

ESCAPE PORTUGAL

# To a warmer Land's End

**Neil Hallam** discovers the parallels between the Cornish countryside and the south-western tip of Portugal — most prominently, they're both great cycling destinations

Words and photos: Neil Hallam Photos: Roo Fowler, Andy Jones

**T**he south-western tip of Portugal has its own Land's End with a vibrant surf scene, prehistoric sites and quaint fishing villages. Most importantly to the cyclist, it has miles of trails and quiet roads.

I spent a week exploring this beautiful area with Jonathan Neil and his Spanish wife Violeta. We took along two road cyclists, Irishman Brian and Stephen from the Lake District. Neither had off-road experience, but both plan to return for more of the Algarve's varied cycling.

Our bikes came from Lisabikes near Faro airport, which has a good range of road and mountain bikes. We chose new looking Specialized bikes to explore trails as well as tarmac, and at €50 for six days, hire seemed reasonable.

A 20 per cent sign heralded our first big road climb, before a long descent to the fishing village of Salema. The buildings were typically Mediterranean, rather than Cornish stone, but I could not help comparing it with Lynmouth. The steep climb out of the village also seemed

reminiscent of the road to Lynton.

The N125 marks the national park boundary. Despite being the main coastal road it was quiet and nothing like Cornwall's A30. The Cornish parallels disappeared as we left the national park, with coastal villages giving way to forest and farm. We climbed steadily on tarmac through picture-postcard villages towards the Serra De Monchique hills. Our day was spent in the foothills, but the main range is within reach of a fit cyclist. At Barao De Sao Joao we

**40 miles**

**"A 20 per cent sign heralded our first big road climb, before a long descent into the fishing village of Salema"**



The Serra De Monchique hills rolling to the horizon



No shortage of lemon for a post-ride G&T



Mediterranean munch stop

made our first of many cafe stops in a typical Mediterranean cafe bar, with pavement tables facing the village church. Refreshed, we left the road, climbing on crushed stone tracks through plantations of eucalyptus and stone pine.

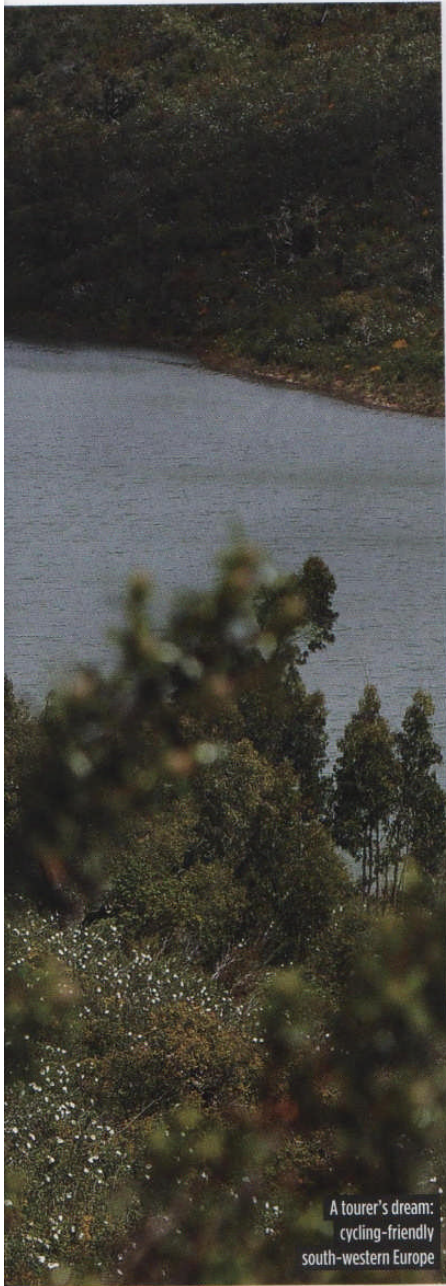
**Trail blazing**

There is a seemingly inexhaustible network of these trails serving agriculture and wind farms. Each junction has a waymark, either pointing to a village or showing the coloured bands of a walking route. Today we rode part of the GR13, or the Via Algarviana path from Spain.

The many wind farms provided a surprising benefit as landmarks, while their well-surfaced access tracks made for easy riding.

Turning west towards the coastal Serra Do Espinhaco range we left the well-surfaced plantation tracks. There were more ups and downs as we crossed a succession of valleys. All were rideable and this was definitely trail cycling, not mountain biking.

Descending one winding track through overhanging vegetation, South African Jonathan imagined tigers stalking us. Despite the jungle appearance of this section, any tiger would be very lost indeed. Re-crossing the N125 into the national park the West Country comparisons returned with a selection of ancient monoliths. These standing stones are less spectacular than Stonehenge, but give



A tourer's dream:  
cycling-friendly  
south-western Europe

clues to the history of human occupation of the area.

### From Portugal's Lands End

Our next ride began at Cabo de Saint Vicente, Portugal's Lands End. A penny-farthing sculpture marks the start of the Eco Via, a waymarked route similar to our Sustrans network. At first I was impressed with its signposting; main junctions had information boards about the town and a route map, minor junctions had posts with the cycle logo. At 100-metre intervals the logo was painted on the road surface.

At Vila Do Bispo (Bishop's Town) signage became less clear, needing some logical deduction to follow the route as it turned across farmland. I was promised a more remote ride along the west coast. Apart from a shepherd and two other cyclists, we saw no one for hours as we rode through numerous abandoned farms. In an English national park, with restrictions on building, these would have been snapped up for restoration. We ate lunch on a cliff top watching wild Atlantic waves crash against rocks below. Such a viewpoint 10 minutes' drive from Newquay would not have been ours to enjoy alone.

For our last ride we were joined by Stephen, a dad on an Aquaventura family holiday. A Lake District roadie, Stephen was nervous of our planned trail riding. It is fair to say that Cumbrian off-roading is more extreme than we were to face.

We rode north on tarmac before cutting across the central plateau on plantation trails. We had not been off road long before Stephen said, "If this is mountain biking, then I completely get it."

Deeper into the hills we entered a series of valleys, with tracks in all directions. The distant ocean gave an idea of direction, if not location. So we picked a trail and made for the sea. After an exhilarating descent we hit the coast road and found ourselves at a village.

To enter the wilds of Dartmoor, or any British wild county, so ill prepared would be madness. We had no compass and only a road

**"We ate lunch on a cliff top watching wild Atlantic waves crash against rocks below — a view that was ours to enjoy alone"**



## STOP!

### GETTING THERE

#### Flights

Faro is the closest airport at 70 miles on good roads, and is well serviced by budget airlines from UK regional airports.

### ACCOMMODATION

Jonathan and Violeta's guests currently stay in a modern house at Ingrina, within the Parque Natural do Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina.

They will soon be transferring their accommodation to an organic cork oak farm near Pedralva [www.aqua-ventura.com](http://www.aqua-ventura.com)

### BIKE SHOPS

Lisabikes - close to Faro Airport  
[www.lisabikes.com](http://www.lisabikes.com)

map, yet with the application of logic we safely navigated a wilderness area. This was only possible because of predictable weather and a good network of trails, yet Jonathan is planning to GPS log a selection of routes from his farm.

The dirt roads provided very pleasant trail riding once given time to dry. If you are unlucky enough to arrive in a rare wet period, the quiet tarmac roads are the better option.

English is widely spoken in tourist related businesses, although not so widely in the general population. But this is a European country, where the necessities of life are understandable.

### Off the bike

It would be easy to compare Sagres with Newquay, but it is an unfair comparison. There are surf schools and T-shirt shops, but Sagres seemed a nicer town.

Jonathan offers a range of walking trips, both coastal and more remote. On one of the few rainy days we walked a winding rocky path linking the many beaches. And as twice Spanish sea kayak champion, Jonathan is an ideal kayak guide. He took us on a paddle up the Seixe River to Odeceixe for coffee and the biggest range of cakes I had ever seen — among favourites was sweet potato cake.

Bird watchers flock to the Algarve as it is a stopping point for African-bound migration. Egrets were pointed out to me and I could not fail to recognise the huge birds circling overhead as vultures.

**End**