



# SURPRISING PORTUGAL

JOHN PEARSON JOINS  
PORTUGUESE ENTHUSIAST  
JOSÉ ALMEIDA FOR AN  
ADVENTURE THROUGH HIS  
HOMELAND'S RICH VARIETY  
OF TRACKS AND TRAILS

**T**o many people, a holiday in Portugal means a visit to the Algarve's golden beaches, or maybe a weekend break in the capital, Lisbon. But away from the coast it has so much more to offer – especially if you travel there in a Land Rover.

Unlike some other European countries, Portugal welcomes vehicles on to its off-tarmac tracks, which means you get fabulous access to its wonderful countryside. Our journey took us from breathtaking mountain routes in the north-east to the spectacular lowlands of the Alentejo region.

The idea for a Portugal adventure came when Land Rover enthusiast José Almeida got in touch to ask why we'd done little coverage of his country in recent years. 'Put us in touch with someone who'll guide us to the best places, José, and we'll be there,' was my answer. His response was quick: 'I'll do it!'

So, fast-forward a year or so and there we were crossing from Spain into Portugal over the Douro river dam, ready to meet José and his friend, Pedro Quintella, at the ancient city of Miranda do Douro.

We parked the 110 alongside José's black Td5 90 in the main square, walking down cobbled streets that date back to Roman times, for lunch and a final briefing at the bustling restaurant, O Mirandês.

Both José and Pedro are mad keen on Land Rovers. José, who works for BP's LPG division, owns five of them – a 1970 Series IIA, a 1966 Series IIA fire tender project, a 1967 ex-Portuguese Navy SIIA

station wagon, a 1995 Range Rover Classic and the Defender. In addition, he has more than 400 models and a houseful of parts, catalogues and brochures.

Pedro and his wife have three Range Rover Classics at home, while he switches between a Defender 110 double cab and a Freelander 2 for his day job as sales manager for one of Lisbon's Land Rover dealerships.

## DAY 1: MIRANDA DO DOURO TO FREIXO DE ESPADA À CINTA

Our plan for this adventure was not only to get in plenty of driving, but also to see some of Portugal's history, culture and tourist attractions. So, before we headed off to the first mountain track, José suggested a boat trip along the river from Miranda through the rugged Douro International Natural Park. This proved worthwhile, with the sighting of some golden eagles.

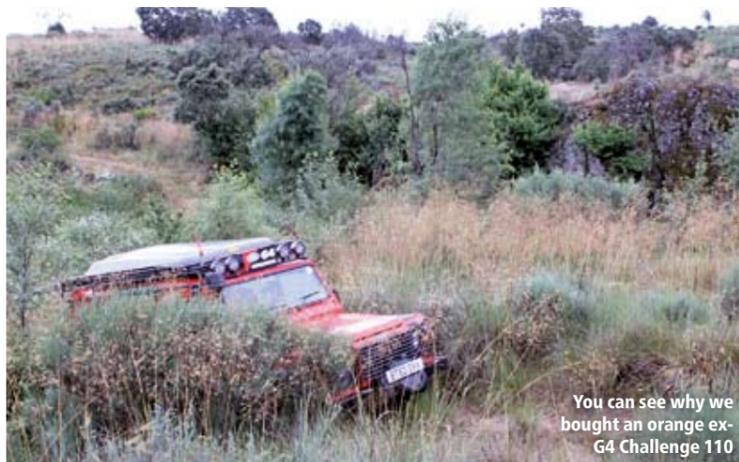
Then we're on our way, heading south into the hills and picking up a maze of tracks alongside the Douro, which forms a natural border with Spain.

In one area the vegetation is so lush and tall we can barely see the other vehicle ahead of us.

There's an amazing bright pink sunset as we drive the last track before motoring into the narrow streets of the old town of Freixo de Espada à Cinta. We're staying in the lovely 15th century Casa do Conselheiro B&B, which at €40 (about £35) for a room is a bargain. And the landlady lets me park in her yard behind an ancient set of wrought iron gates.

It's late, but a local bar serves up welcoming beer, soup and





You can see why we bought an orange ex-G4 Challenge 110



It would have been rude not to sample the Ramos Pinto wine



This valley around the Ramos Pinto vineyard was almost flooded for a reservoir



Private Land Rover parking at the B&B

Series III Stage 11 V8 fire tender. Captain João Teixeira proudly shows us around the Carmichael-built machine, which is still in regular use by the brigade. After Almeida we pick up more tracks en route to Guarda on the slopes of the Serra da Estrela mountain range – the highest city in Portugal, at 1056 metres. But before we get there we detour to José's home village of Avelãs de Ambom to see the results of a local charity project. Last year José drove his Range Rover Classic with his cousin, Luis Figueiró, to the Heritage Land Rover show at Gaydon as a sponsored trip, raising €2000 (about £1750) towards the



Ford through the river Cõa is tricky, with rocks strewn around

pork rolls. Then our landlady provides a glass of port as a nightcap – and a hearty breakfast the following morning.

**DAY 2: FREIXO DE ESPADA À CINTA TO GUARDA**

The sun's shining, the sky is blue and we're soon climbing steeply on a loose gravel track with a series of sharp hairpin climbs. We pass through more vineyards, olive groves and rows of almond trees on our way to a spectacular viewpoint high over the Douro river at Penedo Durão. Here some vultures circle high on the thermals, getting an even better view than us of the impressive scenery.

On the next track, José tugs the local baker's Transit van from a mudhole before we continue from Barca de Alva towards Castelo Melhor. The track becomes flanked by countless grapevines as we drop down to and then ford the River Cõa en route to the Ramos Pinto vineyard at Quinta da Ervamoira.

We take an interesting tour around the vineyard's museum, guided by Sónia Teixeira – who drives a Defender 110. The grapes from here are used to make award-winning red and white Douro wines, and for port wine. Some are still trodden in the traditional way.

Sónia tells us that the beautiful Cõa valley the vineyard is located in was due to be dammed and flooded a few years ago. It was reprieved when ancient rock art was found nearby.

Once back on the other side of the river Cõa, we drive towards the top of Marofa mountain near the ancient town of Castelo Rodrigo. From here we drop down some steep, rocky inclines through eucalyptus forests. One long, loose-surfaced descent is scarred by deep washouts. This is the trickiest section so far, and to drop a wheel into one of the washouts could trigger a roll-over. But with expert spotting by José and Pedro we ease the Defenders through safely.

Then we reach the ancient walled town of Almeida, driving in through one of its triple-arched gateways to discover the first of José's 'surprises'. There waiting for us at the Almeida fire station is a

committee, and they treat us to a lovely meal at a nearby restaurant. I'm now committed to taking part in one of their four-day events in early October 2012!

**DAY 3: GUARDA TO SERRA DA ESTRELA**

Today we're heading into Portugal's largest – and highest – protected area, the Parque Natural da Serra da Estrela. We're joined for the day by another of José's friends, André Bela, in his 2005 Td5 Defender 90.

The mountains are criss-crossed with tracks we can drive, the only access restrictions being in extremely dry weather when red signs indicate closure due to fire risk. Even then, José tells me that the main tracks are always still open.

Our route takes in a variety of trails before we drop on to the tarmac road that climbs up through a picturesque glacial valley – Europe's largest – towards the highest point in mainland Portugal, the Torre (tower) on top of the Estrela mountain at an altitude of 2000 metres

(about 6560 feet, which is more than 2000 feet higher than Ben Nevis, the UK's highest mountain). This is rugged, exposed terrain, which is covered by one-metre-deep snow in winter.

But today the skies are clear blue, allowing us to take in the big views in all directions. As we approach the summit I realise that we're about to get another of José's 'surprises'. We're greeted by members of the GIPS (Grupo de Intervenção Protecção e Socorro) first-response rescue team, with their well-kitted-out Defender 110 rescue vehicles.

The GIPS is an elite branch of the GNR (Guarda Nacional Republicana – the national guard). We're welcomed by Captain João Figueiredo, who handles the force's PR, and Captain Vítor Lima, the team leader. Captain Lima is an experienced mountain climber, who scales mighty peaks such as Mont Blanc during his days off.

The team is kept busy with more than 300 call-outs a year – to rescue hikers who get lost or injured on the mountain

slopes, or to winch distressed car drivers out of deep snowdrifts. They have four TDCi-engined 110s and three Td5s.

The team unpack their Defenders to show us the extensive rescue equipment they use to cope with emergencies. Captain Lima explains that winds coming in from the Atlantic can make the mountain range a really inhospitable place in winter. 'There is considerable wind-chill,' he explains. He adds that the type of snow they get is very icy, making it hard to drive or even walk on.

Why does the team use Land Rovers? 'Because there's simply no other option,' says Captain Figueiredo.

The GIPS team's base is one of the former Portuguese air force radar towers on top of the mountain, and we're allowed to take a look inside the dome at the top. After climbing a series of spiral staircases and ladders we enter the dome, which is an acoustically surreal experience. Stand in the middle and talk, and it feels as if your voice is echoing inside your head.



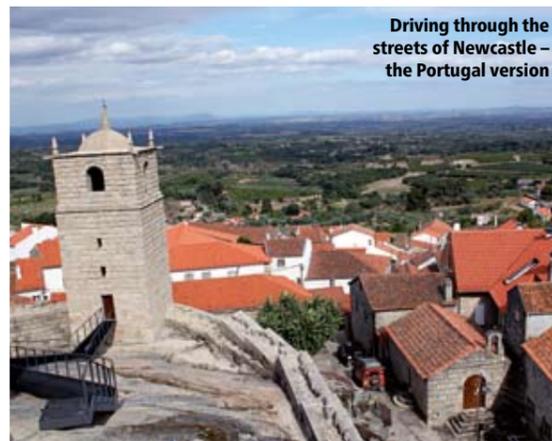
Some of Portugal's mountain tracks match any we've driven in the Pyrenees

**USEFUL LINKS**

Official Tourist Office website: [visitportugal.com](http://visitportugal.com)  
 Clube Escape Livre (escapelivre.com)  
 Clube Land Rover de Portugal (clubelandrover.pt)



Driving through the streets of Newcastle – the Portugal version



After a picnic lunch we head into a series of tracks in the Serra da Estrela that match any that I drove in the Pyrenees last year. In fact, one is as good as I've driven anywhere. It just ticks every box: stunning scenery; spectacular, hairpin-strewn descent; technically demanding driving; and even a jungle-like section of chestnut trees when we get lower down the hillside.

I'd drive it all over again, but we've seen a white fire observation tower far across the other side of the valley with a steep track leading up to it – and that's our next challenge. We pass through Manteigas then pick up the pine-tree-lined track up to the tower, which gives the Defenders a good workout.

We should have been camping in our roof tent at the Parque Vale do Rossim, a lovely site in the mountains. But the owner, Land Rover fan Julio Barbas, tempts us with the chance to stay in one of his six Russian/Mongolian-style yurts. These are yurts with a difference – a plush en-suite bathroom on the back, a wood-burning stove and a large, comfy bed. We didn't need asking twice.

Julio is another Land Rover enthusiast and owns eight of them; he competes in extreme challenges with a Td5 90 and runs his own Land Rover events. He's put a lot of effort into the campsite and it's a lovely place, featuring quality toilets and showers along with a sauna and spa. His restaurant just outside the site overlooks a lake where eagles fish for breakfast.

**DAY FOUR: PARQUE VALE DO ROSSIM TO CASTELO DE VIDE**

The campsite would make a great base for several days, either relaxing or making trips out to drive the mountain tracks. But we're less than halfway through our journey and have to get rolling again the next morning.

Heading back towards the Estrela mountain, we pick up a track around the valley edge, with a sheer drop to the

right. 'Keep left,' says José over the CB radio. I already am...

We drive various tracks, then reach the village of Alcongosta, deep in the cherry-growing region. Today it's celebrating its Festa da Cereja (Cherry Festival).

Further on in the mountains there's a testing, very long, loose-surfaced climb. There are some rough, rock-strewn tracks around here, which demand respect to ensure tyre preservation.



Left to right: José, Pedro, Sofia and John's partner Pat



Meeting the Land Rover-equipped team from GIPS



Testing long, steep, rock-strewn climb demanded precise driving

as soon as she could drive, it had to be in a Range Rover. It's in excellent condition, and boasts two-inch lift courtesy of Old Man Emu springs and dampers.

**DAY FIVE: CASTELO DE VIDE TO MONSARAZ**

The day starts with a visit to Castelo de Vide, with its whitewashed buildings and narrow streets, with colourful flowers growing in every available space.

There are more tracks as we get into the Alentejo, driving through vineyards and olive groves, and there are lots of cork trees with outer layers stripped off.

We stop in Estremoz for a drink, then take a drive around the marble quarries that the area is famous for. Portugal is the second-biggest exporter of white marble behind Italy, and the giant quarries are something to behold.

Our journey takes in roads and tracks, eventually heading over a three-quarter-mile-long bridge across Europe's largest man-made lake – the Grande Lago of Alqueva – towards the fortified hilltop town of Monsaraz. This well-preserved town has a rich history, originally dating back before Roman times, and it's like winding the clock back as you drive through the gates and along the narrow cobbled streets.

Our accommodation is a real treat; we're staying in the Casa Santo Condestável B&B, a former priest's house (Casa Paroquial) near the church. Our room has a lounge, large bedroom and bathroom, with a balcony overlooking the expanse of the Grande Lago. It's

magical, and truly exceptional value at €60 (about £53).

In the evening we all pile into the Range Rover and drive back over the bridge to the town of Mourão, where we savour a traditional Portuguese dinner at the popular Adega Velha restaurant.

**DAY SIX: MONSARAZ TO COMPORTA**

We have to get our vehicles outside the Monsaraz walls before 11am, but take some time to wander the streets, visit the medieval castle and spend a few euros in the gift shops.

Then, almost immediately, we drop steeply down off the road and on to a series of loose-surfaced tracks that head in the direction of the lake, before climbing up the nearby Monte São Gens. There are some tricky sections, but the view from the derelict building at the top is worth the drive.

The Unesco World Heritage Site of Évora is our next destination. We park and start walking up towards the historic walled centre. But before we get there we're distracted by the local Bombeiros, the fire brigade. Sitting proudly in front of the vehicle line-up is the commander's Defender 90, and among their fleet are two Series IIs and a six-cylinder Santana.

Our journey continues through the heart of the Alentejo, where we drive some excellent tracks through farmland and olive groves. We even see paddy fields growing rice.

We're heading in the direction of Comporta on the coast, south of the capital Lisbon, when we turn off the



Alternating colours highlight each day's route on this adventure



**Big views over Europe's largest man-made lake, the Grande Lago of Alqueva**

road and into a farmyard at Monte Novo. I'm totally unprepared for what comes next – the last of José's surprises. There waiting to greet us is a line-up of more than 20 Land Rovers belonging to members of the Clube Land Rover de Portugal. There's everything from Series Is to a Series IIB Forward Control, a rare Camel Trophy Edition Discovery 1 and the latest L322 Range Rover.

These lovely people invite us along for a sand driving session in the dunes at a nearby private estate that the club uses a couple of times a year. So, we drop the 110's pressures to 20psi and tag along.

There's a series of big hills that require spirited attempts to reach the top, and we take a convoy drive around the estate's sandy tracks as the sun drops.

That was a fun last off-road drive of the trip, and the grinning faces all around

us just go to show that Land Rover enthusiasts are the same the world over.

But the surprises are not over yet, because we're invited as guests of honour at a splendid banquet at the nearby Escola (former school) restaurant. Club president Frederico Gomes presents my partner Pat and I with a commemorative plaque, club polo shirts and badges. And club member number one Horácio Dias shows us his prized first editions of LRO.

It's a wonderful end to a superb adventure. We've experienced some great drives, visited interesting places, stayed in excellent accommodation and enjoyed a variety of delicious food. I was certainly surprised at what a wonderfully varied place Portugal is. It's impossible to say which was the high point because it's all been so good. We'll be back. **LRO**

**Below: Cheers, everyone! Glasses raised at the banquet**

**THANKS TO**  
Portugal is a wonderful place to visit in a Land Rover – whether you want to learn about the history and culture, sample the culinary delights or just drive your vehicle through the picturesque countryside. And everyone we met welcomed us. I'd like to thank Pedro and Sofia Quintella who, along with André Bela, were great company. Also thanks to Luis Celinio of Clube Escape Livre and all members of the Clube Land Rover de Portugal for their wonderful hospitality. But, most of all, it's a big thank-you to José Almeida, who inspired this amazing adventure, prepared for it extremely comprehensively and acted as our guide. *Obrigado, José.*



**Club president Frederico Gomes presents JP with mementoes**



**PORTUGAL: NEED TO KNOW**

- Language: Portuguese, but English spoken widely.
- Visa: not necessary for UK passport holders.
- Currency: euro.
- Jabs: make sure your tetanus is up to date.
- Approx cost of fuel: we paid between £1.19 and £1.24 per litre for diesel. Petrol is expensive.
- Time difference: none.
- Recommended reading: The Rough Guide to Portugal (£8.52, amazon.co.uk).
- What's the food like? The Portuguese are proud of their food, and justifiably so. We tried posta mirandesa (beef from rare-breed cattle that are unique to the north-

- east), various traditional soups, the popular bacalhau (cod), spicy sausages and cheeses, grilled sardines and desserts made from eggs and sugar, as well as a variety of meat dishes – including hare stew. We had some tasty rabbit pie at the Land Rover Club banquet.
- Beer and wine: there are two widely sold lagers, Sagres and Super Bock. Portuguese wines are excellent – as, of course, is port.
- Drive on the left or right? Right
- Ferries: we travelled by P&O, Dover to Calais (poferries.com) and drove down through France and Spain. Alternatives are Portsmouth to Le Havre (idlines.co.uk), or Portsmouth or Plymouth to

- Santander (Brittany-ferries.co.uk).
- Fancy trying it? You can do it yourself, visiting the places we did. José is up for guiding more small groups of enthusiasts. Contact him at dreamlandrover@gmail.com. If you don't fancy doing the whole trip, you could base yourself at the excellent Parque Vale do Rossim campsite in the Serra da Estrela mountains. Alternatively, companies such as OneLife Adventure (onelifeadventure.co.uk) and Waypoint Tours (waypoint-tours.com) are offering group trips to Portugal.
- WHERE WE STAYED**
- Casa do Conselheiro B&B, Freixo de Espada à Cinta. Excellent

- value, comfortable, stone-walled bedroom with wood panelling (+351 279653439).
- Pensão Aliança, Guarda. Basic town-centre hotel (+351 271222235).
- Parque Vale do Rossim in the Serra da Estrela. Excellent campsite – try one of the yurts. Good restaurant, too (vr-ecoresort.com).
- Camping Vakantieboerderij at Quinta do Pomarinho. Good location that could do with a few more toilet and shower cubicles (pomarinho.com).
- Casa Santo Condestável B&B, Monsarez. Lovely former priest house in preserved walled town (+351 266557181).