in the eighteenth century. A walk through, learning about the production process and the international connections it spawned, offers a fascinating glimpse into the history of the Douro Valley region. I was told that the Methuen Treaty, governing the trade of Port Wine between England and Portugal, is the oldest standing treaty in the world.

Your love of riding and a taste for Port or wine in general are reasons enough to call Motocadia. Most Portuguese vintners eschew standard wine-making grapes in favor of indigenous varieties and much of their output is only available in Portugal. Some of the wines can only be found and enjoyed in a particular region, truly a treat.

From the Ocean to the Ocean

After another great breakfast, we head south. At Vale de Cambra, the N227 shoots us west on an incredible, curvy piece of road that winds through more villages and farmland. Goats, cows, and donkeys far outnumber vehicles and the rhythms of country life

range around every corner. The modern road twists and winds its way across ancient bridges, past farms, vineyards, and orchards that have remained unchanged for generations. This really is the Old Country.

We stop for lunch at a cake shop in Tondela where any doubt that the typical Portuguese has a sweet tooth is soon eradicated. The choice of cookies, cakes, pastries, and fresh breads is amazing. Recently baked, meaty lunch rolls are on display and swiftly transferred to our plates. A sugary custard-filled doughnut tops things off to satisfy a certain American sweet tooth. It's simple, slice-of-life discoveries like this that make knowledgeable guides like Julian worth every penny.

The ride swings east and eventually brings us back to the coast. A stop for a quick soda at a small oceanfront pub seats us beside a wide, sandy beach kissed by ice-blue waves with nary a soul to be seen. We ride briefly south to the lighthouse near Sao Pedro de Moel and stop again to watch giant waves crashing against the steep, rugged cliffs. Fusillades of foam and spray shoot skyward in a magnificent, humbling display of the Atlantic's explosive power. Those tourists drawn exclusively to the crowded sands of the Algarve don't know what they're missing.

We arrive in Nazare for the only two-night stay on the tour. Delightfully scenic, this traditional fishing town provides the perfect backdrop for winding down. We've ridden over 1,000 miles, and having a day to chill out and let the journey soak in sounds like a winner to me. Of course, clients are free to ride to other points of interest that abound nearby, or if preferred, they can explore this appealing town and its wide sandy beach.

Obidos is not far away, and a more comprehensive look at this walled city is on my next day's schedule. It's an

easy ride to get there and back for some quality time as a wide-eyed tourist in the city and a slit-eyed slug reclining by the pool. A satisfying dinner of monkfish stew at a small, backstreet café winds down a perfectly relaxing day. And to really cap it off, I grab a small bottle of local wine on the way home, back up the hill to my comfortable room at the four-star Hotel Miramar.

To the City and Beyond

As my stay in Portugal draws to a close, Julian gives me a ride to my hotel in Lisbon in time to have the better part of the day to explore this beautiful capital. Normally, Julian would return then, leaving Lisbon for the clients to see at their leisure, but an uncharacteristic bit of free time allows him to show me around. The city is situated on seven hills and much of the area can be walked. Tour buses and a quality public transportation system also make the city easy to navigate. Julian says one of his clients described Lisbon as "shabby chic." The buildings do show their age but there's an undeniable, modern sensibility floating in the air. Smartly dressed business people stroll beneath laundry hanging from windows, new and old in comfortable coexistence. And like the rest of Portugal, Lisbon is so welcoming and open to extensive explorations.

The past six days have shown me some of the finest riding imaginable, a rich history, and an especially proud, friendly people who seem genuinely pleased I'd chosen to visit them. The food and wine are exceptional – honestly, some of the finest meals I've ever had – and the land is fun, different, and chock-full of great roads. Thankfully, Julian Cade has simplified the process by opening an avenue into this wonderful destination for the two-wheeled crowd. I'm already planning my return to share all the beauty and exhilaration with my wife.

Obrigado Motocadia, obrigado Portugal.

Northern Portugal

FACTS AND INFORMATION



In General

The influence of Portugal, once perhaps the richest and most powerful of nations, extends all over the globe, from Macau to the far reaches of the Amazon. And while it's no longer the colonial power of yore, there's still an aura of empire on Portuguese soil. Manor houses, castles and gilded cathedrals in all states of ruin and repair dot the landscape and cities, hinting at the incredible riches legendary navigators brought back to her shores. Today, despite falling behind its European neighbors under the dictatorship of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, Portugal is beginning to benefit from a return to democracy and its membership in the European Union. Thanks to the EU, much needed cash has been invested in the nation's infrastructure – which most importantly, my biker brethren, means newly resurfaced mountain roads.

As I write this, these great roads are quite barren of traffic. Roughly somewhere between Maine and Indiana in size, Portugal also has a small population that's sparsely distributed. Just over 10 million folks call Portugal home, and most of them live in or near the cities.

Safety was never a concern. The crime rate in Portugal is very low, and despite being in a foreign land, I never felt the least bit uncomfortable. Even the ladies should feel perfectly secure in Portugal. In fact, Julian is toying with the idea of offering a "ladies only" Motocadia tour. If that sounds good to you, send him some feedback.

How to Get There

I traveled from Raleigh, NC, to Lisbon via Newark and flew on Continental the whole way. There are also many options available through Air Portugal. Check

with one of the many online booking agents to see which arrival and departure times best suit your itinerary.

Food & Lodging

These are areas where an investment in a good guide pays a healthy return. Every place we stayed was clean, comfortable, and drenched in local ambience. Continental breakfasts were available every morning and never failed to impress.

Portuguese cuisine is basic, hearty, and delicious. Every area has its own local delicacies ranging from cheeses, wines, and sausages to pastries and aperitifs. Vegans beware: The Portuguese are champion meat eaters. Julian can work with a vegetarian client but he admits it can be a challenge.

Roads & Biking

On the whole, the roads and their condition are excellent. There were only a couple of small areas where the roads were in poor shape and big signs with the EU flag indicated they wouldn't remain that way for long. The rides ranged from easy to moderately challenging and very light traffic allows for any pace the group feels comfortable riding.

Riding in the cities, of course, requires proper attention as the only aspect of Portuguese life that seems hurried is city driving. I'm glad I didn't have to ride in Lisbon. Drivers here can make the ride interesting, so be on your toes in populated areas.

Sightseeing & Shopping

Portugal's rich culture and heritage dates back centuries. A weeklong tour barely scratches the surface. Despite this, there are a few must-see places. The storybook cities of Obidos, Sortelha, and Monsanto should definitely be taken in. The trip up to and down from the Torre

Motocadia Motorcycle Tours

is well worth the ride for the wild landscape and bragging rights for having been to the top of Portugal. And whatever you do, don't bypass a trip through the Douro Valley.

A confirmed shopaphobe, I can only report in a cursory manner. The "old city" section of Lisbon seemed to offer numerous curio shops and plenty of upscale boutiques. I did purchase a watercolor for my wife from a street artist there. A gift of distinctive wine is a no-brainer in Porto, and the seaside shops in touristy Nazare display many interesting arts and crafts.

Books & Maps

Frommer's *Portugal* gives a real nice overview of the country and what to expect. If you're not going to hire a guide, a book like this is your next best friend. I also picked up a free *Europe Travel Book* from my local AAA office that offers a decent, but short section on Portugal. Motocadia also provided me with an excellent, detailed Michelin map that includes explanations of the road signs and traffic laws.

- o Frommer's *Portugal*
ISBN 0-76454-282-6, \$19.99
- o AAA *Europe Travel Book*
ISBN 1-56251-409-1
\$16.95, free to members
- o Michelin *Portugal-Madeira*
Travel Map, ISBN 2-06-711281-3

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Two years ago, Julian Cade and his wife Alicia had had enough. Deciding to escape the hurly-burly of England's crowds and the stress of corporate life, they scooped up their young daughter Francesca and moved to Portugal. Many wondered, why Portugal? For the Cades, that was the easy part. Having vacationed there numerous times, they were smitten long ago by the country's natural beauty and the friendliness and hospitality of its people. Settling the issue of how to make a living in their new home, the Cades combined their experiences and business acumen to found Motocadia.

An ardent motorcyclist, Julian has long felt that the roads in Portugal are custom-made for two-wheeled travel, yet woefully ignored. The belief that Portugal has poor road conditions is quickly being put to rest thanks to large infusions of European Union cash for infrastructure improvements. What once may have been considered mere cow trails are now smooth sweeps of pristine, twisty tarmac weaving through a strikingly beautiful landscape. With all of the elements in place for great motorcycle holidays, Julian seized the moment. Presently the only motorcycle tour operator based in Portugal, Motocadia offers weeklong trips that highlight the "best of Northern Portugal." No arguments here, the ride and the accommodations were spectacular.

Preferring to work with small groups, Julian feels that much of the spirit of the tour is lost when having to corral double-digit numbers of bikes and personalities. This approach dovetails perfectly with the freedom allowed the group. Meals are generally up to the client. Whether to strap on the feedbag or just nibble (marvelous cheese) and sip (a glass of primo Port), the option is yours. Motocadia is also happy to customize tours. The possibilities are nearly endless and Julian is perfectly amenable to discussing any option or concern a client may have.

The company offers a nice choice of bikes for the twisty Portuguese roads. Their small, but growing fleet includes Yamaha's Bulldog, TDM900, and Dragstar 1100, BMW's F650GS, and three recently added Triumph 955 Sprint RS models, with more Triumph models coming soon. All of their bikes are professionally maintained to ensure reliability.

If you're looking for a truly unique moto-vacation in a relaxed, safe, and beautiful place, think Portugal and check out Motocadia at www.motocadia.com, or give them a ring across the pond at 001-351-262-950006.