

PORTUGAL'S Wild places

Who needs Africa? In part one of his latest adventure John Pearson joins up with José Almeida to explore some of Portugal's most remote areas

PHOTOS: JÉRÔME ANDRÉ AND PAT SUMMERS

We halt our Land Rovers on the side of a mountain track and walk over to a fig tree that's heavily laden with ripe fruit. No one minds us helping ourselves to a handful of the succulent figs; the peasant farmers abandoned the area many years ago, unable to eke a living from the harsh terrain.

LRO's Portugal Editor José Almeida and I are in a remote eastern part of his

country, close to the border with Spain. We've been driving for three hours and haven't seen another soul, or any tarmac, or even any buildings apart from the derelict stone farmhouse near the fig tree.

José tempted me back to Portugal with the promise of driving some of the country's wildest, most remote mountain tracks, before crossing the central Alentejo region for a grand finale alongside the savage but stunningly beautiful south-western Atlantic coast. How could I resist?



'We toast our adventure with a bottle of Hobby Alentejo wine with a Series II soft top on its label'

YOU CAN DO IT TOO

For the past two or three years José Almeida has been operating self-guide adventures in Portugal. He provides comprehensive information to do the trip tailored to your requirements, including routes, places to visit, campsites/accommodation and restaurants. On top of this is 24/7 assistance for mechanical, medical and logistics issues. It's handy to have a native speaker on hand if a problem does crop up. Prices start from £180 per person.

For 2014 José is launching personally guided tours through remote Portugal. The first, from September 2-13, will go from Rio de Onor on the northern border with Spain through to the Alentejo west coast. Cost will be from £480 per person (excluding ferry). For details see dreamlandrover.com.

Portugal is a popular adventure destination, and most of the major UK tour operators visit it. See: atlasoverland.com, onelifeadventure.co.uk, waypoint-tours.com.



A rare river crossing – we mostly drove dusty tracks



Great driving south of the Malcata mountain range

HOW WE GOT THERE

My recommended way to get to Portugal from the UK is via the Brittany Ferries routes from Plymouth or Portsmouth to Bilbao or Santander in Spain. Crossing the Channel is cheaper, but the cost of travelling through France is expensive, with fuel, road tolls and accommodation, and it takes a day longer than by sea. Brittany Ferries operates up to five UK-Spain sailings a week, and fares start from £284 each way for a car plus two people (£424 in high season), including an en suite cabin. Book online at brittanyferries.co.uk or call 0871 244 1400. Brittany Ferries can make your life easier by arranging accommodation/campsite for your drive across Spain. For details, visit brittanyferries.com/holidays.

We meet at the border town of Vilar Formoso and I'm delighted to see José waiting in the lovely special-edition Camel Trophy Discovery 1 he bought last spring. The Camel-liveried Sandglow Yellow Disco and my Tangiers Orange G4 Challenge Defender look a treat together in the bright afternoon sunshine. It's going to be a great adventure.

Days one and two

Remote border country

Highlight: Malcata nature reserve

A short drive south-west from Vilar Formoso is Freineda, where I'm about to get a history lesson. We walk through cobbled streets between whitewashed buildings towards a house in the centre. José tells me that this was a certain Arthur Wellesley's HQ during the early 19th century. Wellesley, as history buffs will know, became the Duke of Wellington, a formidable military strategist. He was here with British troops fighting with the Portuguese during the Napoleonic wars.

From Freineda we dip our wheels in the Cõa river at Porto de Ovelha, dodging some submerged rocks, then pick up a series of mainly gravel tracks, going south along the river's banks. We thread between drystone walls among Spanish broom and small oak trees, with golden grasses waving gently in the warm evening breeze.

The sun is dropping fast, creating a majestic sunset to welcome us to Portugal. We just have time to squeeze in a visit to the old stone toll bridge, Ponte de Sequeiros, that's been spanning the Cõa since medieval times. Then we head for our accommodation at Vale das Éguas, toasting our adventure with a bottle of Hobby Alentejo Tinto (red) 2008 wine – with a soft-top Land Rover Series II on its label.

The next morning José takes us to the Reserva Natural da Serra da Malcata. This protected nature reserve stretches over 16,000 hectares (617sq miles) between the towns of Sabugal and Penamacor and across to the Spanish border.

We haven't applied for a photo permit in advance, so red tape prevents us actually showing you the beautiful wild terrain. And

even if we'd got one of those we couldn't photograph the Defender that ranger Francisco Campos and tourism technician Manuela Fernandes use to guide us around some of the reserve's tracks because vehicle publicity is banned.

So you'll just have to create a mental image of the tough, white Td5 130 Hi-Cap double cab leading José's Disco and my 110 along dusty tracks through forests of oak and sweet chestnut and around a vast reservoir – with black vultures soaring overhead.

The area is rich with wildlife; unfortunately the one thing they don't have is the rare Iberian lynx that is pictured on the reserve's logo. Despite attempts at bolstering food sources through the reintroduction of rabbits, no one has seen a lynx in the reserve since the early 1990s.

Francisco and Manuela take us up to the source of the river Cõa, high on a rocky hillside. This trickle of water eventually becomes a fast-flowing river, ending up as a tributary of the mighty Douro.

It's all off-tarmac from here to our accommodation, which is in the middle

of nowhere,' declares José. And he's not exaggerating. For three and a half hours Francisco leads us on 44km (27 miles) of tracks through varied terrain, with amazing vistas; along woodland gravel tracks, across mountain ridges and over dry riverbeds. A true wilderness and a dream place to drive.

Again, the sun is dropping fast as we near our destination, casting long shadows and bathing everything in warm light. It looks lovely, as does our B&B at Moinho do Maneio.

Owners Rui Marcelo and Anabela Martins gave up city life in Lisbon to rebuild the accommodation from what was a derelict watermill, with no electricity, mains water or telephone. Rui was a motorcycling journalist for 19 years, so we sit on the verandah chatting about bikes over a cold beer.

Day three

Geology lessons in the Naturtejo Geopark

Highlight: The 'bleeding' cork oaks

I provide the comedy turn at breakfast when my chair collapses and I disappear from view under the table. José and my partner Pat are still tittering some time later when we hear the sound of a 300Tdi Land Rover engine approaching. It's João Galdes and Rita Ferreira in their colourful Discovery 1.

João and Rita have busy lives. They are geologists, who explore the country for suitable places for companies to mine. They also run a B&B with João's parents in the border town of Salvaterra do Extremo and they are involved with the local Naturtejo-Geopark – a UNESCO-designated area that contains sites of geological importance. This was formed in 2005, the first in Portugal.

João and Rita organise guided walks, cycle trips, canoeing, climbing and 4x4 tours in the geologically rich and picturesque region.

They not only know the tracks in the area like the backs of their hands, but can tell us what's under the ground and all around us. Standing on a hill with a professional geologist describing how the area was formed up to 600 million years ago and the types of rocks we can see before us beats any lesson I had at school. The Discovery even has a geological map on its bonnet to aid the explanation.

We drive a series of tracks, dropping to a dry river bed and heading through forests of oak and eucalyptus. From the Malcata mountain range we head across a vast plain before climbing steeply again. The 31km (20 miles) route provides just about everything an off-roader could want: big, loose-surfaced climbs and drops, scary cambers, rock crawls, washouts and sand. And a lot of dust, which makes our Land Rovers look as if they've taken part in the Camel Trophy and G4 Challenge.

We stop at the hilltop town of Monsanto. Its ancient houses were built into the giant rocks and boulders. The panoramic view from the Monsanto Castle at 753 metres (2470ft) is breathtaking, stretching from Portugal's highest mountain range, the Serra da Estrela in the west to the Spanish border at the east.

Then we rush off to a nearby forest of cork oak trees that João knows of that have recently been stripped of their bark for cork production. This initially leaves the trunks bright red – the locals call it bleeding – and these look magical, almost surreal with the colour enhanced by the late afternoon sun.

While we've been out driving, some Ensopado de Cabra em Panela de Ferro (goat stew cooked in an iron pot and served on fried bread) has been bubbling away on



Ooh-ah, we take it gently over this tough rock section

Not really the best time to be reading about a bottom-end overhaul



João Galdes uses his bonnet map to explain the geology



João's parents' stove in the B&B. We sit out in their garden for our meal and it's truly splendid, made even better when washed down by a glass of local red wine.

Day four

Into the Alentejo

Highlight: Driving inside ancient walled Marvão

João and Rita join us again the next day when we drive towards Rosmaninhal, where the Tagus river runs due west, carving the border with Spain and then dividing Portugal's regions. This is the longest river on the Iberian peninsula, flowing across Spain and Portugal to the Atlantic.

South of the river is the Alentejo, one of the hottest parts of Europe and the temperature is definitely rising. It's more than 30°C – while reports from the UK tell us it's very wet there, and just five degrees.

It's still a very remote area, with rolling hills and big views, but no people. We drive in oak forests, past olive groves and through areas of broom, wild herbs and golden grasses. Our track heads through a narrow but fairly deep river. João fords it easily, but a rock moves and snags José's Disco. João rolls up his shorts to wade in and attach a rope to haul him out, Camel-Trophy-style. We continue the

adventure towards our overnight stop in the ancient walled town of Marvão.

The landscapes flatten out, looking more like Africa than Portugal, with golden grasses and occasional rock outcrops. A detour takes us to the phallic prehistoric monument Menir da Meada. Located 10km north of Castelo de Vide, this 7m (almost 23ft) monolith is the highest in the Iberian peninsula. Then we say goodbye to João and Rita, who have to get back to their B&B. They've been good company and a great source of information.

We're staying overnight at the Pousada in Marvão. Pousadas are a chain of well-appointed hotels in historic buildings throughout the country. This one is in a fabulous location, positioned high inside the walls of the ancient town, affording panoramic views from its windows.

It's very special to drive inside ancient town walls and squeeze through narrow streets to reach your bed for the night.

Day five

Serra de São Mamede

Highlight: Elvas is the star turn

The following day we drive a series of gravel tracks leading towards the Serra de São Mamede mountains. Some of the woodland is overgrown, jungle-like overgrown, with

NEED TO KNOW

- **VISA** Not required for UK passport holders, up to 90 days.
- **RIGHTS OF WAY** Most tracks are legal to drive – private areas or routes closed due to fire risk will usually have a barrier across.
- **DRIVING** Many motorways now have electronic-only tolls. Can be pre-paid online, or pay at services booths. But you'll be driving on tracks, so it won't be necessary.
- **FOOD AND DRINK** Cuisine is excellent and varied. Try a shot of Aquarente de Medronhos (brandy made from wild strawberry tree berries) in the Alentejo. It's also known as firewater. And it makes you hoarse. It has a hint of strawberry if it's good.
- **WHERE WE STAYED**
 Vale das Éguas: Carya Tallaya, two-bedroom house (caryatallayacasasdecampo.com, +351 926 035183).
 Penamacor: Moinho do Maneio, B&B rooms in remote lodge (facebook.com/moinhomaneio, +351 277 394399).
 Salvaterra do Extremo: Casa do Forno, B&B (casadoforno.com.pt, +351 277 455021).
 Marvão: Pousada de Santa Maria, quality hotel (pousadas.pt, +351 245 993201).
 Juromenha: Casas de Juromenha, tasteful lakeside apartments (casasdejuromenha.com, +351 268 969242).
- **CAMPING** See campingportugal.org.
- **OTHER INFO**
 Serra da Malcata reserve (tinyurl.com/o8awto5). Individual vehicles are allowed on to the reserve's tracks, but organised groups are prohibited.



Camel club members are pleased to see us

several fallen trees blocking the way – our saws are put into active service to get us through. Our track occasionally crosses the tarmac road to the summit before diving back into woodland, where we get some respite from the relentless heat.

Our Land Rovers make easy work of a steep, long dusty climb up a fire break between pine trees. Then we pause to savour the view back towards Marvão before setting off south-easterly along the ridge of the Serra de São Mamede. It's another lengthy off-tarmac drive; climbing and dropping, sometimes weaving through forests of oak and eucalyptus.

We're detouring to the city of Elvas. This border town has been heavily defended over the years, with forts positioned on surrounding hilltops, and extensive city walls. It has a long history and was under Roman and Moorish occupation, the latter of which has influenced its architecture significantly. The view across the rooftops from the city walls looks like Fes in Morocco rather than a Portuguese municipality.

There's much to see here, with Roman ruins, and an amazing four-mile-long aqueduct running through the city, but the crumbling 18th century Forte da Graça is the most fascinating attraction.

We stay overnight in a cottage at the comfortably furnished Casas de Juromenha, which sits on the banks of the Guadiana river. We're there in time to take a bird watching boat trip from the accommodation to see a rich variety of storks and other wading

birds, with the setting sun providing another wonderful backdrop.

Some of the other cottages are occupied by a film crew who are producing a movie of the Portuguese novel *Sei Lá*, by Margarida Rebelo Pinto. Several of the actors are lounging by the pool, waiting for darkness, when filming is due to start under tonight's full moon.

Day six

Through African-style savannah to Serpa

Highlight: A gathering of Camels

Our drive the next day heads south, not far from the border, along a series of tracks through agricultural land in rolling countryside. We pass herds of goats protected by vicious looking dogs that chase our trucks.

Then suddenly we're transported into Africa – that's the only explanation I can offer for the savannah landscape that stretches out ahead of us. All it needs to complete the scene is a pride of lions lounging under the trees for shade and a herd of elephants trudging across the scorched grass to a distant waterhole.

The journey continues along red dusty tracks, into a demanding rock crawl and some sharp pebble tracks that give my Cooper S/T Maxx tyres a good workout – and then into more African-style landscape.

Our destination tonight is the town of Serpa, but José is acting in a furtive manner, making a number of phone calls; and I know

'I'm going to meet two of the heroes who represented Portugal in the Camel Trophy and tomorrow everyone will join our adventure'

him well enough to suspect there could be one of his 'surprises' awaiting us.

There certainly is – we drive through Serpa's back streets and turn into a parking area where, ta-da, the Portuguese Camel Trophy Club has provided a spectacular line-up of vehicles to welcome us, all sparkling in the sunshine, resplendent with flags and banners.

Paulo Rocha, who is one of the club's founders and stalwarts, tells me that 2013 is a double anniversary year for the club: 'It's 30 years since Portugal first competed in the Camel Trophy, and it's 10 years since I read a story in the April 2003 issue of LRO that inspired me to build my Camel Trophy Defender replica – which led to the club's formation.' I think that's really special.

We're about to go for a celebration meal with the club members, I'm going to meet two of the heroes who represented Portugal in the Camel Trophy events (1983 and 1997), and tomorrow everyone will be joining us for the next leg of our adventure through Portugal's wild places.

I can't wait. Read all about it in the next issue of LRO. **LRO**