

SOUTHEASTERN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL



Travis Gill of viajarMOTO.com

We remember the feelings and the emotions we felt after having our travel plans come to a screeching, no ABS skidding halt in Cartagena, Spain. Chantil and I were only a few weeks into our full-time motorcycle travels and were now in the thick of a complete country-wide lockdown and quarantine.

We experienced frustration, sympathy, and finally acceptance. In the end we were grateful. The three-month lockdown forced us to slow down and reconsider our travel timeline. Our initial plan was to ride through nearly every country in Europe in a year. Not an impossible task but definitely a challenging one, especially if we planned on seeing many of the tourist destinations and cultural sites along the way. Once the travel lockdown was lifted in June, we had another 90 days of travel time on our visas. Instead of trying to focus on seeing as much of Europe as we could in those 90 days, we decided to spend it in just Spain and Portugal.



Iberian Peninsula

The Iberian Peninsula of Europe includes the countries of Spain, Portugal, Andorra, and the British overseas territory of Gibraltar. Size wise it is comparable to about 84 percent of Texas and the population of the Iberian Peninsula is nearly double that of the Lone Star State. We got to experience both Spain and Portugal for four and a half months, however three months of that was restricted to the region of Murcia, on Spain's southeast coast, due to the COVID pandemic.

Our motorcycle travels stayed mostly along the coastal regions of these two countries. We started in the northeast and made our way clockwise around the peninsula winding between the various regions; experiencing their uniqueness and diversities.

Hola Espana

Catalonia was the first region we entered after crossing the Pyrenees mountains from France. On our first day we experienced heavy winds that made for an interesting and expensive day. In the afternoon we found a gravel road that brought us to a beautiful overlook with incredible views of the Mediterranean Sea. I wanted to capture the moment, so I set up the camera on a tripod. Within seconds the fierce winds blew it over, smashing it into a rock, and damaging the retractable lens. While I was surveying the extent of damage, the winds knocked over my motorcycle! I set my helmet down to pick up my motorcycle and it too started blowing away! This was not a particularly great way to start our travels in Spain!

Fortunately the rest of our Catalonia experience was much better. That next morning, in Port Lligat, we woke to one of the most spectacular sunrises we've ever experienced, enjoyed visiting the home and museum of the extravagant artist Salvador Dali, and purchased a replacement camera in the busy capital city of Barcelona.



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Side Trip to Andorra

Andorra is a small country situated between France and Spain in the mountains of the Pyrenees. We expected amazing mountain views, but were somewhat surprised with the amount of shopping centers and tax-free boutiques. Gas is also much cheaper – 1.30 USD less per gallon! We made sure to fill up our internal and external tanks before leaving.

Since we were visiting one of the tiniest countries in Europe, we decided to visit the Miniature Museum in Ordino. This charming museum features the extraordinary microscopic artwork of Ukrainian artist Nikolai Syadristy where he expertly crafts the tiniest of scenes inside the eye of a needle!

Back into Spain

From Andorra, we ventured back to Spain to the pastured lands, orchards, and arid steppe plains of the Aragon region. Our primary reason for riding into Aragon was to visit the town of Borja. This small and modest town was made world famous in 2012, when a well-meaning parishioner attempted to restore a fresco of Jesus Christ. The spectacularly bad restoration resulted in what looked to be a monkey wearing a tunic and has been called one of "the worst art restoration projects of all time".

The day before we reached the coastal city of Cartagena, the prime minister of Spain declared a State of Alarm, locking down the entire country. We were fortunate to find a countryside Airbnb with a wonderful hostess who took us in during these uncertain times. After 56 days we were allowed to travel again, although limited to the region of Murcia. We enjoyed exploring coastal fortresses, sunny beaches, and even rode a 119 mile (192 km) section of the Trans Euro Trail. **See Upshift issue 51.**





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After 92 days of travel restrictions, we were ready to explore anything! Fortunately Spain's southern Andalusia regions offered plenty of opportunities. This region was especially interesting since many civilizations have influenced and shaped the history here. The Carthaginians, Romans, Moorish, and Spanish Kingdoms, have all left their mark. The cities of Granada, Córdoba, Malaga, and Seville are full of such cultural diversity that it's not uncommon to visit the remains of a Roman theater, a Moorish marketplace, a Spanish castle, and a renaissance Roman Catholic cathedral all within minutes of each other. The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba and the Alhambra palace and fortress complex in Granada are both definitely worth visiting.

Our final day in Spain was spent in Port of Palos at the Muelle de las Carabelas learning about the historic expedition of three ships - Santa Maria, Pinta, and Niña. On August of 1492, the crew of these three ships and Christopher Columbus set sail to find a passage to China and India. We especially enjoyed walking aboard these full-sized restorations and imagining ourselves crossing the unforgiving ocean into the unknown.



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Bem-vindo a Portugal

After crossing the Puento Internacional del Guadiana bridge, we were in a new country! The southern region of Algarve is famous for its Atlantic coastline, warm climate, and great beaches. The highlight for me was visiting the Capela de Ossis Bone Chapel in Faro. This small chapel, located to the rear of the Igreja do Carmo church, is where the skulls and bones of over 1,200 monks have been cemented into the walls and ceiling, with a creepy, but satisfying symmetry.

The Alentejo region of Portugal is more rural with a diverse range of landscapes from farms, forests, and rolling hills. As we were riding along the coastal road we noticed large orchards of gnarly, reddish, oak trees with numbers painted on their trunks. They all seemed to have the bark stripped away from the trunk. It turns out that these are cork trees! In fact, a majority of the worlds cork used for wine bottle stoppers, bulletin boards, flooring, and fishing rod handles comes from this region of Portugal.

We were welcomed into Lisbon with a feeling of déjà vu as we entered the city from the south. The 25 de Avril Bridge, which was named after the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and the beginning of a democratic Portugal, has a similar design and color as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. We stayed in Lisbon for a few days to enjoy exploring the colorful street art and learning about the history and culture of one of the oldest cities in Europe.

Just 30 minutes from Lisbon, is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sintra. This lush and mountainous region is known for its fairytale palaces, medieval castles, and historic estates, villas, and gardens. We toured the Pena Palace, climbed the stairs of the Castle of the Moors, and enjoyed our first ride in an open-aired Italian Ape Calessino three-wheeled vehicle!





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At the end of the day we watched the sun dip into the Atlantic Ocean from the steep rocky cliffs and monument at Cabo de Roca. This location is one of the extremes of Europe signifying the furthest western point of continental Europe. Perhaps someday we'll visit the other extreme points of Europe: Punta de Tarifa in the South, Cape Nordkinn to the north, and Ngodyayakha Mountain in the east.

During our final week in Portugal we continued riding north where we experienced cooler temperatures and remote roads far from the hustle and bustle of cities and towns. In this region traffic consists of an occasional farmer giving you a friendly smile and a wave. We especially enjoyed the winding roads and trails of the Peneda-Geres National Park with the backroads from the Granaries of Soajo to the northern border of Spain being especially memorable.

Memories of a Lifetime

As we looked back through our favorite photographs of Spain and Portugal from the last 3,660 miles (5890 km) it's difficult to imagine that we briefly (very briefly) considered storing our mules in southern Spain and returning to the United States. We're extremely grateful that we stuck-it-out and have some of our favorite memories of the diverse regions of the spectacular Iberian Peninsula to show for it.

About viajarMOTO: After being inspired by Upshift writers and photographers like Tim Burke, Michnus Olivier, Olivier de Vaulx, and many others, Travis and Chantil Gill started their own full-time motorcycle travel in early 2020. You can follow them on their website www.viajarMOTO.com and on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.

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