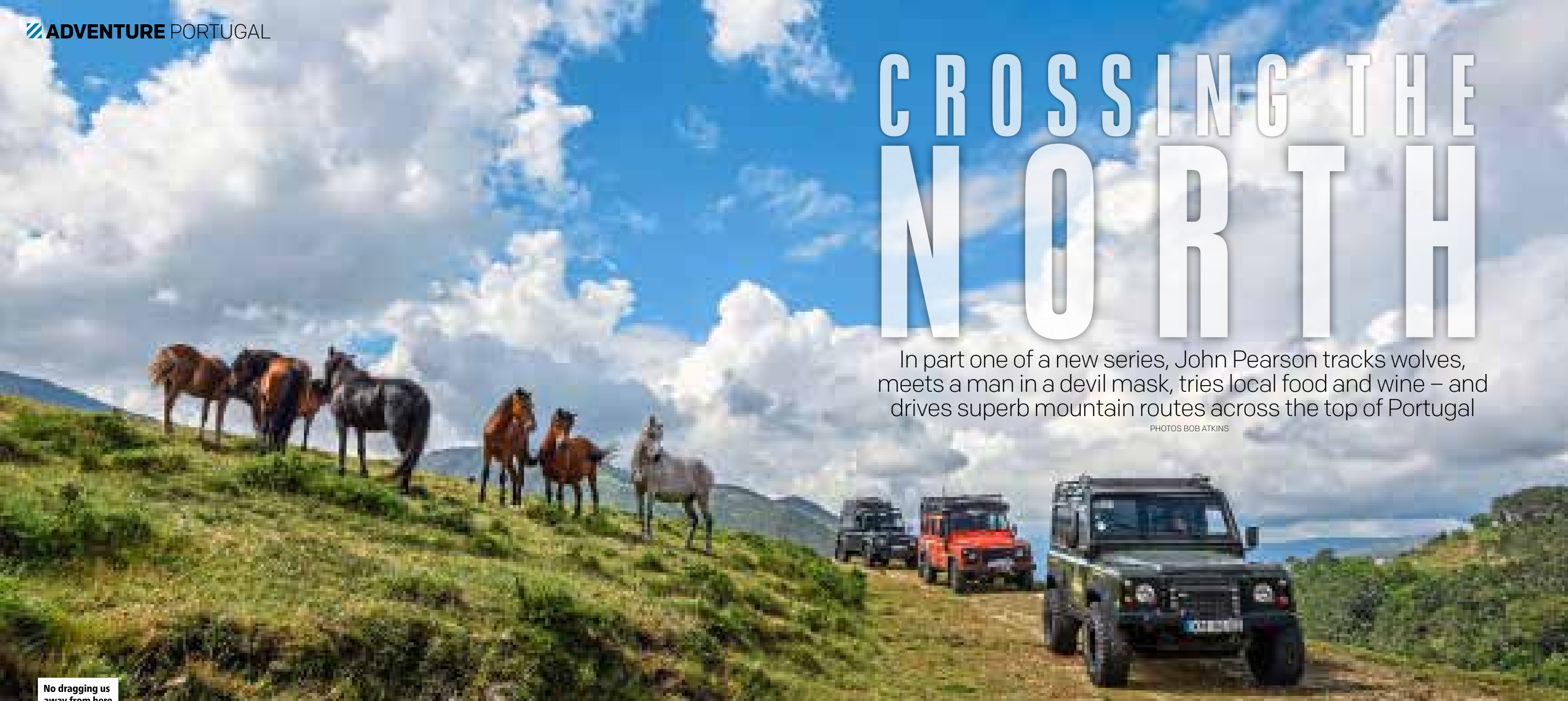


# CROSSING THE NORTH

In part one of a new series, John Pearson tracks wolves, meets a man in a devil mask, tries local food and wine – and drives superb mountain routes across the top of Portugal

PHOTOS BOB ATKINS



No dragging us away from here

I've been waiting a long time to make this trip. Horrible weather across Europe thwarted plans to do it in late 2019, after which the Covid pandemic curtailed all overseas adventures for a couple of years. But, finally, I was on the Brittany Ferries boat to Spain, followed by a drive to the ancient border-straddling town of Rio de Onor, where I meet my good friend José Almeida of Dream Overland and his black 90. José then leads us to our campsite for the night, the delightful Cepo Verde Camping, at Gondesende near the village of Bragança. The site is spread over terraces carved into the wooded hillsides, and has a superb restaurant where the owner Telmo Cadavez welcomes us to Portugal by serving up a veritable feast. I love Portuguese food, and this is a wonderful mix of locally produced smoked meats and sausages, fresh salad, pork and wild boar dishes baked in the oven and a selection of desserts – which leaves us absolutely stuffed and very happy to be back in the country. I'm in my ex-G4 Challenge 110, to which I've fitted an Alu-Cab Icarus lifting roof conversion

during the Covid-enforced break from travelling. I've used this new luxury penthouse for camping trips in Yorkshire and Scotland, but this is my first overseas trip with it. Over many years of travelling the world by Land Rover I've used ground tents and both hard- and soft-shell roof tents – which have all been great, but nothing can match the speed with which I can set up camp with the pop-top: release two catches, lift and climb aboard. José has fitted a Front Runner roof rack and roof tent to his 90 since I last travelled with him. We'll both sleep well. We're here in Portugal for almost three weeks on a series of adventures that will see us drive numerous tracks across the north, from east to west, then head down the spine of the country on a trek that will eventually take us over its highest mountain routes. I'll be continuing coverage of our progress in the November and December issues, hopefully inspiring you to give Portugal a try. Travelling through this beautiful country with José is a lot more than just driving mountain tracks from morning till night – as

enjoyable as that can be. We'll be learning about Portugal's rich culture and history en route – as well as sampling more of that famed food and wines.

**Day 1 Gondesende to Chaves, 89 miles**  
**Highlights:** Fantastic feasts, pagan costumes, mountain tracks

We're straight into the history and culture bit the next morning, in the heart of the city of Bragança, driving its cobbled streets and through narrow archways to the square in front of its medieval castle. We're visiting the 15th century Domus Municipalis, which is reputed to be Portugal's oldest town hall. Back in the day the local council met in the upper floor, sitting on flagstone seats under stone carvings representing their various 'clans'. Then we walk down the steep cobbled street to what looks like a tourist gift shop. But this is not a place to buy tacky souvenirs – as we can see from the rack out front that's displaying a number of carved devil masks. It turns out that the shop is devoted to the Caretos tradition,

an ancient Celtic ritual that's still practised in local villages – and the owner, António José Vale, is not only a participant, but he hand-carves the masks from foraged chestnut wood. The Caretos are groups of young men who put on the masks, dress in colourful clothing with rattles on their belts, then run through the village streets while playing bagpipes, shouting and hollering, 'robbing' villagers' wine cellars while attempting to impress the local single females. António readily dons his Careto jacket and mask for us and I can't help thinking that young ladies of a nervous disposition may find the concept more disconcerting than alluring. However, the beautifully made masks make great souvenirs, and I buy one. Back in the Defenders, we head north into the hills for our first tracks of the adventure. They're initially dusty, undulating farm tracks threading between cereal fields and around abundant chestnut trees. No shortage of wood for António's masks, then. As we loop up towards the border with Galicia the scenery gets more dramatic, while

The scenery gets more dramatic, while the tracks are steeper, twistier and rougher

the tracks are steeper, twistier and rougher. It rains a lot around here in the winter and there are some tricky washouts to negotiate as well as viciously sharp rocks to be wary of. We're mostly on loose surfaces, but occasionally pass through villages with cobbled, narrow streets. Our lunch stop is at the hamlet of Fresulfe, near a disused watermill and swimming area, where the river Tuela was dammed to provide water to turn the millstones. Lunch with José, or indeed most Portuguese people, is a lot more than just grabbing a sandwich. Out comes the picnic table, which is piled high with cold and smoked meats, a variety of cheeses, olives, fresh bread and fruit.

Absolutely stuffed, we're back on the tracks, which are lined by colourful wild lavender and foxgloves. We drop down to the village of Vinhais, then pick up a route through a pine forest south of the N103 – with monster views out to the south. Most of the going is straightforward, but we encounter a steep, loose climb that has me using the 110's diff lock for the first time on the trip. There's a series of hairpins, which José's nimble 90 skips around while my longer 110 makes harder work of them. Then we're into a demanding rock crawl followed by some tricky loose-surface climbs. At Tronco, a few miles east of the city of Chaves, we stop at the geological phenomenon that is the Pedra Bolideira. It's a massive boulder about 10 metres long that is so perfectly balanced that it can be easily pushed up and down. Which José and I do, because we can; it's weird to be moving something of that size and weight. We're overnighing at Quinta do Rebentão, a well-equipped campsite just outside Chaves. The restaurant is closed, so photographer Bob



Rocks and remote tracks near Ponteira



It'd be rude not to try the local beer and wine



Bragança's castle walls and cobbled streets



Caretos rituals still practised here



Just another stunning view, then

cooks spaghetti bolognese. Although several of our planned campsites have restaurants, we'll still be self-catering a fair bit.

**Day 2 Chaves to Campo do Gerês, 112 miles**

**Highlights:** Roman baths, Portugal's second-highest mountain

This northern part of Portugal is very green. That's because it rains a lot, which it's doing today. The tracks will be sloppy, so we take time out to visit Chaves, which was the spa town of Aquae Flaviae back in Roman times.

Crossing the Tâmega river over the well-preserved 16-arch Roman bridge we visit the huge Roman thermal bath museum that was opened in 2021. The local authorities started excavating the site to build an underground car park and discovered the Termas Romanas, the remarkably well-preserved baths that had been buried for 1700 years after a landslide.

For foodies, Chaves is renowned for its Pastel de Chaves (puff-pastry pasty filled with meat, bread and onions), Presunto (dry-cured ham)

and Folar de Chaves (like a savoury brioche with ham, bacon and chouriço spicy sausage baked inside). We buy all three, intending to have them later for lunch, but the temptation is too great and we've scoffed the pasties before we get back to the Land Rovers.

The rain has stopped, the sun is shining and the sandy terrain is drying rapidly. A stone block causeway takes us over the Tâmega and on to a number of tracks with spectacular views and big boulders scattered across the landscape. It's a great drive, climbing ever higher, and there are some technically challenging washouts to traverse.

Today's lunch stop is at a peaceful location, under some shady trees near the Capela Senhora dos Galegos (Chapel of Our Lady of Galicia), high in the hills west of Sarraquinhos. What's also fascinating about this location is that there's a sarcophagus carved into the top of a large boulder on a nearby hill. Someone was buried in a coffin carved into the hillside.

Back on the tracks we cross over a plateau at 3050ft, alongside fields of rye. It's a common crop in Portugal, due to its ability to thrive in

The temptation is too great and we've scoffed the pasties before we get back to the Land Rovers

drought conditions and poor soils, and is used for making the staples of bread and beer.

At Montalegre we detour north, close to the Spanish border to take a sinuous tarmac road to the top of the 5003ft Serra do Larouco – Portugal's second-highest mountain. This punishing climb is used in the country's most prestigious cycle race, the Volta a Portugal. As you can imagine, the views up here are immense, although the scene is spoiled by the triangulation point at the top, which is a scabby concrete structure.

Back on our journey west towards the Peneda-Gerês National Park, we're on to some dusty tracks that take us over 3800ft in an

area populated by electricity wind turbines. Then there's the village of Ponteira, which is surrounded by massive rock formations. It's like an explosion occurred in a rock factory.

Our overnight stop is at Parque Cerdeira campsite near Campo do Gerês, a quality facility with excellent toilets, showers and other amenities, plus a superb restaurant.

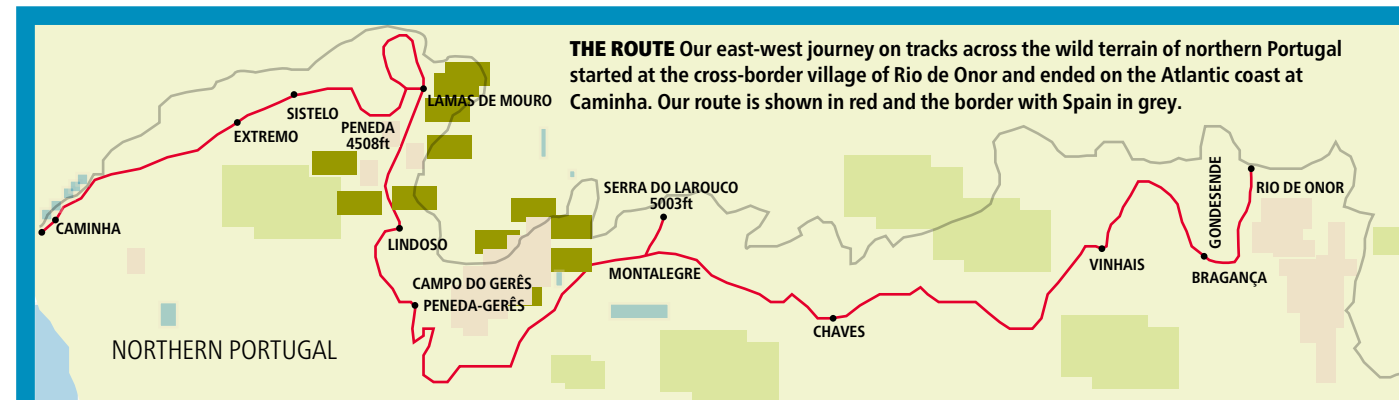
**Day 3 Campo do Gerês to Lamas de Mouro, 76 miles**

**Highlights:** Lindoso grainstores, Bob's burgers (not the sitcom)

The only unsealed track we can legally drive inside the Peneda-Gerês park is literally just out the back of the campsite. It takes us high

above the dam that flooded the village of Vilarinho das Furnas back in the 1970s – the drowned buildings spookily emerge when water levels drop. It's a spectacular drive, with massive rock formations and waterfalls.

Then there's a long road drive to the village of Lindoso. This is renowned for having more than 70 espigueiros – small individual grain







Even the tarmac roads are spectacular



Peaceful Lamas de Mouro site



Bob's Burgers; the star attraction



No wolves, but a great drive



Paws for thought: looks like a wolf got here first



The staircase to Heaven



Border crossing. Dover it ain't

PORTUGAL NEED TO KNOW

- **VISA:** UK passport holders can visit Portugal for up to 90 days without a visa. Note, since Brexit your passport is stamped when entering the EU, which can cause delays at customs.
- **CURRENCY:** Euro.
- **RIGHTS OF WAY:** Many tracks are legal to drive, but not in National Parks. Any private areas or routes closed due to fire risk will usually have a barrier across but check local restrictions, especially during summer when wild fires can be a serious, potentially life-threatening problem – as we've seen on recent news reports.
- **DRIVING:** Drive on the right. Most motorways have electronic tolls: these can be pre-paid online or at services booths – or get an Emovis tag (also usable in Spain) in advance so you can drive straight through.
- **CAMPING:** We camped at: Cepo Verde Camping Gondesende, Bragança (montesinho.com); Quinta do Rebentão, Chaves (campismochaves.pt); Parque Cerdeira, Campo do Gerês (parquecerdeira.com); Lamas de Mouro Camping (camping-de-lamas-de-mouro.negocio.site). Wild camping is not allowed.
- **FUEL:** Diesel is more costly in Portugal than Spain, so top up before crossing the border. As in the UK, supermarket fuel is the least expensive.
- **SUNSHINE:** Portugal averages 29 days of sunshine per month. Avoid the height of summer, especially in central areas, if 40°C is too hot for you. Best time of year to visit? There's a clear winner: the weather in spring is absolutely gorgeous.

What's green, but can be white, pink or red?

Vinho verde; the name translates as 'green wine', but it's basically a fresh young wine from the north-west of Portugal that's sold between three and six months after harvesting the grapes. White vinho verde still wine is the most popular, but there are also sparkling white, rosé and even red varieties. The red is traditionally drunk from a ceramic bowl, a malga de vinho.

We visited the Dom Salvador vineyard on the banks of the river Mouro at Peso in the Melgaço municipality, near the border with Galicia. We met the founder's son Jorge Salvador and wife Rosa Philip, who guided us through their three still vinho verde wines and one sparkling Espumante. These are all white wines, but Dom Salvador is planning to introduce a rosé to the range.

This is Portugal, so there's a mini feast of the usual cheeses, smoked and cured meats, sausages etc. And of course they serve it at the perfect temperature, which Rosa says should be 'seven to eight degrees. alvarinhodomsalvador.com

stores – that were built like a shanty town around its castle in the 1700/1800s and have survived to the present day. Designed to store maize and other cereals harvested from the local fields, these mostly granite constructions sit on mushroom-shaped pillars, designed to keep out rodents. 'Tourists often mistakenly confuse them with mausoleums, especially as each has a cross over the doorway,' says José.

Heading north, we visit the Santuário da Nossa Senhora de Peneda, which sits proudly on a rugged mountainside, a spectacular zig-zag staircase taking us up to the chapel at the top. Apparently every year in September it's a magnet for pilgrims who flock here to worship Nossa Senhora das Neves (Our Lady of the Snows), who allegedly appeared here during the middle ages.

We've been mostly on tarmac today, due to being inside the National Park, but tomorrow will see us out in some wild places – tracking wolves. Our campsite is at Lamas de Mouro, and is the nearest thing you'll get to wild camping without actually wild camping. It's an area of woodland but with showers and toilets (albeit in a scruffy building that could do with a lick of paint and the locks fixing on the toilet cubicles). The on-site cafe isn't open, so we're self-catering again – with Bob on chef

duties once again. After Bob's Bolognese a couple of nights back, we're now experiencing Bob's Burgers – no relation to the animated American TV series or 2022 film. They're hand-made and rather splendid. And that's the thing about camping, you don't have to rough it. With a few simple ingredients you can eat well, wherever you are.

Day 4 Lamas de Mouro round trip, 53 miles  
Highlights: Tracking wolves, wine tasting

It's exciting to spot wolf paw prints in the sandy track ahead. They're big – over three inches wide and four inches long – and the way those claws have dug into the sand makes you appreciate just what a powerful killing machine the wolf can be.

Iberian wolves were just about wiped out in Portugal during the 19th and early 20th centuries, due to loss of potential prey and from being exterminated by farmers to protect their animals. It was a brutal process, with the wolves being driven between converging high walls in a V-shape towards a deep pit – a fojo de lobo – where they were slaughtered. Fortunately, wolves are now a protected species here and, while numbers are small,

He says he can identify which part of a kill the wolf has been eating by the colour of the poo

they can be found here in the north – and we're out looking for them today. Our guide is João Ferreira, a naturalist photographer who has studied and photographed many wolves along with other species. He's not promising that we will see any of these shy animals, but tells us they inhabit the area we're heading to, close to the border with Spain.

João explains that wolves can be solitary creatures, 'but mostly they travel in pairs, sometimes in threes. The packs usually consist of seven animals, with a maximum of 14.'

Although a protected species, he says that farmers still occasionally illegally shoot them. 'They do get compensation from the state for animals killed by wolves – usually calves – but it takes time [to get the money].'

We're soon climbing to over 3700ft, with a spectacular cloud inversion in the valley

below. We're on the border now, which is simply marked by stones with E (Espanña) and P (Portugal) on them.

There's a herd of red deer on the horizon, and evidence that wild boars have been rooting around here, but no wolves so far. João surprises us by saying that it's common for deer, boars and wolves to be found close together in an area of dense broom. 'The wolves don't eat all the time – if they catch a big prey like a deer they won't eat for the next week, other than maybe a snack of a rabbit, rat or berries. Then a week later they go hunting again.'

He's excited to find some wolf poo, which he examines closely, as naturalists do. He says he can identify which part of a kill the wolf has been eating by the colour and consistency of the poo. 'They eat the organs first – liver and lungs – when the poo is dark, loose and very smelly.' This here is from the last stages of eating the carcass, and has animal hair and fragments of bone in it.'

We drive around a number of potential wolf habitats, but fail to spot any – although the poo and those prints on the sandy track confirm their presence. Maybe they're resting after a kill, keeping an eye on us from that large patch of broom by the trackside!

We're back at the Lamas de Mouro campsite for a second night, after visiting the Dom Salvador vinho verde vineyard (see panel, opposite page). It's a rainy evening, but we're dry enough sitting under my awning, and it's warm, with the temperature in the low 20s.

Day 5 Lamas de Mouro to Caminha, 85 miles  
Highlights: Sistelo terraces, the best 4x4 driving of the trip so far

The scenery is stunning as we skirt along the Branda da Aveleira glacial valley, before joining a rough mountain track, where we find a purposeful-looking 300Tdi 90 is waiting. José has arranged for Cláudia Fernandes of North Land (northland.pt) to show us around the area. Cláudia runs 4x4 guided tours and mountain walking trips throughout the region. She's a long-time Land Rover enthusiast and also has a Discovery 2 and Series III soft top on the North Land Fleet.

Cláudia takes us along a series of twisty, narrow tarmac roads to a spot high above a truly amazing phenomenon – the Sistelo terraces. These awe-inspiring terraces were dug by hand out of the mountainsides in the 17th century to provide increased flat





**Truly amazing Sistelo terraces**



**The going was tricky in places**



**Portuguese for cheers is *saud!***



**Verde nice: it's not just the wine that's green**

growing area for the locals' crops of maize and potatoes, plus animal grazing.

After leaving this breathtaking spectacle we take a steep, narrow cobbled road that climbs through numerous hairpins up to nearly 2500ft, where there are a few tumbledown granite buildings. This is Branda do Alhal, a 'branda' being a place where local farmers would bring their livestock and live for the summer months before descending again for the winter. A solitary existence indeed.

There's a heavy storm tracking along the valley, but we're heading indoors, for a lunchtime feast at the highly-rated Tasquinha Ti-Melia – a bustling, family-run tavern. It's all very traditional, with steaks from the local long-horned Posta de Cachena cattle and arroz de feijão, a rice and vegetable dish cooked in a three-legged cast-iron pot – called a pote. As part of the cultural dining experience José persuades me to try a sip of the local (red) green wine from a malga de vinhão bowl. Unlike the excellent white vinho verde, this does seem to be more of what's best described as an acquired taste.

It's time to say goodbye to Cláudia and head west along some mountain tracks that would probably provide yet more spectacular views if we weren't in the middle of a violent

thunderstorm. We can't see very much, but it's still a great technical drive, with the rocky tracks looking more akin to Scottish streams, with water rushing down them.

One really tricky bit has a slippery camber, where a combination of gravity and zero grip takes my 110 inexorably down into a deep, muddy washout. But gently does it, and we ease our way through. We're driving towards a town called Extremo, which seems rather appropriate in the circumstances.

Next there's a tough, loose rocky climb, followed by a similar descent and a push through a very overgrown section of broom.

Then, just like that, we're out of the storm and the tracks are bone-dry. Dry, but still rocky and technically demanding as we look across towards the river Minho estuary. That's where we're heading, to the coast at Caminha. But first there's the small matter of the steep descent on the tracks that will take us there. It's tricky going, with acute-cambered hairpins and some deep washouts to negotiate.

But eventually we can relax at our campsite, close to Praia da Foz do Minho beach on the Atlantic coast, and make plans for part two of this adventure in the next issue. This will see us cut back east before heading south down the spine of the country. I can't wait. **LRO**

## VISITING PORTUGAL WITH DREAM OVERLAND

It all started back in June 2011 when I first joined José Almeida for an adventure in Portugal. He'd been in touch about a story in LRO and our email correspondence had continued along the lines of: 'Why don't you do a story about the real Portugal?' 'We'd love to – can you recommend a guide?'. 'Yes. Me.'

It was a great success, putting the country firmly on the radar of LRO readers as a superb, safe, friendly destination for a 4x4 adventure tour. Since then, José has set up his own travel company, Dream Overland.

What you get with him is extensive local knowledge in terms of places to visit, the best tracks, local culture, history and experiences, and good places to eat, drink and stay. He's fluent in English and has a network of contacts in tourism and Land Rover repairs all over the country.

Dream Overland runs guided tours across the north of Portugal and in the high mountains, plus the Alentejo and Algarve regions. He also provides routes for self-drive trips. See [dreamoverland.com](http://dreamoverland.com).