



## Roadtrip across southern Portugal

by Amaru & Suzanne, May 30th 2006

After 3 days in Lisbon the time to explore other parts of Portugal had now arrived!

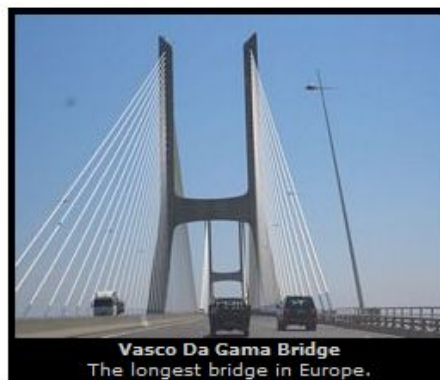


The Itinerary shows our progress on our roadtrip

### Day 1

We woke up early, both of us looking forward to hitting the road. Our plan was to get to the airport where we would pick up a car from any of the car rental firms available. The main reason that we wanted to pick up the car in the airport was that it would save us from trying to drive through the narrow and steep streets of Lisbon. However, when we checked out of our Pension and the guy behind the desk found out about our plans he suggested that we rent a car through them. After checking through the leaflets they had, we actually found some pretty good deals and told him to try and fix them up for us. He called and around 40min later the car had arrived (about the same time it would have taken us to get to the airport as well, but considering that we would have had to carry heavy packs this was much easier).

So, we now had a car, parked right in the middle of Bairro Alto, luckily we had managed to acquire some good roadmaps of the city and managed to navigate our way out of the city centre without any problems. Soon we were on the "Vasco da Gama" bridge which at around 17km is the longest bridge in Europe. We crossed it and were now finally outside Lisbon and on our way....



Vasco Da Gama Bridge  
The longest bridge in Europe.

Before we continue any further I think that there's a small detail we need to mention, our car didn't come with a/c (that's what happens when you go cheap on the rental).....we previously wrote that the first night in Lisbon we were a bit cold, well no more, during the next few days the temperature reached around 35C. So as you can imagine we were pretty hot and sweaty most of the time in the car (especially when we were riding the highways and you just can't have the windows open).



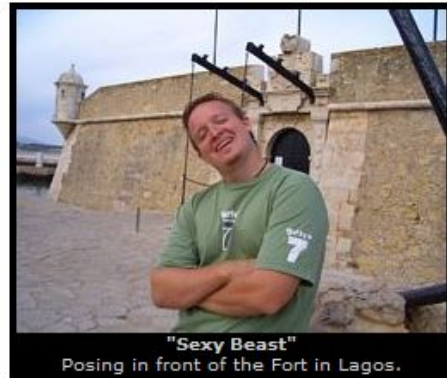
We reached Lagos  
Where we spent our first night on the road

Well, if we wanted to be comfortable all the time we would have stayed home ;)

So, back to the story, we were driving the highways in Portugal, heading south. We didn't really have a plan set for what we wanted to see (see map below showing our itinerary). We knew of a few things that looked interesting and if we had the time.....well, we'll see them!

Our first stop that day (besides some of the reststops along the highway) was the town of Alcácer do Sal, we got off the highway and stopped here for a quick lunch. This was the first place where we noticed that they didn't have anything in English anymore. But with a mix of English and Spanish we managed fine and got our food.

With lunch finished, we got back into the car and after taking one or two wrong turns we made it back onto the highway where we stayed all the way down to the southern town of Lagos. We drove straight into the town centre looking for hostels/pensions/hotels and also somewhere safe to park the car (this is the major drawback about driving). The streets of Lagos were narrow and also one way, at one point I noticed a small red light telling drivers not to continue straight.....well, the road also divided itself onto the left and that's where I went (I didn't think the traffic light applied to me, remember that these were very narrow roads). Here I came face to face with a guy on a motorbike, from his wild gestures and way of speaking I quickly realised that I should have waited at the red light!



"Sexy Beast"  
Posing in front of the Fort in Lagos.



Spain!!!!  
...in the background

Luckily we didn't face any other traffic and continued on. Eventually we were back to where we started (just outside the town walls) and found a decent and free parking. We had a general idea of where the place we thought of staying was, but we had barely walked 15 metres past the town wall when an old lady approached us and pointed in her direction saying in broken English: "room, have room". We followed her and found a nice room in her house which was cheap as well. Happy over the place we threw in our bags and made our way to have a look at the town.

Lagos is a very cozy little town, it obviously caters to tourists (of which we saw a good few), but it still had a small town feeling to it. We strolled around for a while checking the sights and so. After a while we found a nice restaurant where we had a very nice veal in red wine

sauce.....it was just delicious! A perfect end to our day.

## Day 2

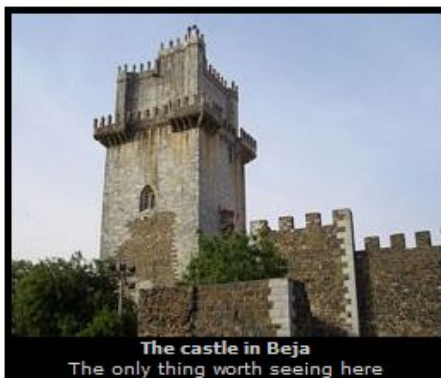
Before having breakfast, we went back to our car and drove about 3km south of the town to "Ponta da Piedade" which are some sandstone cliffs just by the sea, according to Suz they look just like the "Twelve Apostles" in Victoria, Australia. We walked all the way down to the sea, since it was so early there were no other people here but we could see lots of signs advertising boat rides and such through the cliffs.....we were pretty happy we had missed out on all of that. After admiring the view from some of the higher cliffs we drove back about 1km to one of the main beaches, "Praia Ana". Sure it was very pretty but from what we could see the beach wasn't that good, it contained too many rocks....



Mertola village  
A cute laneway... one of many.

We left the area and headed off to our next destination, Monchique for breakfast. This is a small village in the mountain which was very nicely described in our guidebook. We really didn't see anything special about it so we just had our breakfast (which was quite pricy) and kept going.

Our next stop was a town called Tavira, which is described as the "Venice of the Algarve". Well, it wasn't any Venice, that's for sure, in our books we would go as far as calling it a bit boring. We still did some quick sightseeing, had a simple lunch and continued on towards the Spanish border...



The castle in Beja  
The only thing worth seeing here

We reached Vila Real de Santo Antonio from where we could actually see Spain just across the river (we were thinking of crossing over but didn't since we decided we didn't have time to see two countries).

Later on during the day we we drove and drove through hills and nature without seeing much civilisation and all of a sudden a small town with sun bleached buildings appeared out of nowhere.....we had reached the small mountain town of Mertola. We found a very nice parking space in the shade just outside the town walls (and a good thing we did since it was HOT!) and strolled into the town. It's a beautiful town almost in the middle of nowhere with lots of small laneways everywhere. Our guidebook advertised a bar in it's centre called "Lancelot Bar" and after walking for a while we really needed a refreshing drink (good think we didn't come here during summer when the temperature can reach

47C). We walked up some lanes, down some other lanes and along a big square with 3-4 trees filled with oranges.....but we couldn't find the damned bar! Eventually we ended up at the beginning again, saw the sign pointing to the bar but we just went the other way to where we parked our car and to the bar that was there instead.....ahhhh, is there anything better than a cold drink when you have been walking around in the heat, don't think so!!

After refreshments we got back to our car and headed to Beja where we would spend the night. We managed to find parking on the street right in front of a hotel and luckily they had rooms available. When we strolled the town a bit later on we suspected that the hotel might have had lots and lots of free rooms. It was almost like being in a ghost town. There just weren't any stores, bars or restaurants open and we couldn't see that many people either.....and this in a town which is supposed to have a population of around 36,000.

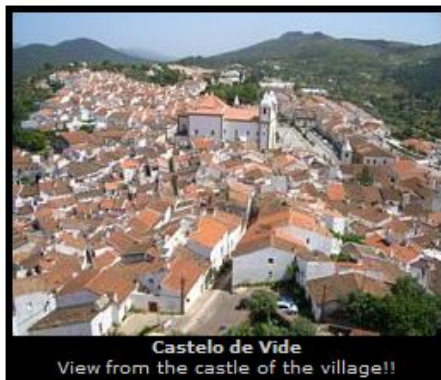
Eventually we made it to the castle and went inside it's walls.....here we saw a few people, there was food and music and first we suspected that it was a private gathering. Suz was almost on her way back thinking that we were intruding, but I wanted to check the place out, so I stepped in and figured out that it was more of a town event and not something private (the souvenir sellers along the walls sort of gave me a hint). It looked like a nice town event though (would have been really nice with some people), they were selling beers and wine, there was a pig on a stick (looked yummy, yummy strangely enough) and some people were dressed in medieval clothes.



We walked up some stairs and saw a sign that said that the tower was closed.....the guy standing there first told us that it was closed for the day, but then he said: "ok, five minutes ok?". We just replied yes, thank you and headed up the stairs (we didn't even have to pay....hehe). The tower reaches 42m and offered us a nice view of the city.

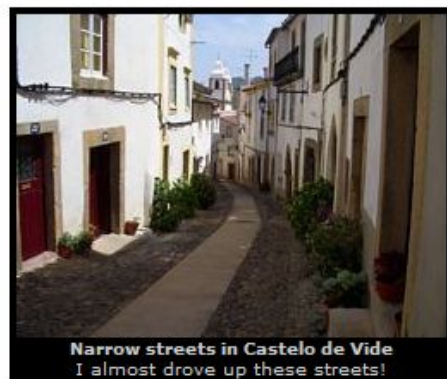
That night we managed to find an open restaurant where we could have dinner, and believe it or not, we had the most authentic of our dinners here. No other tourists, no english on the menu and very cheap. We loved it of course!!

### Day 3

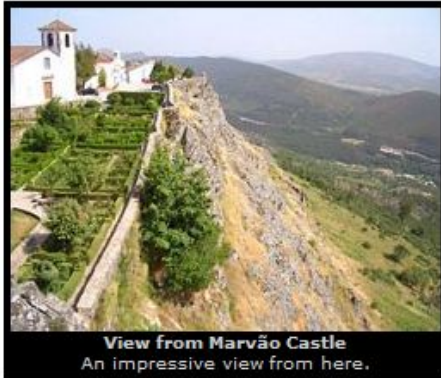


Since we had earlier decided that we didn't want to pay car rental for 4 days, that this was to be our last day on the road. We planned it great though, our first stop took us to Elvas, which contains an immense aqueduct just outside it's walls.....and when I say walls I mean it. This town had 3 outer walls and then a huge wall surrounding it. We drove around in the town along it's narrow streets for a while looking for a good place to park, by luck we found the castle, had a look at it but didn't find it too impressive so we got back to the car (I think it's fair to say that I was getting quite accustomed of driving on the narrow, cobbled streets many of Portugals town have to offer) and found a good parking place in a more central area of town. Don't think that I'm not appreciating the castle though, it's very beautiful, but compared to some of the other ones we've seen (Sintra being number one) it just isn't very impressive..... the walls of the city are though.

After having a cold drink and reading up a bit more about our next destination we got back to our car and eventually came upon Castelo de Vide. Before we did any sightseeing of the city needed some food so we parked and had a simple, yet good lunch. Now we started to drive up to the castle, took a turn and noticed that the road was getting even narrower. Eventually, while driving a bit uphill, we came to a T-crossing and realized that we were not going up that hill.....it was just too narrow (we could see along the walls the scrapings created by many many cars before us). By some fate of good luck I managed to turn the car around (remember...narrow, hill and yes, steep!) and headed back hoping we were not going to meet another car. We found a place, parked and took a second to catch our breath, it wouldn't have been good to have scratched the whole side of the car.....



After our ordeil (well.....as close to it as we got) we walked up the hill to the castle. Now the castle itself wasn't that grand but the view.....impressive. The town is really beautiful, lots of sunbleached houses all huddled together. On our way back we took a different route which took us past the old town and the old Jewish Synagogue (oldest in Portugal). Once we reached the end of the hill we found the beautiful fountain "Fonte da Vila". This town is known all over Portugal for its mineral water and here we found a 400 year old fountain that contained it. The water flowing from the fountain was really cold and we refreshed ourselves with it. Afterwards when we reached the car I grabbed two big empty bottles that we had, ran down to the fountain again and refilled them with the water.....it was that good.



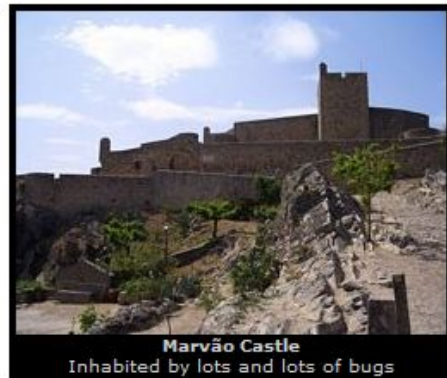
**View from Marvão Castle**  
An impressive view from here.

Well, from the castle we could spot our next destination, barely, up in the mountains, Marvão. We were able to spot the castle from miles away when driving towards it. It towers on the top of the mountain. When we reached it we were walking the walls of it and noticed that there were a few annoying bugs flying around the town.....weird. Well, we continued along the path up to the castle when we encountered a big group of tourists coming back. They were all hitting themselves and each other all over and telling us that there are bugs all over the castle and warning us not to go there. Well, we had seen the bugs already and they weren't all that bad.....famous last words huh!!

After walking for another 5 min we could now see the castle towering in front of us, and all around it we saw millions and millions of bugs. We've never seen anything like it, it was like an invasion of

Locusts.....although the bugs were not that big. All the time during our trip we had been saying that it was good that we chose this time of the year to travel, not too hot, tourists not too bad and so on..... We had now encountered the first negative fact about this time of the year.....springtime!

Well, I wasn't going to let some bugs stop me, when will I be here next?? So I started walking (ie running with my book ahead of me waving bugs aside) with Suz right behind me. Sunglasses was a must and so was keeping your mouth closed when running through the bugs.....and still we got heaps and heaps of them on us. We continued all the way to the top but there were just too many of them, I could barely make it up to the top of the wall to look down.....and forget about taking photos, it just wasn't possible to stand still to be able to snap some away (even though as you can see I managed to get some). So we had to give up and run back through the bugs again.....at the very end I filmed Suz running through the bugs and since I was filming and had to keep still I could feel the bugs on my face, my neck, arms and legs and had to fight a very strong urge to just run away like a crazy person.



**Marvão Castle**  
Inhabited by lots and lots of bugs

Once we got away from the major swarm I just tore off my shirt and pants and slapped all the bugs off me (I even checked my underwear.....just to be sure), and there were plenty of them.



**Old Roman Ruins in Evora**  
From around the 2nd century....

We found a bar and sat inside (two reasons.....bugs and heat) where we enjoyed some cool drinks before heading back to the car. It still felt like the bugs were all over us.....and then Suz found another one that was trapped in her bra!

Our last stop for the day was Evora. We drove around the town and with the help of signs managed to make it over to a very nice and centrally located "Residencial". The best thing was that we managed to find parking no more than 4min away. So, this was to be our last stop before we headed back to Lisbon. We walked all around the town centre, just looking at buildings and people (if you by now haven't managed to figure out that we don't really travel to visit museums and such, you haven't been paying attention) and potential places for dinner. We didn't really find anything that we found to our liking so we

just ended up at an Italian restaurant down the street where we slept. The food was ok, no more than that.

After dinner we walked for a little while, the city felt very safe to walk in, you could see lots of people walking around, even lots of families with their kids. The city is very pretty and it's easy to see why it's on Unescos list as a World Heritage city.

#### Day 4

The next day we had a sleep in, ate breakfast and started our drive back to Lisbon. The drive wasn't very long and soon we were back in the capital. This time we came in through the south, a different bridge and therefore got a bit lost. We eventually figured out where to turn but then couldn't figure out how to get to that lane. After driving for another hour or so (the first part was a bit nervous since we were running short of fuel) we managed to refill our car and then just by making a U-turn found the right road and went back to the place where we had stayed before. Here we just parked the car on a pedestrian crossing (there just wasn't any other place), so we had to wait by the car until they came to collect it....which took around an hour or so.

That afternoon and evening we just took it easy, wrote some postcards and just relaxed. The next day we made our way to the airport, and before we left Portugal, had some more custards tarts.

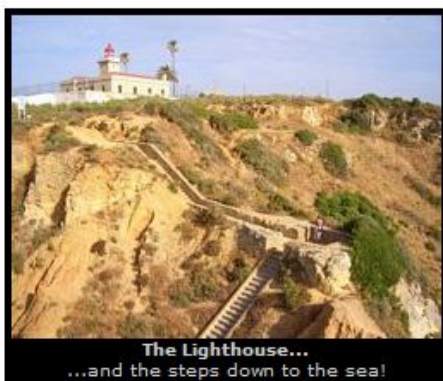


**Pastéis de Nata**  
Our favorite pastry.....the custards tarts!

So....our thoughts on Portugal?

It's just great, the people are friendly, there is so much culture to see, the weather is great, it's quite cheap compared to the rest of Western Europe and the food.....Mmmmm....don't get us started, it's GREAT!! We would recommend Portugal to anyone!

Next destination.....Sweden!





**Down by the sea...**  
...in lowtide



**Suzie and the cliffs**  
Almost like the Twelve Apostles in Australia



**Bar search in Mertola...**  
Amaru was trying to find the Lancelot bar



**Oranges**  
We found trees filled with oranges..



**Mmmmm...pig anyone?**  
What, no pork crackling?



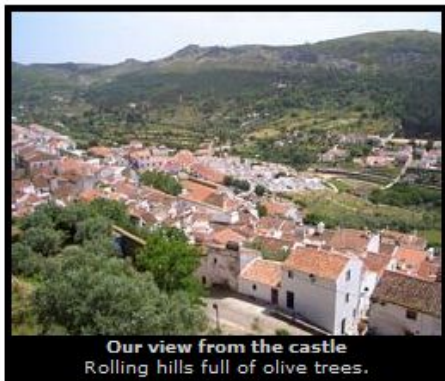
**From the top of the tower**  
We were lucky to get there



**King of the Castle**  
On top of the 42m "Torre de Menagem"



**Break at Elvas**  
A break during a very hot day





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