

# PORTUGAL IN A WEEKEND

**MIKE BEDDOWS** heads to Portugal's Douro Valley for a long weekend of adventure biking, sight-seeing and wine tasting







**D**uring another monotonous afternoon of working my day job, I received an unexpected call. On the other end of the line was Alun from *Adventure Bike Rider*, and he had a proposition for me. Bryn, ABR's editor, was due to travel to Portugal to ride a route along the Douro Valley, but he was recovering from illness and unable to go, so the spot was open and was I willing to, as a regular contributor to the mag, attend? Sometimes in life you have to make tough decisions, so I decided to take one for the team and a week later I found myself on a flight to Portugal to ride Freeride Spirit's new adventure tour, the Porto and Douro Valley Experience tour.

I was to be one of the first people, a guinea pig if you will, to sample Freeride Spirit's new bespoke adventure tours. My destination was Porto, one of the oldest cities in Europe, and I'd be chilling out for an evening before mounting my steed and heading along the beautiful Douro Valley, the first place in the world to become a certified wine region.

On the way over I'd done a bit of reading and discovered that Freeride Spirit is an already well-established tour operator that specialises in off-road tours around northern Portugal. Founded by a chap called João Roxo who, earlier in his career, had spent many years riding enduro to a professional level, the main focus of Freeride Spirit was always riding in the dirt, but João had spotted an opportunity. In order to accommodate the growing numbers of adventure bike riders, Freeride Spirit has introduced a number of road-based tours which focus more on riding exciting roads, seeing incredible sights, and living the high life in the evening. A perfect mix of adventure and luxury.

When I later spoke to João, it was clear that he'd put a lot of thought into what he would want from a tour if he were the customer and, sparing no expense, that's exactly what he's offering. His philosophy, and it's one I now agree with, is that if people are spending the money they'll want a top-drawer experience of fantastic hotels at the end of an exciting day of riding the best roads around on the best bikes for the job. Each trip would take in the best scenery in the area and offer a variety of experiences along the way, from optional off-road segments to wine tasting.

Anyway, back to my trip. On arrival at Porto airport, I was greeted by Miguel Guimarães, one of João's colleagues at Freeride Spirit. After a brief drive we arrived at the seafront to have lunch at a wonderful restaurant. Sitting there, just a few hours after leaving Manchester, I was already thinking about how lucky I was.

Some lunch and a mile or so later, we were at the mouth of the Douro River. It was fitting to see it meeting the Atlantic Ocean, as it was the Douro that we were to be following for the next few days, and it would carve a magnificent line for us to trace. Before long, we headed back to our hotel for the first night, the Palácio do Freixo.

Sitting on the banks of the Douro River, the Palácio do Freixo is an 18th century palace and it makes for some mighty impressive accommodation. (Note: Freeride Spirit chooses a selection of ►







**EASY-GOING  
OFF-ROAD TRAILS**



**ROADS THAT ARE  
BARELY A BIKE WIDTH**



**SCALING THE WALLS  
AT THE CASTLE OF NUMAO**

hotels for any tour, and there's no guarantee that you would get the same ones that I stayed in. Rest assured though, all accommodation is top notch.)

The Palácio do Freixo is unusual in that the reception, bar and restaurant are all in the main palace building, while the rooms and spa complex are next door in a converted flour mill. It makes for a luxurious and characterful place to start a motorcycle tour, and while I was living it up in the spa I couldn't help but be excited to leave the following morning.

The next day I awoke to our bikes waiting for us at the hotel. This is completely different from tours that I have been on in the past, where I've been whisked off in a mini bus to the bikes. It's a little touch, but having everything ready and waiting for you really goes a long way, and it was the first of many signs that showed that the guys at Freeride Spirit are more than willing to go the extra mile.

I had decided to choose the KTM 1090 Adventure R as my bike for the next two days, and the one I got to ride was brand new (only five miles on the clock). I went for the 1090 Adventure R as I was looking forward to the off-road sections of the tour and was keen to try it out, but if you want a lower, more road biased option, you can get the standard model, though even this would eat up dirt. For the more capable, KTM 1290 Super Adventure Rs are available. All of the bikes were fitted with hard panniers which took my luggage with ease.

Finally, we were ready to get going. I was itching to get off and experience the roads of the Douro Valley while also getting my first chance to pilot a KTM 1090 Adventure R. After a few miles, I had already come to the decision that I had made the best choice for my style of riding.

Our guided tour (you can, if you're so inclined, opt for the self-guided version where SatNavs pre-loaded with the route are

provided) began and followed the Douro River as we headed inland and away from Porto. Before long, we diverted away from the river and into the hills to the south. The tour manages to stay off the major highways, concentrating on the more remote stretches of tarmac that flow through vast scenic countryside, and man, were they incredible! Traffic is minimal, and on some sections it's possible to pick up speed and really connect with your bike. The roads loop around the hillsides, sometimes with hairpin bends to tackle, all the time offering ample vision and allowing you to take the occasional racing line.

The KTM 1090 Adventure R is perfect for these roads, and amazing on the off-road sections we would be riding in between them. It's such a capable bike and, with TKC 80 tyres fitted, it handles whatever you can throw at it with ease. If you've never ridden a modern KTM then I urge you to take any opportunity to do so. I love my KTM 950 SE, but at over 10 years old it's getting a bit long in the tooth, though the KTM 1090 Adventure R is the only bike I have been on that I would consider swapping for.

Before long, we moved off the fast roads and onto the lesser travelled routes. Here, you get to encounter remote living as you pass through secluded villages. In some of them, it's as if time has stood still and someone forgot to kickstart the clock. It's amazing to see how some people still live, and I don't mean that in a bad way. Life seems very sleepy, and plenty of farm animals roam the dirt and cobbled streets. I found myself wondering how any of these villagers made a living, though I expect most of them are farmers and, for the most part, live hand to mouth. Everyone we passed by was happy to see the bikes and waved at us as we rode on by.

The trails that are encountered on the tour are great fun and they enabled us to really test our bikes' off-road abilities. There's





WRONG WAY, MIKE!



MIXING WITH THE LOCALS



NAVIGATING THE STEEP VALLEYS



HANG TIME ON THE 1090 ADVENTURE

nothing difficult about the tracks, but Freeride Spirit makes a point of saying these off-road sections are optional for those who want them. There's always a road section to bypass the dirt if required, but I'd say give them a go! They are selected as they link the best bits of tarmac or go over the best passes in the area with the best views.

The day flew by, and after riding hard all morning we visited a winery in the afternoon for a tasting session. The Douro Valley is world-famous for its wine, and this tour takes you into some of the best wineries around. This one is usually the second night's hotel, but it was fully booked on the days we travelled, so we pressed on to the riverside town of Pinhão where we stayed in the Quinta de La Rosa Hotel, which is also a working winery.

The Quinta de La Rosa was completely different to the Palácio do Freixo from our first night in Porto. It is a lot more rustic, with a traditional vibe to it, and the views from my bedroom's balcony over the River Douro were simply stunning. It seemed rude not to chill out with a few glasses of wine on my bedroom balcony while I reflected on the riding I'd just completed.

Day one was incredible, with a mixture of everything I could wish for, and day two was just as great, with more of the same incredible roads and off-road tracks, but the scenery is something else! You are, after all, riding through the heart of the upper Douro, which was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

My highlight of day two was taking a brief stop at the ruins of the Castle of Numao, a medieval castle which was built some time in the mid-10th century. After many years of occupation, it fell to ruins in the 1700s and it now offers some impressive ruins on a rocky hill 677m above sea level.

Unlike many medieval ruins I've visited before, this one is free to walk around, and it's even possible to scale the walls and walk ►



## THE PERFECT BIKE FOR THE JOB

While I had the choice of a KTM 1090 Adventure and a KTM 1290 Super Adventure R, I decided to go with the 1090 Adventure R. Having ridden an old 950 SE for the last few years, I was gobsmacked by how enjoyable the more modern KTM's are! The 1090 Adventure R eats up both tarmac and dirt with ease, it's comfortable, and it's a ferocious beast when you want it to be. It's been many years since I was last on a sports bike (my wrists and shoulders can't take that punishment anymore), but when I flicked to Sports mode on the 1090, all the years of riding them came back in an instant. It may be classed as an adventure bike, but it performs like a sports bike when in the correct mode; the throttle response is instant and not for the faint-hearted, with fast and severe acceleration. Throw it into Street mode, which is my favourite for touring, and you get a more sedate and, in all honesty, safer-feeling ride.



BUSH WHACKING IN  
THE PORTUGUESE OUTBACKINCREDIBLE RIDING  
LEADS TO INCREDIBLE VIEWSIN THE  
HEART OF PORTONAVIGATING THE  
COBBLED HAIRPINS

along between the turrets. It's a fantastic experience, though a bit dangerous as there are no barriers to stop a clumsy tumble. Being in a remote area, it also means the chance of bumping into any other visitors is slim at best.

Eventually, after many more miles of fantastic riding, we reached our maximum distance from Porto, which also happened to be the Spanish border. Here, the Douro River acts as the line between Portugal and Spain, before it slithers into the distance towards its source in the Picos de Urbion, south of Bilbao. We'd be heading in the opposite direction, and while we'd been travelling east for the past day and a half, we'd be heading west, back to Porto.

As ours was a two-day trip, the route back to Porto was on the fast roads. Longer tours are well catered for, and I've been assured that major highways are avoided. Back in Porto, my final night was spent in the Vintage Pestana Ribeira Hotel, the best accommodation of the trip purely for its location. It was right on the waterfront in the older part of the city, restaurants are everywhere, and street performers ply their trade late into the night. What a fantastic place to end a wonderful trip.

I will definitely be back to ride with Freeride Spirit, but next time I'll be bringing my wife and I might even extend the trip to take in one of the many river cruises that were seen chugging up and down the river, sampling wine along the way. The trip I did makes for a perfect weekend away to recharge your batteries in an adventurous setting, but I can see the tour being particularly popular with couples.

You may have held off on tours in the past through not earning enough 'brownie points' to allow you to get away, or simply because of the feeling of guilt you get from leaving your other half, but now you don't have to. Simply bring

them along! It should be an easy sell. Top quality hotels, some with spas and swimming pools, and fun riding through some of the most beautiful scenery around. Throw in world-class wine tasting and great food, and you'll be booking your next couple's getaway. **ABR**

## NO KIT REQUIRED

One of the best things about riding with Freeride Spirit is that the company will provide you with all required riding kit. Before your trip, you're asked for your jacket, trouser, boot, gloves, and helmet sizes, and on arrival at the hotel you're handed the gear that you'll wear for the duration of your ride. With the gear provided for you (and it's top-quality Rev'it! and Schuberth gear), it means that you can travel light and not worry about getting your own bulky riding kit there, saving on flight costs and hassle when you get to the airport.

## WANT TO RIDE THE DOURO VALLEY?

I was riding on Freeride Spirit's Porto and Douro Valley Experience Tour, which is available throughout the year. With three to six-day experiences available, everything except flights, fuel and lunch is provided, with prices starting from €1,480 (£1,309) per rider (£740 [€650] per pillion). You can choose any model of KTM 1090 Adventure or 1290 Super Adventure that you want, and your bike will come complete with luggage and a headset communication system for dynamic group riding communication. All accommodation is in four or five-star hotels, and every day will see you covering approximately 125 miles with optional off-road routes along the way. For more information on Freeride Spirit, and to get yourself booked onto one of the company's tours, head to [www.freeridespirit.pt](http://www.freeridespirit.pt).