

# MOUNTAIN HIGHS AND LOWS

In the final instalment of his latest adventure series, John Pearson continues along epic Portuguese mountain routes into the loftiest range of all – although mechanical gremlins interrupt progress

PHOTOS: BOB ATKINS



**W**e've been camped at Fraguinha in what the Portuguese call the Magical Mountains, and it's certainly been a fabulous place to stay for a couple of nights – pitched up by a wooden bridge over a gently babbling stream in a woodland location. But it's now time to move on into the final stage of this epic adventure series. In the first two instalments in the October and November issues we crossed the north of Portugal, and then tracked our way south down the spine of the country. Now we're continuing towards the Lousã and Açor ranges before looping south-east into the highest of them all, the Serra da Estrela.

## Day 1 Fraguinha to Luso, 62 miles

**Highlight:** Caramulo car museums

Not far from the campsite, our guide José Almeida's black Defender 90 turns off the

tarmac on to mountain tracks. The sun's shining, the sky is blue and the scenery is truly stunning. We're leaving the Serra da Freita and heading towards the Serra da Caramulo across a vast plain. These tracks are rocky, loose-surfaced and flanked by broom, tall grasses and massive boulders before we enter a dense, dark pine forest.

The town of Caramulo is a motoring and motorsport hotspot. I visited the motor museum here several years ago; indeed, the owner Tiago Gouveia allowed us to photograph my 110 inside among some of the more exotic exhibits. But since that time a new Experience Centre has been created in a former egg-sizing factory elsewhere in the town. Here there are displays of classic cars and bikes, and in addition this new venture offers classic vehicle storage plus restoration and servicing in its workshop.

We take a look around the new centre before revisiting the original museum. Apart from its comprehensive array of two- and four-wheeled classics, this is the base for the annual Caramulo Motorfestival, Portugal's

equivalent to the Goodwood Festival of Speed, held annually in early September. All sorts of motoring and motorcycling activities take place, but the most spectacular is the hill climb, where historic vehicles speed up the 1.7-mile, Armco-lined public road course.

We're climbing that steep, sinuous hill as we leave the town before joining a loose, sandy track into the Caramulo Mountains. More tracks, some easy going, some rough and washed-out, take us into an area of eucalyptus forests. Portugal has more than 3800 square miles of these non-native trees, which are grown for paper production.

We drop down on to tarmac, passing under the impressive Trezoi girder bridge, which carries the Beira Alta railway line across a gorge. Then almost immediately there's a steep climb off the road into narrow tracks through more eucalyptus forests.

Eventually we reach the town of Luso, a touristy place best known for its spa and mineral water bottling plant. We're overnighing at the Parque de Campismo do Luso, a tidy, well-equipped regular campsite

that's a world apart from the woodland one we've been in for the past two nights.

I'm camping in my converted Defender's Alu-Cab Icarus pop-top roof, José has a Front Runner roof tent and photographer Bob Atkins is in his trusty North Face ground tent. We're all well experienced at setting up camp and are soon sitting with a cold beer in hand while chef Bob gets on with tonight's meal. There's no restaurant on-site; and while we could go into Luso for a meal, it's actually very pleasant sitting here in the warm evening.

## Day 2 Luso to Góis, 67 miles

**Highlight:** Broken Defender gets fixed promptly

We start the day climbing the narrow roads through the nearby Bussaco National Forest, which has plant species from all over the world. In the middle of it is the fabulously ornate Palace Hotel, formerly the Royal Palace, construction of which started in 1888.

There are many species of trees here, but there's a reputedly historic olive tree in the courtyard by the hotel, according to a sign –

a tree that the then Lord Wellington tethered his horse to back in September 1810 (later, as the Duke of Wellington, he went on to take victory in the Battle of Waterloo, and twice become Prime Minister of Britain). He was here leading the Anglo-Portuguese army to victory in the Battle of Bussaco (or Buçaco; either is correct) against the French. The battle took place on the nearby heights of Bussaco, where we'll be visiting, but first we're calling in at the Military Museum of Bussaco.

This was opened on September 27 1910, 100 years on from the battle. It contains weapons, uniforms and equipment from the 19th century conflicts, as well as miniaturised displays of the forces in combat.

After visiting the High Cross, which commemorates where Wellington stood viewing the battle, we get back on to the mountain tracks. There are no advancing French troops today – just sheep, goats, pine and mimosa trees, and a row of wind turbines.

We stop in the town of Casal de Santo Amal to have a look at its fornos de cal (lime kilns) before briefly joining the famous



A lot more peaceful than it was in 1810



It's like someone came down here with a JCB. But no machine did this, just the force of extreme weather



A wind farm of the traditional kind



Fabulously ornate former Royal Palace



Caramulo: classics of all shapes and sizes here



Houston, we have a problem



Now that's what you call a deep washout!

N2 road, Portugal's Route 66. Stretching the length of the country for 460 miles, from Chaves in the north to Faro on the Algarve coast, it's a popular drive for tourists. We stop for lunch at Km 238, where there's a tourism booth providing N2 'passports', which can be stamped at various places along the route.

But we're turning into the mountains again, on some exceptionally tricky going. The track climbs through numerous hairpins, with acute turns, deep washouts and some vicious rock steps. Then we're on to an even more tricky washed-out, rocky, loose-surfaced track. It's rough – and my 110 is working hard to maintain momentum. But it's worth the effort, taking us up to a ridge south of the town of Penacova where there's the spectacular sight of a row of ancient windmills that have been converted into lodges. Back in the day the warm breeze that's blowing across the hills would have been turning the sails to mill wheat and maize grown by local villagers.

I've mentioned washouts many times on these Portuguese adventures, which is because we've encountered lots of them.

And some, like the ones we're encountering now, are extreme; like someone came down here with a big JCB, hacking out deep sections of track. But no machine did this, just the mighty force of extreme weather. It's a matter of straddling them, holding your nerve and hoping the sides don't crumble in: dropping a wheel into a deep section would be a disaster.

Then disaster *does* strike – not of the slipping into a washout kind, but a mechanical one. The full story is in Our Land Rovers starting on page 88 but, to summarise, the exhaust tailpipe and nearside rear suspension damper have broken during the 110's exertions on these demanding tracks. It's not something we can patch up at the trackside, but José has good contacts for Land Rover repairers and we are soon en route to the workshop of Land Bastos near Miranda do Corvo for repairs. They don't have a replacement damper, but can weld up the broken one and reinforce the other side with weld to prevent that breaking. They also fix the broken exhaust.

The Land Bastos team are a lovely group of people; knowledgeable, helpful and all of

them Land Rover enthusiasts. After they've sorted the 110 we join them in the adjacent cafe for a meal. Then they're back into the workshop, where they'll be fixing Land Rovers into the early hours, and we've got a mad rush to get to the campsite, Góis Camping, before they shut the gate for the night.

### Day 3 Góis to Piódão, 88 miles

**Highlights:** Onion Top Mountain, Piódão village

We're as far south as we're going on this adventure, and the temperature is well into the 30s. I've got my shorts on, and my pale legs are prompting tittering from my rude travelling companions, Bob and José.

This is high mountain country. We're tracking north-east across the Serra da Lousã, then into the Serra do Açor (named after the Goshawk, which thrives around here) and finally the Serra da Estrela.

Much of our journey over the next few days will be away from tarmac. Literally straight

out of the campsite we're climbing into the hills on a hard, rough track that takes us into more of those eucalyptus forests. We continue climbing over 3600ft, zig-zagging up a hillside, where there's a sign to the Poços da Neve, the wells of snow. These are stone buildings with pits in them where, in the 17th and 18th centuries, they played a role in refrigerating food and drink for Portuguese kings.

Blocks of ice and snow cut from the hillsides in winter would be stored in their cool interiors before being taken down the mountains to the river, then along by boat to Lisbon into the royal palace. There was even a royal snow master to oversee it all, the Neveiro Real. And close to the storage buildings is the chapel of Santo António da Neve, Saint Anthony of Snow. This snow business was definitely taken seriously.

A rocky, washed-out downhill track gives the damper repairs a thorough workout, then there's a dusty section before we skirt along the edge of a mountainside, a verdant valley stretching out below. The views are immense and we're mostly above 2950ft,



### THE ROUTE

This time we headed south down the spine of Portugal before looping back north-east through the Estrela mountains, ending at Faia Brava reserve.





**Climbing Onion Top (yes, really!)**



**Be prepared for dusty tracks**



**Evocative ancient streets**



**Repaired dampers get a workout**



**Comprida, a high-altitude lake**

## PORTUGAL NEED TO KNOW

**VISA:** UK passport holders can visit Portugal for up to 90 days without a visa.

**BE AWARE:** Since Brexit, UK passport holders can't take meat or dairy products into the EU, so you'll have to stock up your fridge when you get there.

**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 problem.

**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: Parque de Campismo do Luso ([pitchup.com](http://pitchup.com)); Góis Camping ([goiscamping.com](http://goiscamping.com)); Camping Vale do Rossim, Penhas Douradas, Serra da Estrela ([valedorossim.pt](http://valedorossim.pt)); Faia Brava Reserve, near Algodres ([faibrava.pt](http://faibrava.pt)). We also stayed one night in the ancient town of Piódão at a delightful B&B belonging to the lady who owns the Casa da Padaria (Baker's House) B&B where I've stayed before ([casapadaria.com](http://casapadaria.com)).

**FUEL:** Diesel is more costly in Portugal than Spain, so top up before crossing the border.

**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.

but occasionally plunging seemingly into the bowels of the earth before scabbling back on to the high-altitude routes. We're at 3780ft looking down over the village of Moura da Serra, then pass through Porto da Balsa before tackling the monster gravel climb that takes us to the highest point in the Açor mountains, Cebola – Onion Top – at 4625ft.

From here we can see our destination for tomorrow, the Estrela range; and every ridge, every hilltop ahead is crammed with wind turbines. There's also a plethora of hairpins to negotiate on a dusty, rocky track that climbs to 4265ft. Then an equally zig-zaggy descent plunges us towards the ancient village of Piódão, where we're spending the night.

There's no campsite, so we're staying in a lovely B&B for a change. The streets here are so narrow we have to park our Land Rovers on the outskirts of the village and walk to the accommodation. In fact, the local bartender tells us that it's not that long ago when there were no roads at all into the village, and his mother had to clamber over mountain tracks to neighbouring villages to collect food.

## Day 4, Piódão to Vale do Rossim, 58 miles

**Highlights:** Amazing high-altitude tracks

Heading out east from Piódão we turn on to a spectacular climb at Chãs d'Égua village. It's so steep and the hairpins so acute it's like driving up a spiral staircase. It's also dusty; the clouds of dust billow up and engulf our Land Rovers to the extent that we have to keep pausing to wait for the track to clear. We reach 4225ft at the highest point of the pass and it's wonderful. This is high-altitude driving out of the top drawer, with seemingly endless tracks stretching out to the horizon and beyond, plus a variety of flora – bushes, heather and myriad small flowers – brightening the tracksides.

Entering the Estrela range, we're briefly on the N230 road before turning on to more steep, dusty gravel climbs cutting across dramatic scenery before dropping on to the N339, which take us up to the top of the Estrela range at 6538ft. I've been even higher on a previous trip 11 years ago when visiting

the mountain rescue division of the GNR, the National Republican Guard. They're based in one of a pair of disused radar towers, which we were allowed to climb. So, I have been up the actual highest point in mainland Portugal. We drive around past the kilometre-long dam and picturesque Lagoa Comprida, one of several connected lagoons that provide water for a hydro-electric scheme.

The drive on the twisting N339 is impressive, with its amazing geological formations. We then take the N338 before turning on to a gravel track through the imposing Glacial Valley of Zêzere, heading into Manteigas. From here we're on to more tight, twisty tracks before exiting on to the tarmac again to reach our campsite at the Vale do Rossim.

## Day 5 Vale do Rossim to Faia Brava Reserve, 113 miles

**Highlight:** Faia Brava reserve

The next day we join the N232, climbing to 4200ft on the road before taking a gravel

track through rolling hills. The terrain here is different – ploughed agricultural land, wildflower meadows and fields of rye.

Then we're into tracks through some big valleys, before taking a sinuous route that follows the contour line along the high edge of one valley. Next, we pass through an area rich with ancient chestnut trees before dropping into the village of Videmonte to buy fresh bread for lunch. Here we're treated to the 17th century church clock chiming a glorious rendition of Beethoven's symphony No 9, Ode to Joy, before striking 1pm.

The reason we're buying bread is because further up the road we're visiting Manuel Martins Queijaria Tradicional – a traditional cheesemaker. The cheesemaker is camera-shy but allows us to photograph her cheeses, and we buy a couple – a pungent, month-old sheep cheese and a fresh white goats' cheese that was made last night. That's lunch sorted.

After stuffing ourselves with bread and cheese we're back out on to the mountain tracks – where José's Defender loses its brakes. The metal pipe across the rear axle has worn

through and fluid is spurting out when he presses the pedal. We clamp the flexible hose with grips so he at least has front brakes on the steep downhill ahead, then drive into the nearby town of Guarda to get a replacement pipe. After some phoning around José finds a supplier, and the garage next door kindly allows him to use its lift to fit it.

Time is getting on, so we take the road to the village of Algodres, where we join a track to the truly wonderful Faia Brava reserve. Faia Brava is 850 hectares of remote Portugal near the Archeological Park of the Cõa Valley, a Unesco World Heritage Site. It's a privately owned rewinding project that's a haven for wildlife – and we have permission to camp in the middle of it. This land was traditionally farmed, but has been abandoned in recent years. Now it's being restored to natural habitat, and it's a magical place.

A dusty, rocky track wends its way between large boulders into the camping spot, a wild area that could be in the middle of Botswana rather than Europe. José gets out his posh Melvill and Moon table and chairs, and we sit





**Final picnic of our adventure**



**Cool mountain camping**



**Drink wine, help nature...**



**Faia Brava – but it could be Africa**

having a sundowner beer. A splendid location for our last night of the adventure.

## Day 6 Faia Brava Reserve to Quinta do Ataíde, 68 miles

**Highlights:** The last picnic

But before Bob and I head back to the UK, José has arranged a detour to Quinta do Ataíde. This is a vineyard in the Douro region's Vilaríça Valley, belonging to the British-Portuguese Symington Family Estates – the Douro Valley's biggest producer of wine and port.

We're here to meet Marta Mendes, Symington's sustainable team manager ([symington.com/sustainability](http://symington.com/sustainability)), and Pedro Prata, the team leader at Rewilding Portugal ([rewilding-portugal.com](http://rewilding-portugal.com)). And they've kindly laid on a Portuguese feast of a picnic in the grounds of the Quinta, taking the opportunity to tell us about the work they're doing.

The company is working on a sustainable winemaking plan; Quinta do Ataíde is Portugal's first organic vineyard. And it's

partnering Rewilding Portugal, which is part of a European network. But specifically here in Portugal there are over 460 square miles of the Greater Côa Valley – part of which is the Faia Brava reserve where we stayed last night. Symingtons has recently launched a Rewilding Edition wine under its Altano brand. And a percentage of the proceeds from every sale goes to Rewilding Portugal funds.

The picnic is a lovely way to end our time in this incredibly beautiful country. It seems

a long time since we crossed the border from Spain and went on to the first of many hundreds of miles of mountain tracks. We've seen a lot of the country from a high-altitude perspective, enjoyed its famed food and wines, visited lots of places of interest and camped in some excellent sites. There were the mechanical hiccups, but they were easily resolved and in no way spoiled what have been some truly memorable adventures.

Obrigado, Portugal. **LRO**

## DREAM OVERLAND

We were guided on this adventure by José Almeida of Dream Overland. José delivers extensive local knowledge in terms of places to visit, the best tracks to drive, local culture, history and experiences and the best places to eat, drink and stay. He's also fluent in English, has a network of contacts in tourism and Land Rover repairers (which can be very useful, as you'll see in this adventure), has a tremendous

passion for his country and the environment. He's also an enduring Land Rover enthusiast. Dream Overland runs guided tours across the north of Portugal and in the mountains (on many of the tracks we've visited), plus the south (Alentejo and Algarve regions), with two new ones planned for next year – historical villages, and a food and wine tour. José also provides routes for self-drive trips.