

Seeking sanctuary

WORDS TREVOR WARD PHOTOGRAPHY HENRY IDDON

Portugal's Costa Verde and Viana do Castelo provide refuge, of sorts, from a weather-beaten Britain



We are halfway up the climb to the Sanctuary of Senhora do Minho and ex-pro Ricardo Felgueiras, a veteran of two Vueltas a España and 11 Voltas a Portugal, is

playing mind games.

As if the stiff gradient, brutally potholed surface and sheer drop to our right aren't enough to focus the attention, my riding companion is taunting me with psychological trickery: "The summit is just around the next bend," he says, only for us to get there and the road continue climbing as far as the eye can see.

He laughs it off when, 20 minutes later, the summit really does appear within touching distance: "Riders play mind games all the time in pro races. You have to be just as strong mentally as you are physically."

Ricardo hasn't finished messing with my psyche, because he has deliberately omitted one last detail about the final 500m ramp to the religious shrine on this northern Portuguese hilltop – it is cobbled.

It hasn't been a long climb – barely 8km – but those last few metres up a wall of cobbles are enough to make me gasp out Our Lady of Minho's name in less than reverential tones.

Though the modern church, rebuilt in 2005 to accommodate the thousands of Senhora's pilgrims who make the journey up here each year, is slightly underwhelming, the views of the Serra d'Arga and Lima valley are not. At almost 800m, this is the highest point of this region.

Having started today's ride at sea

level, we can feel every pedal stroke in our legs.

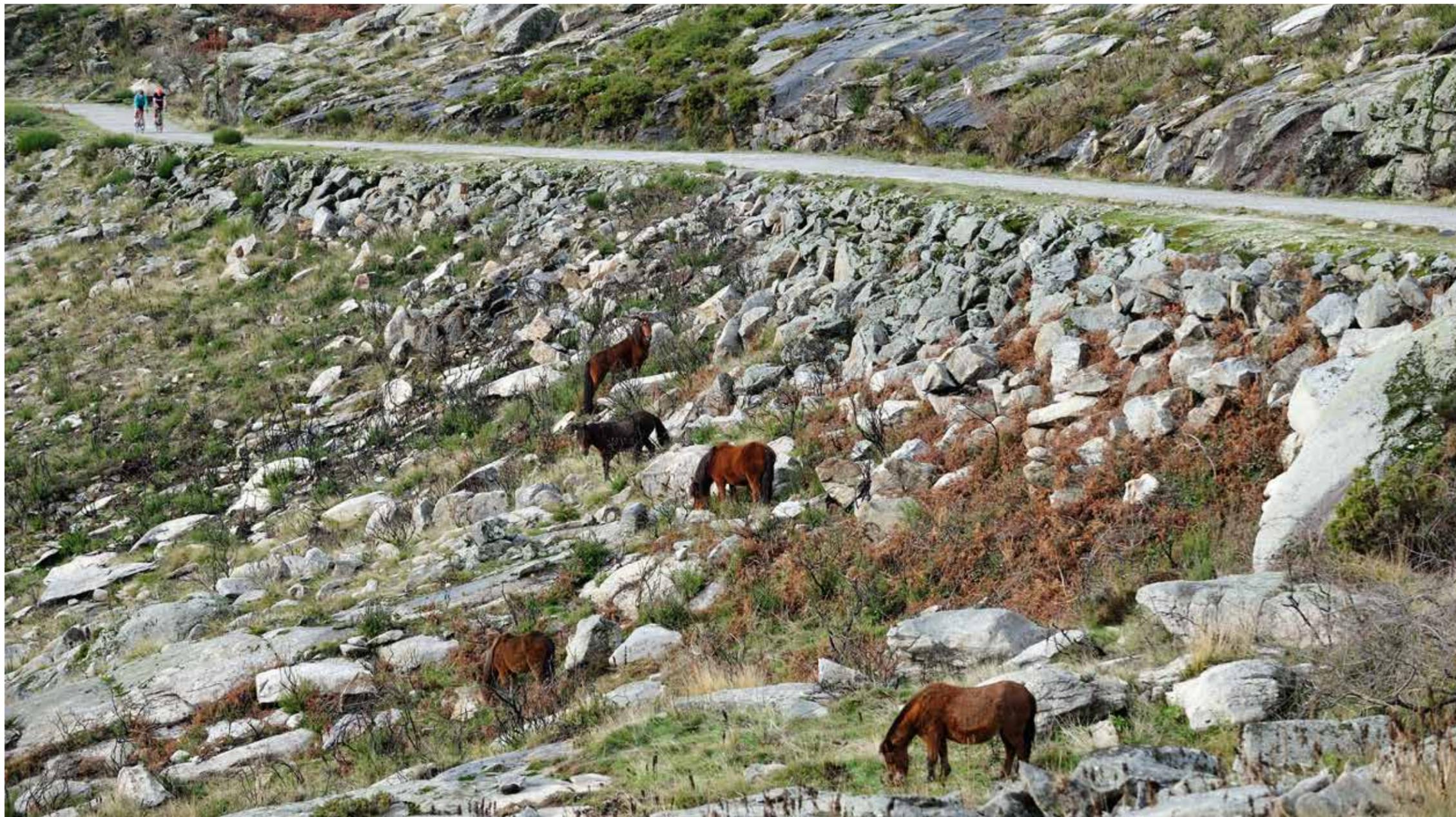
Get away from it all

I'm here because I wanted to escape the drab British winter and didn't want to join the queues for coffee in the more traditional destinations of Majorca or Tenerife. Plus, I can't resist Portugal's pasteis de nata, custard tarts. Of Portugal's other national dish, salted cod, more later.

Ricardo retired from pro racing in 2003 after 13 years serving as a domestique in various Portuguese teams. He worked for another 12 years selling power tools, qualified as a masseur and now works as a cycling guide at a new sports hotel, the FeelViana (hotelfeelviana.com), situated on the Atlantic coast just across the River Lima from the town of Viana do Castelo. Though the hotel's main clientele from May to October is of the neoprene-wearing variety – wind and kitesurfing are the big sports here – it is beginning to attract Lycra-clad warriors from northern Europe in search of winter or spring training.

While the scenery is everything a refugee from broken, congested British roads could hope for, the weather is less consistent. We arrived in mid-December for a four-day break, just after Storm Ana had struck. One of the days saw us dodging uprooted trees in thick mist, while another saw us drowned in torrential rain. But today is as warm and sunny as we could hope for – think what a typical British summer's day is *supposed* to be like.

Today's ride started from the hotel and saw us cross the wide mouth of the River Lima on a double-decker →



iron bridge designed by Gustave Eiffel 10 years before he became famous for his tower in Paris.

After skirting the attractive centro histórico of Viana we passed the marina and the decommissioned hospital ship of Gil Eannes that was used to service the town's cod fishing fleet during its epic voyages to far-flung waters.

Cod help me

Salted cod – bacalhau – is Portugal's national dish, originating from the days when the fish had to be salted to survive the voyage home from the Northern Atlantic. Portugal actually has the third highest consumption of seafood per capita in the world – 40 per cent more than the official United Nations health guidelines recommend! It's one of the few countries that has been urged to eat less fish on ecological grounds.

Those last few metres up are enough to make me gasp out Our Lady of Minho's name in less than reverential tones

Above
The herds of native wild horses – garrano – were a bit of a 'mare!'

On learning I am a culinary apostate who prefers his cod fresh, deep fried and served with chips, Ricardo taunts me throughout the ride with gruesome descriptions of what he – and the rest of Portugal – will be having for their traditional Christmas Eve meal: salted cod boiled with carrots.

"We'll try some for lunch," he threatens. It dawns on me that though Ricardo never became a household name in the pro

peloton – national amateur track champ in 1985 and 24th overall in the 1991 Volta were his best results – he must have reduced his rivals to quivering wrecks with his mind games. The thought of salted cod in your musette would be enough to wilt the soul of any non-Portuguese rider during a long day in the saddle.

The descent back down from Senhora do Minho is a slow, bone-jarring and mentally exhausting affair. Not only do we have to keep an eye on the deeply rutted and pockmarked road surface, but also the herds of native wild horses – garrano – on the unfenced slopes above and below us.

We pause to check our nuts and bolts at a village tasca, where a regular is eating a meat dish accompanied by a fizzy-looking drink he scoops up by the cupful from a china bowl on his table. This is the

local speciality of Champarreão, a blend of white wine, beer, sugar and cinnamon. I honestly didn't think Portuguese menus could offer anything more stomach-turning than salted cod, but I was wrong. We order milky coffees and custard tarts to help me forget.

If cod and custard tarts are the staples of Portugal's cuisine, cobbles are the hardy perennial of its highway infrastructure. Unlike in the UK where town planners have ripped up our heritage by replacing cobbles with tarmac or paving stones, the history of Portugal has been left largely intact on its road surfaces. It's not too much of a surprise when we discover the descent from the village is down a kilometre-long serpentine stretch of shiny paralelepípedos, a word whose onomatopoeic qualities become evident as we rattle down the hill at an alarmingly steep gradient.

At the bottom, we cross a bridge before the road surface flattens out and returns to smooth asphalt. A moped carrying an elderly farmer and his wife splutters past us in first gear in the opposite direction. Trailing behind on a lead is a fat mongrel. "They are training their dog," laughs Ricardo.

The climbs continue

The road bucks up and down through a succession of sleepy villages with the peaks of the Serra d'Arga soaring upwards to our right. Eventually, an abrupt jolt in gradient signals the start of the next big climb of the day, which leads us to the desolate, rocky plateau of the Arga. Clouds are scudding briskly but there is still plenty of blue sky. To our left are views down to the River Minho and, on the other side, the brooding peaks of Galicia in Spain.

Top
At last, this is the final cobbled section leading to the Sanctuary of Senhora do Minho

Above
Regular pilgrimages are made to pay respects

The gradient has eased but the road is still climbing through the forlorn-looking landscape, curling around the shoulder of the mountain. To our left, the slope tumbles down for hundreds of metres into an endless valley.

Apart from the moped couple training their dog, we've barely seen any other traffic since leaving Viana three hours ago. It's not as if the Arga is uninhabited – there are regular settlements, and herds of livestock graze at the roadside – but there appears to be little reason for anyone to make the journey up to this exposed tableland.

We pull in at a doorway under a sign announcing, Taberna do Horácio, and order coffees. The café doubles as the village general store. Black and white photographs adorn the walls, and the grey-haired, tweed-capped Horácio strikes an →

To our left are views down to the River Minho and, on the other side, the brooding peaks of Galicia in Spain



odd contrast with the gleaming, modern coffee machine he is tending. The coffee is good, and by the time we have drained our glasses, a succession of locals have arrived, almost as if Horácio pressed a secret button to let the village know the day's entertainment – in the form of some garishly-clad and duck-footed cyclists – had arrived.

We leave the village between drystone walls that wouldn't look out of place in the Peak District. Then comes a vertiginous, corkscrewing descent – “this is a popular Strava segment in the other direction,” says Ricardo – before a fast, flat section delivers us to the arched, stone bridge that crosses the river Lima to Portugal's oldest village, Ponte de Lima. The bridge dates back to

Roman times when, legend has it, the river was known as the River of Oblivion – if you put your foot in its water, you'd forget everything.

We make it across the bridge – closed to motorised traffic – with our memories intact, and choose an outdoor café in the town square, which is overlooked by handsome, three and four-storey mansions bejewelled with ornate, wrought iron balconies. Before Ricardo can utter the word bacalhau, I've already ordered us a plate of custard tarts.

History in the baking

It turns out these custard tarts play as big a part in Portugal's history as the cod. Ricardo tells me how, following the economic crisis of 2008 when Portugal found itself billions of euros

Above
The Portuguese still love their cobbles, but at least the stunning views help take your mind off the rough ride

in debt, the former finance minister asked: “Why isn't there a well-known Portuguese custard tart franchise yet?” Despite being met with ridicule from the media, his call to arms is credited with helping a Lisbon-based franchise, NATA Lisboa, expand its business to the UK, France, Austria and the United Arab Emirates and play its own small part in helping the economy recover.

Satisfied we are doing our bit for Portugal's GDP, we devour our tarts before heading along the village's pretty riverfront and starting the final leg back to Viana.

The final obstacle of the day is the short but testing cobbled climb up to the stunning landmark that dominates Viana, the Sanctuary of Santa Luzia, a regular stage finish in

the Volta. The cobbles are uniform and highly polished, and the hairpins are quite steep, but the views over the town and the River Lima are a fitting reward, and voted the third best panorama in the world in 1927 by *National Geographic* magazine.

“You know, in Portugal we don't have high mountains, but we have a little bit of everything else the cyclist would want,” Ricardo says, the late afternoon sunshine filling him with civic pride. “We've got short, steep climbs or 10km ones if you want them. The roads are good, there isn't much traffic, the weather is good, and our food is great.”

I sneak a look at him. I certainly have no complaints about the custard tarts, but he can't still be referring to the salted cod, can he? I think he's playing mind games with me again... [PLUS](#)

Above right
When it comes to national dishes, for Trevor it's all about the custard tarts

Distance: 66 miles (105km)
Grade: Moderate to difficult. The climb to Senbora do Minho is tough – not helped by the state of the road – and the final cobbled climb to Senbora Luzia also deserves respect.

Download:
www.strava.com/routes/11366475

GETTING THERE

There are direct flights from several UK airports to Porto, from where it's a 45-minute drive or 90-minute train journey (from Porto's Campanha station) to Viana do Castelo.

WHERE TO STAY

The FeelViana Hotel is a luxury, beachside sports hotel a couple of miles outside

Viana. It has excellent Scott CR1 10 road bikes for rent. You can also rent surf and paddle boards. The hotel has a spa, sauna, outdoor pool and excellent restaurant, where the fillet steak is the highlight. The local wine is also recommended. A double room including breakfast – buffet and cooked – costs

from €114 per night. hotelfeelviana.com

FOOD AND DRINK

We cannot praise the food and wine at the hotel enough, but if for your fix of pasteis de nata, we recommend the Pasteleria Olympia in the centro histórico of Viana, or any of the cafés in the main square of Ponte de Lima. If we haven't put you



off the salted cod, any restaurant or tasca should be able to satisfy you.

TOURIST INFO
visitportugal.com