

Contrasts of the Alentejo

Hotel-to-hotel upper independent cycling

- Gloriously easy cycling: coastal paths, country trails, orange groves and poppy-strewn fields
- Wild deserted beaches untouched by tourism; small coves, high cliffs, fine sand dunes
- Lovely warm climate - around 300 days of sunshine a year
- Rugged coastal castles, colorful fishing harbours, tiny white villages unchanged for centuries
- Exquisite boutique-style hotels; wonderfully friendly people



In the far south-west corner of the Iberian Peninsula between Lisbon and the Algarve is a genuine hidden treasure. The Parque Natural Sudoueste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina is the largest protected coastal Natural Park in Europe, encompassing a rolling sea of verdant hills and river valleys, and over 100km/62miles of wild and pristine beaches and coast.

This is a rural region of tiny white villages and wheat fields, the breadbasket of the nation, where ruined windmills crumble on sun-drenched hilltops, and sheepskin-jacketed shepherds with silver tipped canes stride over fields full of lavender. People have lived here since Paleolithic times, but today's population is very small and you often seem to have the coast and countryside to yourself!

Our cycling holiday here begins inland with three nights in our stylish hotel nestling amid fragrant meadows of white rockrose. It's then a spin downhill towards the turquoise ocean into the Natural Park for the rest of the week. Two days are spent discovering rugged castles, wild beaches and whitewashed fishing villages near Vila Nova de Milfontes, before heading further south for your final two nights on a real smugglers' coast of steep bays and bluffs, cycling along river valleys to meet the ocean.

We were amazed by the quality of the accommodation we found miles out in the countryside. The three exclusive rural properties are all stylishly transformed into boutique hotels (two rustic, one modern, the largest with 8 rooms). Each has charismatic and enthusiastic English speaking owners who are so welcoming it is like staying with friends!

"Liberated from your air-conditioned bubble, you breathe in the scents of pine, eucalyptus and lavender that thrive in a temperate climate boasting 300 days of sunshine a year."

Gill Martin, The Press Association



CONTRASTS OF THE ALENTEJO | DAY BY DAY

Day 1 Arrive in Alentejo

We meet you at Funcheira station and transfer you to your Casas Novas hotel in time for a swim in the pool before dinner. (Private transfers from airport to hotel available on request.)

Day 2 Artisans and Market Towns 21km/13mi or 31km/19mi

A circular southern route through lavender and eucalyptus give an extraordinary insight into ways of life unchanged for centuries! Buy home produced cheese from Dona Mariana's family shop, open since 1876, and look out for dapper shepherds – they wear beautiful sheepskin cloaks that could be tailored on Savile Row! Drop into Cercal – a bustling market town - to admire Senor Godinho's intricate leatherwork, then cycle back for a candlelit dinner on the garden terrace.

Day 3 Casas Novas Northern Circuit 18km/11mi or 46km/29mi

Amazing - paddy fields of rice in Portugal? Pedal through them to follow the verdant River Campilhas for a short ride, or carry on to complete a longer loop. You can stop at tiny cafés en route (even if locals stare like you're an astronaut!) and it is gorgeously easy riding as you coast through white villages to Sao Domingos with its shady plazas and orange trees, before meandering back past black pigs snoozing under olive trees.

Day 4 Casas Novas to Ribeira da Azenha 37km/23mi

Leaving Casas Novas behind, the countryside gradually changes from cork oak meadows to poppy strewn wheat fields as you cycle west. Catch your first glimpse of blue ocean on a fantastic 3km/2mi freewheel downhill breathing in great gusts of scented rockrose as you enter the protected Natural Park. You'll receive a warm welcome from Balt (and his pets – three donkeys and two ostrich!) at his sophisticated cutting edge hotel just 2km/1mi from the sea.

Day 5 Beaches, Castles and Harbours Circuit 29km/18mi or 33km/21mi

Pedal past lemon trees and vineyards to a C16 coastal fortress – Forte da Ilha - where wild, deserted beaches go on for miles! Lunch in a restaurant with views of offshore islands, then take the coastal track below high dunes to the bright boats and palm trees of Porto Covo harbour. Join local fishermen for a *medronho* in a seafront café, then cycle back past ancient windmills and enjoy a stargazing chat with Balt tonight – he's a keen astronomer.

Day 6 Ribeira da Azenha to Brejao 32km/20mi

You head south today deeper into the Natural Park – empty, scenic roads lead you to scarlet Cabo Sardo Lighthouse and the most incredible stretch of coastal cycling yet. This is the only place in the world you can see storks nesting precariously on cliffs below your picnic spot! Beach-hop down the coast to Zambujeira village before arriving at Miguel and Rita's pretty cottages in Brejao just 3km/2mi from the beach. You'll eat out in the village for the next two nights.

Day 7 Odeceixe Valley Route 28km/17mi

Watch fishermen landing their catch in Azenha do Mar harbour, then head south through strawberry fields to Odeceixe - a river valley full of snowy egrets, wheat fields and vine terraces. You follow the river to a glorious sweeping yellow sand beach with views to the corner of Europe! It's a spectacular place to end the week. Back at the hotel, cool off with a swim in the private lake, and enjoy dinner in the village again tonight

Day 8 Leave Alentejo

Return home after breakfast.

Please note that cycling helmets are a legal requirement in Portugal. For safety reasons, we are unable to provide these, therefore we strongly advise you to bring your own.



Dates and Prices

Departs selected dates Tour Only

2012 departures

| | |
|------------------------|---------|
| Mar 11, 18 | \$2,833 |
| Mar 25, Apr 15, 22, 29 | \$2,833 |
| Apr 1, 8 | \$2,899 |
| May 6, 13, 20, 27 | \$2,833 |
| Nov 4, 11 | \$3,030 |
| Sep 30, Oct 7, 14 | \$3,086 |
| Sep 16, 23, Oct 21, 28 | \$3,099 |

2013 departures

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Mar 17, Apr 7, 14 | \$3,032 |
| Apr 21, 28 | \$3,032 |
| Mar 24, May 5, 12, 19, 26, Jun 2 | \$3,032 |
| Mar 31 | \$3,140 |

Singles: Please phone for details and prices.

Child: This holiday is unsuitable for children under 12.

Holiday type: Independent cycling, hotel-to-hotel, no minimum group size, however station and luggage transfers are subject to at least 2 people (in total) booked on each departure.

Departs: Selected dates from Mar 11 2012 to Jun 2 2013.

Duration: 8 days (7 nights).

Meals: Continental breakfast, 3 picnic lunches and 5 evening meals.

Other details: For "What your holiday price includes," see "Holiday Planning" section pp 48-51.

Tailor-made travel choices

Nearest Arrival Airport: Lisbon Airport

Flights can be arranged from most US/CANADA airports, with connecting transfers as required, prices and details on request.

The above prices include our standard transfers: Funcheira train station at 15:39, (transfer to hotel, 40 mins, provided). **Return:** Funcheira train station by 11:07 (transfer provided).

Rail options: Lisbon Oriente to Funcheira 13:20/15:39. Return: Rail Funcheira to Lisbon Oriente 11:07/13:12

*Rail tickets from Lisbon Oriente to Funcheira and return, pay locally. Allow approx \$50.

Tour only: Transfers included from Funcheira station at 15:39, and back to Funcheira station departing hotel at 10:15.

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CONTRASTS OF THE ALENTEJO | WHERE YOU STAY



Verdemar Hotel
 ●●●●
 Casas Novas
 Days 1+2+3



Tres Marias Hotel
 ●●●●
 Ribeira da Azenha
 Days 4+5



Cerro da Fontinha
 ●●●●
 Brejao
 Days 6+7

For extra nights we recommend Casas Novas, Brejao and Lisbon.