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PORTUGAL

Refinding its Cycling Pedigree

*Jeremy Edwards discovers an untapped beauty
and a re-found cycling heritage*





I am hunched over my top tube and sweat is mixing with sun cream, stinging my eyes. As my breathing recovers I take a swig from a solar heated bidon and sit up to survey the climb that has just encouraged me to stop at its summit. I smile. Sprawled out in front and below is the Arrábida Natural Park. With its deep green Mediterranean vegetation and cloudless skies, it is a welcome sight for sore eyes. I am here to discover a bit of what a cycling holiday in Portugal might offer as an alternative to the tried and tested col hunting in France.

Portugal has a rich cycling heritage, the Volta a Portugal em bicicleta was first ridden in 1927 and whilst not as important as the three grand tours it always has been and remains a significant competition. My arrival in Lisbon coincides with the 9th and penultimate stage of the 78th edition of the race, which runs between Alcácer do Sal and Setúbal, covering 187.5km. At this point a Portuguese rider, Rui Vinhas representing the Portuguese team W52-FC Porto-Porto Canal, is still in contention for the GC. It is clear from crowds gathering early in Setúbal that expectations are high. These expectations are driven by memories of Joaquim Agostinho, Portugal's most famous cycling son, who was champion of Portugal in six successive years and twice finished third in the Tour de France, winning on Alpe d'Huez in 1979. More recently Rui Costa, who won the 2013 UCI Road World Championships, has inspired a new generation of cyclists. Professional cycling in Portugal is growing again, powerful Football clubs such as FC Porto have returned to sponsor a team after a 31-year hiatus.

Fernando Pedrosa of Phoinix Cycling, a small tour operator based in Setúbal has arranged for me to ride part of today's stage, which also follows the route of the local Granfondo held annually in October. Two short rides have been planned, which will complement the timing of the stage and enable plenty of time to enjoy the company of my hosts whilst pit stopping at a couple of their favourite cafes. This is, after all, a special day, being the first time the Tour has passed through Setubal in 40 years. The first ride, in the morning will head into the Arrábida Natural Park, and will include both the category three climb at Alto das Necessidades and the coastal category two at Alto das Arrabida. The second ride, in the afternoon will head back via an alternative route to Alto das Necessidades, where we will wait for the Tour to arrive, hoping to witness an attack on the 20% gradient that appears near the end of the climb. Somehow we then have to make it back to Setúbal before the leaders arrive for what should be a sprint finish. The tour riders have a much greater distance to cover and this includes a lot of climbing; despite this I have my doubts regarding our ability to return in time.

As we leave for the morning ride I am too busy enjoying the heat (36C) and the sea breeze to worry about missing the sprint finish. The ride out of town is a steady climb and quickly takes us away from the noise and traffic of the busy port. As a first time visitor to Portugal I am immediately struck by how green the hillsides are in August; the contrast between

the perfect azure of the sky and the olive tones of the hillside is stunning. I am cycling with a mixed group and as such the pace is steady, given the temperature I am happy to be eased into the ride. We break onto a narrow road that takes us deeper into the Natural Park and leads towards the day's first climb, the category three at Alto das Necessidades. The climb is steady at first and there is time to enjoy the mixture of farm land, which is mostly comprised of small vineyards, olive trees and grazing sheep. As we progress the climb undulates and I find myself looking forward to the tree-lined sections providing shade as the heat takes its toll. In the last 300m the gradient begins to really ramp up and I find myself out of the saddle and relieved to take the crest in order to take on some much needed water. Thankfully the journey to Aldeia Rica, a small town on the edge of the park is flat and the pace leisurely.

We break for a drink at a café and I enjoy sampling the locally-baked pastries, my pastel de nata, a type of egg custard tart, is superb. A mountain bike parked in front of the café sparks conversation about bikes owned past and present and it is quickly apparent that the team from Phoinix have an encyclopaedic knowledge of bicycles and are keen to share stories. Fernando, who fell in love with mountain biking whilst training for fitness to further his motocross career, tells me how he started with a converted Rossin Mistral cyclo-cross bike which he then fitted with a flat bar. Many of the tiny roads which form a maze across the Arrábida Park are unsealed gravel tracks, the local riders frequently opt to take cyclocross bikes or simply fit heavier tyres to road bikes in order to benefit from these rural lanes which complement the tarmac roads. One of our party, João Serralheiro, who runs a local cycle distribution business is actively involved in the development of the local cycling scene. He plans to make good use of these gravel roads as they will comprise part of the route for the spring classic that he has created and has just been added to the UCI calendar for 2017.

Returning to the saddle we head back into the park and begin the ascent towards the coast. The sun is dominant in the sky, and as I push harder the bushes and trees which line the roads are filled with cicada and their rhythmic song adds to the contrast from cycling at home. I am cycling with a grin, in fact as we begin to traverse the coast and the gentle breeze provides some relief, that feeling of flight or even Jean Bobet's *la volupté*, ('pleasure from a combination of speed and ease, force and grace') begins to hit me. The ocean sparkles to my right and a smooth curving asphalt strip beckons to the fore. I have already decided that I will be



PHOINIX CYCLING

Phoinix cycling, based in Setúbal south of Lisbon, are a small cycle tour operator who offer bespoke packages for those who do not wish to move base every day. Instead they are focussed on providing a personal experience with rides from a single base led by guides who have an encyclopaedic knowledge of cycling. Comprised of a group of friends with a passion for and a lifetime involvement in cycling, Phoinix want to share the best of road cycling in this undeniably pretty part of Portugal. Phoinix can provide bikes, full mechanical support and massage as well as a choice of accommodation. Whilst being lovers of cycling this group are also most definitely lovers of life and as such they are keen to share the best of the local food and drink.
www.phoenix.pt



ARRABIDA GRANFONDO - 2ND OCTOBER 2016

This is the second edition of the event, the first attracting over 600 riders. This is a race of just over 133km, mainly through the Arrabida natural park on closed roads and includes a summit finish at the castle in Palmelas. Interesting to note, there is also a category for those wishing to ride a vintage bike. www.arrabidagranfondo.com



returning to discover and explore more of what this area has to offer, it is so different in culture and landscape to Northern Europe. It is worth exploring these contrasts from a saddle. The drop from the category two climb at Alto das Arrabida down to Setúbal is a heady combination of smooth dry roads and open bends which encourage you to let go and lean in. I am rapidly passed by the local riders who know these routes so well and are possibly spending less time admiring the views of the Tróia Peninsula.

Following lunch in Setúbal we head back to Alto das Necessidades to wait for the Tour to arrive. We cycle via an alternative route, this time heading back along the coastal road before heading inland up a steadily rising lane. Either side of us the combination of red rock and eucalyptus trees reminds me somewhat of Western Australia. As we climb out of the valley the views change and we are moving through a cork tree plantation, a firm reminder that we are definitely in a wine producing area. Soon we arrive back at Alto das Necessidades, where the crowds that have already developed are mostly made up of local club riders. The atmosphere is one of bonhomie and the crowd is cheering the last of the vehicles to pass up the climb before the road is closed. Many of the lesser powered cars and mopeds are stalling on the 20% gradient and the audience delights in celebrating each failure before helping them on.

As the tour arrives a small break of about ten riders is leading the peloton by a couple of minutes. No decisive moves or attacks are made, but the atmosphere is fantastic and it is great to see that the behaviour of the crowd is respectful to the riders. The last support vehicle passes and there is a scramble as the crowd turn to their own bikes and begin to hurtle back down to ensure arrival in Setubal in time for the finish. Cycling with the group from Phoenix we get ourselves organised and after negotiating the lanes of the natural park we manage to average over 50kmh on the final 5km of sweeping downhill into town. What a way to finish a perfect day, that was capped by the sight of home favourite Rui Vinhas coming in safely to maintain his lead of over two minutes in the GC.

Time is precious and for most of us, especially those with families. If we get away once a year for a cycling holiday we consider ourselves lucky, which means we must choose wisely. Whilst the Arrabida Natural Park and surrounding areas obviously does not provide the chance to take on any of those cols on your bucket list it does provide other opportunities. It is a pleasure and a change to cycle in a southern Mediterranean landscape. The terrain offers some seriously punchy climbs and very rapid descents, all set against the stunning backdrop of olive groves, glistening ocean and unspoilt beaches. Furthermore, the welcome is as good as or better than anywhere else is Europe and the local restaurants do not seem to know how to serve a bad meal. Anyone who loves seafood will be in heaven. Whether it's for a cycle only holiday intended for use as a training camp or for a combination of cycling and family downtime I would highly recommend this area as an alternative to the tried and tested destinations.