

Riding through the amazing UNESCO sloped terraced vineyards of the Alto Douro Vinhateiro region, the oldest controlled wine region in the world.



CYCLING MYTHICAL PORTUGAL

WITH ITS SUN-SWEPT BEACHES, MEDIEVAL CASTLES, EXQUISITE FOOD, AND SPECTACULAR CYCLING, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO FALL IN LOVE WITH PORTUGAL.





THE WESTERNMOST COUNTRY IN EUROPE, PORTUGAL, was named the 2016 'Destination of the Year' by *Travel + Leisure* and it has also become a hotspot for cycling tourists thanks to its inviting climate, reasonable prices and cultural significance.

Lisbon is also famous for its Seven Hills. The maximum elevation is around 200m above sea-level, so it could be considered a climbers/ stitch-up paradise, but the overall cycling experience here is really top shelf. A word of caution; while the locale is stunning and you'll feel safe and comfortable here, riders must remember that with trams come tram lines, they are about the perfect size for a road bike tyre. Then add the cobbles - and they are everywhere.

If you're here in September you can participate in Subida à Glória aka the Climb to Glory, 17% over a tiny 265m! On this same street is the famous Tram 28 (similar to a funicular ride) which operates every day and is a must see when in Lisbon.

For something a little less steep, ride or catch the train west. Head toward the UNESCO town of Sintra. There you'll find Parque Natural de Sintra-Cascais and plenty of beautiful quiet roads and rolling hills. You can even stop at the Western most point of continental Europe - Cabo da Roca.

I was invited to Portugal to participate in the inaugural edition of Ride Across Portugal. A five day cycling event from the North to the South wherein riders would spend most of their time riding on the N-2, the Portugese equivalent to Route 66 in the USA. This 'mythical road'



starts in Chaves, about 12 km from the Spanish boarder and runs 750kms down to Faro, the southernmost city in Portugal. For years, knowledgeable travellers have ridden, walked or driven the N-2 through the most amazing natural scenery, picturesque villages and unbelievable local food and wine.

In the innaugural year, 30 riders were invited from around the world to participate in the event. Riders from the UK, Brazil, Belgium, Spain, Norway, Hungary, Australia and of course Portugal were on the start line in Chaves.

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The idea behind this event was to showcase Portugal, and that it did, visually and gastronomically. Each day we could clearly see the terrain alter from region to region. Some of the highlights from the various stages were riding through the amazing UNESCO sloped terraced vineyards of the Alto Douro Vinhateiro region, the oldest controlled wine region in the world. We rode along the Mondego River, the longest river located exclusively in Portugal. Riders saw James Bond like Goldeneye dams and rode to the geographical centre of Portugal near the village

of Vila de Rei. To get to this point, riders rode up one very steep 1.1km climb with an average of 8.3%, was this brutal side trip going to be worth it? Yes indeed, there we witnessed the magical 360 degree vista and it gave us another chance to sample some more Portuguese delights at yet another well catered rest stop.

Each rest stop, located every 50km or so along the route, is slightly different to the last, with fruit, energy bars, water, coke and nuts. Then there was locally crafted specialities, including bread, honey, "famous spring water", tarts and

ABOVE: The N2 crosses more waterways, on stage 4; this lake is the Albufeira do Roxo.

RIGHT: Descending through the forests surrounding the town of Pedrógão Grande in central Portugal.

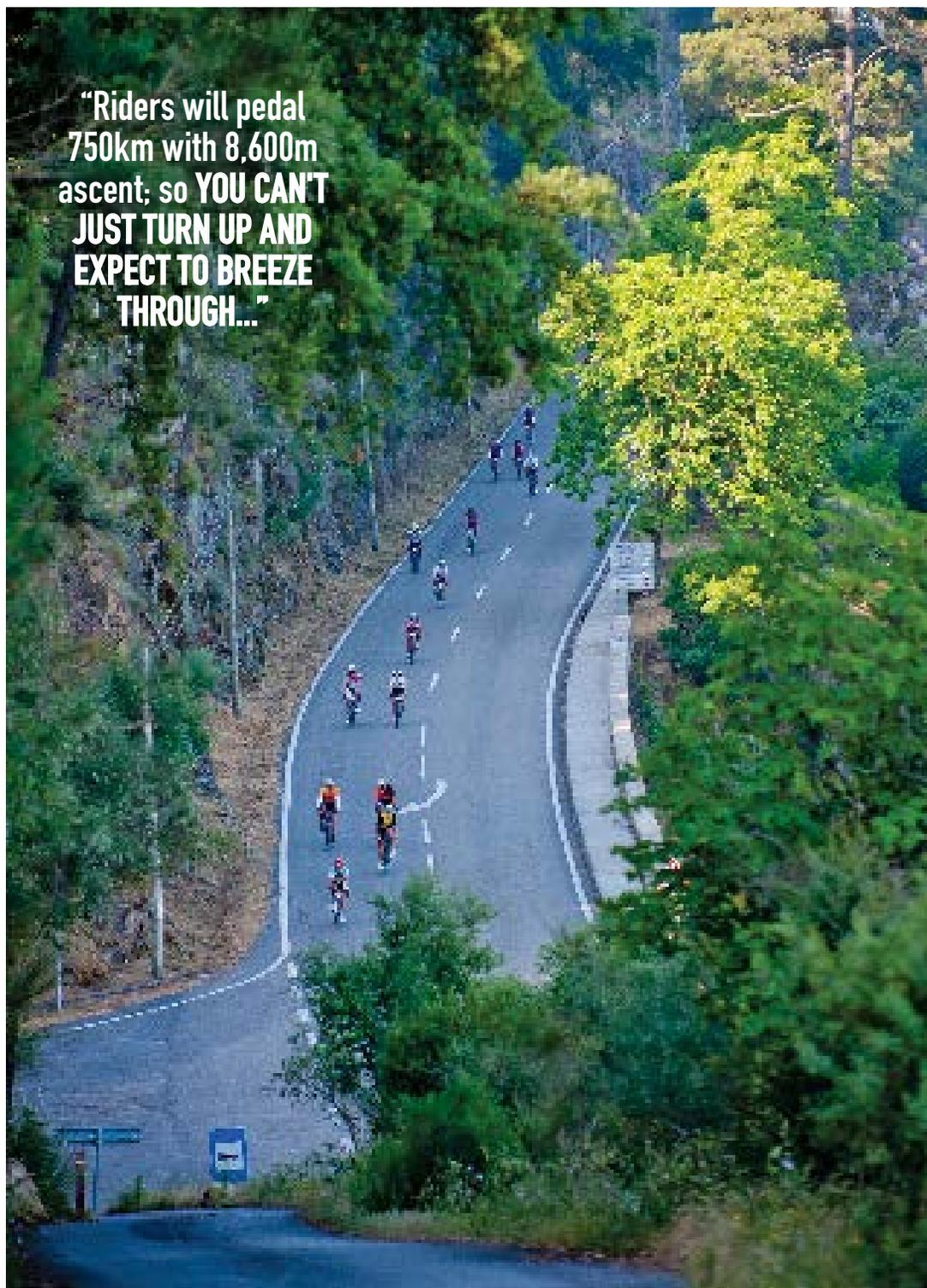
PORTUGUESE PASTRY

One of the highlights of visiting is to experience the taste sensation of one of the famous Portuguese tarts. I am sure you have heard or even tried one yourself but they taste different here. Go to the right store in Lisbon, you may have to wait in line but they are best served fresh out of the oven. Sprinkle some cinnamon and powdered sugar and you are sent to taste heaven! The most famous tarts in Portugal can be found at Pasteis de Belém. They are not in 'downtown' Lisbon, they are located around 8km from the centre and are more than worth the trip out and worth the wait in line.

Catch a pre-war, circa 1930's tram out and enjoy the journey, you will not regret the effort plus you can get some more culture in Belém by visiting the UNESCO Jerónimos Monastery and then the tower of Belém.



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pastries, deep fried cod balls, wine and Spumante plus hams and cheeses. We were treated to daily lunches and dinners and each afternoon and night we were spoiled for choice, fish, meat, pasta, rice, soups, desserts and again specialities of the region; a fine way to replenish the stores after a tough day in the saddle.

The local councils really got behind this event and we regularly saw the local Mayor at the various stops as well as welcoming us at the finish line.

To give you an idea of how tough this ride is I might compare it with the Haute Route (HR). We

have participated in the HR since its inception in 2011. The HR is a seven day cycle-sportive 'The Toughest and Highest Cyclo-Sportives in the World' they offer races through the Pyrenees, Alps, Dolomites and Rockies. On average each HR is seven stages, 900km with 20,000m of ascent. However, the Ride Across Portugal is not trying to be a HR. They want to offer an event that is still a challenge, yet possible for riders of all abilities to complete. Riders will still have to pedal 750km with 8,600m ascent; so you can't just turn up and jump on their bikes for the first time and expect to



LEFT: Lunch in the shade in Pedrógão Grande at the end of stage three.

BELOW: Finishing stage 1 in the medieval city of Viseu in the hills of Beira Alta.

THE ROUTE

STAGE 1

173 KM / 2800 M (ascent)
Chaves to Viseu

STAGE 2

148 KM / 2150 M (ascent)
Viseu to Pedrógão Grande

STAGE 3

125 KM / 1430 M (ascent)
Pedrógão Grande to Montargil

STAGE 4

163 KM / 1140 M (ascent)
Montargil to Albernoa

STAGE 5

148 KM / 1080 M (ascent)
Albernoa to Faro



breeze through the event. As always, the fitter you are, the more fun you will have.

While not officially a race, there are timed sections on each day's stages. They range from 4km through to 20+km, some are flat while others are climbing sections. Some riders may take it easy through non-timed sections, saving themselves for the timed kilometres while others just ride consistently through to the end. The secret as with any of these types of events is to find a bunch which has the same mentality as you and with the same level of ability and stick with them. Riding for four to six hours is always much more pleasurable if done in a bunch.

It is not just the unique foods and terrain which made this event stand out. It was mandatory for riders to carry a GPS. Having one with maps was crucial, such as a Garmin 1000. The day's course was signposted but not heavily. Yes, riders were primarily following the N-2 but in some cases we were going through tiny villages with left and right turns. Having a GPS with maps alleviated any concerns about getting off course. The GPS was

also critical for your timing on each stage. After each stage riders handed over their GPS and the files were downloaded. This is how we were ranked on each stage. Riders also had to carry a tracker, this was a safety feature for the event put in place by the ride organisers.

We're planning on attending again in 2018, offering an 11 day tour which will include entry to the event. Riders will come into Lisbon a few days, staying at a majestic five star Palace. We will have a chance to sample Lisbon and get a few rides in, including Sintra to shake away any jet lag. We then head north up the coast to sightsee and ride through some more spectacular scenery. Once the five day event begins, our team will have support vehicles en-route and our own dedicated mechanic and massage to look after our riders. When finished in Faro, we will spend one night relaxing before heading back to Lisbon for our final night in the Palace. **BA**

For more details on the tour, head to twowheeltours.com.au or email us at info@twowheeltours.com.au