



HIGH ON THE ALGARVE

Portugal offers far more than beaches for those brave enough to venture away from the tourist hotspots into the mountains and the culture

Story and pictures: Patrick Cruywagen

"Would you like to drive up there?" asks guide Joe de Bie from Goexploring.com, a company specialising in 4x4 tours in the Monchique and Alentejo regions of southern Portugal. But the Land Rover Defender 90 that I'm driving doesn't belong to me and the long, rutted, rocky incline looks impossibly steep.

"Hell yeah let's go for it," I hear myself reply. I strain my eyes and it looks a bit messy near the top. I stop at the bottom of it to engage low range and the centre diff.

"Mind the step near the top. I'm not sure if this will make it up there so brace yourself for a reverse all the way down again," Joe says comfortingly. I close my eyes and quietly go through the steps of a hill stall. I am good to go and select second gear. The first bit is easy despite the thousands of fist-sized rocks doing everything in their power to break our traction. The 300Tdi was created for

conditions like these. It effortlessly helps us crawl all over them. About halfway up the 250 metre long climb it starts to get a whole lot steeper. The Defender starts to gasp for air and so I put the pedal to the metal. Fortunately thanks to rain and natural weathering, the step just before the top is gone and suddenly we find ourselves at the summit of one of the thousands of hills that make up the Serra de Monchique. In the distance I can see Foia. At 902 metres it's the highest point in the Algarve. Joe tells me that often it's shrouded in mist.

Serra de Monchique forms a buffer between the stunning coastline of the Algarve and the Alentejo province to the north. I'd never imagined the off-roading scene in the mountains of Monchique could be so enjoyable. It's good to be here.

While most Brits come to the Algarve for a beach fix, I'd definitely challenge them to take the short trip to the mountains of Monchique as they won't be disappointed. The tree-covered hills seem a world away from the





This page: The terrain is amazingly variable, meaning even the most experienced drivers are kept on their toes

white beaches, yet on a clear day you can see the ocean from several of the viewpoints out here. Also no matter where you are in the Serre de Monchique, the beach is never more than a 30-minute drive away.

Joe offers the 4x4 enthusiast a host of trip options. As time is money we were on the VIP Weekend Tour. So when we land at Faro Airport there's a guy in a smart suit from VIP Chauffeurs waiting for us, while all the other tour operators are in T-shirts and shorts. But who can blame them as it's about 25°C outside? Now for someone who's used to sitting in a draughty Defender with ineffective air-con, the hour-long drive to our accommodation was a real treat. The Mercedes we were in had Wifi, cool wet cloths to clean our faces and an air-con that worked. We were getting the full treatment. Obviously Joe caters for all kinds of clients including those wanting to come and experience the mountains of Monchique in their own Land

Rovers. It would be interesting to compare the cost of driving here versus flying in and using one of the Go-exploring.com off-road vehicles. Some people just like to be in their own vehicle, whereas I'm not really that fussed. As long as it's as capable as my Defender back home, I'm happy.

This is my first time in the Algarve and I just want to soak up as much of it as I can. We head west on the drive from the airport along the A22, one of the many toll-roads in Portugal that the locals just don't use. (I found the same when on a recent visit to the northern part of Portugal for a wedding. The European government has spent millions of Euros building these heavenly highways, yet the locals drive on parallel roads because they don't want to pay the toll fees.)

Once we reach Portimão we head north, away from the coast and slowly we start to climb towards the market town of Monchique. Suddenly we find ourselves in a whole new

world surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of hills. Some are covered in vines, while eucalyptus trees tend to dominate most. I'm reliably informed these are logged and turned into paper.

Just before we reach Monchique we pass through the quaint spa village of Caldas de Monchique. It's definitely worth a detour as many a moon ago the Romans built baths here to utilise the natural spring waters, thought to have magical healing powers. In 1495 King João visited these very same baths in an effort to heal his dropsy but sadly he died shortly after this.

Despite this my wife Ali very much likes the idea of whiling away some time at the spa.

For the duration of our stay we will be based a few miles outside of Monchique at the guesthouse Casa Jaede. Our hosts Luc and Freya Wauters are from Anwerp, Belgium. There they ran several bars and eating establishments before retreating to the hills of



“We found ourselves surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of hills...”



Southern Portugal. I will quickly find out that Luc is a top-notch chef and he's not happy unless you're eating or drinking something. Their property is over seven hectares in size and situated at about 700 metres above sea level. So they literally own a mountainside and on it they have two houses for visitors to stay in. They also have five dogs and a cat so if you are missing your mutts or moggy, you'll feel right at home here.

Our VIP weekend is to consist of two days of off-roading followed by a cultural day taking in some of the area's most popular attractions. The great thing is that they are totally flexible. So if you don't want to go on a cultural day and instead prefer to laze by the pool while enjoying the hot weather, you're welcome to do so.

One of the conditions of my visit was that Joe arranges a Land Rover for me to drive as he does not have one in his fleet. But before we head out in it on our first day's drive, he first gives us a very comprehensive safety briefing. Each vehicle has a radio in it so the convoy will be able to communicate. I will be in the only Land Rover in the convoy while all the other vehicles I think come from the Land of the Rising Sun. Peter Weaver, a former RAF Squadron Leader is in a Mitsubishi Shogun. His recovery rope over the bonnet makes me a

little nervous but as he's bringing up the rear, he obviously uses it to give those in trouble a little tug from behind. Then we have Nick Barron in a LWB Hyundai while guide Joe is in his Mitsubishi Pajero.

Joe has given me a rather well-prepared route book which details each step of the route in great detail. It even gives the GPS coordinates for each listed point of significance. As we head out, the heavens open up. This is the first of the rain they've been expecting for months. At least it will help settle the dust that one normally finds on the tracks at the end of summer here.

The first thing that strikes me is the fact that there are tracks everywhere. How does anyone know which way to go? Well fortunately we have Joe to guide us, as he's driven, walked or crawled over just about all of them as this is the only way to find out which are suitable for an off-road challenge. Joe rather cleverly gently eases us into things. He normally uses the first day to assess the abilities of the drivers and can then tailor the route according to abilities and need. I can't believe how much the terrain varies during the drive.

I quickly find out that a hill is not just a hill out here as the severity of the incline, road surface type and condition, and obviously the

This page: Amazing views, but inexperienced off-roaders need a guide with local knowledge

Below:
A hill is not just a hill. Once Patrick got to the top, it was all downhill from there...



type of vegetation that grows on it, can change significantly from one moment to the next. Cork trees are big business here and it doesn't take us long to spot the first one. Locals come and remove the cork barks from the tree and then write the date on it so they know when to come and harvest that same tree again. When earlier passing through Monchique we had seen piles of the harvested cork, some several feet in length.

Despite the fact that it's rainy and misty, once we reach the top of some of the hills, we're treated to pretty special views. All of the red sections in the road book have what I like to call a chicken run, so if you don't fancy the tougher track, you can opt out and stay on the easier route. This is one of the reasons why Joe has two support vehicles so if the convoy does split up – as some go on the red and others on the blue route – both groups will have a guide and support vehicle in attendance. A guide is vital as there are literally thousands of tracks to choose from. The only traffic we encounter on our first morning is a friendly local on a donkey.

At around 1pm Joe calls a halt to proceedings and we stop at a local café for a toasted sarnie. This is authentic, rural Portugal at its very

best. During the afternoon's off-roading I notice there are many small red signs next to the road. "These tell us that this is an official wild boar hunting area," says Joe – but as we're currently outside of the official hunting season, we shouldn't see any hunters or their dogs.

As we make our way through a series of switchbacks, I ask Joe how his business came about. "I love driving in the countryside and lived in these hills for several years. So a passion has evolved into a business really," he says with feeling.

Once our driving is done for the first day we head to the Restaurant el Rampa for dinner. The piri-piri chicken is the best I have ever had. The skin is crispy, the white meat succulent and the seasoning perfect.

Joe takes us along some new tracks for our second and final days of off-roading. After several minutes of climbing we find ourselves on a twisty ridge road with several switchbacks. The weather is better than on the first day and from up here I can see the coast at Portimão and the relatively new impressive dam they call Barragen. Down below in the valley I can see the Odelouca River, which we plan to cross several times.



Above:
Portugal's rich cultural heritage, this plant makes a rather potent liqueur

GO-EXPLORING.COM



"A passion has evolved into a business"



Thanks to Joe de Bie from Go-exploring.com for arranging our southern Portugal 4x4 adventure. The best thing about his 4x4 trips is that they cater for every type of client. We had the fly-in VIP experience but if you want, you can drive there in your own Land Rover and camp or stay in the guest house. Whatever you want Joe and his team will make it happen. For more details see www.go-exploring.com or tel +35 1919 263852.





Below:
Rain fell on the first day, but after that the skies cleared, enabling our intrepid adventurers to enjoy stunning views

But first we'll have to get there via a long descent. The terrain changes once again and we now find ourselves on the tree-covered valley floor.

As this is the end of the dry season, the several river crossings don't pose any significant challenges. However a sign next to one of the crossings warns of a strong current and high waters during the winter. I enjoy this section of the route as it feels as if you're driving through a rainforest.

Lunch is once again at a roadside local café called Encontro D'Amigos which means friends' meeting place. This time we go for the pork rolls option. I have eaten so well on this trip that I am starting to feel like the pig we're consuming. The afternoon's tracks are best described as a giant rollercoaster.

As the trees on the hills need to be harvested, there are tracks everywhere to ease access to the crops and trees. On some hills it looks as if a giant has taken a rake to them.

A standard Defender or any other factory 4x4 won't make it up some of them, but there are enough challenging ones for us to enjoy. The variety and quality of the tracks has me stumped. The best part is that you have them all to yourself.

Okay we did encounter one other tour operator. He though does day trips and you have to sit in the back of his white Defender. Judging by the way they drive it can't be that



“Like driving through a rainforest”

comfortable and the chances of bringing up your lunch look very real.

After Nick gets a nick in one of his tyres we decide to call it a day, as he has a flight to catch and we've been at it all day.

Our final day is a cultural one. I am not a sit-by-the-pool kind of guy and so we instead visit the nearby Quinta do Francês winery. It's a very young vineyard of only eight hectares in size.

It takes them three days to pick the grapes during harvest time and this is done entirely by hand. They also buy-in grapes from nearby wineries which they use for their white wines.

We then head for Silves, the postcard-pretty village with cobbled streets that was once the Moorish capital. Do climb the hill to go and see the castle as it's the best-preserved castle in the province. Right next to it stands the cathedral which too is in need of some preserving. If all the hill walking makes you tired, there are enough street cafes where you can put up your feet.

After a day in Silves it's back to Monchique where our final supper awaits. Luc's cooking does not disappoint and his hospitality makes me want to stay longer.

For those that think the Algarve is all about the beaches, think again. The 4x4 tracks in the Serra de Monchique are just like the peri-peri chicken: perfectly formed – and they'll leave you wanting more and more.

