

# Time Off



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## REV UP FOR PORTUGAL

... and we don't mean for the football. **Mike Higgins** kicks off our country special on a motorcycle tour in the shadow of the Estrela mountains

**W**e were winding our way down the Zezere valley, the longest glacial valley in Europe, when we hit the traffic jam. Above us lay the long shadows of the Estrela mountains in the evening sun and below us the verdant hills around our destination that day, the hill town of Manteigas – all we had to do was get past the snarl-up. Fortunately, it didn't take long for the two goatherds to ease their few dozen goats out of our way and to wave us through.

In doing so, we were being ushered, it seemed, from one world to another, from the Highlands of Scotland to the foothills of the Pyrenees in just a few moments. Northern Portugal is a sampler of European landscapes. Within a few hundred square kilometres,

it stitches together undulating, high moorland, lush, deep valleys, rolling plains of vineyards and medieval towns, long, sandy beaches and sea cliffs, which stand square and tall against the Atlantic.

The fans arriving in Portugal for the forthcoming European championships wouldn't have to look long to find a scene that would make them feel at home. And they couldn't choose a better way of experiencing this diversity than climbing aboard a motorcycle and hitting the empty Portuguese highways.

Over the course of a week's escorted tour with Julian Cade of the bike-touring company Motocadia, you'll ride about 1,000 miles, taking in Lisbon, the Serra da Estrela mountains, the Douro Valley, Porto and

many points between. But even in a single day, it is extraordinary where a motorcycle will take you. The 12th-century castle of the Knights Templar and accompanying Convento de Cristo lies on the outskirts of Tomar. It's a World Heritage Site now, but eight centuries ago it was conceived as a strategic post in the campaign to drive the Moors from Iberia.

This combination of the religious and the military imbues the architecture at every point, not least in the fortress-like Charola (an extraordinary Romanesque rotunda) and the charming statuary of the Knights themselves on the walls of the Chapterhouse. From there, an easy couple of hours' ride north will get you into the Estrela mountains and up to 2,000m (don't expect a range like the

Alps, by the way – the Serra da Estrela is less jagged, more like dramatically undulating moorland). Here, you can stop to explore the walks that cross the range or find the obscure N230: 75km of the most thrilling riding road to the town of Covilha, on which eucalyptus forests give way to rich purple and yellow gorse.

The N230 was just the sort of road that the Gill family from Telford had come to Motocadia for. David and Karen Gill are keen bikers, and have managed to recruit their 16-year-old son Gareth to the cause – he couldn't ride because he was too young, yet he was happy to travel pillion for the week. But you needn't be a serious biker to keep up.

I'm a scooter rider in the UK and only recently obtained my licence to

ride any road bike. But on day one of my motorcycle tour I happily clocked up 250 miles on a BMW F650GS, by far the most powerful motorcycle I had ever ridden.

Wherever you ride away from the cities in northern Portugal, you'll witness a rusticity rare in western Europe. No matter how remote the road, for instance, you're likely to pass a little old lady, dressed in black, walking purposefully with a bag of onions, miles from the nearest village.

What's more, the other bikers you'll meet will tend to be elderly farmers on rickety mopeds or tricycles, ferrying themselves to and from their fields. It comes as no surprise to learn from the friendly and enthusiastic

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JULIAN CADE

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