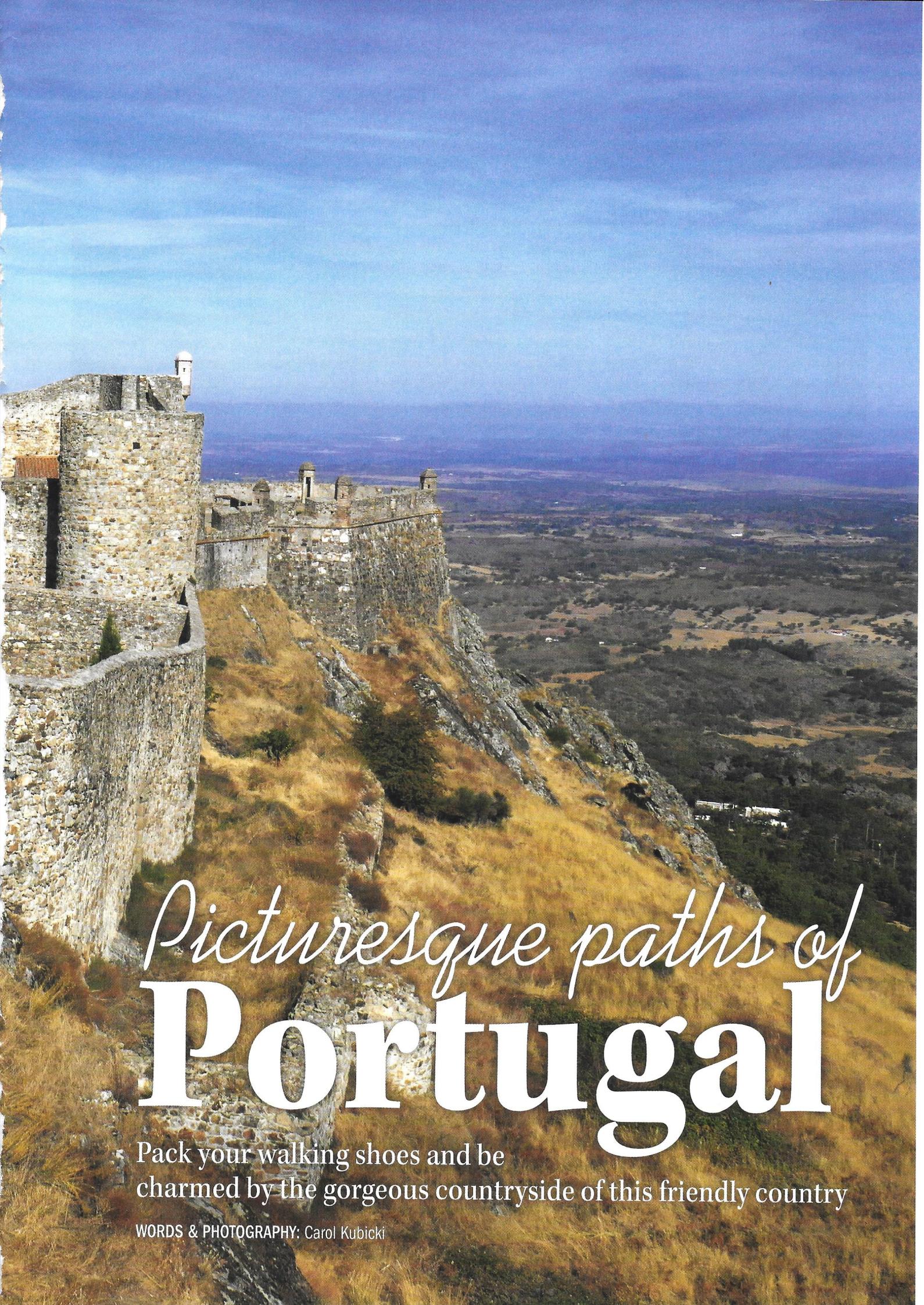




The castle walls in Marvão hug the perimeter of its hilltop



Picturesque paths of Portugal

Pack your walking shoes and be
charmed by the gorgeous countryside of this friendly country

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



Carol Kubicki...

...and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

ABOVE Looking over the rooftops of Castelo de Vide from its castle tower

INFORMATION

 campingkeyeurope.com
 acsi.eu

Portugal might look like a small country on the map but it packs in variety with mountains, castles, captivating villages, handsome cities and a stunning coastline. The Portuguese people are friendly and welcoming and they make excellent wine and delicious cakes – no wonder we love it there!

On this trip we planned to travel from north to south and explore the gorgeous countryside on foot and bicycle, the best pace at which to see this laid-back country.

The northern Peneda-Gerês is Portugal's only national park. This mountainous area, where nature and traditional architecture overlap, is scenically beautiful. Here are tree-covered slopes, granite farming villages that tumble down hillsides and long-horned barrosã cattle grazing on high meadows. Cobbled lanes lead to stone-faced terraces that flow along the contours of the hills, dotted with hay and corn stacks.

Entre Ambos-os-Rios, only 12 miles from the Spanish border, is well placed for walks that unearth the story of farming among these hills. Generations of backbreaking work created the terraced fields for corn, with vines grown on granite pergolas around the boundaries, the dripping black

grapes encouraging us to reach up and taste the sweet fruit as we pass.

Near the high village of Germil we found a wolf trap: a V-shape of walls running down the hillside enabling farmers to funnel a trapped wolf into a pit. In the shady lanes of Sobredo, we discovered traditional cork and thatch beehives and tall hayricks that looked like something from the cartoon, *Scooby Doo*. I imagined them shuffling behind us every time we looked away.

The area's iconic farm building is the *espigueiros*. When corn was introduced to Portugal 300 years ago, it transformed the Peneda-Gerês as the cobs could be stored through winter in *espigueiros*. Many of these three or four-metre-long structures are over 200 years old, with slatted sidewalls allowing air to circulate and stone toadstool-shaped supports to keep vermin out. What appear today to be decorative buildings are eminently practical and they are everywhere. The village of Sistelo has attractive examples filled with colourful fresh corn cobs.

With clear bathing pools in the river on the ascent, caramel-coloured barrosã on the high plateau and spectacular views, the walk to the isolated village of Ermida



BELOW LEFT A section of the Geira Roman Road, which stretched from Portugal into Spain

BELOW RIGHT Thatched beehives can be seen in the Peneda-Gerês

was another fantastic excursion. Ermida is beautifully situated among the mountains and the village is a labyrinth of streets that are the haunt of cows, cats and sleepy dogs in the afternoon heat. We continued on walled cobbled tracks to Bilhares. Crickets bouncing around us and lizards darting over rocks, a bubbling stream and large, shady, sweet chestnut trees made this pleasant walking.

The Peneda-Gerês is more rugged around Campo do Gerês and there are plenty of waymarked trails. The Eagle Trail climbed to a col with glorious views and a true sense of being among the mountains.

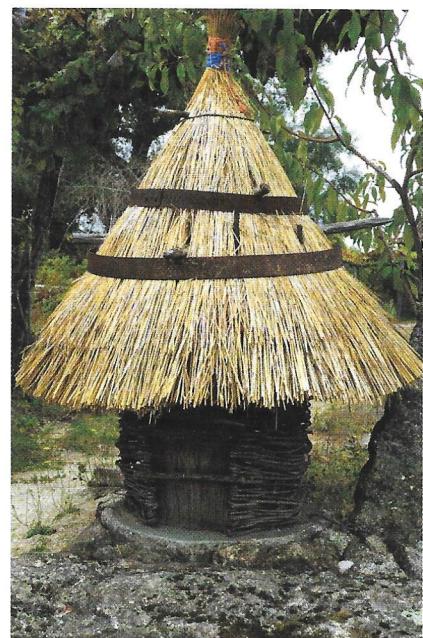
After an arduous descent through fruiting strawberry trees and flowering heather, we reached the Geira Roman Road. Constructed from large granite boulders, here the road follows the reservoir shore with views to rugged peaks. The path opens

out at a collection of inscribed Roman milestones. We stopped to watch colourful two-tailed pasha butterflies before climbing to the charming village of Assento, where we relaxed under vines in a wine bar.

After cycling from Arco de Baúlhe on an old railway line (an *ecopista*) and visiting the town's charming railway station museum, decorated with beautiful tiling, we took the scenic road from Amarante to the River Douro, stopping on the way to take in the view and impressive vineyards.

Around us were steep hillsides covered in snaking rows of green vines, dotted with white villas. Below the wide river was busy with boats. On the roads were trucks loaded with grapes and minibuses crammed with tired workers.

The River Côa, a Douro tributary, held onto a secret for millennia. In this valley are 5,000 etched animal figures on rock faces, ➤



Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our second Devon Conversions 'van. At 5.3m we think it's enormous and, with a bathroom, also luxurious



2015 Devon Tempest

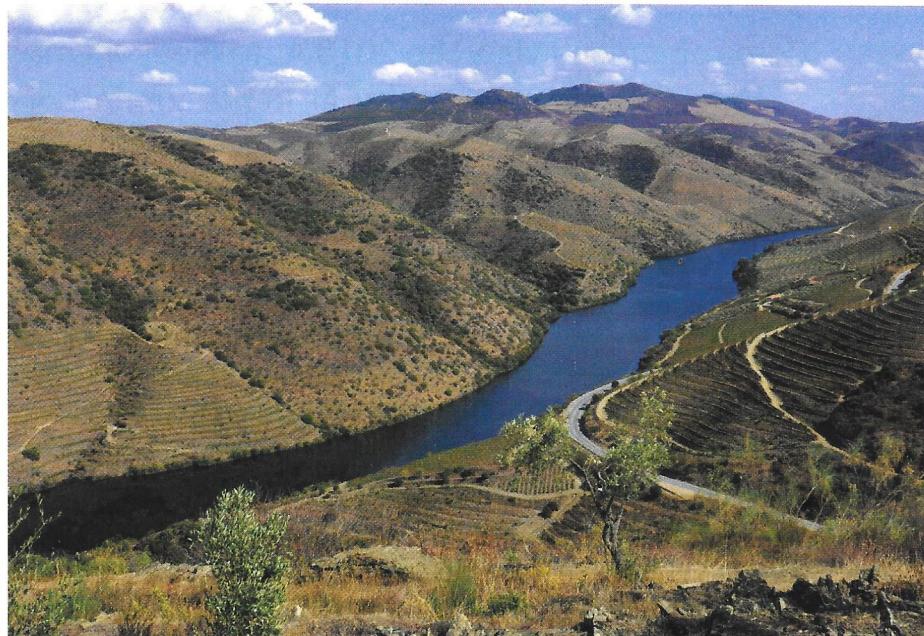
THE JOURNEY

We travelled from Salford via the Portsmouth-Bilbao ferry and spent 40 nights in Portugal from mid-September to late October as part of a longer trip via Spain. We drove 1,633 miles in Portugal alone

3,520 miles

THE COSTS

Fuel average 34mpg (€523)	£470.95
Ferry Portsmouth-Bilbao return	£768
Site fees (€497.59)	£448.08
Attractions two adults: Côa Valley rock art guided trip, Côa museum, Conimbriga, Marvão Castle, sand sculpture festival, Capela dos Ossos, Évora cathedral tower, Forte da Graça, Lagar-Museu do Palácio Visconde d'Olivâ, Museu Aberto and Centro de Ciência do Café (€112.80)	£101.97
	Total £1,788.60



TOP TIPS

Driving up to **Piódão** is worthwhile and the best road to get there is the EM508 from Cedeira; other routes are single-track and badly maintained. There is a discount if you stay at **Camping Quinta das Cegonhas** and at **Quinta do Pomarinho**.

TOLLS

If you enter Portugal on a motorway there will be an EASYToll machine within a few miles of the border where you can buy a 30-day ticket using a credit card, which links to your number plate and automatically deducts tolls.

Another option is the TOLLCard (from post offices and motorway services), which is pre-loaded with set amounts and needs to be activated by text message.

 portugaltolls.com

created by artists with quartz implements up to 20,000 years ago. The Côa rock art was hidden until the 1990s when it was discovered during preparation for a dam, which was then abandoned.

Today, only guided visits are allowed in this scenic valley and we had arranged to meet Marco to see the Canada do Inferno sites. In the stifling heat we descended to different engraving sites of horses and aurochs. Marco traced the faded images, many overlapping, and explained they would once have been visible from across the river. The indelible drawings and Marco's enthusiasm and knowledge built a connection across the eons.

The nearby town of Mêda has a good municipal campsite and walks to the neighbouring villages of Marialva and Longroiva. Slivers of quartz glint in the sunshine on the sandy tracks winding through almond and olive groves and below granite crags.

Marialva is reputedly named after a pretty Moorish princess who was cursed by a witch and given goat's feet. She eventually threw herself from the castle tower. We had our picnic in the shade of this tower looking over cultivated fields, the swooping antics of crag martins taking my mind off the princess' sad tale.

The Serra de Estrela mountain range in central Portugal is a protected area that has plenty of craggy drama and includes Torre, the highest point on mainland Portugal at 1,993m (6,539ft).

Manteigas is in the heart of the Estrela, a warren-like town magnificently situated at

one end of the stunning 13km-long (8-mile) Zêzare Glacier Valley and we stopped to buy some local tangy sheep's cheese. Above the valley, we walked in the dramatic rock-bound landscape dotted with natural pools.

Hearing a bell we spotted a lone goat and tiny kid sauntering along a gully. We watched anxiously as the inquisitive kid disappeared from sight in the jumble of rocks and the distraught mum searched the hillside, constantly bleating. We dithered over helping to search and were relieved when the two were eventually reunited.

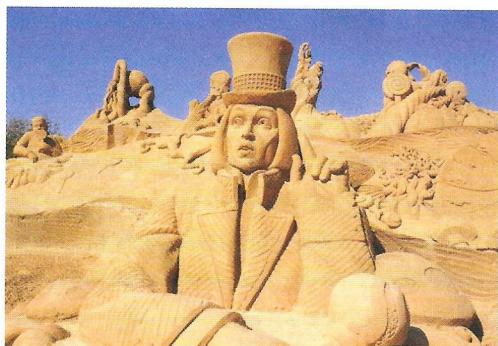
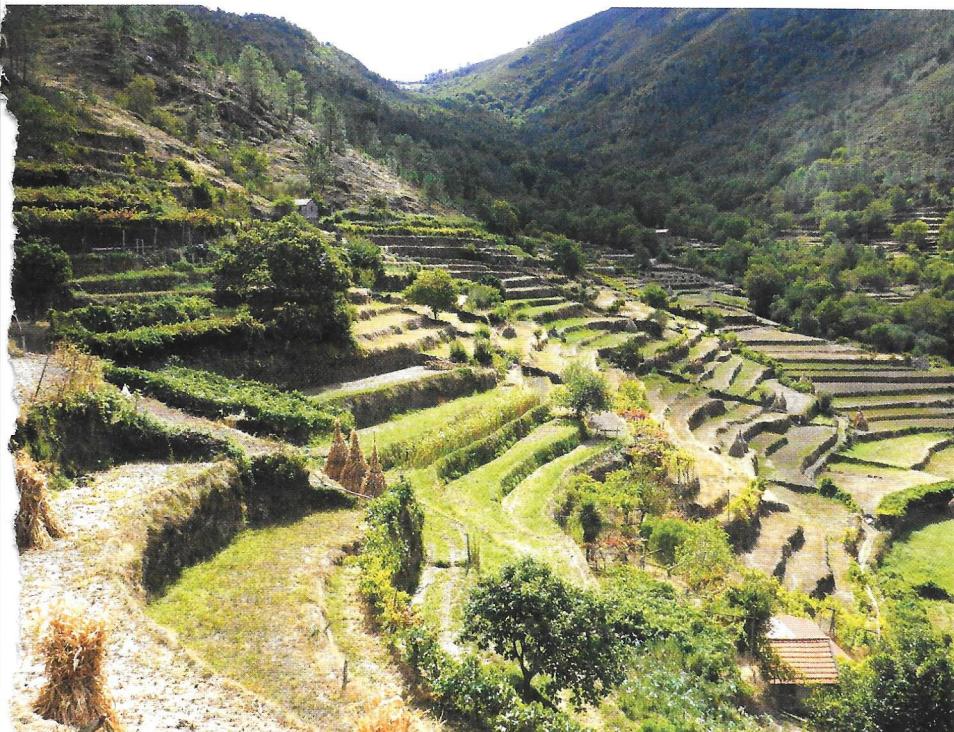
The well-organised Quinta das Cegonhas campsite has leaflets for a dozen local walks in the Estrela. My favourite was a varied walk to Folgosinho, Portugal's second highest village. We climbed through grassland to Gravanho, a 948m (3,110ft) high peak with wide views over the plains, before contouring through sweet chestnut and pine to Folgosinho.

In the tidy village the most activity was at the communal wash house, where two women chatted over their laundry. We descended on stony tracks between terraces of apple, fig and walnut trees and passing an old tungsten mine.

South of the Estrela is the mountain village of Piódão. We took the 'van on the single-track and potholed road from Vide that was only passable because no other fools were using it (there are better routes).

The houses of Piódão are tightly packed into the hillside, uniformly built from local chestnut-brown schist slate and punctuated with highlights of bright blue paintwork. The meandering slate alleys and steps are ▶

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Painted tiles (azulejos) at Arco de Baúlhe railway station; the River Côa valley; the espigueiros of Sistelo with fresh corn cobs



ABOVE CLOCKWISE The terraced fields around Sistelo; an iconic windmill near Serpa; the Johnny Depp sculpture at Sand City is just one of the intricately made figures

delightful to explore and plenty of walking trails start from the village.

After a few days of culture in the city of Coimbra and at the Roman town of Conímbriga, we returned to rural Portugal. The landscape changed dramatically after we crossed the River Tagus (Rio Tejo). The sinuous roads and stone houses gave way to a flatter landscape with straight roads and whitewashed buildings.

We were heading for the Serra de São Mamede near the Spanish border, where hills emerge from the plains. We struck lucky when Dolf, who owns the Castelo de Vide campsite, almost overwhelmed us with walking guides.

The weather was unseasonably hot for October (over 30°C) and we chilled at this peaceful campsite. We watched a little owl hunting over the fields, deep orange sunsets and night skies full of stars. In the evenings we strolled to the nearby Sobral dolmen in an isolated field, one of many in this area.

With Dolf's guides in the rucksack, we headed out walking. Walled tracks by scattered farms and cork oak trees took us on to the São Paulo ridge. Here we were rewarded with spectacular views over Castelo de Vide and its castle.

Continuing uphill we reached a picturesque chapel and spring before picking up medieval cobbled lanes downhill to Castelo de Vide, where white and yellow houses line steep and cobbled streets. I was enchanted by the medieval ambience of the

walled town and the view over the rooftops from the castle tower. We found the tiny synagogue museum and heard the sobering stories of Jews who had fled from Spain.

Dolf booked us a taxi to the village of Marvão, perched on a lofty escarpment. After exploring the castle and walls, we headed out on the well-signed route back to Castelo de Vide, which wound precipitously down a boulder track. Losing sight of Marvão, we had far-reaching views across olive groves and vines peppered with white farmhouses. On granite outcrops we could catch the breeze and we rested at fountains, refilling our water bottles.

Fóia, at 902m (2,959ft), is the highest point of the Serra de Monchique in the southern Algarve region. Although the summit is cluttered with buildings and telecommunication facilities, it is a great viewpoint over the coastline.

We hiked downhill, enjoying sweeping views and the shade of fragrant walnut trees. Contouring around the hill, we stopped for a beer before tackling the strenuous path back to the top, arriving among the car-driving tourists dripping with sweat. You can overnight on Fóia and we seized this outstanding opportunity to look down on the sun setting over the Atlantic and more star-gazing.

Picota is the second highest Serra de Monchique peak and we enjoyed the shady and cool woodland ascent from the market town of Monchique. The broad ▶

WALKING ROUTES

Routes (in English) in the Campo de Gerês area can be bought from the Ethnographic Museum just outside Campo de Gerês or downloaded from

 cm-terrasdebeouro.pt/rede_trilhos_pedestres

Leaflets for marked walking routes in the Serra da Estrela are available from tourist information offices in Manteigas, Gouveia or Covilhã. Each office only seems to have information for their area, rather than the

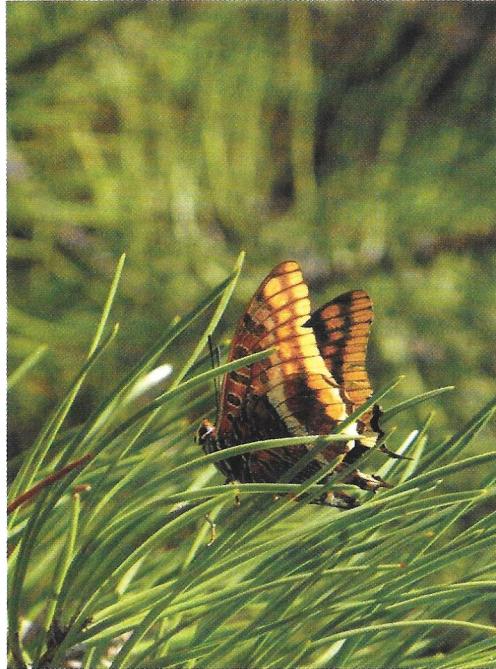
whole park

 natural.pt

More walking route websites

 walkalgarve.com and

 wiportugal.org



mountaintop is a granite slab with views over the trees to Fóia.

After staying in Alvor and an entertaining visit to Sand City near Pêra, with hundreds of huge sand sculptures, we headed north to the Alentejo. We visited the Roman city of Évora, handsome Beja and, my favourite, Serpa, which has more cafés than the 15,000 residents can surely need, giving it a relaxed and laid-back atmosphere that encourages visitors to wander its winding streets of white-washed houses, explore its castle and aqueduct and maybe walk through the olive trees to the River Guadiana.

All this walking calls for fuel and one of the bonuses of touring Portugal is the variety of local cakes. Serpa's delicious *queijadas* (curd cheese tarts), Évora's surprisingly scrumptious *pastéis de feijão* (made with beans) and the ubiquitous *pastéis de nata*, with crisp pastry and creamy custard filling, all accompanied our daily coffee perfectly.

We hung around Elvas near the Spanish border, joining 'vans parked alongside its striking medieval aqueduct and followed the line of the aqueduct to the zigzag of walls of this fortress city.

Exploring the old town we found the Igreja das Domínicas octagonal chapel, with medieval tiling and columns painted with delicate leaves and flowers.

From the castle with Moorish origins, we walked down meandering streets to the English Cemetery, a peaceful green haven remembering soldiers who died in the Peninsular Wars. Elvas is a real gem and

justifies its World Heritage status.

We then had to reluctantly leave Portugal but know we will be tempted back by its network of little-used pastoral tracks radiating from scenic villages that provide plenty of opportunities for walking, as well as its diverse wildlife, stunning architecture and engaging history. 

ABOVE LEFT A two-tailed pasha butterfly resting on pine needles

ABOVE RIGHT The charming white and yellow houses of Castelo de Vide

WE STAYED AT

As this is a very long list, we've abbreviated the information below. To get full details of address, open dates and prices, head for motorhome.ma/MMMPortugalTour

Camping Lima Escape, Entre Ambos-os-Rios  lima-escape.pt/en

Campismo Arco Unipessoal, LDA, Arco de Baúlhe  eurocampings.co.uk

Parque de Campismo Municipio de Mêda, Mêda  cm-medida.pt/diretorio/parque-de-campismo-municipal

Camping Quinta das Cegonhas, near Gouveia  cegonhas.nl/en

Camping Toca da Raposa, Meruge  toca-da-raposa.com

Aire at Parque Verde do Mondego, Av Ines de Castro 40, 3000 Coimbra

Quinta do Pomarinho, Castelo de Vide  pomarinho.com/pt

Elvas Aqueduct car park, N372/N246

Parque Rural Vale da Carrasqueira Camperstop, Monchique  campingvaledacarrasqueira.com

Parque Campismo de Alvor, Portimão  campingalvor.com

Algarve Motorhome Park, Silves  algarvemotorhomepark.com/en

Parque de Campismo Municipal de Serpa, Serpa  parquecampis.moserpa@cm-serpa.pt

Parque Markádia, Alvito Odivelas  markadia.net

Orbitur Parque Campismo de Évora, Évora  orbitur.pt

Camping Os Anjos, Campo Maior  campingosanjos.com/en