

PORTUGAL

ADVENTURE COUNTRY TRACK

END OF THE SEASON ADVENTURE





If you're a regular reader of UPSHIFT, you've undoubtedly heard of the Backcountry Discovery Routes (BDR). If you haven't, then you've probably spent the last 13 years riding in the desert without access to the internet. Since 2010, the BDR organization has created and made GPS tracks available for dual-sport and adventure motorcyclists to enjoy for free at www.RideBDR.com. With the recent release of the Oregon BDR in February **Issue 78**, there are now 12 routes where motorcyclists can ride miles of backcountry roads, while experiencing some of the most beautiful scenery and uniqueness of various regions throughout the United States.

However, this story isn't about the BDR. It's about its smaller cousin. The one that lives in Europe and has an Austrian accent. It has a similar mission, but a different name – The Adventure Country Tracks. As of 2023, there are now six Adventure Country Tracks (ACT) that travel through remote regions of the countries of Portugal, Romania, Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom and the Pyrenees Mountains. You can download each of these track routes on the ACT website at www.adventurecountrytracks.com.



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A REMARKABLE START

With the latest route and updates loaded into our smartphone mapping app and Garmin GPS receiver, Chantil and I made our way from Spain **Issue 79** to the northern start of the Portugal ACT. Our pair of heavy laden BMW G650GS mules, seemed to love the mix of twisty mountain roads that passed through small villages, and delivered us to the quiet border town of Rio de Onor.

As we neared the city of Bragança, we realized that the designers of the route did a wonderful job of creating a memorable first impression. The start actually begins inside the stone walls of a medieval castle! How many ACTs and BDRs can say that they start at a 12th century castle? It was an exciting beginning to the next 13 days and more than 1,250 km (775 miles) of exploring and riding that laid ahead of us.

After leaving the Castle of Bragança, we weaved through the maze of narrow cobblestone streets, before leaving the city. It wasn't much longer that we reached the first section of gravel roads – not a surprise, since roughly 65 percent of the Portugal ACT is off-road. Chantil and I don't feel we've had a "proper riding day" if we don't get at least a little bit of dirt or gravel under our tires. Fortunately, every day of the Portugal ACT was a proper riding day.



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NOT MUCH TO STRESS ABOUT

Riding in a foreign country can be stressful. It's easy to get overwhelmed with the myriad of questions: What language do they speak? What currency do they use? Where are the restaurants? Fuel stations? Hotels? Camping? Fortunately, this is the beauty of the ACT, much of the stress of venturing into the unknown is alleviated by simply following a colored line on a moving map. The organizers even created waypoints of recommended places to get fuel, eat, and sleep.

Access to cell phone data was prevalent along a majority of the route, where we enjoyed daily updates on weather, Portuguese translations, hotels, and mapping apps. We also preloaded an offline portion of Google Maps and the Portuguese language file for our translation app, just in case we didn't have a signal. The backcountry can be unpredictable, even in a westernized country like Portugal. It would be prudent to also have a satellite communication device, like the Garmin inReach, in case of a major accident.

Not to worry though – thousands of dual-sport and adventure motorcyclists enjoy riding the Portugal ACT each year. Success boils down to focusing on safe riding practices, not riding beyond your ability, watching the weather, and stopping regularly to take in the wonderful views – of which there will be plenty!



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NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

The cooler temperatures of November were creeping in – especially in the early mornings. Wiping frost off the tent and seats of our mules was becoming a daily ritual. We first felt the cooler temperatures of the season a few months before, while riding in Great Britain **Issue 75**. During one particularly cold UK morning, Chantil noticed that the left grip on her mule was not heating. I flipped mine on as well, and discovered that the right grip was broken. Together we had one set of working heated grips, between our two mules. Since Chantil's cold tolerance is lower than mine, we decided to swap the operating grips to her mule. I would be fine.

I was fine, until the November winds of the Portuguese mountains made my fingers numb from the bitter cold. Time to get creative and “MacGyver” some handlebar muffs from whatever we could find. As we passed by a small town, we noticed a trash bin full of recycled cardboard. Perhaps a pizza box and some duct tape would work? With a bit of ingenuity, a half-roll of duct tape, and twenty minutes, we had successfully made a functioning, albeit a bit ghetto, set of handlebar muffs. Thankfully, all without the stress of a MacGyver time-bomb!





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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PORTUGAL ACT

Riding through Portugal along the entire ACT was full of memorable moments. The Castle of Bragança was a stupendous start, but there were many other highlights during the 1,250 km (775 miles) adventure. On the first day, we opted to attempt one of the optional difficult sections, which rewarded us with being able to ride on a Medieval-era stone bridge! It's not everyday that you get to ride a motorcycle on a thousand-year-old structure.

The entire route is a nice mix of pavement and off-roading that travels through some amazing landscapes, especially during the late autumn season, where the bright reds, oranges, and yellows added splashes of vibrance to the Iberian countryside. Twisty and well-maintained roads drifted through the picturesque Douro Vally which is renowned for their famous Portuguese wines.

With so much sensational scenery it was easy to keep riding all day! However, there were a few places worth parking the motorcycles in order to absorb some of the history and culture of eastern Portugal. Castelo Rodrigo is not to be missed. In fact, the ACT route actually cuts right through the narrow cobblestone streets of this hilltop town. A tour of the 6th-century castle provided commanding views of the entire valley, dotted with white-washed homes with their brown terracotta shingled roofs. It was stunning!



Another highlight was crossing the Serra de Estrela mountain range. Being late November, we half expected that crossing this 1,993 meter (6,537 ft) high mountain range might be a challenge, but we honestly didn't expect that it would be the worst ice and winds we've ever experienced during our 75,000 miles of motorcycle overlanding. We were extremely grateful that the paved road portions stayed free from ice, and our cold-weather motorcycle gear, along with my newly created MacGyver mitts, kept us warm and dry.

If you've ever yearned for experiencing the Mad Max landscape without the post-apocalyptic destruction of the world, then the abandoned Mines of Sao Domingos won't disappoint. This area used to be the site of one of the largest mining operations in Europe until the copper and sulfur resources were exhausted in 1966. Walking among the mangled patchwork of rusty iron, rubble, and blood-red pools, created an uneasy feeling. I half expected to even see a wild-haired feral kid, barking like a wolf, and yielding a metal boomerang.

NOT EVERY DAY IS SUNSHINE AND RAINBOWS

Almost every day of riding on the Portugal ACT was enjoyable. We relished in the beauty of the seasonal colors, and the solitude of riding through some of the most remote areas of western Europe. However, there was one particular day of riding that was emotionally challenging.

We were about to ride into a large storm cell with rain forecasted for the next two days. Since we were not on any time constraints, we decided to find a hotel and wait out the unfavorable weather. As we neared the town of Mogadouro, Chantil looked at her tank bag and noticed that her smartphone and case, containing most of her credit cards and ID was gone! With grey clouds billowing overhead and nighttime on the horizon, we knew we had to act fast in order to find her smartphone and wallet! We backtracked as much of the route as we could, before the rain and darkness set in – however no phone. We realized that finding a black phone case at night and in the rain was almost pointless. We set up our tent, behind an old stone church, and went to bed with a sullen quietness, and a heartfelt prayer.

The next morning, we woke up well before sunrise in order to pack and get an early start on our continued search. It was a wet and miserable start of our day. We didn't expect that the phone would survive the evening of constant rain, but we still had hope that we could at least recover the ID and credit cards before they were found by someone else. After packing the mules with our wet tent and dampened spirits, we continued our search.



After 30 minutes of riding along muddy trails and roadways, I was starting to lose hope. As we dropped down a small ledge from the pavement to the last portion of dirt road, I spotted it! Just off the side of the trail, laying in the grass was her phone case!! With elated joy, we picked it up and turned it on and it still worked!! Miraculously, the case had fallen and opened in such a way that protected the phone and cards from getting wet. It was a moment of pure joy and excitement that had us smiling for the rest of the day and the remainder of the ACT Portugal!

MORE ADVENTURE COUNTRY TRACKS AHEAD

After our memorable experiences on the Portugal ACT, we are eager to ride even more of the ACTs in the future. Stay tuned for more stories as we ride through Greece, Romania, and Italy in the future.

ABOUT VIAJARMOTO

Travis and Chantil Gill have been living on the road and motorcycle overlanding since early 2020. So far they've explored 44 countries in North America, Europe, and north Africa, and hope to someday circumnavigate this "pale blue dot" they call home. Follow their journey at www.viajarMOTO.com.

