

A TENT WITH A VIEW

CYCLING SOUTHERN PORTUGAL

by Willie Weir



I remember a line from a Sunday school song in my youth.

"The foolish man built his house upon the sand."

The song didn't say anything about a tent. It should have.

I'd scouted out this campsite on a dune along the Alentejo coast of Portugal. The tourist guides will all send you to the southern beaches and coastal resorts of the Algarve. That's fine if you're on a package

beach vacation. But if you want dramatic wild scenery without the tourist crowds, the southwestern coast of Portugal is for you. Rather than hug the coast, the roads flirt with it. But when the road (sometimes unpaved) follows the rugged coastline, the views will leave you speechless. They're some of the most beautiful kilometers we've ever pedaled on earth.

When I returned to my wife Kat, who had stayed with our bikes by the road, I

announced, "It is going to be a lot of work, but it will be worth it!"

And even after dragging and carrying our bikes and gear a half mile through soft sand, Kat agreed.

There was not a cloud in the sky. A light refreshing breeze blew in off the Atlantic. The lights of a quaint seaside town glowed in the distance. We had found many amazing wild campsites during our bike journey, but this one topped them all.

We cooked a meal and shared a bottle of wine, then fell asleep to the sound of the surf far below.

About 4:00 AM the wind began to whip sand against the tent. A light rain quickly turned torrential, and strong gusts racing across the Atlantic now slammed into our portable shelter. The inside of our tent sounded more like a train. The tent stakes went flying. I zipped open the door and grabbed one flapping end of our rain fly and

held it down, my elbows buried in the sand.

A tent is not much more than a piece of nylon fabric with a frame. The same can be said for a hang glider. We were both laughing nervously while wondering if a strong enough gust could carry us with our tent, *Wizard of Oz* style, off the cliff and out to sea.

We held on for the good part of an hour before the wind and our nerves began to calm down.

We laughed about it over breakfast but

realized how foolish we'd been not to check the forecast.

Although our tent had felt flimsy and unstable on the dunes, we owed our experience in southern Portugal to our little yellow tent. Without it, our trip, which spanned two and a half months, would have been over in three weeks. Hotels, inns, and B&Bs are nice, but they're budget busters. That bag of material with poles and stakes is a magical trip extender.

We'd done our share of camping in northern Portugal, but had also stayed in hotels in order to explore the cities of Bragança, Porto, Coimbra, and Lisbon.

Southern Portugal is less populated and less traveled than the north, outside of the Algarve coast. But it has pristine beaches, oak forests, mountain outposts, and plenty of wide open spaces to pitch a tent.

We tend to like to wild camp rather than be limited to a square of dirt or grass with a number. One of our favorite sights was a farm/inn/campground run by a Dutch couple. It was conveniently located just five kilometers outside the charming city of Castelo de Vide near the Spanish border.

We had seen the vineyards in the north during harvest time. Now, late in October, the colorful grapevines in the south were still holding onto their leaves, but just barely. The air was crisp and cold in the shade and the sun gloriously warm but not oppressive.

Our tent site had a pastoral view with a stunning display of stars at night. It was possible to hike over the hills and arrive in Castelo de Vide for a lunch of succulent goat or sweet pepper pizza, followed by



coffee and a pastry and a walk around the narrow stone streets.

Back at the campsite, a neighbor pulled in and opened up her trunk to reveal homemade curry, soup, and chocolate mousse for sale at prices too good to pass up.

As we traveled from the mountains back down to the coast, we pedaled through vast stretches of cork oak forest. The bark is harvested every nine years, sliced and peeled away in sheets by trained foresters with special axes suited for the task. This doesn't kill the tree but leaves its exposed trunk a deep, rich red that glows with the autumn light.

Cork is a sustainable product. The prime cork forests of Portugal are protected by law. So drink plenty of bottles of wine with real cork stoppers — you'll be doing your part to save the cork forests of Portugal!!

The Alentejo region is also home to some of the largest bulls you will ever see. This is all the reason you need to keep from jumping a fence for a campsite. Better to knock on the door of a farmhouse and get permission than to risk wild camping with an angry 1,500-pound neighbor. I'm saying this from experience. When you hear the grunt or foot stomp of a bull in the pitch dark and you can't determine if that bull is on your side or the other side of the fence, you'll hit and sustain your target heart rate until sunrise.

But even with dramatic ocean cliffs,



Casa do povo. Women dressed in traditional Portuguese garb watch as community-center instructors teach children the local dance steps.

vast oak forests, and rolling vineyards, our encounters with locals were the standouts of the trip.

A gentleman approached us at a store in a small town, announced he loved being a tour guide, and spent the rest of the day showing us around. He took us to his favorite restaurant and his favorite art gallery. His favorite site was out of town, high above a river gorge, so he drove us there. We pitched our tent that night outside his summer home and he gave us a large jar of honey produced by his own bees.

On another evening and in another small town, we were having a hard time finding a place to camp. It had been raining hard so much of the countryside was a bog. There was a group of old men at the edge of town, all dressed in wool coats with wool caps. We asked about a possible tent site. One gentleman rambled on for three minutes, explaining in Portuguese exactly how we should get there. We understood exactly three words of his speech. His friend stepped up and agreed to show us the way.

He shuffled over to a little electric scooter and waved for us to follow him. This vehicle topped out at about four MPH. Our forward progress was so comically slow that it was difficult for us to stay vertical while following him. But some 20 minutes and a dozen turns later, we found ourselves at a cute little town park with tree cover and a water spigot to boot. He indicated

that he lived across the street so we should knock on his door if we needed anything. We didn't get his name, but he will forever be known as our four-mile-per-hour hero.

Early on a Sunday morning, we pedaled

through a small town a couple of days' ride east of Lisbon, scanning both sides of the street for a bakery or café. We passed a group of people dressed in traditional clothing — men in white shirts and vests,



The little yellow tent. Kat and Willie lucked upon a spectacular camping spot above a small Portuguese fishing village.

and women in long skirts and head scarves.

One guy glanced up at us and gestured for us to come over. It was subtle, a slight little wave of his hand.

We had so many questions but so few words in our Portuguese vocabulary. But two minutes later, a young woman appeared who spoke perfect English. She explained that this was a traditional culture group and we had arrived during their annual festival. They had just butchered

the pig, food was being prepared, and we were to be their guests for the rest of the day. She was to be our interpreter.

We were ushered into the *Casa do Povo* (community center) to taste some local liquor and homemade cookies. We'd be feasting later. But first it was time to pile into a waiting bus to go visit a traditional fishing community near the river.

Everything happened so fast. There were giggles and laughter and kids and

adults singing as the bus took us to within 500 meters of where we'd camped the night before.

After the tour, we arrived to a feast of pork, potatoes, and homemade bread followed by rice pudding with cinnamon. Bottles of soda and carafes of wine were passed around as the band set up and an accordion began to play. The stage filled with dancers. Skirts whirled about the stage as dapper men spun their partners.

Nuts & Bolts: Portugal

#1 The Alentejo Coast

This region south of Lisbon is not the easiest coastline to access in Portugal but is worth the effort. Be ready for some dirt roads and views that will stop you in your tracks. There are some public campgrounds, but also plenty of wild camping opportunities. If you are interested in a guided tour, Turaventur (turaventur.com) is a locally based/family owned company with 20 years of experience in the region.

#2 Castelo de Vide/Marvão

Castelo de Vide and Marvão are two beautiful towns near the Spanish border. Castelo de Vide has a larger population and thus more stores, restaurants, and street life. Better to stay there and do a day trip to Marvão. There is a wonderful little Dutch-owned farmhouse and campground about three miles west of Castelo de Vide (pomarinho.com).

#3 Évora

You can rarely go wrong with a university town, and Évora fits the bill. If you approach



from the north, you can pedal into the city on one of the first rail-to-trail projects in Portugal. Wander the streets. Listen to live music. Hang out in the town square. And, if you aren't too squeamish, visit the Capela dos Ossos (Chapel of Bones) created by a couple of monks in the 16th century.

#4 Ecovias Algarve

I'd always heard that the Algarve region in Portugal was beach resorts and concrete,

connected by too much asphalt. *Ecovias* (ecoviasalgarve.org) are bike routes that use already existing smaller roads and dirt paths to create an alternative route through the Algarve.

Steep unpaved sections may surprise some cyclists, but the views and landscape are worth the effort. The route is either marked by a blue stripe on the side of the road, a series of bike symbols on the pavement, or signage on unpaved sections. Warning: This route isn't complete. So you'll have to enquire about the section you want to pedal. Of course, if you get lost, you can always get help from a local — and those connections are what travel is all about.

#5 Lisbon-Transit Pass

You'll probably fly into Lisbon to begin your Portugal journey. Before you pedal off into the countryside, park your bike for a day and explore the city via public transportation.

Lisbon has a wonderful transportation system, including electric trolleys and funiculars. A day transit pass will only put you back about five bucks. And what a deal! Kat and I made it our goal to ride every trolley line, every funicular, and the-one-and-only *elevador* ... all in one day. You can read more at A Transit Nerd's Dream Day in Lisbon (yellowtentadventures.com/a-transit-nerds-dream-day-in-lisbon).

Other useful information:

- wikitravel.org/en/Portugal
- portugal-sport-and-adventure.com/cycling-portugal.html
- dmoz.org/Regional/Europe/Portugal/Travel_and_Tourism
- wikitravel.org/en/Portugal



The little kids joined, dancing in giddy circles.

I was on my second helping of pudding, and I glanced over to the other side of the room. There was the man I'd first seen — the man who had waved us over. He had a glass of wine in his hand and he held it up with a smile and a wink as to say, "You made the right decision to stop and join us, didn't you?" I held up my wine glass and my smile answered his question. (We learned later he was the mayor.)

There is not a museum, or cathedral, or historical landmark that can match the travel thrill of the unexpected social encounter.

We had traveled as far as we were going to go that day because the party went late into the evening.

A storm blew through after midnight, but there was no high-cliff drama. We hadn't even unpacked our tent. We had been given the keys to the guest bedroom at the volunteer fire department. As the rain beat against the roof, Kat and I laughed at our fortune. We weren't travelers that night. We were family. **AC**

Willie Weir (willieweir.com) has been writing for *Adventure Cyclist* for 15 years. His first book, *Spokesongs: Bicycle Adventures on Three Continents*, is now available in digital format.



On one of many, Kat rides a smooth lane through cork oak trees in southern Portugal.

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