

PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

John Pearson joins 50 other 4x4 enthusiasts on a mountain adventure from central Portugal to the pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela in Spain

This track climbs through a series of hairpins from São Bento da Porta Aberta, looking back over the Rio Caldo



PORTUGAL: NEED TO KNOW

- **Language:** Portuguese.
- **Currency:** Euro.
- **Jabs:** None compulsory, but make sure your tetanus is up to date.
- **Cost of fuel:** Diesel €1.44/litre (£1.16).
- **Time difference to UK?** None.
- **Drive on the right.**
- **Where we stayed:** Clube Escape Livre provides all hotel accommodation for the duration of the adventure and is included in the fee. We stayed at Tourism Hotel Trancoso (hotel-trancoso.com), Agua Hotel, Mondim de Basto (mondim.aguahotels.pt), Axis Ofir Hotel (axishoteis.com/en/Axis-Ofir-Beach-Resort) and Los Abetos Hotel, Santiago de Compostela (hotellosabetos.com).
- **Campsites:** campingportugal.org lists 127 sites throughout the country, split into regions.
- **Legal rights of way?** Portugal welcomes users of its thousands of miles of non-tarmac tracks, allowing access to some breathtaking scenery. The only restrictions are if it's a private track, which will usually have a barrier across the entrance. And in areas of high fire risk during the summer there can be closures – look out for *acesso reservado* signs (not to be confused with the proliferation of red signs saying *zona de caça associativa* or *green area de não caça*, which are for hunting/no hunting respectively).
- **Which maps?** All route information was provided by Clube Escape Livre, but if driving Portugal's mountain tracks, maps from the Military Institute of Portugal (igeoe.pt) are available in 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 scales.



Driving through eucalyptus forests en route to the mountains around Celorico de Basto



Way to go: detailed road book keeps you right

CLUBE ESCAPE LIVRE

Luis Celínio is the driving force behind the Clube Escape Livre, which when translated means Club Free Exhaust, or open exhaust pipe. Club president Luis, whose day job is a lawyer in Guarda, founded the organisation in 1986. He'd been running a radio show about motoring and the club came from that.

The club was originally devoted entirely to Land Rovers, but with poor sales of the marque in Portugal due to unreasonably high import duties, they decided to open it to all makes of 4x4. This has been a great success, with entry lists for events like the Santiago de Compostela run being full many months ahead. This event costs €785 (£632) for two people, which includes all hotel accommodation and meals.

The club's major 2013 event (April 19-21) takes in most of Portugal's top mountain ranges, starting in the biggest, the Serra da Estrela. It finishes by the sea at Figueira da Foz. For more information or to enter an event, visit escapelivre.com.

For alternative ways to drive Portugal's mountain tracks, contact LRO's Portugal Editor José Almeida (dreamlandrover.com).

UK companies offering adventures include OneLife Adventure (onelifeadventure.co.uk) and Waypoint Tours (waypoint-tours.com).



Wide variety of conditions suited diverse field



One of the easier stretches for the Land Rovers

I must confess that, when I saw the line-up of 'other' 4x4s entered for the Portuguese Clube Escape Livre's three-day adventure, I wondered how testing the off-road driving would be. If the event was catering for the likes of Porsche Cayennes, plus various BMWs and Mercs, would it be exciting enough for those of us in Land Rovers?

Well, the answer came as we turned off the tarmac and picked up the first track in the Serra da Lapa mountains. This was no gentle introduction for the 'soft-roaders'; the track was littered with potholes and scored deep with washouts, which tested ground-reading skills and demanded the perfect choice of line.

Admittedly, some of the tracks we drove were flat gravel that wouldn't trouble your granny in her Nissan Micra, but many others like this ticked enough boxes to put them in the LRO four- and five-star category in terms of scenery, terrain and steep mountains with scary drop-offs.

I was here as part of the 50-vehicle line-up on a drive that loosely followed one of the routes (*caminos* in Spanish and *caminhos* in Portuguese) that take pilgrims from around the world to the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain. Legend has it that this is where the body of Santiago (St James), one of the 12 Apostles of Jesus, is buried.

There are a number of these *caminos/caminhos* throughout Europe. Pilgrims have been traversing their way along the highs and lows of these incredibly popular ways for more than 1000 years, and these days they are busier than ever, with an estimated 100,000 people

making their way from Europe and the rest of the world to Santiago de Compostela.

For the past couple of years, one of Portugal's major 4x4 clubs, the Clube Escape Livre (CEL), has been running a motorised version, taking in 420 miles of tracks, trails and some tarmac roads from central Portugal to the cathedral destination. The Portuguese are religious and the Clube's route takes them to many of the ornately fitted-out churches and monasteries that pilgrims visit on their journey.

Back in 2011, on my first Portugal adventure, I visited CEL HQ in Guarda, to the north-east of the Serra da Estrela mountain range and promised its president, the genial Luis Celínio, I would return to enter the event the following year. So here I was at the historic town of Trancoso, joining 49 other 4x4 drivers ready to go to Santiago.

The club was originally devoted entirely to Land Rovers, but declining sales caused by punitive import taxes forced the club to

'Darkness is closing in... it's an evocative scene as our convoy's lights pick their way through clouds of dust'

embrace other marques. This has proved to be a great success, with a variety of European and Japanese 4x4s in the event's entry list, along with 11 Land Rovers and Range Rovers – including my ex-G4 Challenge Defender 110.

The Land Rover entrants included our good friend José Almeida, LRO's Portugal Editor, in his black Defender 90 Td5, with his sister, Ana. José's cousin Luis Figueiró was there with

wife Paula in their white Td5 110 double-cab, with their friends Alexandre and Linda Oliveira (Freelander 2) and Jorge Ribeiro and Leonor Teira (300Tdi Defender 90) making up the Land Rover gang that we would be travelling with.

I'm impressed by the slick signing-on session and exceptionally thorough driver briefing (in Portuguese, of course; but José translated the major points). We're being supplied with comprehensive road books and, even better, Ana Almeida is an experienced navigator on such events and the José/Ana team will be leading the Land Rover contingent.

After that initial track, we pick up a series of loose-surfaced routes through the Serra das Meadas mountains, before stopping for lunch at a restaurant overlooking the town of Régua in the Douro river valley.

I'm slightly taken aback by the amount of food at the lunch stop. We have a plateful of delicious hot and cold appetisers before moving upstairs to the *Paraíso Douro* (paraisodouro.com)

restaurant for a four-course meal. Phew. And there's still a large meal to come in the evening.

More than replete, we get back into the vehicles. Our route then drops down into Régua to take us alongside the mighty Douro river before turning north and climbing into the Serra do Marão mountains. We head up the spine of the mountains, then drive a series of tracks that cling to the hillsides, with extreme drops to the

side, before tackling a steep, rocky low-gear climb that's a real tester. We eventually reach more than 1300 metres (4265ft – which is not far short of Britain's highest mountain, Ben Nevis). The scenery here is of the highest wow factor and it rates as a genuine five-star drive.

A twisting tarmac mountain road takes us to more tracks through woodland, where plastic containers are attached to the pine trees to collect resin. Darkness is closing in as we drive the final few miles, and it's an evocative scene as our convoy's lights pick their way through billowing clouds of dust.

Our overnight stop is at the Mondim de Basto hotel – with another four-course meal. I don't think there will be any complaints about the quality or quantity of food on this adventure.

The second day's action starts with a drive through eucalyptus and pine forests, before driving into the mountains around Celorico de Basto in the Minho region. This area is rich with big vines that produce the local *vinho verde* (green wine). Several sandy tracks lead us to an area that Portuguese motor sport enthusiasts talk fondly about – the Fafe Lameirinha rally stages, where back in the 1980s the rip-snorting Group B rally cars would fly 50 metres through the air on the Rally of Portugal. Take a look on YouTube for some of the spectacular action from that era – and look at the bizarre antics of the 10-deep crowds that line the stages.

The going gets tougher as we drive through the Serra da Cabreira mountains. There are washouts and plenty of rocks scattered over the tracks, making this a great off-roading day.

Five-star drive through the Serra do Marão mountains – steep climbs and big drops



We cross the bridge over the Rio Caldo in the picturesque Gerês area, which is famous as an inland holiday resort. Lunch is just north of there, at São Bento da Porta Aberta, after which we climb a steeply rising track through a series of hairpins, with a stunning backdrop looking over the Rio Caldo. It's another exhilarating drive and I'm enjoying myself.

Portugal has tracks through some beautiful remote areas, and today's route takes us deep into some of the best.

We also stop at the Mosteiro (Benedictine monastery) de Tibães, near Braga. Dating back to the 11th century, this fabulously ornate building has a chequered history, but has been state-owned since 1986 and restoration is continuing as funds allow.

'Portugal has tracks through some beautiful remote areas, and today's route takes us deep into some of the best'

Our journey continues to the Atlantic coast for our overnight stop at the Axis Ofir Beach Hotel, to the west of Braga. It's dark when we arrive, so no time to take in the sea views. But there's another slap-up meal...

The final driving day starts with us heading north, climbing Mount Santa Luzia near Viana do Castelo, which provides big views down over the Atlantic coast. We drive a series of tracks, some open, some dense with eucalyptus forests, occasionally catching glimpses of wild horses. We're into the Serra d'Arga mountains, which give us a view down into the Rio Minho valley, on the other side of which lies Spain.

Lunch is at the Braseirão do Minho (braseiraominho.com) restaurant in Vila Nova de Cerveira, after which I'm interviewed by a Portuguese TV channel, TVI, about my visit to the country. 'What do you like about Portugal?' Hmm, that's not difficult to answer: 'Good weather, great food, fabulous places to drive a Land Rover and lovely people.'

The cameraman comes along for a ride in – and on – my Defender for filming on the next off-road stages after we've crossed into Spain. The finale to this is a tricky, rocky zig-zag climb that demands commitment for a successful exit.

And that is it for the off-road action. The rest of the journey into the city of Santiago de Compostela and our accommodation at the Los Abetos Hotel is all on-road.

After dinner, Luis Celínio leads us all into the city centre to view the cathedral, and the next morning we get a guided tour of its impressive interior. The finale of this is watching a post-mass ceremony, where the world's largest incense burner, the 80kg Botafumeiro, is swung on a strong rope through a 65-metre arc across the cathedral. It's an amazing sight as it

hurtles from ceiling to ceiling and I recommend checking it out on YouTube. The cathedral is packed, and you can't help thinking how many people would be wiped out if the rope broke.

It was a slightly surreal end to a great driving adventure. The off-road driving turned out to be excellent in terms of quality and quantity, and we've driven through some wonderful parts of Portugal en route to Santiago. I'm impressed by the Clube Escape Livre's organisational skills. Everything was slickly run and always to schedule. Dealing with a large group of people isn't easy, but the organising team, led by the authoritative figure of President Luis Celínio, handles it all with aplomb. If you're interested in doing one of the Clube's events in the future, see the info panel on page 55.

Thanks to Luis Celínio and the other team members from Clube Escape Livre; to José Almeida for all his help; to Ana Almeida for her navigation skills; and to everyone on the event who made us so welcome. **LRO**

HOW WE GOT THERE

My recommended way to get from the UK to Spain or Portugal these days is via the Brittany Ferries' routes from Plymouth/Portsmouth to Bilbao/Santander. The cost of travelling through France is expensive, what with fuel, road tolls and accommodation, and it takes a day longer than by sea. The overnight boat is also a relaxing way to travel.

Return UK-Spain fares start from £284 per person (£344 in high season) based on a vehicle plus two people and a cabin. They also have routes to the French ports of Caen, Cherbourg, St Malo and Roscoff, which can take a chunk of mileage out of your journey compared to a Dover-Calais crossing. Book at brittanyferries.com or phone 0871 244 1400. Brittany Ferries can also arrange accommodation. More information is available via brittanyferries.com/holidays or by calling 0871 244 1444.



John scrubs up for the Portuguese TV cameras



Journey ends with the fascinating Botafumeiro