

Pedalling Portugal

The last of Europe's wild coasts

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It was the solitude that struck us first.

As we helped our driver unload our bikes and cycling gear in Vila Nova de Milfontes, my husband and I felt alone for the first time since arriving in Portugal.

Our cruise a couple weeks earlier up the Douro River was perfectly pleasant but required piling into buses when we went ashore, and mingling with other passengers at every meal. And in the historic city of Porto, we lined up with other tourists to visit museums and shop at Livraria Lello, one of the world's most beautiful bookstores.

But here, just two hours south of Lisbon, the streets of Vila Nova de Milfontes are quiet and empty except for the occasional cat that wanders past. In July and August, this village swells with Portuguese tourists, but in mid-May it feels like we have the place to ourselves. In fact, as we'll discover, the entire coastline from here south to Sagres could almost be our own private park.

"You don't find this in Spain or France, Italy, Croatia," opined our driver on the way here. "All the southern countries where you think of going for summer vacation have hotels, golf courses, houses, mass tourism. This is the last of Europe's wild coast. Twenty-kilometre stretches with nothing."

Nothing, that is, except gorgeous sandy beaches, dramatic cliffs pounded by waves, windswept headlands carpeted in wildflowers, picturesque fishing villages and forests where wild boar roam.

It sounds too good to be true, but more than 100 kilometres of coastline and 75,000 hectares of pine and cork forests are largely untouched by human



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hands, protected from development by Portugal's Southwest Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park.

For cyclists and walkers, it's a dream destination. And in the coming weeks and months, while we're all still highly COVID-conscious, I can't think of a better place to ease gently back into international travel.

Even pre-COVID-19, the southwest Alentejo was the perfect place for our first self-guided cycling holiday. The company we went with—Portugal Nature Trails—gets rave reviews for its well-organized tours and support.

The Portuguese company offers many itineraries, but its Easy Wild Coast sounded just right. Following quiet roads and trails with only a few big hills, we'll ride just over 100 kilometres to Sagres, the southwestern-most point in Portugal and all of Europe. In a car, you could do it in an hour and a half. We'll take a leisurely week.

Our first morning we enjoy a filling breakfast, then say goodbye to the friendly couple who run our B&B. Our luggage will be picked up by a pre-arranged driver and moved to our next night's accommodation. Our bikes' GPSes have been programmed. Helmets on, we're ready to pedal.

Before long, the trail leads to the first of many cliffs over the Atlantic. When we reach the century-old Cape Sardão lighthouse (built facing inland by mistake!), we stop to observe half a

dozen white storks. This is the only place in the world where these long-legged beauties nest on cliffs. We can easily peer down and see their fluffy chicks, who are blissfully unaware of their precarious situation.

May is also peak wildflower season and the profusion is simply astounding. A plant called hottentot carpets the cliff edges in perky pink and yellow blossoms. It's an invasive species from South Africa, but too pervasive—and too pretty—to even think about removal. Further on, sheep and cows graze in pastures with their young. With so much flora and fauna to photograph, I now realize why we need six days to cycle 100 kilometres!

One day, when we stop to get close-up photos of a cork tree, we're surprised to see a man herding cows. He's wearing a brown sheepskin vest that's clearly tailored for his outdoor needs; it's short in the front but reaches almost to the ground in the back—perfect for sitting on. Except for his jeans and shirt, he could be from a different era.

But Portugal is most definitely in the 21st century. Some months it generates enough renewable energy to power the whole country. We see some of that green power on display one day when we cycle along a ridge that's dotted with enormous wind turbines, gently whirring in the breeze.

There's also plenty of history on this storied coast. Reach-

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ing the village of Aljezur—known for its purple sweet potatoes—we begin a slow, strenuous climb to the ruins of a medieval castle that was occupied by the Moors from the 10th to 13th centuries.

At Bordeira's beach we stop to climb sand dunes—this time on foot—and watch a lone kite surfer race across the waves. A few kilometres further on, a couple dozen surfers are catching waves off another beach that's just as empty and pristine.

Late one day we reach the Pedralva Slow Village Hotel. It's really an entire village that slowly emptied when people moved to cities for work. In 2006, a few Portuguese entrepreneurs decided to buy and restore many of the abandoned houses for tourism.

"We didn't know who they belonged to. We didn't know where they were," Pedralva's manager tells us, explaining they tracked down 200 descendants of the former owners and negotiated to buy 31 houses.

Today, the gleaming, whitewashed cottages look lived-in again, with red roses blooming by doorsteps welcoming "slow" tourists like us.

At lunchtime on our final day we realize we've yet to try percebes—goose barnacles—a local delicacy. At a restaurant in Vila do Bispo the waiter shows us how to squeeze the edible flesh from what look like sharp claws. They're salty, messy and addictively delicious.

Too soon, we cycle into Sagres, our final destination. At nearby Cape St. Vincent we look north from where we came and can only marvel at this coast, once the end of the known world, and today as naturally spectacular as ever.

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