

Touring Portugal

Story and photos by Dan D'Ambrosio

Last year I turned 50. To help ease the pain, my wife Alice and I flew to Portugal for a 12-day, 400-mile, self-guided tour that would take us from Sesimbra on the Atlantic Coast just south of Lisbon to Vila de Sagres, the southernmost point on the spectacular Portuguese coast.

At Sagres on a promontory jutting dramatically into the Atlantic and towering hundreds of feet above its surface, Henry the Navigator, according to legend, trained the 15th-century Portuguese sailors whose heroic journeys of discovery still inspire their countrymen today. The notes for our trip, supplied by Blue Coast Bicycles, the company that arranged our route and lodgings, mentioned Henry's "historic sailing school" at Fortaleza Sagres, the ancient fortress on the promontory. An earthquake in 1755 severely damaged the fort, but remnants, including an imposing outer wall, still stand. As we would learn, however, nothing of the school remains, perhaps because there never was a school at all.

At the very least, the exact location of Henry the Navigator's school on the promontory is unknown. But, to make matters worse, the person manning the entrance to the Fortaleza insisted there had never been a school at all in the sense of a structure with a roof and walls. Henry's "school" was not a building, she said, but simply an idea — the power of a shared obsession among Henry and his navigators to learn what was beyond the ocean's horizon.

Adding credence to the notion that the school is simply a myth is the undisputed fact that the voyages of discovery Henry sponsored left not from Sagres, but from

Lagos, a bit farther east along Portugal's coast. Later explorers like Vasco da Gama, the first sailor to reach India from Portugal, opening up a lucrative trade that helped make Portugal a world power, would leave from Belem in Lisbon, where Alice and I also stood gazing down the

the world.

It's a place to worship the sea and to trust your fate to its vagaries. In fact, long before Henry ever set eyes on Sagres, ancient mariners would come to this spectacular plateau of land to make sacrifices to their gods before braving the Atlantic in their primitive boats. I tried to imagine the desolation of this place in those pre-historic times and the courage it took to launch a journey into the unknown in a small boat on a very big ocean. Our little bicycle trip paled by comparison. But we felt pretty good about getting here under our own power nevertheless.

I picked Portugal as our destination for a couple of reasons. First, it's the antithesis, climatically and culturally, of the Netherlands, where we had toured in 2007. The Netherlands were cool, windy, and rainy just about every day when we were there in late spring. To add insult to injury, the previous two months had been unusually warm and sunny, as we were reminded regularly by the amused Dutch.

In Portugal, every one of our 15 days was sunny. A few of them were hot — very hot — pushing us to our physical limits. When you're fairly certain you could make a nice cup of Earl Grey with the water in your water bottle, it's hot.

Second, I was drawn to Portugal because of its status as the poorest nation in western Europe with a per capita gross domestic product that was just 65 percent of the average in the European Union in 2008. Portugal fell behind Cyprus, Greece, the Czech Republic, Malta, and Estonia last year in terms of individual purchasing power. I figured it would have a different feel than the other European countries we



MAP: CASEY GREENE

Like the great Navigator, two cyclists are captivated by Portugal's coastline

had toured, the Netherlands and Italy.

It did. Portugal is the only country we've toured so far where we've seen a horse-drawn cart clip-clopping down the back road we were riding, carrying a weather-worn farmer who looked as if he could fit right into the 19th century without changing a thing. In the many villages we rode through, the older generation seemed to stand watch over a vanishing way of life that was tied to the land and that contained timeless cycles of work and relaxation.

One day after a quiet ride through flat countryside under clear blue skies, we arrived in Senita Susana, where we could hear the clacking of storks nesting in the steeple of a whitewashed church and watch them flapping away on their errands. A small grassy area not unlike a village green in New England sloped down from the church, encircled with shade trees and flanked by the villagers' homes, which resembled row houses but were so much brighter and more cheerful. The Portuguese favor vivid blues, reds, and yellows to accent their whitewashed



noon. A few yards away, three more ladies watched as we exited the town, one of them smiling and chuckling as I snuck a shot with my digital camera while riding by.

Romantic and inspiring promontories bookended our trip to Portugal and left a lasting impression in my mind. The trip began with an early morning landing in Lisbon that took us past another spit of land jutting into the sea just past the wing of our airplane.

Normally I don't dwell on the flight that gets me to the country where the real fun will begin — our bicycle tour — but I was so struck by that sight outside my window after the overnight flight across the Atlantic that it is still one of the first things I think of when remembering the trip. The promontory appeared uninhabited and washed with bright sunlight. I could make out the white breakers hitting its shore, and I was filled with a sense of exploration and discovery. It was a place truly different than any I had seen before.

stucco buildings.

Beneath two trees, two ladies had arranged their folding chairs for easy conversation as they worked away on their knitting in the quickly warming after-

Alice and I had two days in Lisbon before Blue Coast Bicycles would pick us up for the trip to Sesimbra and the beginning of our tour, and we made the best of them, walking the city until we were

footsore. This fits the pattern we have established over the past three years, which I've discussed in these pages before, but which I'll revisit briefly because there are always new readers of this magazine.

We have settled on a style of touring we believe strikes the perfect balance between serendipity and pre-planning,

between being footloose and having a van hovering at your rear wheel, ready to scoop you up if you feel yourself growing tired or bored. We go on self-guided group tours, but the group consists of Alice and me. Our route and our overnight accommodations are pre-arranged, but we are also self-contained, and it is up to us to navigate our way along our pre-determined route.

Our first tour along these lines was to the Tuscany and Umbria regions of Italy in 2006, where we were given the typical cue sheets and accompanying maps. There were times when it was a challenge to match the written word on our cue sheets, or drawn line on our maps, to what we were seeing in the real world, but overall, navigation was pretty straightforward on that tour. The next year, we took a quantum leap into the future while on tour in the Netherlands as we were provided with a pre-programmed GPS unit on the handlebars of my bicycle.

I was uneasy at first about trusting our fate to the little black arrow on the GPS screen and to figuring out just how that little arrow related to the physical world around us, but once we got it down, about the second day, it was ridiculously easy. Navigation faded into the background as little more than a trivial concern.

Cue Portugal last year where we took a quantum leap backward. Arriving at the spectacular coastline at Sesimbra, where we caught our first glimpse of the Atlantic stretching to the horizon in a blue sheet far below the towering cliff we stood on, we were handed laminated 8-1/2 x 11-inch cue sheets with primitive maps and minimal directions for each of our day's rides.

What do you do on a bike trip with an

8-1/2 x 11-inch map that cannot be folded? First you try to fold it, curse briefly and colorfully, then strap it down whenever you can. And you stop a lot to consult it, even though it frequently doesn't seem to hold the answers you're looking for. It was the most unsuitable format we've ever seen a bicycle map take. When we brought the subject up with Blue Coast Bicycles, we were told that other customers had found the maps to be excellent, so there you have it.

That first day from Sesimbra, we found our way in fits and starts to the Hotel Quinta das Torres in Azeitao, the former palace of D. Maria da Silva and her husband D. Pedro D'Eca in the early 16th century. The palace was built as a square with a courtyard in the middle and towers in each corner topped by pyramids. We sat on the roof below one of the pyramids just outside our room and ate our crackers and cheese for dinner. We had discovered too late that the only restaurant in town was closed for remodeling. Fortunately we made it to the only grocery store in town minutes before it too would be closing and

gathered up our crackers and cheese and some fruit.

As charming as Quinta das Torres was, some aspects of it were definitely the worse for wear after nearly 500 years. But the spectacular *pousadas* we would stay in over the coming days of our tour were a different story. *Pousadas* are buildings of historical significance — old castles, churches, monasteries — that have been reclaimed as luxurious hotels. Although it's a concept that's likely to give a restoration architect heartburn, Alice and I were completely charmed by the *pousadas* with their swimming pools,

fine dining rooms, and elegant refitting of marble, wood, and stone complementing high-end and spacious rooms.

Refining our system over the years, Alice and I have settled on nice rooms as a reward we deserve at the end of a riding day, and I have to say it has been

easy to fall into the comfortable trap that accommodations with a triple-digit price tag afford. Competing with the *pousadas* for our affection in Portugal were lodgings known as *turismo rural*. As you have probably surmised, these are found in rural areas, but they

have all the comforts of home, particularly if you live in a million-dollar home.

Perhaps the best *turismo rural* we



Bike Friday Travel Truths #1

THE BEST WAY TO GET FROM A TO B.

When Guinness Book of Records' "Most Traveled Man by Bicycle," Heinz Stucke, set out to break another record, only one bike would fold to allow him to hop, skip, and jump between remote GPS coordinates; Bike Friday's Custom Pocket Llama. We figure that with 45 years pedaling under his chamois and no rest stop in sight, he must know something about getting from A to B ...

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stayed in was Herdade do Touril de Baixo. This large working farm sits on a plain overlooking the sea; it's located in the Alentejo region's natural reserve park on the Atlantic Coast known as Costa Vicentina. We spotted Herdade long before we reached it, riding across the expansive plain that dropped off into the ocean at its edge. It truly appeared as an oasis — with long tiled roofs, solid white adobe construction, and colorful accents.

After eating lunch outside on a patio surrounding a beautiful pool, Alice and I took a short ride down to the sea and the two miles of coastline belonging to the Herdade. There we found a hidden cove with a deep, sandy beach and a rocky pathway high above waves crashing dramatically against the gigantic boulders far below us. It was the kind of place you hate to leave, even as the road beckons.

The Alentejo is Portugal's breadbasket with expansive fields of wheat, endless groves of cork trees, and shining fields of sunflowers stretching to the horizon. We had seen wheat fields and even sunflowers before. But the sunflowers' gigantic yellow heads nod-

ded toward the sun in fields that stretched for miles. And we had never seen cork trees. The cork is peeled from the trunks of these ancient, gnarled trees, leaving behind a blackened naked trunk, but the bark grows back in a dozen years or so, making the trees a renewable resource.

We rode through mile after mile of



shady groves of cork trees, and indeed Portugal accounts for about half of all the cork harvested in the world. Cork is used to seal wine bottles, of course, but the Portuguese have found it's handy for many other uses as well. We saw everything from cork hats to cork book covers in Evora, the ancient Roman settlement in the heart of the Alentejo that was easily the most touristy spot we stayed on our tour. In the little village of Santiago do Escoural, we saw a truck stacked 15 feet high with layers of peeled cork, a sight so peculiar that it took me a while to figure out exactly what I was looking at. I pondered the sight long enough to prevent me from getting my camera out in time to get a decent picture as the truck passed by.

If the Alentejo is Portugal's breadbasket, it also feels about as hot as a bread oven. In Beja, 60 miles south of Evora, we stayed at a *pousada* in a former 13th-century monastery. An outdoor thermometer read 33 degrees Celsius (about 92 degrees Fahrenheit) as we rolled our bikes through a plaza surrounding the *pousada* in the late afternoon. We were told later that we were lucky it wasn't really hot yet and that temperatures regularly reached 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) or more

during the height of summer there. We were there in mid-June.

Two days earlier, we had just begun to feel the heat in Evora, where we saw the spectacular and well-preserved ruins of the Temple of Diana, built in the second century AD. Evora was headquarters for the Roman commander Quintus Sertorius from 80 to 72 BC and was an important military center in the Roman empire.

Our longest ride of the tour was from Beja to Santiago de Cacem, listed as about 89 kilometers on our itinerary, but well over 100 kilometers according to the computers on our bikes. Unfortunately, Alice's rear tire went flat toward the end of that ride, which is when I discovered the pump we had been provided was not really up to the task of reinflating the tire. We ended up walking about eight miles that day in



addition to riding close to 70 miles.

All tours have their challenging days. It's part of the charm. And when we returned to the spectacular Portuguese coastline at Porto Covo for the final 100 miles or so into Sagres — all the while with the sparkling blue Atlantic to our right — all was forgotten, thanks to Joao Lacerda of Blue Coast Bicycles.

When he learned of our travails on the ride from Beja to Santiago de Cacem, Joao offered to pick us up at the remote *pousa-*

da where we were staying and drive us to the next day's destination so we could have the day off. Although we appreciated his generous offer, we didn't want to spend the day in a car, so we asked Joao to take us to Porto Covo instead where the route returned to the coast. That way we would still get a decent ride in.

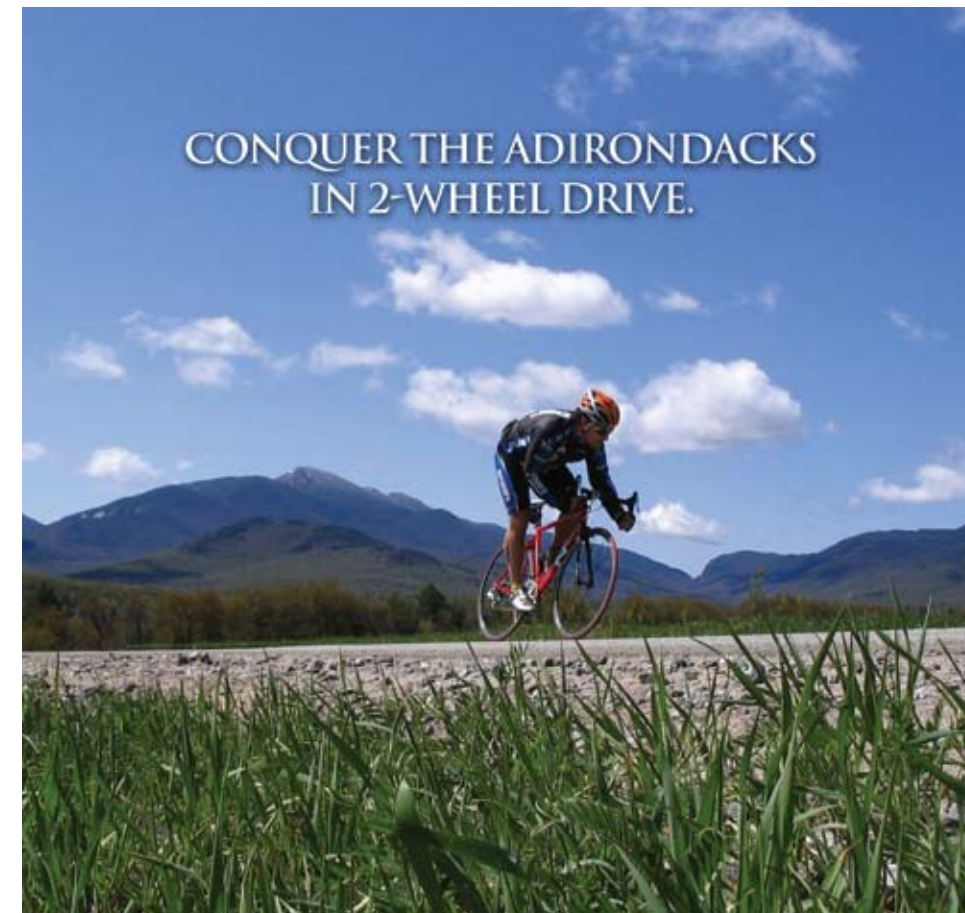
Once we reached Porto Covo, a charming fishing village, Joao bought us lunch and regaled us with stories of Portugal's history and of his experiences growing up in his family. By the end of lunch, our troubles the previous day were long forgotten, and we had much more insight into the Portuguese people. But Joao wasn't finished. At the end of the tour in Sagres, he and his wife picked us up and spent the day driving us back to Lisbon for our flight home. It was a vivid reminder of the kindness cyclists regularly encounter from Kansas to Katmandu and the perfect ending for our Portuguese adventure. **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a reporter for the Hartford Advocate. He's also a Ford man, loves the games of golf, jai alai, and bocce, and has an extensive collection of Burl Ives music. For more information about Blue Coast Bicycles, visit www.bluecoastbikes.com or call (888) 788-2942.

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