



PORTUGAL: DISORDERLY NOTES FROM THE ALGARVE



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Chapter 1 – Enjoy The Journey

For most people holidays are relaxing affairs, taking the time to re-charge whilst bringing back exotic stories of foreign places that call *Walkers* crisps '*Lays*' and where need you to flush the urinals. For me time away has always been about exploration, discovery and a seemingly destructive desire to be able to answer the question "how was your holiday?" with the answer "I've come back to work for a rest". In my early twenties I remember this very phrase being used as loose evidence in a performance appraisal that maybe I wasn't taking my job as seriously as I should be. As a guy who has essentially sold beans since 16, this was surely far less of a crime than the other way round.

This time would be different. A week in Portugal with no defined plan, no structure, no travel, no hire car. My hyperactive inner child felt nervous. Here I was on the way to the airport, knowing this was exactly what I needed but apprehensive about whether my normally caffeine fueled body could take the change in pace.

The time between civilian life and leave is a wonderful twilight zone of character transformation and unusual situations. Airports and plane travel have become a normal part of life now with us Brits taking

226 million international flights in 2016, working out at just under 4 flights for every person in the UK! This familiarity has meant we are now colourblind to a lot of the oddities of airport travel. Where else is it acceptable to get a beer, remove your belt in public and get frisked by a handsy man named Julian all before 8am?

I contemplated hard on these elements of travel as I did my best to resolve some confusion at customs. I had done everything asked of me so far. Removed tiny and highly dangerous tubes of toothpaste, separated my laptop into its own individual receptacle and stood my well-worn boots on top of my case. I'd managed to make my way through frisk free holding my jeans up with one hand as they made a determined break for freedom in the absence of a belt. My compliance with the rules had not treated me too well though. Despite the personal assurances of 'Charlie Customs' on the other side of the desk my boots were not in fact "perfectly safe" resting on top of my bag. I made my case to a middle aged woman in a dull green uniform who I stupidly mistook for someone who may want to help.

"Sorry I only search the cases" she said. "I'll do what I can, are you definitely sure you're missing one?". This question threw me somewhat. I can be somewhat forgetful at times, but at no point had it passed through my mind that the reason only one of my boots arrived on the output conveyer was that I had arrived at the airport shod only on my left side.

"Pretty certain." I responded, wondering if her question was based on a prior experience or purely her idiosyncratic approach to

customer service.

“Ah right” she replied “Just checking.” What happened next would be enough to give an introvert night terrors. She screamed down the line at a rather under qualified young man who then brought the entire contraption to a standstill whilst he fished around inside. I’ve had some popularity lows in my life, but bringing a mile-long queue of rushing travelers to stand still whilst they retrieved my footwear brought me to a new level of group resentment. In hindsight, maybe the lady in green was just trying to give me an easy way out. I retreated quickly into the crowds, keen to put distance between me and the massing mob.

After finishing off my game of transport bingo (a car and bus was now followed by a train to get to the plane) I boarded a rather tired looking budget airline plane to Faro.

Chapter 2 – Luz

In 1876 massive rainfall in the Portuguese interior led to both the Tagus and Guardiana rivers to overflow and cause widespread floods along the shores of the Algarve. In Mértola, about 100km North of Faro only 3 of 64 buildings along the shore of the Guardiana were left standing. Newspapers at the time were filled with stories of heartbreak

The impacts to the area were devastating but in the midst of all the destruction there were some surprising discoveries. The flooding had uncovered various historical ruins in the area, and archaeologist Estacio da Veiga was commissioned by the Government to fully excavate them. In Luz he found the remains of a Roman spa and fish salting vats dating back to somewhere between the 3rd and 5th century. This is just a small part of Luz's long history which has mostly centred around the sardine industry. This started with the fishing and salting of sardines and then moved on in the 19th century to the conserving of fish in olive oil. Whilst a small fishing industry still remains the canning has now moved across the water to Morocco which in towns like SAFI have had canning plants since the early 80s.

Despite all this history Luz is most widely known for a chubby faced, gap toothed little girl named Madeleine whose image will be forever etched in most of our minds in the vain hope she may someday be found. Whatever you feel about the circumstances surrounding her disappearance, it is a deeply traumatic story that has been repeated the world over and on which everyone has formed their own opinion. It also left Luz (or Praia da Luz as it has come to be known with tourists or 'beach of lights') with a lasting legacy. Maddy went missing in May 2007, three years before the start of a four-year long recession in Portugal. In the short term after her disappearance there is strong evidence tourists started to stay away, citing reasons from worries for their own children to wanting to avoid the hordes of press that regularly gathered. This then crossed over into a financial crisis that saw Portugal have to borrow nearly €71 billion Euros from the International Monetary Fund.

Despite all of this Luz has held on to its charm and remained a popular choice with British tourists, and I could see why. It has been far too long discovered for it to be a forgotten rural seaside village, but it certainly hadn't been ruined by tourism in the same way, say Benidorm has.

Luz does a good job of feeling like it hasn't sold out completely. There is development work going on all over town, trying to squeeze out every pound per square foot of land, but generally this seems to have been done in quite a complementary manner. The high rise

buildings have been kept to a minimum, and unlike some other European sea side resorts it's clear from every angle you're in Portugal. The white angular buildings, with edging of colour and beautiful lighthouse esque chimneys are regularly offset with intricate tile work is a trademark of this country. The tiles in particular fascinate me. They are often in a traditional white and dark blue delicately drawing out some scenes from maritime history or the fig picking heritage of the area. Even the street names are incorporated into these beautiful designs.

Most of the streets are laid down in a white mosaic of small stones which must take hours of labour to lay and have the added benefit of causing absent mind tourists to completely lose their footing. They seemed to be forged from a greased up combination of Teflon and ten pin bowling lane, which on hills of 1 in 4 gradient really brings the added element of danger that most British streets lack.

Every road in town brings you down past the beautiful Nossa Senhora da Luz, a church built in 1521 but kept so wonderful clean it looks as if it was put up yesterday. It is so well loved that after an earthquake devastated the area in 1755 the locals paid for it to be rebuilt! When you head inside you are met with an entire wall of ornately carved gold which catches the light from the sun in the afternoon as it shines through the West facing window. In front of the altar is a rather unfortunate statue of Jesus, who in his traditional pinned up on a cross pose, had also been adorned with the face of a young Ross Noble and knees that look like he has just lost a rather

brutal game of British Bulldog. As if the having nails rammed through your extremities wasn't bad enough.

Down from the church the road turns onto the sea fronting Avenue de Pescadores which quickly became my favourite stroll in Luz. The route is completely pedestrianised and tiled with a black and white pattern quite clearly inspired by early Atari games. It is flanked on the left by what looks like but is almost certainly not a Roman wall, and on the right by palm trees - each of which were carrying dedications from local business on oversized dog tags hanging around their necks. In the distance is the jagged and imposing 'Rocha Negra' (Black Rock) which is the product of some epic lava flow 150 million years ago. About three quarters of the way down a small metal gate cleverly hides the rarely visited Roman ruins before swiftly opening up to the classic European beach vista of golden sand edged by benches and cafes.

I could while away many hours sitting at cafés like these, reading and people watching. It's amazing how if you occasionally just stay in one place all manner of lives can intersect yours. Much of modern life is a constant cycle of getting from one place to another but it's an often fruitful experiment to break the cycle and see what comes to you.

It was barely a few minutes before my first disruption came along. A disheveled looking man in a bright orange t shirt was wandering along the sea front. He had the kind of angular walk that suggested he was battling gravitational forces with every step. The

movement suggested focus but his eyes were scanning the horizon like a twitcher trying to pick out a rare flycatcher lost in the scrubland. He stopped in front of our café and offered an opening line to a slightly shocked looking tourist sitting in the shade of the café's parasols.

"What happened mate?". The guy looked back at him harnessing the powers of confusion and 'fuck off' in a single glance.

"The chair mate, the chair. What happened?". He said pointing to the wheelchair the tourist was sitting in.

"An accident"

"Ah right, I had the same, badly hurt in a car crash, in pain all the time have to take loads of stuff. Did you come over here to get treatment?"

"No, it happened years ago".

"Respect mate respect, you deserve it". He shook his hand and carried on.

It was one of those awkward moments that felt desperately uncomfortable but also incredibly heartfelt. Sometimes you've just got to hope people mean well.

The rest of Luz sea front is dedicated to a mixture of curio shops and restaurants, both of which seem slightly confused as to where they are. The shops are filled with all manner of goods from boomerangs and African carvings to Buddha statues. It was tough to figure out what was authentically Portuguese in amongst the imported nik naks. We settled on a 7 foot inflatable lobster for the pool and 5 ceramic sardines in homage to the local fishing industry.

Of the restaurants two really stood out. *A Fabrica* (The Factory) is housed in a building originally using for canning tuna and sardines in olive oil. The inside is sharply decorated with nods to the heritage and a lovely little bar area behind which a Swedish guy - who looked like he'd based his entire look on an issue of 'Camden Monthly' - was chucking bottles around in a blur of cocktail making. The food was fantastic, it's what I'd consider a dartboard menu, stick it on the wall, blindfold me (I could shut my eyes but some things have to be done properly) and check a dart at it. I would have been happy with any of the dishes that came out. The only thing lacking at *A Fabrica* is a sea view, but everything else more than makes up for it.

At the other end of the bay is *Fortaleza Da Luz*. Built into a 17th century fort overlooking the Atlantic Fortaleza is stunning. Initially we were disappointed not to have been seated outside, but after being led through a stunningly restored restaurant that wouldn't have looked out of place in *Game Of Thrones* we were given a table with panoramic views right over the ocean. This is the kind of place you'll remember forever, eating dinner as the sun goes down behind, watching the evening surfers make their way back up the beach. The food wasn't as good as *A Fabrica* but to be honest, I didn't care a bit.

Chapter 3 – Cycling

As is customary being a cyclist any extended holiday is always accompanied by the hiring of a bike and disappearing into the countryside on a lonely pilgrimage loosely labelled as ‘getting to know the country better’. Being very specifically a road cyclist the hiring of said bikes is not always as easy as you may think and normally involves some off the record cash transactions on a dimly lit street corner. Portugal was no different. Using the modern day babel fish of Google translate I had managed to hire myself a small scooter, retracted my initial query and then realised that ‘road bike’ in Portugal is locally known as ‘racing bike’. The conversation moved into English and instructions followed:

HELLO BEN,
PLEASE CALL ME WHEN ARRIVE.
0035196552548642.
LUIS

Less information that I was hoping for, but I managed to take the two vital messages. Firstly, Luis wanted to keep the paper trail to a minimum and secondly he needed a new caps lock key.

I called and the deal was done. Why hiring road bikes in foreign countries always plays out like a dodgy nuclear arms deal I'll never know but the location was agreed. Praia Da Luz church, 1655. Be prompt. Come alone. Bring the hostage. Used notes only.

At around a quarter to six - and having done much theorising on why Southern continental countries have a very liberal view on the word 'prompt' - I sighted a dishevelled young man who looked like he'd just clocked off as an extra from *'Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure 3'*. I quickly deduced he was my guy given he was clearly looking for someone - that and the fact he was pushing a road bike - and gave him a friendly wave. The deal was done quickly, cash was exchanged, there was even paperwork which caused much amusement to my most excellent friend as it turns out we have the same birthday. Having hired a bike off the back of a van in Cape Town and from the red light district in Barcelona it turns out Portugal have a more professional approach than I gave them credit for. In what is the two-wheeled equivalent of blind date I'd done pretty well, and took my battle weary but well-loved *Willer Triestina* back to the villa.

My first ride out was the next morning. In a simple equation Algarve+June=hot which meant the only time for riding was early. I got out of the door for six and headed along the N125 towards Raposeira.

Cycling in a new country is a real thrill. The roads around my home in Bedfordshire are well worn now. I have memorised every incline, pothole and bit of loose gravel. Nothing in a surprise anymore unless I head out a long way. Taking those first pedals strokes on new roads is a voyage of discovery. Think Vasco Da Gama without the ships and cutting off of hands. Every corner brings a new vista, every ridge a new view. There's something awe inspiring about knowing that everything you see that day will be unfamiliar, every sight completely and utterly new. Whilst pretty much everything above sea level in this world now has been discovered by someone, seeing it for myself somehow still feels pioneering.

The N125 is the main road between Lagos and Villa do Bispo but given it was 0615 on a Monday morning this did not feel like commuter central. The road was a single lane in each direction but with a big hard shoulder either side ideal for cycling. It meant I could get up some decent speed but still feel connected to the world passing me by.

As I flew through Budens I startled a cockerel who was close enough to the road to hear me coming but far enough away to not be visible. He reacted like a guard caught napping at the gates of some stately palace by his superior, instantly jumping back to duty as if nothing had happened letting out a crow so loud it could have woken up most of Southern Portugal. This startled me into the most pathetic of swerving manoeuvres that certainly woke up the driver of the puffing old Peugeot following me up the hill. He responded with a

gesture that was somewhat lost in translation, but I think loosely transcribed to “hey there old chap, would you kindly keep your lycra clad flanks to your side of the road and away from my windscreen”.

The roads started to ramp up more steeply as I got closer to the Southwest Alentejo and Vicentine Coast Natural Park. It was the far point of my plotted route, the planning of which had essentially involved me heading to the big green on the map. As much as cyclists will tell how much they enjoy climbing, most of us are lying. We do however love the reward of a pedal free adrenaline sapping shoot down into the valley. Unfortunately, Portuguese road designers had taken all the fun out of the descents, dropping a roundabout right at the bottom of every hill meaning all momentum is lost as you start to slug up the next climb.

The roundabouts seemed to cause further problems too, crashing my Garmin navigator every time a junction came up. This meant sitting at the side of the road for 5 minutes waiting for it to pick up satellites. I handled this with all the poise and restraint of an adult, calmly booting a pile of sticks into the verge and needlessly prodding my finger against the buttons to provide my companion with some much needed encouragement. The few morning drivers passing by witnessed a scene that certainly didn't do a lot to enhance the credibility of the cycling community.

There was nothing else for it I'd have to forge on based on instinct alone. Well that and Google maps. It sounds simple enough but the signposting so far had been at best inconsistent and at worst

completely absent. I bet Vasco Da Gama never had problems as big as this.

I managed to navigate my first junction which took me off of the N125 towards Hortas de Tabual. This was the first part of the trip away from a main road and it couldn't have been more different. The road narrowed and became rougher with any kind of road markings becoming a luxury. The landscape changed and felt as it was closing in around me. These were clearly the older roads, not carved through the landscape on the easiest navigable route but practical old roads jumping from farm to farm. I felt as if I had been transported to a different land. If you'd told me I was in the middle of a Caribbean island now I wouldn't have been surprised. There were wind swept palm trees engulfed by ancient ferns broken up by pockets of incredible colour from delicate and hardy flowers. It got steeper too. I was deeply hoping that the route I had plotted was slightly wrong. It had calculated about 700m of climbing, and so far I was at less than 150m and getting on for a third of the way though my morning's exertion. Uninformed optimism is one of my biggest strengths.

As the ground below me ramped up above 12% my hopes were quickly dashed. My recent cycling diary was as empty as a celiac's breadbin and the lack of training quickly started to take its toll on my legs. Well I say my legs, but actually it was my arse and hands that were taking the biggest kicking. When you think about cycling you are only actually attached at three points, and two of them were really starting to hurt.

Hills really focus the mind. You notice every pedal stroke, every intake of breath, every slight change of gradient. But as I clawed my way up the third steep incline I was rewarded with a fantastic downslope. The road was empty and I hugged each bend, drinking in the stunning views and feeling truly alone. This is both the joy and fear of cycling in a new land in a microcosm. Everything you take in is a new memory, but one mistake, one puncture and here you are completely alone and miles from anyway. It is truly a thrill.

The first sign of life was when I passed a guy making his way down the hill. He had a t-shirt in hand and clumped dreadlocks sitting just above his weather-beaten shoulders. On one hand he was walking with a pace bearing comparison to a London commuter running late for the morning tube on the other he had a swagger that said he answered to no one but himself. I slowed down and held out my water bottle as I went by in show of generosity from one traveller to another. He lifted his hand, flat palmed transforming quickly into a thumbs up to acknowledge my gesture “See you at the bottom” he yelled down the road after me.

The bottom appeared quickly and brought with it the beautiful unspoilt cove of Praia do Zavial. This was both a sweet and sour experience. Zavial is an out of the way quiet little cove big with surfers. The oversized car park was occupied by a couple of VW campervans with surf boards tied to their roofs. VW campervans must have a hard life, resigned to a clichéd existence of ‘Quicksilver Presents – Mad Wax, the Surfing Movie’ stickers and old Bob Marley records. Still they

never look too sad on it. As much as this was a beautiful place to sit and watch the world go by I'd run out of something pretty vital - and that was road. I should not have found the coast this soon on. I had a quick check on Google maps, and sure enough I'd missed my turning. I dislike retracing my steps at the best of times, but given the gradient of the hill I'd just shot down this was going to be even more painful than usual. I made my way back out of Zavial, too embarrassed to make eye contact with my dreadlocked friend on the way back up.

Having recovered both my energy and mood after the long climb I shot down through Salema and – after stopping for a brief rest looking over the beach – made my way back towards Luz.

The route home was largely uneventful other than a short stretch of an incredible tiled road that I came across just outside Salema. It looked like a perfectly restored Roman Road – arrow straight and completely flat - but I can find no reference to it anywhere on the internet. It was the last bit of flat road on the route back into Luz. I toiled my way back into the wind, my legs feeling the fact that I have covered hardly any KMs so far this year. It hurt, but it was worth it.

Chapter 4 – Burgau

It is curious how you can learn about a place. No guide book or map can ever replace the word of mouth information handed down after a chance encounter. It was because of this we found ourselves on the coastal path to Burgau. As humans we often place a lot of faith in people we don't know. We mindlessly follow crowds, step out onto zebra crossings and for us we were now following the advice of a lady for which our only association was that we had sung 'Happy Birthday' to her when she was 70.

The chance encounter I speak of had occurred two nights prior. Whilst hunting out somewhere in Luz that provided both food and air conditioning we had ended up in an offset little restaurant called *Chaplin's*. It being butted up against the church, my mind had filled in the blanks and assumed we were heading into an establishment formerly run by a member of the clergy. I was quickly corrected as we were surrounded by hundreds of replicas of a little man with a funny moustache, ill-fitting trousers and a bowler hat.

Despite the uncomfortable gaze of 'the little tramp' the food was good and the beer cold, but this is not why I bring you with me into this rather odd scene. The place was run by a little old northern

lady who had hair so white I wondered if it had ever had colour. She was rushing around in sub-tropical temperatures (turns out the air conditioners wasn't as good as we'd hoped for) whilst showing a remarkable ability to not look hot at all. The only giveaway was when taking our orders she joined us at the table for a minute on an additional chair whilst scribbling away our choices. Later in the night she appeared from the kitchen and made many failed attempts at lighting a candle that was implanted into a chocolate muffin. This may have been in part due to the quality of her matches, but more likely due to the propeller sized ceiling fan above her that was rapidly forcing warm air around the room.

"It's for the lady o there" she said "70 t'day, been coming here for 32 year". Before my mind could register the fact that you could come to the same resort every year from the age of 38 onwards we were being pressed into action.

"Yer wouldn't mind 'aving a sing for us luvs would yer?". It felt more of an unsubtle threat than a question and between us we started up as she headed to the table in the corner.

Now everyone knows happy birthday - the tune is not a problem, the lyrics are fairly well established - however there is one bit of vital information you require to make it really shine and that is the name of the person you are directing it to. This vital piece of counsel had been withheld from us in this instance, so we did our best to cover our tracks with various coughs, half words and mumbles. I

think we got away with it, well enough that the lady came over and said thankyou for our slapdash efforts.

On the way home that night, we bumped into the same couple again and had a chat with them as we wrestled with the unforgiving gradients of the Algarve. They recommended the walk up the coast to Bergau suggesting it should take an hour or so but there was “a bit of a hill on the way”. Who needs a guide book? We wished her happy birthday once more and headed off into the night. We never did learn her name.

The path from Luz to Bergau is a spectacular one cutting its way along the outline of the Atlantic. We hopped from loose rocks to red sandy paths that reminded me of trekking in Africa, the occasional patches of tall reeds really adding to the affect. It would not have been wholly unsurprising to navigate a bend to see a Gorilla sat cross legged chewing on the stem of some giant old plant. Thankfully, other than the aforementioned large hill, we had no such difficulties to negotiate.

I was not expecting a lot from Burgau. The internet had not been kind to this little village. The Wikipedia entry consisted of 8 lines though one of those showed promise Burgau having been voted ‘quaintest beachside village of 2010’ by readers of Lonely Planet. My only reservation to this piece of information is that I could find no reference to it anywhere else – not even on the Lonely Planet site - and no evidence that the competition has ever been run again. I can only assume they called a halt to the competition on the basis that

Burgau's quaintness could never be topped. In a move akin to awarding Brazil the original World Cup trophy in 1970 there must be a dusty award stashed somewhere in the town.

My expectation was lowered even further by the second entry on the search page. I clicked through in anticipation to a page which cited 7 entries under 'things to do in Burgau'. Unfortunately 6 of the 7 turned out to be bars with the 7th being a fort that was relatively close to Burgau in the same way London Luton is relatively close to London. Well, at least the walk had been worth it.

Whether it was my lowered expectations, ever increasing dehydration or future potential to be a judge for 'quaintest beachside village' I'm not sure, but Burgau turned out to be a delight. A narrow, steep street flanked by pure white buildings guided us downwards towards the coast. Each of the houses was edged by a different line of colour that framed the building, door and windows. The colours ranged from mustard right through to turquoise giving each structure its own identity. House Martins darted from side to side building tending to their young families below the jutting tile eaves.

We lost height quickly with all roads leading to the cove. If evolution had worked out right the long term residents should by now have developed reversible ankle joints to aid them on their slogs up and down the inclines.

The cove itself was beautiful. The small sandy beach had a really unusual cliff at the far end that had been carved out at a very shallow angle giving the impression that it was almost melting down

to the sea. There was no harbour, but two concrete jetties showed where the fishing boats would have been hauled up into the village many years ago. The boats now looked privately owned, nestled together in a small holding area bunched up and longing to be out at sea. My favourite of these was the intriguingly named '*Shark II*' a name which makes you wonder uneasily about the ironic fate of its predecessor.

Whilst I've never been a fan of beaches from a 'sand in your crevices, sit till you burn' kind of way their aesthetic beauty never fails to amaze. This was indisputably the centre point of Burgau, whether in its past as a fishing village or now as a tourist stop off (or the fact anything spherical that fell from your pocket would end up here). The waves lapped the shore with a power strong enough to drag you off but in the discriminate way that oceans do, leave all the sand behind. The colour changed quickly from turquoise to a deep blue about 20 metres out suggesting a sharp drop off hidden away beneath its surface. On the edge of this ridge were a group of divers doing their best marine wildlife impression and prompting everyone who first set eyes on them to persuade their brains it was a small pod of dolphins basking in the sun.

The beach itself was filling up quickly - despite the early hour - with folks who looked like they made this into a professional pursuit. We were passed by some incredible specimens desperately trying to wrestle with the kind of ungainly beach accessories that suggested they were settling for the day. Cool boxes, umbrellas, wind screens it

seems nothing designed for the beach was done so with ease of transportation in mind.

Now I can be judgemental at times, and whilst I do my best to curb my natural instincts, this setting was throwing me the kind of tests that gave my tongue tooth marks. As much as it pains me I will gloss over the finer details of large bronzed men with balding heads and pony tails onto one very specific example. I happened across a chap down one of the side roads who was clearly heading towards the sand. His face was showing the damage of the previous day's UVB assault and he walked with the upright posture of a man who felt as if the skin on his back may just split. He'd counterbalanced this today with the sensible choice of a t shirt to save his hide from aging further. It was this that drew me to him. Emblazoned across his front were the words 'THIS IS MY DRINKING T SHIRT, I WEAR IT EVERY DAY'. Humorous t shirts have pretty much passed me by so far in life. I had a brief experiment with an 'I LOVE LAMP' number at the height of the *Anchorman* movement but it never really provoked the reaction from others I was hoping. And once you've worn it once amongst people you know it quickly becomes tiresome. The advantage of an unbranded cotton crew neck is no one is ever quite sure if it's the one they saw you in the day before. In this case I'm not sure if he was trying to draw us to his impending alcoholism diagnosis or his lack of personal hygiene. Either way it quickly reinforced my belief that I was just not a beach person.

We stopped for breakfast at a small café called Veranda de Burgau. It was a well-kept if unambitious venue demonstrated by the menu which listed 4 types of toasted sandwich in the 'specials' section. The wider selection seemed to suggest the chef had skipped various sections of culinary school. 'Banana and cheese toasted sandwich' and 'quiche with fruit' hinted towards a man who turned up on day one, played truant until desserts and haphazardly filled in the blanks. I always try to sample the local cuisine when abroad, and seeing an absence of the local delicacy sardines from the choices I opted for the banana and cheese toasted sandwich assuming this would also be famous in these parts. Judging from my experience I fear it was more likely the result of a typo, and the proprietors were too cheap to get the menu re printed. Still, the fresh orange juice was the best I've tasted for years!

The walk back to Luz seemed alot faster than the journey out. Maybe it was the tailwind, maybe the increased potassium levels in my system but the speed made it no less beautiful. The coastline is like a well-designed city that keeps you gripped, with every bay and cliff slightly different than the last. When God did the interviews for coastal designers in these parts it seems he was flooded for applications, and instead of making the tough recruitment choice just brought them all in. Walter who worked Tuesdays and Thursdays had a speciality in sandstone cliffs and sheer drops onto jagged tooth rocks. He saw himself as a traditionalist and took his inspiration from a dusty book about the Jurassic Coast. Roger who picked up Mondays,

Wednesday and Fridays liked to think he was an artist, and through his haze of rolled up cigarettes drew out a maze of grottos and caves for future generations to appreciate. Brian who worked the weekend was just a bitter and twisted old bastard who decided to stick a fuck off big hill where one was completely unneeded.

No one liked Brian.

But even he didn't put me off the undocumented little gem that is Burgau.

Chapter 5 – Ponta da Piedade

Tf there was one place near Luz I had been desperate to see it was the Ponta da Piedade. Jutting their way out to sea just South of Lagos they form the kind of natural structures that humans have spent millions of years trying to emulate. Towers, arches, amphitheatres and caves have all been cut into the sandstone cliffs under relentless persuasion by the Atlantic Ocean.

I arrived by bike from Luz. The morning was grey and the ride had been fairly unremarkable. I'd cut my way over the main headland that separates Luz and Lagos expecting to see some wild views of the ocean but instead had to hack my way through a rather uninspiring, modern golf resort that felt as if it had been picked up from an American TV show and dropped right in. The buildings were a uniform terracotta with tall, pillared electric gates serving a fairly unique purpose of guarding the resident from would be golf buggy thieves. I skirted the edge of Lagos and through Torralta on a fairly barren road out to the coast.

On arrival at the Ponta de Piedade I was pretty disappointed. I was expecting the road to lead right out to the headland and be able to park up my bike and have a look around. Instead I was greeted by a

car park, some wheelie bins, a large fence and the kind of man-made structures that make you wonder if there is a serious drug problem amongst Portuguese architects.

I found a break in the fence to the left and worked my way round the sandy paths hoping the photos I'd seen online weren't just visible from a boat. I was greeted by the Ponta de Piedade lighthouse which had cleverly disguised itself as a Russian Orthodox Church. It was a blocky building without any of the curves of the classic lighthouse image and to be honest if you'd taken out the light and stuck in a bell you'd have a perfect place of worship. This wasn't living up to expectation!

All disappointment was quickly swept away when I set eyes on Ponta de Piedade. There are very few places on earth now that you can't find a photograph of online and this being one of the most popular places in this area the local tourist sites are filled with images. But experience is something that is unique to an individual. The way a place feels, sounds and smells, the memories it conjures up, your thoughts and feelings at the time. All of these are the exclusive to you. See all the photos on a 13 inch screen you want there is no substitute for the real thing.

Set out in front of me was a sculpture garden of coastline. Towers of rock burst their way out of the ocean Some were connected to the mainland with small land-bridges topped off with tufts of hardy grass, others were just standing stoically against the tide. Around the bases were all manner of different coves, grottos, caves and pits

burrowed into the softer stone leaving behind structures that were beautiful and delicate. Some resembled the teeth of a great ancient marine creature - fossilised and upturned its gaping mouth facing the heavens. Others looked more man-made, carved away to allow through the traffic of fishing boats or to hide chests filled with gold pieces from a pirate's great haul.

Nearly all off the rock faces had some kind of flora growing from them. This was a harsh environment - soaked, baked and windswept - with no escape from the elements. But clinging to nearly every section of cliff there was something: small white flowers, damp dark mosses, sharp-edged stubborn grasses. It never fails to amaze me the strength of life on our planet. From the deepest depths of the ocean, to the ceiling of the world it manages to find a way. It leaves me feeling rather inadequate that there are patches of my back lawn that I struggle to tempt the grass to fill in the bare patches of mud but here nature can conjure up plants on sheer, merciless crags.

This morning I had the place to myself. As is so often the case with getting out early when travelling you are treated to the sights without the crowds, hawkers and pickpockets who often frequent the more touristy places. It is a free pass to a behind the scenes tour with which you only need an alarm clock to buy.

The only downside to being alone above a 50ft drop with no phone reception it what to do if it all goes wrong! The path out towards the edge of the cliff tops narrows significantly and in some places was barely more than a few metres wide. To add into this, I was

wearing cleated shoes, perfect for increased power on the bike, not so good for scrambling across precarious shingle strewn trails. I was hopping up and down big rocks and down narrow stepped tracks towards the edge of the cliff, all in pursuit of the perfect angle for a photo down the coast. With every photo I hung on to my phone with hands like clamps, desperately hoping I could prevent it sliding out of my sweaty fingers into the waves below. This meant occasionally setting off *Siri*. “How Can I Help You?” she chimed from the speaker, her sickeningly cheery voice cutting through this natural landscape with its artificial tone.

“Some ‘fear of heights’ hypnosis and a decent pair of hiking boots” I muttered before muting her and pondering whether losing my phone in the sea would be such a bad thing after all.

By the time I got to the end the wind was throwing in an added challenge. It wasn’t that it was strong, more the inconsistency. One second it was completely calm, the next it was gusting, trying to topple me. I sat down to give it less surface area to attack also giving me a few minutes to appreciate my surroundings without feeling like I was one turned ankle away from a watery ending. There was nothing out on the ocean today to look at other than the endless miles of rising and falling water. Ahead of me across the sea the next landfall was Africa, to me right (ish!) was America. I was sitting on the very arse-end of Europe with no one else in sight. I love moments of isolation like this, no pressure to move on, no need to worry about what to do

next. Just me and a few swallows who were expertly snipping flies out of the up-draughts from the cliff.

I just sat, with the contentment that comes from getting to a place on your own steam and having the time you need to truly appreciate it.